ENGAGING, EXAMINING, AND EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF SOCIAL CLASS AT PINE TREE ELEMENTARY

by

KRISTY NANSTEEL SHACKELFORD

(Under the Direction of

Stephanie Jones)

ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how the phenomenon of social class operates at Pine Tree Elementary, an elementary school located in the southern United States where over half of the students received free or reduced lunch. This study is foregrounded with class-sensitive theoretical and pedagogical commitments (Jones & Vagle, 2013), which strive for educators to engage in class equitable practices giving careful, critical, and reflective thoughts to their pedagogies, challenge deficit perspectives, and eradicate classism. I use post-intentional phenomenological methods to examine the complexities of social class as it was experienced by the students, the faculty, and myself.

Societal discourses including those of meritocracy, "it doesn't matter where you come from," "overcoming poverty," and being "more than" your working-class family members were spoken by educators at Pine Tree. By situating these discursive narratives within social and

political contexts, I illuminate how flawed these notions are, how damaging they are to working-class and poor lives, yet how easily they are taken up.

The elementary student participants in this dissertation desired to talk about their lives and wanted their voices to be heard and privileged. These students were happy children who loved their families and challenged deficit narrations of their lives through their writings and conversations. Drawing and deepening Dutro's analyses (2008, 2009, 2011) I recognized the importance of testimonies, the imperativeness of critical witnessing, and that classrooms can be transformative spaces where lives are valued and stereotypes, judgments, and deficit perspectives are challenged.

INDEX WORDS: Class-sensitive research, post-intentional phenomenology, social class, critical literacy, testimony, critical witness, counternarratives, class blind, socially classed beings

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my beautiful children Asher and Ella. You inspire me each day to see the world in different ways. You've taught me the joy that accompanies taking risks and the beauty of discovering new things.

I love you both forever. This is for you.

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Stephanie, to quote my favorite musical *Wicked*,

I know I'm who I am today

Because I knew you.

And,

I have been changed for good.

You've changed me for good. You've opened my eyes to the complexities of the world and helped me find my voice to make a difference. Thank you for your constant faith and always believing in me when at many times I didn't. You have been more than a mentor—you've been my friend.

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They say it takes a village, and I certainly could not have gotten to this point alone. Deepest thanks and love to…

My amazing husband Cary,

Thank you for your selfless love and your commitment to this work. Thank you for the many weekends you gifted me with time to write. You never complained, yet always offered encouragement to keep on going! You made me believe this could be possible; you made me believe in myself. This is just as much yours as it is mine. I love you so very much.

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You played such a large role in the success of this document. Countless hours babysitting, hours consoling me when I wanted to give up, yet reminding me, that *we'*ve all invested too much time and energy to quit! You are the definition of it takes a village as I surely could not have done this without your love, support, and help. I love you both so much—*we* did it.

Nana and Papa (Gail and Mike Shackelford),

I know how proud you both would be of this work. It encompasses so much of what you held as passionate truths. And, the addition of another Bulldog in the family is always an added bonus! I love you both so much… Gone but never forgotten. Go Dawgs!

Sammy,

Thank you for your friendship through this wild academic ride (not to mention the thousands of text messages and phone calls). With your encouraging love you always showed me the power of possibilities. Love and adore you forever.

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It's because of all of you that this was possible. Thank you from the depths of my being.

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Name	Position
Luann Smith	Current Principal at Pine Tree Elementary
Dr. Phillips	Former Principal at Pine Tree Elementary
Sarah	Fourth Grade Teacher at Pine Tree Elementary
Charlotte	First Grade Teacher at Pine Tree Elementary
Barbara	Third Grade Teacher at Pine Tree Elementary
Linda	Inclusion Teacher in Sarah's Classroom

Table Two:
List of Student Participants

Name	**Grade Level/Homeroom Teacher**
Steven	4th/Sarah
Simon	4th/Sarah
Angela	4th/Sarah
Brittany	4th/Sarah
Valentina	4th/Sarah
Thomas	4th/Sarah
Susan	4th/Sarah
Melinda	4th/Sarah
Pete	4th/Sarah
Jake	4th/Sarah
Kinsley	4th/Sarah
John	4th/Sarah
Miguel	4th/Sarah
Becka	4th/Sarah
John	4th/Sarah
Tony	3rd/Barbara
Grayson	3rd/Barbara
Holt	3rd/Barbara
Addison	3rd/Barbara

CHAPTER 1

STANDING AT THE WHITEBOARD: AN INTRODUCTION

January 2009

My first class as a doctoral student at the University of Georgia began on a cold January day at five o'clock in the afternoon. I was about thirty minutes early as I walked into a small classroom on the fourth floor of the education building with a warm coffee in hand to revive my tired teaching mind. My day had been spent in the company of my eighteen kindergartners, and I'm sure I wore remnants of glue, food, and markers on my clothing. As I entered the classroom, I noticed a woman who looked to be my age. She had her computer open and a coffee purchased from the downstairs café positioned to the right of her computer. To the left she had a small box of breath mints. She sat straight in her chair and smiled at me as I entered the room. Her face bore a combination of nervousness and fear masked with feigned confidence. I recognized that look because my face bore the same mixture. I immediately placed my belongings near her.

My first doctoral class was called "Issues in Social Class" and was taught by Dr. Stephanie Jones. Truthfully, I knew little about the class except what the online course description revealed. My friend, Sharon Clark, a fellow doctoral student at the time (now Dr. Clark), told me that I should, "see if Stephanie Jones and JoBeth Allen are offering classes, and then sign up for them," which I did.

Dr. Jones walked in and began class. I cannot quite recall how class began, but one event stands out as vividly in my mind today as it did so many years ago. The classroom was small and had whiteboards covering three-fourths of its walls. Dr. Jones asked each student, perhaps nine of us, to find our own space on the whiteboard. We each made our way to our own section of the board, and as I stared at my blank white pristine area, Dr. Jones asked us to write or draw what we knew, or thought we knew, about social class. Marker frozen in my hand, I stared at my empty space on the board and thought that aptly defined it—my social class knowledge was relatively scant. My body started tingling as the panic within me began to escalate. It started in my stomach and like a heated wave flowed quickly through my body. It was the first day, the first hour of my doctoral career, and my fears of not succeeding as a graduate student were mounting.

I looked at my marker still in hand, and its fumes seemed to be mocking me—*failure* they taunted. Since staring at the board in a blank stupor was not an option, I seized control over my taunting marker. My first thought was to draw a money sign. Social class had to do with money… I was pretty sure. I did a sly look around the room at what other students were writing and drawing and felt pretty confident that my money sign would at least keep me in the room. So I drew my money sign and then wrote the word *money* in case there was any confusion. Then, I wrote the words *low-class, middle-class, and upper-class*. I put the cap back on my marker. That was my extent of my social class knowledge. My coffee and breath mint friend was still writing and someone on the other side was actually putting up a quote with an APA citation. Standing there as my classmates finished, I pretended to be deep in thought of something else to write. I placed my capped marker to my chin and made my eyes squint to mimic deep reflection. I

realized I didn't know too much about social class, but did it matter? Did social class matter to me as an educator—did it matter in education?

I stood alone at the whiteboard, feeling awkward and uncomfortable after being forced to reflect on something I never really had considered before. Yet, little did I know this marked the beginning of a journey into something larger than I could have ever imagined. Social class was one of the *somethings* I had never really considered, particularly regarding education. Social class has been described as "central to our everyday lives" (Zweig, 2004, p. 2), yet it felt more like an invisible force that my colleagues and I had worked with, and against, over the years and not named.

Over my eleven years as an elementary classroom teacher, several workshops on multiculturalism were held, but never one featuring working with and understanding students from working-class and poor families (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Before this doctoral class, I could not recall a time where as an educator I ever talked about the complexities of social class, how it affected my students and their families, how it affected the educational structure I worked in, how it influenced my pedagogies, and how it influenced me.

As a white middle-class woman in her thirties with eleven years of classroom experience under her belt and a Master's Degree hanging on the wall, I had never given the topic of social class much thought until I stood at that whiteboard. It existed, I recognized it, it did not really affect me, so I moved on. Conversations I had surrounding social class included phrases such as "free and reduced lunch," or "low socioeconomic." I'm not sure if I ever really reflected on what those phrases meant and what these phrases were *doing* to working-class students and families. Yet my class *un*awareness played a role in nearly damaging and tearing apart a young family in my classroom who had already been through so many hardships when Child Protective Services

was unwarrantedly called. I could only imagine how many more students and families were marginalized and affected by my class unawareness over the years.

While it is a bit unsettling to admit my naiveties and ignorances, I recognize that I was, and am, not alone. There are many other educators out there right now in our schools who share similar thoughts as I showed above—good teachers, loving teachers, energetic and innovative teachers, but completely unaware and oblivious to the ways class is played out and lived in our schools daily by working-class and poor students and families; blind to the "savage inequalities" that reside in our schools and classrooms (Kozol, 1992); unaware that we are *all* socially classed beings (Brantlinger, 2007; Vagle & Jones, 2012).

The "Issues in Social Class" course, accompanied with the start of taking a more broad critical reflective look at my pedagogies and myself, opened up an internal dialogue on social class that could not be silenced. I hungered for knowledge and found myself seeking out researchers and writers who could enlighten me more. I loved being in the literary company of Deborah Hicks, Dorothy Allison, bell hooks, Stephanie Jones, Elizabeth Dutro, and Annette Lareau—powerful women researchers and writers who with tireless passionate spirits work to educate and eradicate classism all while showing me the power of possibilities for myself as a woman researcher. While parts of me felt embarrassed and foolish about my prior failure to examine issues of social class in education, more of me felt empowered and confident in the knowledge that I was not alone in my former ways, and in addition knowing that *I* could do something about this was encouraging. It was my time to be and feel powerful.

Research Purpose and Theoretical Engagements

Just ten years ago, only four states reported a majority of their students receiving free and reduced lunch (Layton, 2013). In 2011, the number had increased to 17 states. In 2011, 57.4% in

the southern state where this study takes place qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch assistance, 9.4% higher than the national average. Students are eligible to qualify for free or reduced lunch assistance if they reside in a household where the total income is 185% or less of the federally determined poverty line. According to the 2014-2015 federal requirements, for example, a family of four making $23, 850 annually would be eligible for free school lunches while a family of four making $44, 123 annually would qualify for reduced lunches (www. fns.usda.gov). Southern states (this report names Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia as southern states) have a total of 53% of public school students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch, which is the highest among other regions. (Southern Education Foundation, 2013).

Although working-class and poor students comprise a majority of the students in our schools, examining and engaging in discussions around issues of social class within our educational discourses, or even conversational discourses, has been strangely missing. Speaking about issues of class seems in many ways to be a taboo topic; a topic that tends to make people feel uncomfortable, a topic that is not "fashionable" (Gans 1995) and therefore is silenced (Gorksi, 2013; Jones, 2006). Often when others ask what my dissertation focuses on and I respond that it centers on social class, the responses are mostly the same. Often they look at me, with surprised or shell-shocked expressions on their faces, and respond with a, "Oh that's cool," or a long drawn out "Okaaay." Their words say one thing, yet their bodies speak another. They often look uncomfortable, fidget a bit, and the conversation seems to take a swift shift, yet others seem intrigued, asking lots of questions and telling me how *needed* this discussion is.

Perhaps the lack of class discussions in education derives from the hopes we place in the ideal that education is the great equalizer, that with schooling and an education all things are possible despite your economic standings. As Gorski (2013) states, "We [educators] want to believe that schools, of all places, give all people an equal shot, even when the odds are stacked against them" (p.1). Despite this idyllic narrative, which sounds wonderful and promising, schools have *never* been places offering equality to all of its students—"students from poor families, the ones most desperate to find truth in the 'great equalizer' promise, appear to pay a great price for their poverty" (p.1). Poor families endure unequal opportunities and a lack of access to fundamental resources provided to the middle-class including, decent jobs, housing, schooling, and health care to name a mere few (Gans, 1995).

Many researchers, including Janks (2014), have described education "as a dividing practice"-- a practice that "separates children into haves and have-nots" (p.8). Schools are not designed for working-class and poor families (Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1992); schools are systems constructed in ideologies that continually churn out middle-class values and practices (Gans, 1995; Hicks, 2002). Working-class and poor students learn quickly that school can be a place that is not for them- that does not welcome their lives- a place where teachers tend to privilege middle to upper middle-class children at their expense (Hicks, 2002; Janks, 2014; Jones, 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001).

Educators, often middle-class, have been described, in one way, as missionaries out to "save" all the working-class students (Freire, 1985, p. 18) or as policemen/policewomen constantly monitoring the actions of working-class families (Walkerdine, Melody, & Lucey, 2001). Teachers often position themselves in superior ways, perhaps consciously and unconsciously, influenced by dominant discursive practices privileging the socially powerful.

We all--teachers, researchers, parents, and students-- work within an educational system that continually makes class-based assumptions with expectations that students should identify as middle-class (Dutro, 2009; Hicks, 2002; Vagle & Jones, 2012; Layton, 2013). While teachers may acknowledge that students may not be classified as middle-class through their family's financial capital, they assume that their values, lives, and practices align with that typically thought of as middle-class (Heath, 1983; LaReau, 2003). When educators make these assumptions and then hold them as truths, we dismiss and miss the lives of our working-class and poor families. We silence their voices, and perspectives in our classrooms. When educators do not engage in critical class sensitive practices, the world continues dispensing damaging untruths concerning working-class or poor people that can have lifelong effects (Walkerdine et al., 2001, Jones & Shackelford, 2013).

For example, a superintendent in the state of Georgia whose suburban county is comprised of approximately seventy five percent low-income students, discusses what he defines as "the pathologies of poverty" (Tagami, 2014). He defines these pathologies of poverty as "homelessness, hunger, domestic violence, medical or mental health problems, disengaged parents" and continues, saying that in a suburban county these issues are more difficult to address because social service organizations are busy attending to inner city families. As a former director of Child Protective Services, he calls for schools to have a closer relationship with the Child Protective Services because, "We expect teachers to be social workers, but they're not. All of the problems come *to* the schoolhouse, but they originate *outside* of the schoolhouse" (Tagami, 2014, emphasis added).

This superintendent, like many in education, continually positions one group as powerful (middle-class educators) while positioning another group as less than powerful and perhaps even

deviant (working-class or poor families). He asserts that these working-class and poor families need closer monitoring, to be *policed* by educators and Family Services. He implies that the schoolhouse is a neutral place stating that "all of the problems come *to* the schoolhouse," but what of the problems that come *out* of the schoolhouse or *because* of the schoolhouse? The schoolhouse has never been a neutral, unbiased construct. It is built with classed histories and constructed by notions of normality. Its walls have witnessed the pains of students and families as their lives are viewed in deficit ways, where certain families need to be policed because their lives do not match up to middle-class mainstream ideals. Its doors have welcomed and shut out. When educators act or are asked to act as policemen/women against working-class students and families, it sets up an impossible dichotomy of us verse them, causing a disconnection between the students, families, and educators.

The study presented here acknowledges the disconnect experienced in schools by working-class and poor children and families: a disconnect residing in schools where over half of the students receive free or reduced lunch, yet students and families are still indoctrinated in middle-class ideologies and ways they are expected to engage with the world (Hicks, 2002; Jones &Vagle, 2013; Luttrell, 1997: Walkerdine et al., 2001). In addition, this study acknowledges the idea that we are all socially classed beings constructed in societal and discursive ways of understanding class (Brantlinger, 2007; Vagle & Jones, 2012).

Focusing on a working-class school in a southeastern state where Drs. Jones and Vagle engaged in class sensitive pedagogies and critical literacy practices with the staff, this study seeks to understand how social class is lived, experienced, and engaged with by the students and faculty at a racially and socioeconomically diverse elementary school.

By using the term *understanding*, I draw on Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) when they state, “Understanding is not something one does, but is the mode in which humans exist. There is no fixed starting point for understanding; understanding is already there, within the situation” (p. 79). In each classroom and within this schoolhouse, understandings of social class were "already there,” and they were also within me. This study seeks to explore the ways social class was thought of, or not thought of, lived, experienced, and discussed by the students and faculty of Pine Tree Elementary as well as to make an autobiographical account of my own understandings of class.

Research Questions

This phenomenological qualitative study, grounded in class sensitive pedagogical engagements, examines the phenomenon of social class as it is lived and experienced at Pine Tree Elementary by the faculty and the students. My questions guiding my research include:

1. How is social class being lived, embodied, discussed, and experienced in this school and in what ways do students and faculty talk about their understandings of a socially-classed world*?*
2. What other forces or factors are at play influencing how social class is lived, embodied, and experienced at this school?

This study is grounded and centered with the works of researchers engaging with class sensitive pedagogies and critical engagements around social class (Gans,1995; Gorski, 2013; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jones, 2004, 2006, 2008; Jones & Shackelford, 2013; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Lareau, 2003; Vagle & Jones, 2012), commitments to critical literacy (Gee, 2001; Janks, 2014; Jones, 2004; Luke & Freebody,1997; Vasquez, 2003), conducting autobiographical work (Jones & Vagle 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), and viewing classrooms as places for

testimonial and critical witnessing (Dutro, 2008, 2009, 2011). Together these researchers have harmoniously framed my study and worked together diligently to interrogate my search for understanding and gaining answers to my research questions. I conduct this work by drawing on phenomenological discernments to post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle 2009, 2010, 2014) and reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, &Nystrom, 2008).

Introduction to the Site and My Relationship to the Site

Pine Tree Elementary is located in a rural southeastern town in the United States known for its poultry farming and manufacturing. The school sits atop a large rolling hill with lush green lands and farms surrounding it. It is a K-5 racially and socioeconomically diverse public school where seventy-five percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and the school is composed of mostly white and Hispanic students. Pine Tree Elementary has a very familial feeling; several members of the staff have family members that work at the school or have children attend the school. Most of the staff resides in the community where Pine Tree Elementary is located, many were born and raised in the town, and several of the staff members attended Pine Tree as a student.

I was introduced to Pine Tree Elementary through my mentor professor, Dr. Jones in the fall of 2012. Dr. Phillips, the principal of Pine Tree at the time, noticed a disconnect between his staff and the working-class students and families who they served and began to engage, under the guidance and leadership of Drs. Jones and Vagle (co-founders of The CLASSroom Project) in class-sensitive and critical literacy practices. For two years, Drs. Jones and Vagle worked closely with the Pine Tree staff engaging in both small and large group discussions and inquires, working with teachers and students in classrooms, and introduced students to photostory as a method to tell and validate their lives and their families. Upon my first day at Pine Tree, the front

hallway was filled with photographs and writings about what families did for work. The hallway spoke loudly and proudly of differing types of work families did including farming, working at a chicken plant, producing commercials, landscaping, working at restaurants, and working at a tractor manufacturing company to name a few. This work was the result of a final photostory project led by Drs. Jones and Vagle and served as a visual reminder of their class-sensitive work at Pine Tree.

Dr. Phillips extended the work of The CLASSroom project and began a working-class book of the month program asking each classroom teacher to read a selected book featuring characters with diverse economic lives. These books foregrounded economic realities featuring topics including not having enough money, a family member losing a job, and living in an area of town that is not conventionally "beautiful" (e.g., *Tight Times (*Hazen, 1979), *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998)), and also spotlighted different ways of thinking about work, difficulties with work, workers' rights, and valuing all work (e.g., *Si, Se Puedo! Yes, We Can!* (Cohn, 2002), *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007). Dr. Phillips asked the teachers to engage in a discussion with their students before, during, and after the reading of the book and to conclude by having the students create some kind of visual representation of their choosing, to show students' ways of connecting, disconnecting, and/or thinking about the book. Examples of visual representation included poems, drawings, and photographs.

When Dr. Jones presented me an opportunity to work at Pine Tree as a writing professional developer, I jumped at the chance. Having worked as a consultant to The CLASSroom Project in several different schools and counties, I was eager to see the fruits of their work concerning class-sensitive pedagogies and practices in perspective action and to learn more about Dr. Phillips' book of the month program. I joined Pine Tree Elementary in the spring

semester of 2013 as a professional developer under a grant from the National Writing Project (NWP) written collaboratively with Dr. Jones and Phillips. With a group of eight teachers (five of the teachers had worked closely with Drs. Jones and Vagle) we worked collectively to uncover their writerly selves, guided under NWP's premise that great writing teachers first think of themselves as writers. We met after school many times throughout the semester, digging into how great writers talk about their practice (e.g., Goldberg, 1986; King, 2010; Lamont, 1994), engaging in different writing strategies and techniques, forming writing groups based on the type of writing they wished to explore, and writing and sharing a final writing piece. Once a week I would go into the teachers' classrooms and help them implement some of the things we learned and discussed in our professional writing group with their students, in conjunction with assisting them with their implementation of writers' workshop. I asked three of the teachers in this group if they would be a part of my research study and they agreed. Charlotte, a first grade teacher, Barbara, a third grade teacher, and Sarah, a fifth grade teacher (as well as her inclusion teacher Linda) were all a part of this writing group as well as being featured in this study. Each of these teachers identifies as white and self-identified as middle-class.

Organization of Dissertation

In this first chapter I have situated this study within context, explaining why this study matters, stating my research questions and the theories informing my work, and introducing you to the site of the study as well as my positioning there. In the next chapter I will dig more deeply into the literature surrounding the theories informing and grounding my work. Chapter 3 focuses on my methodology as I define and articulate how I drew upon post-intentional phenomenological and lifeworld phenomenology methodologies and to explain some of the unexpected twists and changes in my research. Chapter 4 begins the first of three data chapters

titled “The Classroom of Testimony.” This chapter foregrounds the work of Dutro (2008, 2009, 2011) and her analyses that classrooms can become transformative places of testimonies and critical witnessing. Chapter 5, titled “What’s Class Got To Do With It?,” details two of the teachers’ (Charlotte’s and Barbara’s) and the principal of Pine Tree (Luann’s) engagement with the phenomenon of class. Chapter 6, titled “The Students Get The Floor” centers on the students as they discuss social class. The final chapter presents my findings and answers to my research questions and offers further class-sensitive implications for educators.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

This chapter explores the theories informing my understandings of the phenomenon of social class at Pine Tree Elementary. This study foregrounds class sensitive pedagogical commitments, which Jones and Vagle (2013) describe as "thought and action grounded in the goal of eliminating classism and class bias of all kinds, ensuring full access to dignified education and meaningful educational opportunities for working-class and poor children and youth of all races and ethnicities" (p. 130). Jones and Vagle's (2013) five principles for class-sensitive engagement offered me ways to think about how class was operating in the school and classroom settings as well as provided language informing my perspective of data collection, analysis, and my commitments as a researcher and educator. These five principles are:

1. Analyze educators' and students' experiences of class within broad social and political contexts;
2. Locate and disrupt social classed hierarchies in school and communities;
3. Integrate social class and marginalized perspectives into curriculum;
4. Perceive classed bodies in moment-to moment interactions with educators, students, and families; and
5. Change broader school and classroom policies and practices to reflect anticlassist and antipoverty commitments (p. 130).

Each of these five principles was constructed for educators and others committed to class equitable practices to engage in critical, thoughtful reflection of their selves and their pedagogies

and to recognize and ultimately eliminate classism in their classrooms, schools, districts, and even at broader levels such as in state and national policies.

Each principle is not intended to stand alone; but instead, each principle acts in dialogue with the next, building on and extending one another, all working together to theorize the idea that educators and students (and this researcher) are *socially classed beings* —beings constructed by systematic dominating discourses and hierarchical reproductions of class stratifications (Brantlinger, 2007; Jones &Vagle, 2012).

This chapter highlights each of Jones and Vagle's five principles, unpacking and extending each principle with theories and researchers who provided valuable insights into my understandings of class sensitive research and the phenomenon of social class. Just as each principle was not intended to stand alone, nor do my writings under each principle stand alone; instead each is intended to speak harmoniously with the principle before and the one after.

Principle One: Analyze Educators' and Students' Experiences of Class Within Broad Social and Political Contexts

We live in a society where social class is depicted in many ways. Social class has been described as a hidden entity (hooks, 2000), a taboo topic (Fussell,1983; Gorksi, 2013), a silent war (Gans, 1995), and/or a "past injustice that has been sufficiently addressed" (Kozol, 1991, p.3). Yet, while class may be considered a silent war, its silence or absence in our discourse has been anything but—it has also been described as "louder than drums" (Jones, 2006, p. 45). Class is neither an invisible or hidden entity but something that is felt and lived in everyone, even if we can't quite articulate how—we feel the thumping of the drums deep within us.

This first principle is perhaps the most difficult of the five principles (it certainly is for me) because it asks educators to place their experiences with class (and their students'

experiences) within broader political, social, and economic contexts. Jones and Vagle (2013) advocate the importance of putting the "social" back into the discussion of class, noting "individual narratives of success or failure force one to recognize the tangled web of economics, politics, social networks, access, power, and personal opportunity" (p. 131). By situating the personal within the broader contexts, educators can ask themselves, "Under what conditions could this become possible?," acknowledging the tangled web of complications and inequalities for working-class and poor students.

As Jones and Vagle (2013) acknowledge, we are not born with innate classist sensibilities, yet from the moment we emerge from the womb we are indoctrinated in them. We live in a system that consistently inundates us with messages informing our beliefs concerning class. We see teachings about class on our television shows, in commercials, books, and movies; from politicians, family members, schools, churches, and friends (just to name a mere few), and we use these perceptions to narrate and construct our ways of knowing and understanding issues of class (Kozol, 1991)—we are shaped by these dominant pervasive teachings.

These dominant pervasive teachings include the ideals of meritocracy; that through hard work anything is possible and any economic dream can be achievable; "that achievement is deserved rather than rendered" (Gorski, 2013, p. 14-15). Meritocracy narrates the power of possibilities—everyone can equally achieve upward mobility through hard work. If you want to succeed in life, you hold the power to make it possible. Like most narratives espousing hope, it feels inspired and possible; it provides the confidence that we all start out on a level and fair playing ground, that all children despite their backgrounds are given a fair and fighting chance (Lareau, 2003). We live in a society that constantly preaches that class does not matter, that "the social class a person is born into has only minimal bearing on who or what he or she will

become" (Gorski, 2013, p. 12). Yet research has proved the opposite to be true--class *does* matter and researchers are actively battling discourses that hide class or make it invisible and are working to educate just how much it does matter (e.g. Correspondents of *The New York Times,* 2005; Gorski, 2013; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jones, 2006; Jones & Shackelford, 2013; Jones and Vagle, 2012, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001).

Adhering to principle one allows educators to see the flaws in meritocracy. Notions of meritocracy are seen as more of a myth than a reality when educators dig into the social and political structures in place that make it impossible for all students to succeed in this country (Gorski, 2103). Working-class and poor students are faced with many inequalities that prohibit them from starting on a level playing field with middle-class students. Inequalities for working-class and poor students include overcrowded classrooms, high teacher turnover, inexperienced/unqualified teachers, low teacher expectations, more policing of students and families, and fewer resources such as computer labs and libraries (Brantlinger, 2007; Kozol, 1991; Jones &Vagle, 2103; Gorski, 2103; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Brantlinger (2007) adds:

> Americans still like to believe that success in schools and markets depends on such personal traits as intelligence, stamina, common sense, and a strong work ethic rather than social class and race privilege. Few patrons question the win/lose aspect of meritocratic schooling (p. 238).

In meritocratic schooling there are no winners. Brantlinger writes about how the middle/upper class students are losers in this system as well, with highly negative attitudes towards schooling, worries about not meeting parents' high expectations, and "frustration about not being able to perform the ideal roles expected of students of their social class" (p. 236; also see Lareau, 2003 for further examples). Working-class and poor students, as well as students of

color, “are often placed in stigmatizing school arrangements, receive primarily negative feedback about schoolwork, and are subjected to discrimination by teachers and schoolmates” (Brantlinger, 2007, p. 238; also see Anyon, 1980; Hicks, 2002; Luttrell, 1997; Kozol, 1991, for further examples).

In the age of high stakes testing and No Child Left Behind legislation, where the intention was to close the achievement gap and make a more equitable educational climate for all students, the opposite has ensued. No Child Left Behind and the high stakes testing regime places the responsibility/blame for passing or not passing the tests in the hands of working-class and poor students, not taking into consideration the myriad of unfair and inequitable schooling conditions that influence students’ learning and performance in standardized tests (Brantlinger, 2007; Vagle & Jones, 2012; Kozol, 1999). In the state where this study takes place in 2008 three-fourths of low-income students were not passing the standardized tests. These numbers are alarming and speak to how we “pathologize low income students… positioning them precariously in dominant discourses circulating in society, but these numbers also point to the possibility that this is about more than tests and test taking” (Vagle & Jones, 2012, p. 319). Placing the “social” back into the discussion of class reveals the multitude of social factors influencing and affecting working-class and poor students’ lack of success in schools.

In addition to schoolhouse inequalities, working-class and poor students also have inequities outside of school, including lack of access to affordable healthcare, quality childcare, resources such as home internet for schooling assignments/enrichment, transportation, healthy living and working environments, and “access to a validating society” (Gorski, 2013, p. 74). Gorski adds, “If bearing the brunt of these deprivation…is not enough, low income youth also must weather a fairly constant storm of bias and bigotry…carrying with them an underlying

message that they are to blame for the very inequities that repress them" (p. 82). These are just a few examples of what Kozol (1999) deems savage inequalities--unfair treatment and conditions based on racial and class distinctions further replicating social class statuses (Vagle & Jones, 2012). Putting the social back in the class discussion allows us to see that these inequities are social problems and, therefore, can be eradicated (Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2003).

Kozol writes about how educators and students testify about their experiences of class within social and political contexts and the unfairness the system generates. He writes about a friend, Elizabeth, who lives in a poor black neighborhood in Boston:

> My children… know very well the system is unfair. They also know they are living in a rich society. They see it on TV, and in advertisements, and in movies… they know this other world exists, and when you tell them that the government can't find the money to provide them with a decent place to go to school, they don't believe it and they know that it's a choice that has been made—a choice about how much they matter to society. They see it as a message: This is to tell you that you don't matter much… (p. 215-216).

We all live in a system that reproduces inequalities, sending messages that our working-class and poor "don't matter much," "that the contest is unfair" (Kozol, 1991, p. 215). In our schools, students and teachers are working within unsuitable and unfair conditions where they not only feel they don't matter but they are experiencing it. Schools possess and regurgitate classist thoughts, enforcing ideas that students who are in poor schools *deserve* to be there. The need for all educators to become critical analysts of the societal and political messages they are working in and through is great.

When thinking critically about ways we must analyze political and social perceptions of our class understanding, reflecting on the systematic and discursive narratives including that of

meritocracy, and digging deeper into Discourses and discourses, is beneficial. Gee (1990) differentiates between discourses (with a lowercase d) and Discourses (with an uppercase D) stating that lowercase discourses could be thought of as language in action—face to face conversations, stories, or debates. Discourses (with an uppercase D), as used by Gee, refer to ways of being and identifying in the world which transfer into our speech, values, and ways we present ourselves, an "identity kit" of sorts (Gee, 1990, p. 142). Discourses with a big D could include affiliations with a country, profession, religious group, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic groups, and beliefs and attitudes. Societal narratives of meritocracy and "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" would be examples of Discourses. Gee adds:

> Yet another way to look at Discourses is as 'clubs' with (tacit) rules about who is a member and who is not, and (tacit) rules about how members ought to behave (if they wish to continue being accepted as members). Being a member of a family, a peer group, a community group or church, a drinking group, a classroom, a profession, a research team, an ethnic group, a sub-culture or a culture requires 'rites of passage' to enter the group, the maintenance of certain behaviors (ways of talking, valuing, thinking) to continue to be accepted as an 'insider', and continued 'tests' of membership applied by others (p. 143).

Thinking about Discourses along similar lines of clubs is helpful. Membership in clubs is generally done so through an exclusionary process—some are in and some are out. Once in, you must conform to the prescribed rules and beliefs of the club. In schools, the "clubs"/Discourses that reign powerfully are White, Christian, heterosexual, and middle-class (to name a few). Middle-classed ways are valued and privileged and thus exert more power than white and/or minority working-class Discourses (Gee, 1990) and force working-class and poor

students to comply to the rules of their club (e.g., Luttrell 1997, Walkerdine et al., 2001). We possess many Discourses that don't live harmoniously together—they are always evolving, changing, conflicting and shaping our perceptions and what we view as normal or abnormal (Jones, 2006). My Discourses influence me and my thinking in ways I am not always aware. To be a white, middle-class, married, mother of two small children, Christian, doctoral candidate, and pet owner requires access to particular ways of talking, believing, and engaging with the world. We are ALL members of particular Discourses and they and the larger societal messages each Discourse brings with it influence us ALL. In chapter five I dig deeper into this principle, analyzing how strongly Discourses narrated the Pine Tree faculty members' conversations.

Principle Two: Locate and Disrupt Social Classed Hierarchies in Schools and Communities and Within Educators

America is engaged in a war, a war most are completely unaware that they are fighting, yet daily we find ourselves on one side or the other of active combat; combatting labels, stereotypes, false assumptions and perceptions against the poor and working-class or ascribing them. Ascribing labels, stereotypes, and false assumptions carry damaging consequences as Gans (1995) explains,

> The resort to imagined knowledge is *labeling*, and the descriptions of people based on it are labels. Labels are used primarily to designate people as 'deviant,' different in a negative or pejorative sense because 'these people' or some of their actions and beliefs, are beyond the pale of our own or even 'mainstream' values" (p. 11-12).

Labeling is ascribing "imagined knowledge" to people or groups of people without clear understanding of who they are. When we label students, we ascribe a particular set of understandings, judgments, and assumptions upon them and daily in schools, educators are

labeling students and families. Jones and Vagle (2013) convey, "People often judge others (and themselves), and are judged by others, based on perceived social class and economic status" (p.132). How someone looks, how they dress, how they speak, where they live, what mode of transportation they use, where they go to school, and what materials they have for school are all used as tools to judge, creating imagined knowledge of what we think their lives are like outside of school. Often these judgments portray working-class and poor families in negative deficit ways, painting a picture that depicts their lives are "less than" the lives of others (Delpit, 1995).

For example, several years ago in an introduction to early childhood course I co-taught, a discussion arose about the importance of knowing where your students are from. Many administrative teams make the decision to drive their teachers on school busses to see the neighborhoods where their students live. A pre-service teacher in my class expressed objection to this idea because she said she would not want to know if her students lived in "poor" circumstances (she used the example of living in a trailer) because she would feel "too sorry" for them. When I questioned her why she would feel this way she replied because of how poor they were. The deficit Discourses were already a strong whisper in her ear, *if you live in a trailer, your life must not be as great as someone's who lives in a $300,000* house. For many the $300,000 house has a particular "taste" to it—it seems to offer economic and cultural capital to its owners that the trailer could not. It offers imagined knowledge about what the families in each dwelling must be like, usually resulting in thinking that the $300,000 house family is one not to be pitied, one not to felt "sorry for," whereas the trailer inhabits *were* to be felt sorry for (e.g. ,Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2003).

As a teacher I too had imagined knowledge about one of my students based on my perceptions and constructions of social class, which almost resulted in having her removed from

her mother by Child Protective Services. When we act regarding our own perceptions of what is normal, when we do not stop and question the whispering Discourses in our ears, the consequences can be dangerously life changing. Therefore, we have the power and responsibility to examine ourselves and our practices to "ensure that we are not reproducing inequitable conditions in our own classrooms and schools" (Gorski, 2013, p. 3).

Before an educator can engage in critical class sensitive work, educators must undertake autobiographical work examining the multiple ways *they* read and understand the world (Jones & Vagle, 2013; Vagle & Jones, 2012). In other words, educators need to be inwardly reflective and take the time to examine their own Discourses, reflect on where they come from and how that informs their everyday lives. Hankins (2003) adds that when educators become inwardly reflective it affords the ability to understand others. Becoming critically aware of ourselves allows us to examine our own personal histories, prejudices, assumptions, and judgments that affect our classroom decisions and interaction with families and students. Hicks (2002) contends that teachers have "to confront their own racisms and classisms *before* they could see the richness of children's culturally saturated lives" (p. 26, emphasis added). Like the popular adage suggests, "Change *first* begins with me."

Children, like adults, are enveloped in culturally specific practices, which sometimes are valued in schools and sometimes are not (Heath, 1983). Without examining our own personal histories, social class positioning, and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, Amanti, 2005), we may privilege our ways of knowing while marginalizing students who may read the world in different ways. In other words, we consciously or unconsciously define ideas of normality in the ways we see it, instead of learning how our students define it for themselves.

Understanding our "autobiographical and ancestral roots," which encompass us and shape our understandings, is important work, especially when they come into conflict with students and families from working-class or poor backgrounds. As teachers we "*always* bring [our] own history to teaching" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 22, emphasis added) and thus our "histories" must be deconstructed and analyzed for the biases, prejudices, and stereotypes we possess (Boomer & Boomer, 2001; Hankins, 2003). Our histories encompass our constructions of normality, which for the majority of educators are typically saturated in middle-class ideologies (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2007; Whitfield, 2007), typically viewing anything other than middle-class lives as deficit.

Jones (2004) writes that how we read the world and texts is based on the lives we have lived or the lives we wish we could have lived. We bring our lives, both positive and negative elements, into shaping our understanding. Alternatively, when we think only in terms of how we read the world we can be clueless about others' lives when they are different from our own. As educators, we often privilege *our* lives, experiences, and perspectives whether in classroom discussions, literature we select, or ways we form assumptions about our students and families. Engaging in reflective practices, much like any critical work, is always a work in motion-constantly moving and shifting and is essential to class sensitive work.

Principle Three: Integrate Social Class and Marginalized Perspectives into Curriculum

Many middle-class educators, entrenched in their ways of knowing and viewing the world, often make pedagogical decisions that silence and/or marginalize working-class and poor students. A class sensitive educator is interested in learning about the lives of her students, both in and out of the classrooms, working to understand their class specific histories that they bring to school each day (Jones, 2004). All students come with particular ways of engaging with the

world, which connect in many different ways in the classroom. Teachers need to be responsive to their students, taking note of what the students value and the funds of knowledge they possess (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Luke and Freebody (1997) note a shift in how educators view what students bring to the classroom from "individual differences, knowledges, skills, and backgrounds" (p.208) to the "view that students bring to classrooms available cultural, community, and social resources, texts, and discourses" (p. 208). Class sensitive researchers and educators understand and advocate the importance of knowing and understanding your students and how essential it is to create classrooms that reflect their diverse needs. Some choices an educator makes one year, such as the selection of a particular book used as a read aloud, may not be the most productive choices for the next year's class. Each class holds its own unique students with their own cultural and societal ways of knowing and an educator must be responsive to each student's needs each year. Having lesson plans that are recycled year after year after year is no longer an accepted practice, especially in a classroom committed to critical literacy methods and class sensitive pedagogies.

Jones and Vagle (2013) advocate "one way to build knowledge and even pride in working-class and poor folks lives is to integrate issues of social class broadly, and working-class or poor perspectives specifically, into and across the curriculum (p. 134). One such way to integrate working-class or poor perspectives into the classroom is through the implementation of children's literature foregrounding issues of class. Jones, Clarke, and Enriquez (2010) discuss a young working-class girl named Cadence struggling to connect with the children's book *Henry and Mudge* that her class was reading. They write:

> She must have wondered how her own life mattered in school, where she constantly read books about children who lived lives very different from her own. Is that what childhood is supposed to be like? If so, what does that say about my childhood? It must be very complicated indeed for children in school to be constantly faced with idealized versions of family life when they know their real-world experiences don't resemble such portrayals (p. 62).

Children, like Cadence, are often faced with classroom literature that does not include depictions of their lived experiences. Educators often use prescribed or mandated literacies or choose literacies that they connect to or enjoy, which may or may not include socioeconomic diversity. Without critical literacy engagement, students, like Cadence, are made to feel like their lives are not valued; that their lives are not considered normal (Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2010).

Educators must be aware of their students' lives and incorporate books that foreground diverse social class issues. Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) explain that using books that foreground social class issues "make difference visible, give voice to those traditionally silenced, explore dominant systems of meaning in our society, question why certain groups are positioned as others, and show how people can begin to take action on important issues" (p. 384). Jones (2008) further explains that for working-class and poor children to "recognize themselves in children's literature is equally important as teaching them to reposition themselves as critical readers who recognize in/visibility in texts and speak out against representations that marginalize and devalue tens of millions of families' lived realities in the United States." (p. 50). Working-class and poor students need to be able to see themselves in the literary pages and equally must be able to critically examine the ways in which they are conveyed.

Students, in addition to educators, can conduct critical autobiographical work attending to the "why" of their experiences (Dutro, 2009, p. 231). Dutro (2008, 2009, 2011) discusses how classrooms can be transformative places where testimonies and critical witnessing can occur where wounds are allowed to speak (Dutro & Bien, 2014) and status quos can be challenged (Dutro, 2013). Dutro acknowledges students daily enter classrooms with difficult stories but as critical witnesses we must "reify the pre-existing storylines that assure us that certain experiences are not to be voiced in school or are just the kinds of challenges, pathologies, that *they*, as opposed to *we*, would confront in life" (Dutro, 2013, p. 311). Troubling and disrupting the pre-existing storylines, such as the stories told about working-class and poor families—the assumptions and judgments associated with living on the "lower ends" of the social class spectrum-- invites educators to take up the difficult work of critical witnessing which requires "drawing in another's testimony, with a heart-piercing embrace, allowing her story to speak to what we sense, but cannot fully name," while "holding that story at arm's length and seeing and acting on the material differences that situate stories and differences and those living and telling them" (Dutro, 2013, p. 311).

Drawing on the metaphors of testimony and witnessing, Dutro uses these metaphors as "a way to conceptualize how students' lives are documented in classroom and how educators respond to and interpret information gleamed about students" (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 281-282). Students are "everyday documentarians" of their lives and their experience and these metaphors offer critical tools to first, peel away or deconstruct the stories that have been told about them, and secondly, to explore the ways students and teachers can engage in transformative acts of critical witnessing that disrupt pre-exiting storylines and challenges deficit perspectives (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008).

However, testifying and critical witnessing is more than just letting students talk about their lives as educators sit passively and listen. Critical witnessing is challenging and imperative work. When educators bear witness to students' reconstructions of an experience, it can cause uneasiness and discomfort. And Dutro argues, it should—educators "should be knocked off balance…by stories of loss, plain, absence---shared by anyone, but certainly children. Our visceral unsteadiness is our entre to witnessing, if we allow it to be" (Dutro, 2013, p. 309). It is in these moments of unsteadiness where educators *feel* the student's words and examine the "pre-stitched narrative threads from affixing what we already think we *know about* kids, literacy, what is acceptable, what is valued" (Dutro, 2013, p. 309). It is in these moments where students possess the power to tell the stories of their lives.

In chapter four, "Classroom of Testimony" I put Dutro's ideas of testimony and critical witnessing to work. Focusing on a fourth grade classroom, I examine how using *Tight Times,* a book featuring a young boy who was living economic hardships; coupled with my own testimony about childhood economic hardships led and invited the students to testify about their lives sparking an "explosion" in the classroom that I had not anticipated. While the students testified, I discovered firsthand the hardships of critical witnessing and the anxieties it produced, yet equally learned of its importance as my pre-existing storylines and judgments were disrupted and levels of trust were established.

Principle Four: Perceive Classed Bodies in Moment-To Moment Interactions with Educators, Students, and Families

Social class is lived in and performed through the body in subtle and obvious ways—all influential in the ways people perceive and interact with one another. Classism in education, then, is often expressed through what we do with our body; what we say

through our language; and simultaneously how we perceive others' bodies and languages. (Jones & Vagle, 2013, p. 135)

Thinking about our bodies as educators and the work they do in these moment- to moment interactions is particularly useful to class sensitive pedagogies and was extremely valuable in this study. "As humans, we live as subjects in and through our bodies. All understanding, our memory, perception, emotional and cognitive relations to the world, is embodied" (Dahlberg et.al, 2008, p. 45). Our bodies tell stories that our words may not—facial expressions, eye contact, raised eyebrow, ways we position our body can reveal a classed nature (Jones & Vagle, 2013). As Grumet (1988) adds, "we become convinced that whatever we see in our mind's eye is a private vision" (p. 129), yet our bodies contradict this revealing truths. In this study thinking about my body in moment-to-moment interactions especially was extremely valuable (as seen in chapters four and six). When I physically placed my body in particular places, like on the playground field near the students and away from the teachers, deep and rich interactions occurred with the students. Also thinking about my body when actively listening to the students was important and something the students took note of. For example, one student mentioned that she knew I really cared about her and was really listening to her words because I was looking at her and not distracted by other things like looking at my cell phone (more about this in chapter six).

Reflecting on our "assumptions and perceptions of middle-class normality on others as it has been put on us" (Jones &Vagle, 2013, p.135) is important class sensitive work and is often not critically considered. In a study conducted by Luttrell (1997), she writes about working-class women reflecting on their schooling and the middle-class normality that was imposed on them. To be successful in school, the women attributed it not to themselves but to being a teacher's pet,

and one became a pet by "comply[ing] with traditional, middle-class femininity" (p. 82). Pets were typically "attractive, smart, and—most important—good girls," usually higher class, yet being a good girl was "risky" because it made it difficult to defend yourself against the physical and verbal assaults by peers (p. 82). Being chosen to be a teacher's pet and conform to middle-class normality that defied *their* notions of normality made some feel uncomfortable and others defiant. Luttrell concludes,

> What bothered the women I interviewed (and me) most about teachers' pets was that some students were chosen to be special at the expense of others—a fundamental betrayal of trust in the student-teacher bond. Teachers' pets enhanced the hold of teachers and certain students on their privileged social position (whether age, gender, race, or class based), so the contest became a ritual celebration of social injustice. (p. 89)

Daily in our classrooms "celebration[s] of social injustice" are being held when educators privilege well-dressed, well-mannered, compliant, middle/upper class children while marginalizing (and sometimes even demonizing) working-class and poor students and their families. Educators exercise their power and "deposit" knowledge in their students' heads and, without critical reflection, these deposits are packaged in their ways of viewing the world including stereotypes and judgments. Within this oppressive system students are viewed as "receptacles" (Freire, 2000, p.72), a damaging way of thinking for all students, but especially so for working-class and poor students whose knowledge is already not valued in the classroom (Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2006). Often these students experience the devastating effects of feeling un-powerful where others feel powerful; as "outsiders in their own classrooms" (Hicks, 2002, p. 135). The dichotomy of insider/outsider in the classroom dictates who feels powerful to speak and whose language is privileged when they do (Janks, 2014) leading those

who feel the power to speak and be heard. Class sensitive pedagogies take active note that these ways of normality are difficult to articulate, detect, and trace. Jones and Vagle (2012) further add that students are very rarely theorized as socially classed beings—beings constructed by social, political, discursive, and societal forces. Each of these forces works to form us as socially classed beings, dictating to our psyche ways we *should be* engaging in and with the world. It defines our perceptions, beliefs, ways we dress, and ways we speak--As socially classed beings we are always "subject to positioning by whatever powerful discourses they happen to encounter"(Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p.27 as cited in Brantlinger, 2007, p.239) and are constantly being positioned in various ways. Brantlinger contends "people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then to try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3 as cited in Brantlinger, 2007, p. 239). These constructions mandate social hierarchies, allowing some to be powerful and some to be dominated. Brantlinger (2007) further adds, "in meritocratic schooling…for certain children to be deemed superior, Others must be designated inferior, dumb, and incompetent" (p. 239).

Boler (1999) argues for educators to take critical notice of embodied emotions and the ways they have been described as both socially constructed and individualized. Boler (1999) contends that emotions, "reflects the complex dynamics of one's lived situation…emotions are inseparable from actions and relations, from lived experienced." (p. 2). Schools are places where working-class and poor students know is not for them—places where they are the victims of "symbolic violence" (Brantlinger, 2007, p. 242) and can act out in rebellion against this oppression and unfair treatment receiving brandings such as "emotionally disturbed" (p. 247). Emotions are complicated within school because each member carries his or her own "emotional

baggage" into the classroom, stemming from our varied and multiple individualized backgrounds. (Boler, 1999, p.2).

Thinking about emotions and the ways that allow students to exert power or respond to the power inflicted upon them was a powerful component in this study. Students and educators displayed anger, frustration, fears, and tears in response to outside societal factors at play in their lives and in an effort to feel powerful (Boler, 1999). This is seen in all three of my data chapters—chapters four, five, and six.

Principle Five: Change Broader School and Classroom Policies and Practices to Reflect an Anticlassist and Antipoverty Commitment

Ruby Payne, author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and self-proclaimed "expert on the mindsets of economic classes and overcoming the hurdles of poverty" (www.ahaprocesses.com) has been, in many schools across the country, the sole authoritative voice talking about issues of class. Schools have adopted her teachings as truths and utilized her framework for "understanding" their working-class and poor students. Unfortunately, where her framework lacks in research and data, it makes up for in deficit perspectives and blaming of working-class and poor families. Researchers committed to class sensitive practices have critiqued her work (e.g. Boomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2005, 2008, 2013; Ng &Rury, 2006; Vagle & Jones, 2012; Valencia, 2009) for her exemplification of the deficit perspective and placing the blame on individuals instead of the systematic and structural inequalities that produce inequitable conditions. For example, her books feature many scenarios "to portray the cases which I have become acquainted" (Payne, 1996, p. 9) that feature working-class and poor families in very negative and damaging ways such as parents engaging in drugs, alcohol, and/or prostitution.

Frameworks, like Payne's, when viewed uncritically, can sound like an easy fix—if I do this *then* I will "understand" my poor students and their families. Payne asserts, "poverty in the United States is a culture, an institution, a way of life" (p.148). Yet, Gorski reminds educators that people who are in poverty do not share a culture but share social conditions. He further adds, "the culture of poverty idea is nonsensical because the idea that we can know anything about somebody based on a single dimension…is…nonsensical" (Gorski, 2013, p.53). Payne's teachings are full of false and damaging stereotypes including (in her discussion on generational poverty), "The mother is always at the center, though she may have multiple sexual relationships" (p. 56), "Allegiances may change overnight; favoritism is a way of life" (p. 57), and "discussions of academic topics is generally not prized" (p. 51). All of her teachings create this nonsensical ideal of poverty as a culture, that this is the way working-class and poor people are, and thousands of educators across the country are heeding her teachings as truths. Yet, it is dangerous to accept things as truths without critical analysis (Gorski, 2013). Engaging in class sensitive practices requires deep critical thought and commitments to changing your own thoughts, pedagogies, and thinking about ways to eradicate classism, even if only in your classroom.

However, engaging in critical thought and "disrupting the commonplace " (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) is not enough. Freire (2000) calls for educators to engage in praxis, the action of reflection upon the world in order to transform/change it. Action and reflection go hand in hand. He continues by saying, "To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (p. 88). It is not enough to critique one must *do* something.

When thinking about naming and renaming the world, critical literacy provides meaningful analytic tools to reflect on how power, perspective, and positioning are always at play in our classrooms. Critical literacy can be a misleading phrase seeming to refer to something that only takes place during the literacy hour at school but in actuality it offers "potent ways of reading, seeing, and acting in the world" (Janks, 2014, p.1).

Theorists, researchers, and educators may describe critical literacy in a myriad of ways but most hold true to its core commitments that critical literacy is a political act examining issues of power and language and striving for social action and justice. Vasquez (2003) describes critical literacy as "imagining thoughtful ways of thinking about reconstructing and redesigning texts and images to convey different, more socially just and equitable messages that have real-life effects on the world" (p. 2). By using the word "texts" I refer to both written and non-written texts such as books, commercials, movies; even conversations can be read through a critical literacy perspective.

While critical literacy can and does imagine new possibilities, it's an act of *doing*-to take an assertive questioning eye to text to decide how the text is asserting its power, how it's trying to position the reader, and the multiple perspectives at play competing against one another (Jones, 2006). Critical literacy is more than just a literary practice; it is a life practice, and is a needed tool when reflecting on school and classroom anticlassist and antipoverty policies and practices.

Conclusion

Foregrounding my study utilizing Jones and Vagle's five principles for class sensitive practices, extending it with critical literacy commitments, and thinking of the notion of people as socially classed beings, shaped my understanding of the phenomenon of social class at Pine Tree

Elementary. The literature reaffirmed the complexities and intricacies of understanding social class and reminded me about the context of the word "social class:" that the *social* in class matters. Society perpetuates stereotypes, assumptions, and judgments concerning social class; all saturated with layers of power, positioning, and perspective narrating truths for critical analysts to dispel. As Dahlberg et al. state, "the phenomenological ideal of going to the things themselves means to do full justice to the everyday experience, to the lived experience. The things… are not to be understood as existing solely in themselves" (D, p. 32). Indeed, nothing exists solely in itself and using these five principles helped refine my thinking to see that I was never seeing a singular thing.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Making, Breaking, and Changing Plans

Poet Robert Burns (1785), in his poem *To a Mouse* wrote, "The best laid schemes of Mice and Men oft go awry and leave us nothing but grief and pain for promised joy!" This poem excerpt resonated with me as I had made careful research plans before beginning my study. I spent lengthy amounts of time crafting a plan for what I was going to do while at Pine Tree—what I was looking for, how I was going to try and find it, and how I was going to analyze it. Writing my prospectus and completing all the necessary research paperwork ensured my plans and placed them into prospective action. Walking into Pine Tree Elementary on my first day as a researcher, I felt so confident. I was prepared; my research questions clearly outlined my purpose and I *knew* what I was going to do. While I remember professors advising, "If you know or *think* you know the answers to your research questions before your study even begins, then they are probably not very good questions," I had scoffed off that heeding. I knew my questions and I had a pretty good idea what their answers would be—this research would provide the means to articulate the story confirming my answers.

My first mistake I made as a researcher was to rest comfortably and safely in this sense of *knowing*. My construction of knowing would come collapsing down within my first week at Pine Tree. When designing my study, I initially sought to understand and learn more about a program implemented in the school the prior year. Dr. Phillips, the principal of Pine Tree the prior year,

in conjunction with Drs. Jones and Vagle, had introduced and engaged the school in class sensitive pedagogies and critical literacy practices and a working-class book of the month program was started. The purpose of this working-class book of the month program was to introduce faculty and students to books that featured diverse working-class lives and included books such as *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007*)*, *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) and *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 2002). Classroom discussions would occur, centering on the themes of the books and students' connections/disconnections to the book, concluding with students creating a visual reflection of their understanding and or connections with the book. For my study I wanted to see this in action—to interview teachers before they used the books, observe the classroom discussions, interview the students before and after they created their visual representation, and interview Dr. Phillips who had started the program. My research questions were crafted centering on these experiences and I felt I *knew* the answers to my questions would all reflect how positive and needed these books were in the classroom and how lives were changed as a result of their implementation. I *knew* these books would offer powerful experiences and the true purpose of my study would be to prove it.

I quickly found myself at a difficult crossroad. My confidence, my *knowing*, was shattered with other truths during my first week at Pine Tree. Dr. Phillips moved to another school in the county and the new principal, LuAnn Smith, did not continue his book of the month program. Teachers were adjusting to the shift in new leadership, seeming to forget all the class sensitive engagements they had learned the prior years--all the class sensitive books appeared to be collecting dust in forgotten shelves in their classrooms. My safety and comfort I had rested in knowing was gone—in fact, the basis of what I thought my study was going to be in many ways was gone. Changes would have to be made.

Design of Study: Drawing on Post-Intentional Phenomenology Methodologies

It is comical to me that I went into this research study with all this sense of knowing, yet I had chosen to draw on phenomenological methodology which teaches the exact opposite. I spent the next several weeks returning to its teachings, allowing it to mentor me like an old friend, a friend *I* had forgotten on the bookshelf. Vagle (2014) gently reminded me to first be open and humble, "the kind of humility… when we try to stop being so certain of what we know and think… the kind of humility evinced when we truly consider new things…. In which we let go" (p. 15). I had to humble myself, realizing I *never knew* the answers, realizing how arrogant it was to even suggest I did, and to let go my prior thoughts and fall openly into the phenomenon, to "embrace the openness that crafting phenomenological research requires" (p. 16). And while this felt far less settling than my knowing, it also felt much more freeing. By letting go, I opened up and I allowed the phenomenon to teach me.

This study draws on the theoretical and methodological commitments of Vagle's (2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2014) conception of post-intentional phenomenological research, Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom's (2008) teachings of reflective lifeworld research as well as commitments to qualitative research (e.g., Graue and Walsh, 1998; Roulston, 2010; Spradley, 1980). Vagle introduces post-intentional phenomenology guided by two theoretical assumptions: 1) that qualitative researchers are already "in intentional relationships with the phenomenon under investigation and that this relationship should be the central commitment when conducting phenomenological research" (p.2); and 2) that intentionality can be read poststructurally, because intentionality is "shifting and forever partial" (p.2).

Intentionality, while a difficult concept to grasp, refers "to the relationship between a person and the object or events of his/her experience" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 47) and as an

"invisible thread that connects humans to their surroundings meaningfully whether they are conscious of that connection or not" (Freeman & Vagle, 2009, p. 3). Reflecting on intentionality is important in phenomenological and qualitative research because it reminds us that no researcher ever enters the research completely neutral, without biases, and detached from the phenomenon (Dahlberg, et l., 2008; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995)

Early on in the research process, Vagle (2014) suggests crafting an "initial post-reflexion statement" which not only focuses on "personal beliefs and perspectives, but also what frames your perspectives, beliefs, and perceptions" (p.133). Like Vagle and Dahlberg et al. suggested, I was "already" in an intentional relationship with this phenomenon of understanding social class. As a socially classed being I had a lifetime of ways I had constructed understandings and ways understanding about class had been forced upon me. Up until the age of nine, I was the daughter of a single working-class mother who supported my grandmother and me. When my mother married my daddy (not by birth but the only daddy I know) we achieved much more financial security. We shifted from a working-class single family to a dual income middle-class family. Now as an adult, still residing in the middle-class, I noticed a disconnect with issues regarding social class within myself. Even though I may have had "working-class roots" and while my family of origin in many ways currently operates financially as working-class, I felt disconnected with issues relating to class. After many years as a teacher not giving issues of social class the deserved deep critical thought, and after taking many doctoral courses surrounded by issues of social class where I did nothing *but* give issues of social class deep critical thought, I was curious to see how a school comprised of more than half working-class and poor students and the faculty responded to issues of social class either directly or indirectly. I wanted to see how social class is lived, experienced, and engaged within this school, by its faculty and students, and how I as a

researcher was influenced by this phenomenon as well. Throughout this study, and especially seen through my bridling journal excerpts (as I will explain in my data collection section), I have interrogated my own perceptions of normality and assumptions which I have brought to the research by providing autobiographical accounts.

Posting Phenomenology and Class Sensitive Pedagogies

Vagle introduces a post-structural commitment to phenomenology noting the importance of "seeing knowledge as partial, situated, endlessly deferred, and circulating through relations" (p. 111-112). Meanings are always under construction and being reconstructed in moment-to-moment interactions (Vagle & Jones, 2012) and "because we live in the world of which the phenomenon are part, they have meaning for us" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 49). Poststructural researcher Davies (2003) asserts that a poststructuralist researcher is "sensitive to the multiple possible meanings an event [or text] holds… s/he is sensitive to the way in which her/his own multiple (and often contradictory) desires shape what s/he see and s/he focuses on" (p. 144). Vagle's posting phenomenology offers a powerful addition to phenomenology; it was quite helpful for me to constantly critically examine my *knowings*, taking note that knowledge is always situated within a particular body because of many competing discourses, perspectives, power, and positioning (Jones, 2006).

Embedding my research with class sensitive pedagogies and critical literacy commitments is useful as intentionality is something that can be read critically. Dahlberg et al. (2008) further explain, "when living our everyday lives we do not problematize what we experience but take for granted that what we see is what it seems to be" (p. 131). This proves true when thinking about ways I and others "disconnect" with issues of social class; when we aren't problematizing, we aren't reflecting; thus we take the world for as *we* view it to be.

Thinking about the ways we take things for granted and how people are affected and positioned as a result are central commitments to class sensitive pedagogies and critical literacy and are useful contributions to post intentional phenomenology.

Vagle (2010) lists five components of conducting post-intentional phenomenological research:

1) Identify a phenomenon in its multiple, partial, and varied contexts;

2) Devise a process for collecting data appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation;

3) Make a bridling plan;

4) Read and write your way through data in a systematic manner; and

5) Craft a text that captures tentative glimpses of the phenomenon" (p.400).

The phenomenon I *originally* wished to explore is the phenomenon of understanding social class in the context of an elementary school classroom and the research I *actually* did was exploring the phenomenon of understanding social class in the context of three elementary school classrooms. Granted, both titles seem relatively the same yet my original study and the study that actually occurred were quite different. Dahlberg, Drew, and Nystrom (2001) state that a phenomenon is something "that presents itself to, or, as it is experienced by, a subject" (p. 45 as cited in Vagle, 2014, p.122) and Dahlberg et al. (2008) extend this idea by stating,

> When we let the things themselves present themselves in all their multiplicity we let them show all their possibilities, all their horizons, presentations as well as appresentations. It means that we do not impose ourselves upon the things, that we do not force them into linguistic categories, that we do not make definite what is indefinite…not making definite

> what is indefinite is adopting an attitude of openness to the phenomenon… in which the phenomenon should be allowed to show itself in its own pace and its own way (p.122).

In my proposed study, I had articulated this phenomenon of understanding social class, yet I was not allowing it to "present" itself to me. I was making definite what was indefinite by thinking I had it all figured out before my study ever began. I had to slow down, relax, and let the phenomenon speak to me in ways that beforehand I could not hear. And when I did listen, the phenomenon taught me more than I would have ever anticipated, with things bursting forth, leaving me at times speechless and unprepared.

Participant Selection

Originally, I desired to focus this study on two classroom teachers, one in the lower grades (K-2) and one in the upper grades (3-5). My rationale in wanting one teacher in the lower grades and one in the upper grades was to gain perspectives from both ends of the spectrum of the elementary school.

Dr. Jones and Dr. Vagle did extensive work with the teachers at Pine Tree Elementary surrounding class-sensitive practices and critical literacy work during the prior year. Dr. Jones worked with the entire staff as well as with a small core group of eight to ten teachers who displayed a desire to learn more about class sensitivity and critical literacy and how it connects to classroom practices. Charlotte and Barbara were two teachers who worked with Drs. Jones and Vagle and were also in my writing professional group. Charlotte was a first grade teacher and Barbara was a third grade teacher, and I asked them to participate in my study for two reasons. One, they had already expressed an interest in the phenomenon after having engaged in class sensitive and critical literacy training; and two, they fit the description of what I wanted—one teacher in the lower grades and one in the higher grades.

The study began with a focus on these two teachers and their students. Parental consent forms were sent to each student in each class and most were returned with parental permission to be a part of the study. Students whose parents had given their permission were then asked to sign assent forms which all did. I was in their classrooms on Thursdays as part of the writing professional development and on Fridays for research purposes.

Sarah and Linda were added to the study well after I began collecting data. Sarah, a fifth grade teacher, and Linda, a special education teacher who worked with Sarah's class in an inclusion model, were both part of my professional writing group. After several times in Sarah's classroom working and engaging with her students, I realized in her classroom the phenomenon of social class was presenting itself in ways that I had not seen in the other two classrooms. The threads of intentionality were "running all over the place (Freeman & Vagle, 2009, 3) and seemed to be pulling me into Sarah's classroom. As I write in chapter 4, in many ways I feel my research *began* in her classroom. The students featured in this work spoke to the phenomenon and helped my understanding of class in nuanced ways constantly showing the complexities of class. The students featured in this dissertation were of Hispanic and white descent and many received free or reduced lunch.

Pine Tree Elementary

Pine Tree Elementary is located in a southeastern state in the United States in a county that is home to farming, poultry, and factories/manufacturing plants. The school, as well as the county, experienced some major economic and racial shifts over the last fifteen years. At Pine Tree, the white student population decreased, Hispanic student population increased, and students receiving free and reduced lunch greatly increased. The county noted a large gain in Hispanic population over the last few decades due to chicken processing plants and other

medium-sized and large factories in the county. The majority of the staff at Pine Tree is white and female. Pine Tree has fewer than six hundred students and has a small town, "everybody knows everybody" type feel (several of the staff had family members that also worked at the school and many had children/nieces/nephews/godchildren there as well).

Pine Tree is a "Leader in Me" school, which focuses on Stephen Covey's (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (see leaderinme.org). These seven habits, which included; *Be Proactive*, *Begin with the End in Mind, and Think Win-Win* were seen and heard throughout the school. Posters with the seven habits hung in every classroom, bulletin boards highlighting students demonstrating the habit through writing or pictures, and students could be heard singing the habits (*Be proactive everyday. Make good decisions it's your choice)*. Not being familiar with this program, I found it interesting the emphasis and focus these habits received as well as the anxieties they could produce—it's hard to follow all of these seven habits on a consistent basis even for adults.

In 2013, a shift in leadership occurred with Dr. Phillips being moved/promoted to another school in the county and a new principal, Luann Smith, taking his place. Luann was data driven, removing instructional practices she deemed "unnecessary" (such as conferencing and free writing in writer's workshop), and ran a "tight ship." She required teachers to submit weekly lesson plans detailing what they would be doing and at what times. Teachers were expected to follow their lesson plans and keep on schedule and most of the teachers I observed kept timers on their phones which would signal when the current lesson needed to end and the next lesson needed to begin. The constant beeping of timers fueled what I perceived to be an anxious environment—teachers seemed to feel the pressure of all that was being expected of them at a county and school level.

Remnants of the class-sensitive work by Dr. Jones and Vagle were peppered in various aspects of the school. In the teachers' workroom/lunch area a professional library, started by Dr. Jones, sat in the corner housing literary works as well as professional resources. Through the National Writing Grant, I added many new books on both personal writing and professional writing to the library. The book of the month books sat on classroom bookshelves, as well as boxes of unopened ones in the reading specialist's office. With the shift in leadership, the trajectory of the work established with Drs. Jones and Vagle had been stalled, paused, or seemingly left behind entirely, but some physical artifacts of that work – and even some of the language practices and commitments cultivated during that time (as I would hear in my data) were still circulating in the space, residual reminders that somehow class matters.

Data Collection

I opened, explored, and engaged with the phenomenon of social class through interviews, classroom observations, interactions with students and faculty, focus groups, student journal writings, and my bridling journal. Each brought newness to my understanding of the phenomenon of social class.

Interviews

Initially I desired to conduct three formal phenomenological interviews with my three focal teachers, the new principal LuAnn, and the former principal Dr. Phillips, taking place at the beginning, middle, and conclusion of my study. By the time my study was fully underway, preparations for and taking state standardized testing was occurring, causing my plans to once again change. Trying to schedule three interviews with the principal, LuAnn, was impossible due to busy schedules with only one actually occurring and Dr. Phillips was quite busy with his new school and could not be reached. Only one formal interview with each teacher occurred as well

as many informal interviews and conversations which took place at various times and places throughout the school day. Each formal interview was recorded and many of the informal ones were recorded as well.

No formal interviews with students were conducted. Conversations with individual students generally arose when asked to talk about their writings (e.g. journal writings). Most of my interactions with students took place in focal group or group settings as I will discuss later in the focal groups section.

Classroom observations and interactions

I was usually in each focal classroom twice a week on Thursdays and Fridays. On Thursdays I was working with the teachers and their students as a writing professional development facilitator, while on Fridays my focus was to conduct research. However, it is important to note that my role as a writing facilitator and a researcher did not stay within these neat distinctions—sometimes writing lessons were held on Thursdays and Fridays and data was collected on both days as well. While in the classrooms, I positioned myself as a participant observer, drawing from Spradley's (1980) work noting that participant observation "connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences, discovering through immersion and participation the hows and whys of human behavior in a particular context" (p. 75). Because participant observation requires a researcher to embed herself in the social context of the classroom, Spradley offers three elements to consider in participant observations:

1) Spending time in the location you wish to observe.
2) Building rapport with members involved in the study. The participants need to feel accepted, not threatened, and feel as if they can be themselves.

3) Spending enough time to get the needed data to gain understanding of the phenomenon (p. 75).

Participant observation afforded me an "insider" perspective to things I may otherwise have taken for granted, including the cultural norms of how the classroom operates, who is/is not positioned as powerful, whose voices are privileged and marginalized, what topics get discussed and how they are discussed, and how the teacher engages with her students in the classroom space. I spent time with the students and teachers by joining them on the playground, eating lunch in the cafeteria, interacting with them in the classroom, and engaging in discussions outside the classroom spaces such as in the hallway, cafeteria booths, or on the playground. Students seemed to view me as a part of their classroom, yet not in the same authoritative positions as their teachers, discussing things with me that they did not discuss with their teachers (as seen in chapters 4 and 6).

Although the book of the month project was no longer being implemented, I really desired to see how working-class books influenced or did not influence my understandings of the phenomenon of social class, so I asked the teachers if they would be willing to read a few with their classes. I paid particular attention to how the books were discussed by teachers and students, the potential class sensitive and/or critical literacy practices engaged, and how the students might be positioned as a result. Each of the three focal classes read *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) while a mixture of other books were read among the three classes, including *Se Si Puedo! Yes We Can!* (Cohn, 2002); *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1988); *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007); *Family Pictures* (Garza, 2005); and *A Day's Work* (Bunting, 1994).

Focal groups

Focal groups with students occurred both spontaneously and with prompting by the students. Spontaneous focal groups occurred with Sarah's class, especially on the playground. Due to their recess time, I was always able to join Sarah's class on the playground. I was rarely able to join Barbara's or Charlotte's classes on the playground due to their scheduled recess times.

My first time joining Sarah's class on the playground, I chose to separate myself from where the teachers gathered to be closer to where the students played. The teachers all sat together at the top of the hill under the shade of an old oak tree. I, however, chose to sit at the bottom of a large grassy hill in the midst of all the action (often literal action as I once found myself sitting in the middle of a football game). I chose to sit at the bottom of the hill to have a vantage point of the action; to see the students and how they interacted with one another. Yet, I never sat alone. Students always gathered around me on the grassy hill for a variety of reasons--to "Girl Talk," judge a cheerleading competition, mediate a disagreement, or to talk more deeply about things we talked about in class.

Students also requested focal groups. Sometimes students would come to me and say things like, "Me, Susan, and Valencia would like to talk to you more about our tight times. Could you meet privately with us?" Sometimes the conversations seemed light hearted, such as talking about boyfriends or girlfriends, while at other times the conversations were deep and full of emotion, such as when students discussed issues of homelessness, economic hardships, child abuse, divorce, and family members in jail. Many of the conversations were recorded and transcribed and always with the students' knowledge.

Bridling journal

A bridling journal, or as Vagle (2014) renames it a "post-reflexion journal" (p. 133) is a journal where I wrote, often weekly, to constantly interrogate myself and my thinking. My bridling journal offered me a place to question my understandings, judgments, and assumptions I brought to the research, as well my developing understandings of the phenomenon. It allowed me a place to be shocked, outraged, saddened, and to reflect on things I considered normal/not normal, and ways I was connecting or not (Vagle, 2014). Lather (1993) adds, "It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing--spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitutes power/knowledge" (p. 675 as cited in Vagle, 2014, p. 132). Seeing my thoughts in print, visually seeing what was framing my thinking, was a powerful discursive and analytical tool in my understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection Tools

Throughout my study I heeded Graue & Walsh's warnings that, "I will remember nothing" (p.132) and "Record it. Record it. Record it" (p.144). Always present with me was my laptop, my cell phone recorder, and a composition notebook. Many of the conversations, both whole group and individually, were recorded and transcribed. On my drive home at the conclusion of each day at Pine Tree, I would record audio memos detailing my initial thoughts, potential manifestations, things I wanted to research, and things I wanted to bridle.

Data Analysis

For my data analysis I utilized Vagle's (2010) post-intentional phenomenal approach of whole-part-whole analysis for the interviews, classroom conversations, and focal groups. This resulted in multiple reads of transcripts. For the first read of the transcript I simply read, often times listening to the recordings while reading. Listening to the recordings brought me back to

the particulars of the moment—I could see where students were sitting, I could remember how bodies were responding in ways that a recording could not capture. No notes or coding were taken during the first read.

The second reading is a line-by-line read which took a lengthy amount of time. Careful notes were taken, questions written in the margins, and parentheses were placed around material that seems to possess important meaning. Sometimes these second readings led to things I wanted to follow up with my participants or things to which I wanted to pay closer attention.

The more I read and reread the data, manifestations or themes began to emerge. The data began speaking loudly to me and appeared to "*glow*" (MacLure, 2013, p. 662). The glow of the data was "abstract and intangible…had a decidedly embodied aspect… resonating in the body as the brain." (MacLure, 2013, p.662). It defied logic and explanation but when asked how I determined the manifestations of the phenomenon, I simply stated, "I *felt* them. I felt them deep within me. They spoke to me loudly and strongly and I just *knew*."

My bridling journal presented itself as an interpretive analytic tool. Throughout this dissertation, I include excerpts from my bridling journal where I pull out particular entries to show how I thought and conducted analysis. Excerpts from student writings were also used and all participants were given fictitious names to protect their privacy.

The Confliction to be Open

While phenomenology advises us to be open, I did not consider the embodied feelings that would accompany it. Dahlberg et al. (2008) asserts,

> In truth, remaining open is always more than an intellectual task. It demands an alert awareness of one's entire intellectual and emotional response to the situation and to those who have let us into their lives. We do not go in-depth by staying distant (p. 109).

Research would prove far more than just an intellectual task and staying distant was never an option. I felt a dueling sense of a desire to be open as much as possible to my participants and to myself, reminding me that this phenomenon was never something chosen at random; that I had a connection with this phenomenon of social class and it had a connection with me (Vagle, Hughes, &Durbin, 2009). Once I began conducting my research, I felt fully immersed in it in ways I never thought possible, and the weight of the "data" was palpable. My participants would prove to be far more than just people telling stories to support my supposed theories, and this produced feelings of discomfort for me as shown in the following excerpt from a bridling entry:

The drive to Pine Tree Elementary is pretty basic. Once I get out of the city, the roads seem to open up and the pace of life seems to slow down. Pine Tree is located in a town bearing its name, a town full of rich farmland and beautiful scenery that city life does not offer. As I drive to the school, I notice it sits high on a hilltop like a beacon--a pillar of the community. The school's marquee comes into sight as I turn into its parking lot and suddenly I feel nervousness creeping all over my body. A cold chill coupled with a bit of a stomach cramp. I sink into my leather car seat as the weight of what I am about to do anchors me firmly in its clutches. The fears were mounting. I was going to be observing and writing about real people. Real people who have careers they care about, families, lives outside of the printed text of my dissertation. Real people who have feelings, who want, much like myself, to be viewed in the best possible light. Real people who may be afraid to be vulnerable and, if they allow themselves to be, are they willing to let the world see that? Do they really understand what I've asked them to do and be a part of? Do I?

While conducting my study and throughout the writing of this dissertation, I struggled with conflicting emotions that I had something important to contribute to the canon of academic

inquiry yet feeling in some way I was betraying the openness of my participants. Of course, all names and locations included are pseudonyms, and yes they all signed consent forms agreeing to be a part of the study, but in those intimate moments you will read about, I struggled with knowing if they truly understood that the world would see their words and their experiences. It was also a struggle deciding whose stories would be featured, whose stories would never be heard, and how through my writing and theoretical analysis how these stories and their tellers would be portrayed to the readers.

While Vagle (2014) states researchers "found themselves bursting forth toward the phenomenon" (p.128), Bernet, Welton, & Zavota (2005) caution this bursting will require, "to tear oneself out of the moist gastric intimacy, veering out there beyond oneself" (p. 258). I appreciated how Bernet et al. described this bursting in words that reflected how this bursting and openness felt—it at times was painful, uncomfortable, yet there was a strong desire to go beyond myself, seeing what all I could uncover if I was open, honest, and critical of what I was seeing and the ways in which I was seeing. This work tells the story not only of the participants in my study, but also of myself, as I attempt to veer out beyond myself.

CHAPTER 4

CLASSROOM OF TESTIMONY

"It's hard for me to trust people,

So I usually keep it to myself.

But, you don't have to,

Because we will understand you."

(Melinda and Becka, Sarah's Fourth Grade Class)

Introduction

Deficit perspectives and discourses entrench working-class and poor students' schooling experiences. These narratives depict pathologizing descriptions of working-class and poor families as living lives not as full and happy as their middle-class counterparts; often telling stories that their lives need or deserve middle-class pity. So many stories circulate *about* "these," students, the "they that everyone talks about," (Allison, 1994) but what happens when students are able to give voice to their lives and experiences? What happens when students' outside lives intersect with their schooling lives?

When students cross the thresholds of their school's doors, they bring their lives with them and the difficult experiences they have encountered often as result of social and systematic inequalities and injustices. When students share difficult and challenging stories such as those of homelessness, incarcerated family members, low food availability, runs in with social services such as Department of Family Services, loss of utilities, , economic struggles; these stories send signals and messages to educators—that perhaps their families need to be surveyed a bit closer-

and can easily be used to reinforce deficit perspectives by middle-classed educators, leaving students to feel alienated and not valued in school. Students also face teachers telling them their experiences do not have a place in the literacy classroom, that they do not fit into a space already crammed with testing mandates and curricular requirements, and therefore need to be silenced.

Dutro's work issues a charge to literacy educators to "consider how, by whom, and to what effect [these] stories are documented and witnessed" (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 280). Literary classrooms can be rehabilitated into productive and transformative spaces where students and teachers can give testimonies to their life experiences while equally, and imperatively, engaging in critical witnessing to combat stereotypes and damaging deficit perspectives. In this chapter I work with Dutro's analyses (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014) analyses of testifying and critical witnessing as students testify stories from their lives. As "everyday documentarians" students at Pine Tree testified about their lives through informal conversations, formal and informal writings, classroom discussions, objects brought from home, and (for some) photostory projects that hung proudly on the front hallway wall. Yet the crux of testifying lies in what educators and students *do* with these testimonies.

Critical witnessing is visceral work. Many educators veer away from difficult conversations, sometimes in an effort to "protect" their student or other students, but often it is to protect themselves from the painful and unsettling feelings they might encounter. When hearing students' testimonies, we *should* feel unsteady; feel as if the wind is knocked out from us. Dutro & Zenkov (2008) explains:

> Our visceral unsteadiness is our entre to witnessing, if we dare allow it to be. The emotions that may follow are already heading towards structure, bringing even a modicum of stability to our wobbliness – for structure maps affect onto pre-figured story

> lines of what counts as traumatic, sad or challenging. There is potential in the visceral moment to rewrite those story lines to which we turn and, thus, to prevent certain pre-stitched narrative threads from affixing what we already think we *know about* kids, literacy, what is acceptable, what is valued. Also, the visceral moment holds promise to impede certain ever-circulating assumptions from influencing what we believe we understand about *what kids know*– about school, expectations surrounding them, which of their stories are sanctioned and which needs to be left at the door. (p. 309)

It is in these moments of testifying and witnessing where I felt the visceral explosions of the students' words meet with my own internal explosions. In these moment-to-moment interactions with students, they gave me a glimpse into their socially classed beings—the ways they were viewing and articulating their "traumas," and the systematic and discursive rationales behind it. They invited me into a story of their life, a reconstruction of a particular event, and I often times grasped for a structure to understand their stories—a place to neatly contextualize it—and discovered that those neat places are far from neat.

In this chapter, I introduce Sarah's fourth grade classroom as I engage with Dutro's work on testimony and critical witnessing. Many times I was thrown off balance, "cut to the core," (Dutro, 2008, p. 431) by the students' stories and struggled to articulate the right words to say, and in one case, the wrong words came spewing from lips from my own traumas. Sanctioning students' stories and validating their life experiences requires educators to rethink what counts as learning in classrooms and "to challenge the class-based dichotomies that hold students at arm's length and to allow these youth's perspectives and experiences to matter in what occurs in our literacy classrooms" (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 291). By engaging in testifying and critical

witnessing, educators/I allow the students' lives to matter in a space where, for some, they never felt they did.

Sarah and Her Class

Sarah, a white woman in her late twenties, was a member of the writing group I led. She was petite in stature and possessed a quiet demeanor. She was one of four fourth grade teachers at Pine Tree and one of her teammates, Jamie, was also in our writing group. Jamie was Sarah's opposite in many ways—her personality was strong and loud and could come off a bit abrasive; Jamie's voice often bellowed down the hallways, and she often spoke for Sarah in the writing group and in grade level decisions, which I sensed, made Sarah uncomfortable although she never spoke a word in opposition to Jamie. This year marked Sarah's fifth year as a classroom teacher and her first at teaching fourth grade (the last four years she taught first and second grades). Sarah described this year as "walking into the shark tank" where the classroom dynamics often felt like "too much."

Sarah was a new mother to a baby girl named Lucy and Lucy's framed pictures adorned her desk and served as screensavers on her computer and her phone. Her husband worked as a civil servant, often gone for several days at a time. Like most of the teachers I encountered at Pine Tree, Sarah used her cell phone as a timer to keep on schedule, but she also kept her phone close by in case the daycare needed to contact her concerning Lucy or something were to happen to her husband. While she enjoyed her job, she felt the pain of being away from her family during the school day making comments to me like how nice it was that I got to stay home with my children. Using her timer was a welcomed excuse to keep her phone, and her family, close by.

Due to my work with the writing group, I visited and worked with Sarah's classroom many times starting in January. She was open to implementing new ideas and together we incorporated some of the writing lessons we discussed in our professional small groups—writings that aimed to privilege their life experiences—and together we led students into personal writings including "Where I'm From Poems" (inspired by the poet George Ella Lyon), bucket lists, and neighborhood maps to name a few. Each time I worked with Sarah's students, I was amazed at the stories they wrote and the things they wanted to share—the phenomenon of social class seemed to be bursting in all directions in her classroom! About a month into my study I asked Sarah if she and her students would be willing to participate in my study and she, and her inclusion teacher Linda, agreed.

Linda was a special education teacher at Pine Tree and co-taught with Sarah in the literacy and math hours as part of an inclusion model. Linda was a white woman in her early sixties who had four grown children and possessed a high-energy spirit. She was athletic; her tanned body proof of her many years of being active outside, and loved to incorporate elements of fitness into schooling activities. This school year she started a physical training club aimed at teaching students elements of fitness, health, teamwork, and leadership (the leadership element was a nod to the school's Leader in Me program) and several of the students in Sarah class participated in this club.

While Sarah was a bit more reserved emotionally, Linda was much less so. She embodied Dutro's teachings that teaching is a visceral art. She was not afraid to show her emotions in the classroom, and knew the importance of being knocked off your feet by students' stories. In one of our conversations, she tells me about one of her former students (not in Sarah's class) Samuel and a conversation they had about his dad who had moved to another country:

> Linda: So he sat at the table one day and said hey Mrs. Sampson I got a package from my dad. And I said, oh my gosh that is awesome Samuel! And he started telling me what he got and he said, yeah I got this candy I never tried before and I said oh that's cool your dad thought you'd like to try some from over there. He said yeah and he got me this camera for the computer so we can talk, and then he said, and then he got me this jacket. And it still smells like him. And I started boo-hooing right there. I couldn't even help it. It hit me like a ton of bricks and I couldn't hide it. (Cries as she recounts this story). That was just a little piece he gave me—he trusted me with that information because he hid everything. He was a tough kid—a skateboarder rocker little kid. Such a cute kid. You know, it's stuff like that—you have to listen.

Sitting at the table with Linda, something sparked Samuel's desire to share about his pain of being separated from his father and Linda welcomed this conversation by validating his responses (i.e. oh my gosh that is awesome). She acknowledges that Samuel gave her "a little piece" of his life as he testified about the difficulties of being away from his father. She notes that his story "hit me like a ton of bricks and I couldn't hide it" and begins crying feeling the visceralness of the moment. She seemed welcoming of students' testimonies and was not afraid to be open with the students, yet tackling the intricacies of critical witnessing was a bit of a challenge for her. Like many educators, Linda listened to students' stories yet searched for an attempted understanding—a framework their story fit into—and sometimes these framings positioned students and families in negative and stereotypical ways as seen in this chapter.

The classroom composition seemed to be homogeneous with Sarah's classroom serving more of the "lower" academic achieving students (including resource students in the inclusion model) where her teammate Jamie's class was composed of mostly gifted or high achieving

students. Desks were arranged in clusters of four and after the completion of standardized testing, students were able to choose their seats and sit by friends. The students are mostly Hispanic and white with two African American students and more than half of the students receiving free and reduced lunch (according to Sarah). I chose not to inquire which students were or were not receiving free and reduced lunch (in addition I did not seek any other personal information including test scores and grades). I did not want to place Sarah or any of the other teachers in an uncomfortable position in an already vulnerable situation. Yet I was reading and perceiving these students' as classed beings through my own classed life and perceptions.

Sarah described her classroom as "a shark tank" with "mature" students encountering difficult life experiences. Difficult life experiences in Sarah's class included (but not limited to) family members currently incarcerated, family members with drug and alcohol addictions, one family experiencing homelessness, many with economic hardships (not having enough food, money, utilities being shut off), a deported father, a murdered mother, a student "who would rob you blind," a girl who had been suspended for ten days for threatening to kill another girl in the class, unwelcome interventions from social services, and many students whose families were divorced or going through divorces. Sarah expressed feeling inadequate in her teaching preparation with not knowing "how to deal with all these problems" and felt quite thankful to have Linda as a co-teacher in the class. She noted the dichotomies of us/them in addition to the families at the first Open House:

> Sarah: I felt like at Open House I was being interviewed… Have you taught before? Have you had special ed kids in your classroom before? And it would be different if it had been a casual thing but I really felt like I was being interrogated…. Parents would sit with their arms crossed just stone cold staring at me….

These parents appeared to carry with them the ghosts of their schooling past to this meeting—remnants of their pained schooling memories (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) yet Sarah took it as a personal attack against her. Her students also carried with them ghosts of their inside/outside of school life that at times made the room feel "heavy." As Linda said, "They [families and students] have been wounded and hurt by schools and schools are not a positive…it's an absolute truth."

Nine of Sarah's students are featured in this chapter. Six of the students in this chapter are white (Jake, Pete, Susan, John, Brittany, and Melinda) and three are Hispanic (Simon, Angela, and Valencia). While educators often use free or reduced lunch as class markers, I chose not to know this information. Instead I perceived how class seemed to circulate in the language and lived practices within the classroom and looked for signals that seemed to speak to the phenomenon of social class such as issues of work, housing, family structures, relationships with institutions and social agencies (such as the Department of Family Services and the criminal justice system), and issues around money.

While in this chapter I explore some of the difficult stories they share, I want to be explicit that these were not sad children. Often when working-class and poor students' share difficult life stories these are used as fuel to further perpetuate deficit perspectives (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008) and while this chapter may be read in a deficit fueling manner, I want to make it clear that these were happy children. We shared many jokes, silly moments, fun times on the playground, secret note writing in the lunchroom during the "quiet time," and many talks about boys and relationships especially with Brittany, Melinda, and Valencia. Students showed sadness when they felt sad about something and often times it was tied to systemic injustices and losses. Often working-class and poor children are positioned as always "'having less' of everything

compared to their middle-class and affluent peers" (Jones & Shackelford, 2012, p. 396) and that "happy" children are those who have access to wealth and material possessions, yet these students were happy and expressed tremendous love for their families.

Double Roles and Time to Testify

My first day as a researcher in Sarah's class (after the many weeks of getting consent paperwork completed) was designed to observe Sarah reading the book *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) to her students and the discussions that followed. *Tight Times*, one of the books used in the former working-class book of the month program, foregrounds economic hardships through the perspective of a young boy's life. I was curious how the students would respond to this text.

I walked into the classroom to a concluding math lesson. Linda was teaching the students multiplication with fractions in word problems and several of the students looked up and said, Hi Mrs. Shackelford!" I smiled and waved to them as I placed my things on a long table in the back of the room next to John. He moved his notebook out of the way; his way of granting me permission to sit down.

After I sat my things up, I made my way to Sarah's desk. She was focused on a stack of papers she was grading and said, "Oh hi!" completely unaware that I had been in the room for several minutes. She confessed she was behind on grading papers due to her missing a few days of work (her daughter Lucy had been home sick) and was frantically trying to complete her grades for the upcoming progress reports and *could I please read the book and lead the discussion instead? Sure*, I said not really sure at all. This threw me another research curveball—assuming both a teaching and research position simultaneously. Of course many researchers assume both roles and produced lovely data and rich findings, but they also knew ahead of time they would be performing both roles. And in many ways I had already assumed both roles since I

had led several lessons with this class, but since this was my first official day collecting data, I feared I would lead the discussion in ways that were self-serving. After all, I had designed research questions that I was striving to answer, and my fear was that I would be subconsciously or consciously manipulating the conversations and therefore manipulate the students to serve my own needs.

Linda asked the students to put away their math materials and to get out their writing notebooks and I was grateful for the few extra moments to gather my thoughts. Standing in front of the classroom, I took stock of my body and felt its confusion. It was as if my body was asking me, *how do you want me to act? Like a researcher or like a teacher?* At that particular moment, the embodiment of being a researcher *felt* differently than the embodiment of being a teacher. As a teacher my body and my mind could shift into autopilot—it was familiar and comfortable. When I taught, my body naturally adopted a few differences--my voice tended to shift a bit higher and, according to my husband, my faint southern accent showed its appearance more. As a researcher my body felt tense and alert, bearing a resemblance to my lifeguarding days when I was in constant alert mode—*what's happening over there? What are they talking about? Is that important? Did I miss something?* It was an interesting moment—I had never really thought about my body and how it was positioning me and how I could physically and mentally position it (Jones, 2013).

Thinking about my body in the context of phenomenology allowed me to see that my body was more than just a biological construct but instead was "constantly perceived and constantly perceiving"--it was my way of being in the world (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p.41). My body was having an awakening to all that it was trying to see; it was attempting to perceive and see all that it had not seen before.

Sarah had a white rocking chair that sat in the front of the room with a copy of *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) already sitting there. “Hello everyone!” I said as I sat down in the rocking chair. “Please come and join me on the carpet!” Sarah had a rug she had purchased where the students would collectively gather for class readings or discussions. Memories of reading to my own former kindergarten students came rushing back. “*Come join me on the carpet!”* and my students would come and sit close to me. My kindergarten students would fight over who got to sit next to me, who got to hang onto my leg, or the coveted lap spot. I loved these moments where my students and I were huddled together while reading-- their proximity to me and the pages created this feeling that we were all engaging in whatever reading experience we were about to encounter together.

Yet, now many years later, when I trouble this memory a bit, I see things that I did not see then. As a teacher I prided myself on not having students who were considered “teacher’s pets.” However, there was only one lap spot, only two legs to hang onto; only a few could get these positions. Questions are raised in my mind: How was this read by the students who got to sit in my lap? How did he/she feel? How was this read by the students who did not get to sit in my lap? How did they feel? I imagine that one student was made to feel special at the expense of the other students, a “fundamental betrayal of trust in the student teacher bond” (Luttrell, 1997, p. 89). I wish I could go back in time and examine the students who got to sit in my lap and those that didn’t. While at the time it felt random to me, sometimes it was the student who got there first or who hadn’t sat next to me or in my lap in a while, I wonder if in truth it read a different way--- a preference towards a race, class, gender, religion that I hadn’t considered making this sweet memory more of a “ritual celebration of social injustices” (Luttrell, 1997, p. 89).

For Sarah's students I was certain they were familiar with the concept of making textual reading connections, as it was something that I had observed in the class as well as most of the classrooms I visited. A fourth grade teacher told me on their mandated reading assessments students were *required* to make a connection to the prescribed text. "But what if they don't have a connection to the piece?" I asked. "Then they get marked down for that question," she explained. I shook my head at the ridiculousness of this mandate. While making connections to texts is a valuable reflection skill, making *forced* connections when none can be made seemed oppressive and restrictive. Just another example, I thought, of living in a high stakes testing system where scores are valued more than individuals (Kohn, 2010).

So on this day I decided to teach these students about the importance of making *disconnections*, discussing ways texts are *not* reflective of our life or the ways we live. Creating disconnections can create equal or more powerful text renderings than simply making forced required connections (Jones, 2006; Jones, Clarke & Enriquez, 2010). Introducing text disconnections provided a humorous student response:

KRISTY: So what do we think [text] disconnections are?

STEVEN: Like when you're on the phone and it stops working.

I loved Steven's answer and thought this was a great way to explain disconnections. We discussed disconnections for another moment and further answers included not identifying with something in a text or not having a connection. I sat up a bit straighter in the chair, cleared my throat, and looked out at the twenty-nine faces mostly staring back at me. I held the book for the students to see and began reading.

I read each page, pausing to show the students the pictures. The students remained mostly quiet except for emitting a laugh at the end of the book. The main character wants a dog but his

family does not have the financial means required to take care of a dog. At the end of the book, the young boy finds a cat eating out of a garbage can and his family lets him keep it. He names the cat Dog, which the students found cute and funny.

Once I finished reading the book, I closed it and set it on my lap. Steven immediately stated, "That book was depressing." Others agreed. I asked Steven why he thought it was depressing, and he said because all the pictures were in black and white. Deciding to incorporate some elements of critical literacy into the discussion, I asked the class to think about why they felt the illustrator made the decision to design each page in black and white so void of color. The students shared answers, which included that black and white pictures signified "depression," and stories full of colorful pictures "pulls you up."

The students continued to think on this idea of how black and white pictures make you feel more somber and reflective when I asked the students:

> KRISTY: How many of you, without my asking you to say it out loud, how many of you had a connection to this book? You don't have to say it out loud; you can just raise your hand.

Several hands were raised but not as many as I expected; I thought most hands would be raised. It interested me that not more students "connected", or perhaps at that moment they were just unwilling to proclaim their connections and be spotlighted.

I then asked the students how many made disconnections to the text. A few more raised hands, however half of the class had not raised their hands, indicating that for them, neither a connection nor disconnection was made. I recognized by asking them to raise their hands to admit a connection or a disconnection was a risky thing to do, it was to publicly acknowledge "the text of the work within the text of our lives" (Barthe, 1985, p.101 as cited in Dutro, 2008, p.

425). Taking a step back, I realize I was making some serious assumptions. I was assuming many would connect to the economic hardships featured in this book, prompting my asking them to share their connections. However this book isn't telling *the* story about economic hardships but *a* story and it featured a particular family who looked a certain way, talked in a certain way, and dressed in a certain way. However, because the students had done extensive work making connections, perhaps they were also assuming I was looking for connections such as, I want a dog or I live in an apartment. In our silent moments, lots of potential assumptions were being made.

A nervous chill flashed through my body. This read aloud was not going at all as I thought it might, but Vagle's (2014) words gently reminded me, "to be profoundly present… to remain open; to know that there is 'never, nothing going on and that we can never grasp all that is going on" (p. 12). I had to be present in this moment, not to think about what I thought was going to happen, but to be alive in this moment, to know there was a lot going on that I didn't know, and to watch what would unfold.

I inhaled, took a deep breath of silenced classroom air, and chose to be alive and fully present in this moment and testify about my own connections to *Tight Times:*

> KRISTY: Okay, I'd like to share with you some ways I connected with this story. Growing up, I could connect to the little boy in the story because my family went through a lot of tight times with money. My family, which was my mom and my grandma for a long time until my mom remarried—remember I shared that with you in my *Where I'm From* poem? Well my mom was the only one bringing in any money because my grandmother didn't work. My mom would collect pennies she found on sidewalks and place them in a jar to buy me birthday and Christmas presents. She would go to the

grocery store deli right at closing time when they would sell their remaining food for next to nothing and purchase it for our meals.

Jake raises his hand.

KRISTY: Jake?

JAKE: When I was 4 or 5 we lived in our own house and my mom—she lost her job. She lost her job because she had college and a lot of stuff to do and couldn't keep up with the time for the job. And when that happened, she came home and my dad—he had seven back surgeries. She came home and told my dad and he got mad. We could only eat a plate of supper, maybe a little bit of breakfast because we were running low on food.

Roger raises his hand.

KRISTY: Wow, thank you for sharing that Jake. I really appreciate it. Roger?

ROGER: I would like to tell you my story….

Testifying and Critical Witnessing

Children Giving Testimony: Receiving and Giving Gifts

Something really powerful happened after I testified about my tight times; others wanted to share their stories as well. As Dutro (2008) explains, "that to be an effective witness for the testimonies of our students, we need in turn, to allow them to be *our* witnesses" (p. 424, italicize added). Sharing parts of our intimate lives makes us vulnerable and can be uncomfortable, even risky, yet "our students can't be the only ones expected to share their lives" (Thiel, 2014, p. 44).

By testifying, I was inviting the students to bear witness to my experience. I wanted to take the risk off of them and place it on myself; I wanted to make myself vulnerable by opening up by incorporating elements of testimonial teaching that "fosters the capacity to witness something that may be surprising, cognitively dissonant" (Feldman, 1992, p. 53 as cited in

Dutro, 2008, p. 427). Opening up a space for conversations that may be "surprising, cognitively dissonant" was a way I hoped to privilege students' lives and experiences that may had been silenced before and, if even in a small way, allow the students to know that their stories matter to *me*—that their lives and their experiences mattered (Jones & Shackelford, 2013).

As a researcher and an educator, I wanted to convey to the students, if they wanted to, they could trust me with their lives, yet as an outsider I was not exactly sure how I could articulate this in an authentic way with such a short time remaining in the year. Several days later during one of our professional development afterschool writing session Linda shared:

> LINDA: And they connected with that story that day. They were like, it's okay for you, I trust you, you trusted us and shared that with us and we've talked with them about how it [trust] is a gift somebody gives you and you accept it and what's said in the room stays in the room. It's not for you to go tell.
>
> KRISTY: When somebody tells about their life, it's a gift.
>
> LINDA: Yeah.
>
> KRISTY: I love how you said that.
>
> LINDA: They are giving you a piece of them.

When someone gives testimony to his or her life, they are giving you a gift—a gift about their life. And you then have a choice on how you handle the gift—do you accept it with open arms or reject it? The students received my testimony as a gift and responded in ways I could not have prepared for. Hands all over the classroom rose. Stories were now on the minds and lips of these students. I felt excited and eager to hear their stories.

Sarah had wanted the students to write something after the reading so to respect her wishes I asked the students if they would to return to their seats and to write about what they

wanted to share… to write about ways they were connecting/disconnecting with the text or anything else they wanted to write/share about. I told them they would not be asked to read their piece out loud, but if they wanted to share it with me, I would be available. I hated dismissing them from the rug, afraid that this dismissal would equally dismiss the rich stories that were ready to be shared.

Everyone quickly moved back to their seats, writing notebooks promptly opened, and pencils began moving across the pages. As students wrote, some called me to their desks to read their writing. It was interesting to note that some students read their writings word for word, barely taking their eyes off their page while others used their writing as a springboard to simply talk about their stories. Jake continued his story by sharing that his family had custody of his sister's baby after his sister had broken her baby's arms and after DFACS (Division of Family and Children Services) was called. Simon told me had not seen his dad in years because, "The ICE" (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) came and took his dad back to Honduras and he would not be seeing him again until he is nineteen years old. Angela shared with me that at night roaches crawl over her and her sister as they sleep and that she was homeless for a large portion of the year before. Valentina revealed economic hardships and shoved a letter from the cafeteria stating she owed $88.95 back in her notebook after it fell to the floor.

A majority of the students' writings focused on a particular trauma they were experiencing or had experienced in their lives. Dutro (2008), drawing on trauma studies, states:

> Trauma lurks in the everyday lives of children and youth who suffer from private, personal difficulties such as the loss of grandparents, parents or siblings, family members in prison, placement in foster homes, family and community violence, eviction from homes. Just as with large scale traumas, I argue that the personal traumas that enter our

> classrooms can also reveal the limits of language we have thus far employed to theorize the relation between students' encounters with texts in school and their life experiences"(p. 424).

The traumas had entered the classroom. Arguably, they had always been there but in this moment they manifested in many ways. I felt overwhelmed by the words of these young students, how some of their stories were embedded with such deep pain, and I often felt limited in my language in how to respond. Sometimes I feel I responded in the wrong way, maybe asking questions when there was no need to ask any. Sometimes I felt the wind knocked out of me when they testified, feeling the aftermaths of the "emotional landmines" (Boler, 1997, p. 179); feeling the room began to shake as I wobbled to secure my footing (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008).

So I listened—I embodied listening (Ezzy, 2010; Schultz, 2003). I knelt beside desks, huddled in corners, sat with students on the floor, stood in front of the whiteboard with students. I looked each student in the eye as they read; a way to show that at that moment, their story was the only one that mattered. I used all my power to yield my body in an effort to give them the power. Students grew anxious to testify and abandoned the school norm of raise your hand and the teacher will come to you. Instead they came to *me*. These students were seizing the power of this moment, of this classroom, and Sarah, Linda, and I were letting them (Shultz, 2003). For this moment belonged to them, they alone held the power.

Students began forming a line with writers' notebooks in hand. The line snaked around the classroom from where I stood. Students testified their lives to me, to each other while standing in line, and in conjunction with one another. Students who initially thought they did not

have any connections to the book were challenged in their own thoughts when sharing their stories:

> BRITTANY: In this book I didn't really connect with anything but tight times are important in my life. Like the time when my mother and father were arguing and got divorced. Another time when my brother got stitches and my mother had brain surgery…
>
> VALENTINA: (to me): And she supposedly doesn't have a connection with it!
>
> Brittany laughs.
>
> KRISTY: Brittany, when did your parents get divorced?
>
> BRITTANY: Last year.
>
> KRISTY: My parents got divorced when I was three.
>
> VALENTINA: That's why in your poem it said, "And a daddy who came much later."
>
> KRISTY: Exactly. Because sometimes people will ask me about my dad, who is technically my step dad but he is the only dad I've ever known and that will confuse people. And so I say, no, my daddy just came later.

Valentina, Brittany's on and off again best friend, was surprised when Brittany initially stated she did not connect with the book, when she obviously had gone through a number of tight times, and *I* was surprised that Valentina remembered when I wrote about my father in my *Where I'm From Poem* several weeks ago. By sharing/testifying about my life through my writing, I modeled to the students that their lives mattered to me and elements of my life mattered to them. After sharing about my parents getting a divorce, throughout the remainder of the semester, Brittany and I talked about parents and issues of divorce and the difficulties surrounding it. Brittany lived a complicated life; a life she described as "really stressful." In a later conversation she shared with me her mistrust of educators, including Sarah and the school

counselor, for divulging information she shared with them. She had felt betrayed by those she felt were there to be trusted and now she was cautious.

Students' Testimonies as Counternarratives

The students, in this particular space at this particular time, felt powerful and yielded their power to act as "human agents," resisting and working against ways they may have been marginalized in the past by giving their lived experiences a voice (Dutro, 2009, p.90). This was particularly seen in the contrasting ways that Jake and Sarah talk about Jake's family, where Jake offers a conflicting view--a counternarrative for his experience—that offers new ways of seeing the world (Dutro and Kantor, 2011).

After reading *Tight Times,* Jake was very eager to share his stories. Each conversation concluded with his returning to me and saying, "Let me tell you one more thing!" After about half an hour, Jake came back to me to tell me "one more thing" about his sister and DFACS (Division of Family and Children Services):

> JAKE: So DFACS found out that [the baby] had another broken arm. So DFACS takes Michelle [the baby] and my mom called and told us. I got so mad I punched through the door.
>
> KRISTY: Who were you so mad at?
>
> JAKE: The thing that made me mad was they took my niece on my birthday! They took my niece!
>
> PETE: I was there that night.
>
> JAKE: Yeah, he was.
>
> PETE: Yeah, I was there when he punched through the wall. He had a birthday that night.
>
> JAKE: Yeah, he [referring to Pete] has really been there for me. He has gotten me through a lot.

Jake spoke about the dangers and fears of DFACS, a fear many working-class and poor students and families know all too well (Jones, 2006). Often times, middle-class to upper middle-class people view DFACS as a service that does good things for families while working-class and poor families view it as a force that has the power to come in and take family members away without warning (Jones, 2007). While Jake gave testimony to the event with DFACS, Pete joined in to testify on his friend's behalf. Jake and Pete's friendship was a deep one similar to that of a brotherhood.

Later in the conversation, Jake talked about his dad and has this to add:

JAKE: Yeah, my dad is retired but he takes care of my little sister, Michelle. (Jake's dad had multiple back surgeries due to injuries at work forcing him to "retire.")

PETE: Daddy! (does a baby Michelle voice)

Me: Because your family adopted her?

JAKE: Yeah.

Anytime Jake spoke of his family, his voice filled with pride. He viewed his family as heroes, saving baby Michelle from her "deadbeat" mom, his older teenage sister. Pete continued to testify on his behalf letting me know that Jake's family was a tight unit full of love ("Daddy!").

At the conclusion of the school day, I met briefly with Sarah to talk about what had transpired in class and our plans for the following day. The conversation turned to Jake:

Sarah: He's a good kid—he's a positive kid. Sometimes he's a little in left field, but we try to pay attention--- his parents foster other kids. He knows this is what his parents do and one day he came in, and this was back in December, he said, yeah I didn't get any sleep because they brought a baby home in the middle of the night or he woke up because

the baby wasn't there. You know just kind of showed up. And it affected him for a little while because he wasn't getting as much attention. I think he's a really sensitive boy and a good kid.

It was interesting to me the different readings of the same situation by Jake and Sarah. While Jake spoke with family pride coupled with outrage that an outside force was trying to take away a family member, Sarah read the situation and Jake as something she felt she needed to "pay attention" to make sure that Jake was okay in her eyes. Later Jake came up again in a conversation with both Linda and Sarah:

Linda: Yeah, something's up with him and we can't figure it out.

Sarah: Yeah, like you said, he's a good kid but maybe something with the foster situation or his parents is kind of goofing him up.

Linda: His mother is a bit loony.

Sarah: He's very roundabout. If you call on him he wants to beat around the bush or go around about or out in left field kind of thing.

These two exchanges highlight the complexities of social class, revealing class disconnect between middle-class educators and their ways of normality, the deficit ways working-class families are depicted, and the apparent distrust working-class families have of authority figures (Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2007; Jones &Vagle, 2013; Luttrell, 1997: Walkerdine et al., 2001). Sarah and Linda, while they genuinely cared for Jake, described his life and family in less than positive ways by placing fault/judging Jake's parents calling his mother "loony," and indicating that they felt his parents were "goofing him up." Yet Jake countered their narration with a description of his family as heroes. Through Jake's description I learn family is everything—you would do anything for your family, even raise a baby as your own if needed.

While Jake did not hear the teachers' conversations, I imagine that over his schooling years he has heard deficit narrations of his life, and he proactively sought to tell me a version of his life. Yet I was always hearing partial versions of his story never *the* story (e.g. Jones & Shackelford, 2012). Throughout my time at the school, Jake and I (usually including Pete) met several times and had some deep conversations about his family.

Critical Witnessing: Traumas that Speak Louder than Words

Dutro (2008) writes, "the role of witness bears with it responsibility…. In the classroom, the teacher is the crucial witness… the role of witness is integral to the act or art of teaching" (p. 428). As critical witnesses, educators and researchers must be mindful and critically aware of the ways in which we read the world (Freire, 1985), how we engage and use language (Gee, 2001), and of the ways students read the world and how our readings and their readings can clash and resound together (Freire, 1985). Taking a critical reflective internal stance is crucial, examining for judgments, stereotypes, and assumptions (Hankins, 2003; Hicks, 2002; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Vagle & Jones, 2012). Reading each other's worlds, much like reading literature, is fraught with emotions. "Encountering others' experiences… can bring your own rushing swiftly, viscerally, back to us" (Dutro, 2008, p. 425). Sometimes our experiences come rushing back so quickly causing feelings to stir within us and surface just as quickly.

Exposing a wound and deconstructing Deadbeat Dads

JAKE: Do you know what DFACS is?

KRISTY: Yes.

JAKE: Well, my sister—do you know what a deadbeat is?

KRISTY: Like a dad?

JAKE: No, my sister…

KRISTY (trying to recover): Did you say deadbeat?

JAKE: Yes ma'am. Do you know what that means?

KRISTY: No, tell me what that means?

This exchange between Jake and me highlights a moment in which my emotions collided with societal discourses so quickly that the words escaped my lips before I could stop them. A deep wound was exposed in this moment--one that I had carefully kept hidden for many years. As soon as the words "like a dad" escaped, I felt as if I was standing naked in the classroom—exposed and embarrassed. Heat rose to my face pinking my cheeks while my stomach felt as if it had been punched.

Hearing the word deadbeat immediately offered my response "like a dad" for a few reasons. First of all, there is a strong discursive societal narrative surrounding dads, describing some as deadbeats. According to an online socially constructed dictionary, (*Urban Dictionary,* 2015) a deadbeat dad is "a father who does not provide for a family that he was part of creating. Does not have morals or a responsible enough nature to realize how difficult he is making life for his family." Associated words with deadbeat (according to the site) include loser, a**hole, sperm donor, and coward. Typing "deadbeat dad" in a Google search brings up hundreds of thousands of hits from comics depicting deadbeat dads, articles/journals/blog posts written by children/mothers/dads concerning deadbeat dads, politicians/churches talking about them, even a Facebook book page where you can submit a picture of a deadbeat dad to expose them publically. All across the Internet, deadbeat dads are negatively portrayed and demonized.

Deadbeat dads is a pejorative label, "for separated and divorced fathers who withdraw emotional and financial support from their children," (Presbury, Benson, McKee, Fitch, and Fitch, 1997) used with more intent to cast blame than to strive for changes or to see the complexities behind the label. Oftentimes mainstream discourses surrounding deadbeat dads is

largely around money and failure to pay enough child support money. Yet deadbeat dads is a "systematic problem in which existing child support guidelines overburden obligors, " (Henry, 1999) creating a lose-lose situation for working-class and poor fathers who are taken to court (court fees, costs of obtaining a lawyer, time off of work), receive driver's license suspensions (trouble getting to work, loss of job due to inadequate transportation), and assigned jail time (no income, loss of job). All of these ways designed as means to get fathers to pay money for child support only further place working-class fathers in a losing situation where as middle-class or upper middle-class fathers may have the means to pay court costs and obtain lawyers.

On a personal level, I had a connection with this term because I felt my birth father displayed some of the descriptors of a deadbeat dad. My birth father left my mother, my grandmother, and me when I was three years old; was in and out of my life for years, sometimes playing an active role and sometimes not; never paid full amounts of child support or in many months, none at all. Growing up and even as an adult I felt forgotten and abandoned by him, leaving me angry and sad.

Deadbeat had impacted my language and my life yet Jake offered a differing definition of deadbeat:

> JAKE: A deadbeat is somebody that is rude and doesn't respect. Well, my sister Sophie, she….um… she had a baby about two years ago. She didn't care about her [the baby]. When the baby was ready for naptime she would just come up and yank her and throw her on the bed. And she broke her femur and both her arms.

Taking up Bakthin and his thoughts on language as a form of analyzing the deadbeat discourse is helpful here. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that language, and the ways we articulate its meanings, are never fully our own. Language, he argues, is never a "neutral medium that passes

freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (p.294). Both Jake and I populated deadbeat with our own intentions and we equally had it populated for us by societal discourses. My definition of a deadbeat dad was closely aligned to the societal norms of what constitutes a deadbeat dad from my own experiences, yet Jake offered a differing definition. For Jake, "a deadbeat is someone who is rude and doesn't respect" which counters the mainstream definition of a deadbeat as a dad who is tied up with issues of money and child support. Jake also did not place a gendered identifier to deadbeat like I did (dad), yet named a deadbeat as a "someone" because in this case he described his sister, a mom, as the deadbeat.

While Jake and I differed on our definitions of deadbeat, we both shared blame assignment. Gans (1995) describes blaming as a form of "name-calling, which may make blamers feel better for having expressed themselves and perhaps reassured themselves that they are not alone" (p. 122). Blaming and name-calling place the fault onto an individual and fails to place their story within a larger story of systematic inequalities and practices/policies/discourses that created the conditions for which this could be possible. Jake states that his sister Sophie, "did not care about the baby," his read/blame on Sophie. Sophie is portrayed as the villain—a mother who did not care about her baby--yet when I place her story within the larger discourses of teenage pregnancy, I can see the conditions that make this possible.

Sophie was a teenager when she got pregnant with her daughter Michelle (Jake says she was 18 years old). Growing up in the Bible Belt South, she was raised and educated in a state where sex education in her school emphasized abstinence and fidelity in marriage as the most effective ways to avoid diseases or unwanted pregnancies and consequently, contraceptive devices were not permitted to be brought into her high school. I think about the issue of access of

information and materials for Sophie. Did she have access to contraceptives and ways (if she desired) to terminate the pregnancy? Many argue that contraceptives are readily available and even free at health clinics yet the closest health clinic to Sophie would have been over eight miles away. Getting to the clinic without adequate transportation makes this a challenging or impossible task. Having condoms available in the schools might have offered a more accessible solution. However, then there is the stigma of being prepared for sex. Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) in their study of social class in Britain, found that many working-class women felt fearful and anxious about carrying around contraceptives for fear of being labeled a "slag or tart" (p.194). If Sophie had carried personal contraceptives, she could have been viewed as a slag, "yet the very fact that she had not used contraceptive showed that she had been unprepared for sex and therefore not a slag" (p. 196).

While teenage pregnancy can and does happen despite class positioning, Walkerdine et al. found that for middle-class girls and their parents the "thought of the loss of career was more daunting than having a baby" (p. 196) leaving it "impossible to contemplate anything other than an abortion" (p. 196), while working-class girls and their families did not see abortion as an option or as something they were willing to do. Some politically conservative people in the United States take a hypocritical stance on abortion. On one hand they espouse a Pro-Life platform saying that it is immoral to kill an unborn life, while on the other hand politicians such as Jeb Bush report that we need more "shaming" of unwed mothers to prevent teenage pregnancies. So while Sophie chose to have the baby (moral decision in the conservatives' eyes) should she equally be shamed for being an unmarried teen mother? Sophie is placed in a no win situation within a complex multifaceted system.

Several students in Sarah's class who resided in single parent households challenged the deadbeat dad construction. Susan's father was raising her on his own after her mother was murdered, Melinda spoke lovingly of her jailed father, Simon spoke of how his father was still supporting his family even though he was deported. The students defied the stereotype of deadbeat dads; resisted stereotypical gendered discourses; and countered it with narratives that their dads were heroes, providers, artists, poets, loving, supportive, and providers (see Jones & Shackelford, 2013, for how young girls presented their mothers in multiple and complex ways).

Other student traumas were also filled with societal constructed ways of knowing narrating a story about their experience contrary to the experience they lived. As Dutro and Bien (2014) explain,

> For no matter who is doing the narrating about students' lives…stories about students position and reposition individuals and groups academically, socially, and culturally—within too static categories of race, gender, class, and ability (p. 11).

Despite who was narrating, the narrations were doing something to the students enacting an entirely different trauma of "isms:" classism, racism, sexism, genderisms. As previously discussed, Jake's DFACS visit tells of a long classed history that working-class and poor families need to be watched carefully and policed. Brittany expressed her distrust in authority figures at school due to the teachers who had told her secrets, which has resulted in her perception that schools are not places that can garner your trust. Simon's dad being deported back to Honduras tells of ethic inequalities in our country where not all people are welcomed. The years of silencing of students' stories and their lives tells a story about whose lives are welcomed at school and whose are not. "As teachers," Dutro (2008) contends, "we must do much more than witness students' stories from a distance, we must allow these stories to cut us

to the core" (p. 431). As educators we need to be cut to the core by our students, we need to feel their wounds and grant them the space to do so. Additionally, being cut to the core offers moments to turn testimonies and critical witnessing into pedagogical opportunities to situate individual stories within the larger systematic structures and discourses which make the stories possible.

In this case, having the students think about the construction of mothers and fathers in terms of the deadbeat discourse could be very meaningful. Teachers could set up invitations, foregrounded with critical literacy, to explore depictions of mothers and fathers more deeply (Van Sluys, 2005). Utilizing critical literacy in this context disrupts commonplace discourses around deadbeat parents or ways we expect parents to perform, considers multiple viewpoints (as expressed in texts and by students), places a focus on the sociopolitical systems and structures that we are a part of, and encourages students and teachers to take action (Cowhey, 2006; Van Sluys, 2005). Asking students questions such as how has history shaped our understanding of deadbeat fathers/mothers or ways we feel parents should be, offers a critical starting point to understanding the deeper roots of such discourses.

Making every voice heard: Talking about some hard topics

In an effort to value each student's desire to testify, Sarah had allowed the class to go much longer than usual. As the class was concluding, I did a quick look at the clock and realized I was quite late for my next class. As I was saying quick goodbyes, John stopped me in my tracks. John was a larger white boy who had sat quietly at the back table during the lesson, the boy who had made a space for me to sit at the beginning of class. John was not in Sarah's homeroom but attended her classroom during the reading and writing inclusion block. I remembered John raising his hand earlier when we were gathered around the carpet but feeling

the pressure to honor Sarah's desire to have the students write, I did not call on him, but instead sent the students back to their seats to write. He stood in front of me, blocking my access to the door, writer's notebook opened and asked:

JOHN: Can I just tell you my thing?

KRISTY: Sure!

JOHN (reading from his writer's notebook): My mom is in jail and my dad told me this week and me and my sister were shocked. And then my dad told me she would get out June 3, 2, 2014. She got in jail because… you know what Advance is?

KRISTY: Yes. (Advance is the fourth and fifth grade drug and alcohol awareness program).

JOHN: Yeah we did it and I was going to ask my mom if she wanted to come to my Advance graduation and my whole family knew except me and my sister but then my dad told me and said we were old enough to know. So then my dad told me that she would get out June 3.

KRISTY: What is she in jail for?

JOHN: Drugs. And every time she would come out of her room she would say don't go in my room and I was like why? And she said nothing and ran outside to smoke a cigarette. And whenever she's nervous she smokes a cigarette.

KRISTY: So she's going to be getting out soon? June 3 is not that far. How do you feel about that?

JOHN: Me and my sister were shocked and I can't sleep now. Every time I try and go to sleep I just think about her. Tonight I went to bed at 6 {AM} and I came here late

because I was thinking about my mom. Every night I can't go to sleep because I'm thinking about my mom.

KRISTY: John, I'm so sorry. Is that what you were going to share?

JOHN: Yeah.

KRISTY: I'm so sorry I didn't get a chance to call on you but thank you so much for sharing this with me now.

Out of all the stories I heard that day, John's had the biggest impact on me personally. I knew I was running extremely late for my next class and when he told me about his mom, I felt as if I stepped onto an "emotional landmine" (Boler, 1999). The explosion caught me off guard and I struggled to find the right words to say and asked questions I might not have asked (such as asking about the reason why his mother was in jail).

John was a white quiet student who was tall and large, sat in the back of the room and sort of just blended in. Here was a moment where he was ready to testify, perhaps for the first time about his jailed mother, and I overlooked him. Yet the resilience in him to testify was strong! This boy stopped me with my bag on my shoulder and my arms full of materials and made me bear witness to his life. He was not taking no for an answer.

Schultz says, "listening for the larger contexts of students' lives includes inviting students from the margins to bring their stories into the center of classroom life" (p.77). John was "from the margins" in many aspects of his life. He was a kind boy, much larger than the other students, was from a poor family, and had a laundry list of terms used to describe him including ADD and "low learner." John was *literally* on the margins of the physical classroom, sitting at a back table set up for the inclusion students to enter and exit the classroom without much fanfare. He seemed removed from the other students both physically and emotionally. As students were standing in

line to testify about their lives, John sat in the back of the room and wrote. He missed the opportunity to share when others were sharing, but he wasn't willing to be missed.

When John asked to share his one thing, he didn't do so in a hostile or excitable way. He said it gently but firmly with a small smile outlining his young white face. While he read, his voice did not falter nor did he appear uncomfortable. He did, however, seem in pain. He missed his mom; he was losing sleep thinking about his mom and when she would return. He needed to testify about this. In my bridling journal that day I wrote,

> *I am filled today with 'what if' questions. What if I had called on John when he raised his hand? Would he have shared about his mom being in jail? Would other students have shared about their families being in jail? What could have happened when students realized they are not alone—that they are not serving this jailed sentence alone?"*

Melinda's father was also serving a jailed sentence. The following day, Melinda came to me before class began, notebook in hand and tells me that she also connected with *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) and was ready to testify about it:

> MELINDA: When I found out what happened to my dad I got really mad.
>
> KRISTY: What happened to your dad?
>
> MELINDA: I don't want to say when he's right here (motioning to Jake).
>
> Jake gets up and offers to leave.
>
> KRISTY: Thank you, Jake.
>
> MELINDA: He's, um, he's in jail and he left when I was like 5 or 6 and I've been really mad since. And I don't talk about it really much and I only sent him one letter. And no one knows, not my teachers that much or my friends.
>
> KRISTY: Why do you feel you don't want to talk about it?

MELINDA: Because I just don't trust others with it and I just feel weird about it.

KRISTY: You should write about it, maybe in your writer's notebook or maybe even write him a letter?

MELINDA: I did write him a letter, and it was for his birthday. And for Easter he sent me a jewelry box he made and a necklace he made for me!

KRISTY: How nice! That's really neat!

By engaging in a non-judgmental way, Melinda chose to testify and share even more about her family. I noticed a dramatic shift happened in the conversation when I said, "How nice! That's really neat!" When I responded positively about her dad, her face lit up and she became much more open about talking about her dad to me. The next day she came in waving a paper in my face saying, "I did what you said! I wrote about my dad!"

MELINDA (reading her writing): Yet she took it all from me. The happiness, the love. I needed him for birthdays, for rough times but he wasn't there. My life is nothing but rough times and sadness without him.

KRISTY: Wow, thank you for sharing that with me. So tell me more about what you wrote.

MELINDA: Well it was mainly about… because this is what I think, um, my mom told me what happened and why he went to jail because my sister said he did some bad things to her, but I really don't believe that because I know him, and he wouldn't have done that! I think she only did it because she's my older sister, I think she did it because she wanted my mom and her dad to get back together.

KRISTY: Oh, so it was her stepdad?

Melinda nods.

Melinda and I talked about her dad a lot throughout the semester. She brought in pictures and letters he wrote, and even brought in the jewelry box and necklace he made. She showed it to me with such pride and love, careful to point out every detail of his handicraft. She was proud of her dad, loved her dad, and wanted to talk about her dad. By being receptive to her and her father, by not casting judgment or shunning her from talking about it, we developed a genuine and trusting relationship.

Engaging in hard stories with students can be difficult. Jones (2006) states, "teachers and researchers have choices to make when we hear these stories: we can ignore them, judge them from one perspective, or we can hear and sanction them. I argue for sanctioning these topics and valuing many ways of living" (p.43). She continues, "we are often afraid of what we might hear, afraid of the guilt we may feel, the sadness we may experience, or the hopelessness that may overcome us. But we must stop protecting ourselves because protecting ourselves in this way is hurting children as they disconnect with school" (p. 43). Such a powerful and transformative way of thinking—when we reject particular students' testimonies because of the ways we might feel or ways we privilege, we are rejecting *them;* we choose our needs over our students.

In her study working with her third grade students in a Title One school, Clarke (2011) faced similar thoughts, not within herself, but when dealing with other teachers. She states, "some teachers wondered aloud if certain conversations my students and I had might have been inappropriate for 'this age level;' they did not believe complicated conversations had a place in the third grade classroom—'too much information too soon'" (p. 44). As teachers it is our responsibility to bear critical witness to our students' lives and testimonies of their lives. It is not up to us to choose what they can or cannot share. We must give careful thought "about how students' hard stories are welcomed or silenced in classrooms and that we consider what it even

means to take students' difficult responses seriously in our own work" (Dutro, 2008, p. 433). By bearing witness to these stories, we grow and transform as individuals and can create classrooms that also grow and transform.

Conclusion

Linda: I think we have gotten through a lot but I am a changed person after this year. Aren't you?

Sarah: Oh yeah, we've learned a lot if not more than them.

Linda: Yes, we've definitely learned a lot.

I, like Linda and Sarah, learned a lot from Sarah's students. The day I entered Sarah's room and read *Tight Times* was, in many ways, the day I felt my study really began. True, I had been at the school conducting "research" for several weeks, yet prior to this day I felt unclear on the new directions my research would take since the change in my plans. On this particular April day, Sarah's class opened up the phenomenon in ways I could not have anticipated. I could *feel* the different ways the phenomenon was bursting towards me as students stood to testify about their experiences with class.

As students stood to testify about their lives, I began to see them as "intellectual beings possessing unique experiences and brining important knowledges and resources into the classroom" (Jones, 2012, p. 17). Students had powerful things to say and wanted their stories to be heard. In these moment-to-moment interactions with the students, I learned the difficulties of being a critical witness and the need to "stop pathologizing what it means to be poor and what it means to be a child from a poor family" and actively resist deficit perspectives (Jones, 2012, p.17). When students testified about their lives, they didn't need any kind of sympathy from me—they didn't need me to feel sad about their lives. Students spoke of job loss, not having enough money, divorce, health issues with family, DFACS taking family members away,

teenage pregnancy, the power of friendship/brotherhood/sisterhood, immigration and family members in jail, yet few spoke with tear filled eyes. They did not define themselves by the hardships of their lives—it was an aspect of their life not their whole life. They resisted and challenged the deficit perspectives that society placed upon them. I began to situate these individual stories within broader social, political, and economic contexts realizing that often students felt sad, not because of their families, but because of state institutions pushing in causing psychosocial damage. I recognized and acknowledged the importance of educating myself further on the systematic conditions that made the students' stories possible.

However, I am reminded that exposing wounds and letting them breathe is risky. When students shared about their families and the ways they constructed them (as heroes, deadbeats, loving, supportive, etc.), these perceptions are always live only in that moment and are partial and messy. Privileging students' stories and lives requires more than just a listening ear. As Dutro contends their stories must cut us to our core and this is where transformational classroom moments can occur. Through conversations, integrating social class and marginalized perspectives into curriculum, and invitations students and teachers can *re*construct societal narrations that defines working-class and poor students in deficit ways and dig deeper into systematic conditions shaping their story.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT'S CLASS GOT TO DO WITH IT?

"Do you think social class matters in schools?

"No, I only think it matters as much as adults make it matter."

(Kristy and Luann)

Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce you to three educators at Pine Tree Elementary: LuAnn, the principal of Pine Tree; Charlotte, a first grade teacher; and Barbara, a third grade teacher. These three white women articulate a classed history that influences their perceptions and understandings of the ways social class is lived and experienced at Pine Tree and within their lives. Each woman has differing views on the phenomenon of social class, speaking to its great complexities, and in this chapter I will open up and unpack the dominant discourses, both spoken and unspoken, permeating our discussions. Framing my understandings with Jones' and Vagle's (2013) class-sensitive principles offers me valuable insights in thinking and rethinking hierarchical narratives and constructs that position working-class students and families in unobtainable, damaging, and judgmental situations.

In addition, I draw on the feminist critical scholarship of Reay (2005, 2012) and Boler (1999) who help me to see the importance of the psycho-social nature of class, revealing the complexities of being a socially classed being. Drawing on these scholars, I see ways the women "find themselves in the experience" with the phenomenon of social class (Vagle, 2014, p. 21).

Through interviews and excerpts from my bridling journal, I dig deeper into some of the dominant discourses seemingly informing their beliefs as I uncover my own judgments and assumptions happening simultaneously in an effort to open up (even if ever so slightly) social class as it is lived and felt at Pine Tree Elementary.

And as seen in the opening quotes, if social class only matters as much as adults make it matter, then I will make every effort to make it matter.

"It Doesn't Matter Where You Come From"

The first interview I conducted in this study was with the school's principal, LuAnn Smith. LuAnn was an experienced administrator and educator (close to thirty years in the classroom and with leadership positions) and this was her first year at Pine Tree Elementary. Luann was a white woman in her early sixties and had three grown children. She was born and raised in a southwestern state and her office was decorated in her alma mater fanfare. Her diplomas hung on the wall and underneath them hung a family picture of her, her husband, and her three children on the beach.

Luann had a business like attitude and was on a mission at Pine Tree to "bring up the writing scores." LuAnn prided herself on her abilities to turn a school into a high achieving school and had already made some "much needed changes" as she saw them. For starters, she did away with several key components of writers' workshop, including conferencing and free writing that were significant parts of the writing pedagogy in the school during the previous years, because she believed too much time was being spent and wasted during these components.

Once I arrived at Pine Tree, I was saddened to learn that the school had discontinued the working-class book of the month program with the arrival of the new principal. Luann stated that

discontinuing the book of the month program was something that happened simply with the change of leadership, but it was "certainly something that is worth continuing."

LuAnn and I began our conversation/interview in two leather armchairs sitting across from one another in front of her desk. This being the first interview of my study, I felt nervous energy flowing through me, hoping I would capture every essence she might offer in understanding this phenomenon of social class. I positioned my glasses straighter on my face and leaned in to seize her every word.

The interview began as she described her upper class upbringing. She defined her family as "wealthy" but "the money didn't go to their heads." Her father was a doctor in the small town where she grew up and her mother was a college professor. Her first teaching job led her to an inner city school system evoking a lot of concern from her father. She says, "My father had a horrible time with it [her becoming a teacher in an inner city school]. My dad wanted me to become an attorney and rake in the big bucks, but that's not what I wanted to do. We would go round and round on this topic." She aspired to do something different, something where she felt she could "make a difference." She described her first teaching experience in the following way:

> 100% Title One, all black. I had fourth grade with 9-15 year olds. There were no busses and they walked straight from the projects. Those kids taught me more about life my first year teaching than I've probably learned since then. It was rough, and (laughter) they told me we ran our teacher last year out of here, and we are going to run you out of here too (laughter)! They called me a white cracker (laughter). It was interesting, but I stuck to my guns. I was there for the kids no matter where they came from.

She spoke of her earlier experiences with a lot of pride and credited her success with the students with "high expectations" and "love." She was struck by the educational injustices she

witnessed (such as fifteen years old in the fourth grade) and wanted to work to make needed changes. As the interview progressed, we talked more about her career as an educator and administrator:

> So the lessons I think I learned over my career is, it really doesn't matter- to me. I *empathize* where these students come from but I don't *sympathize* because to me sympathy is a hand out not a hand up. So I empathize and I care about where they come from and I understand that we would not want to live a day, or could not live a day, in some of the lives of our children, but when they are here with us and when they are here with me and here with my teachers, they are ours. And we can either make a difference and show them the way, or we can make excuses and let them stay right where they are. I guess that's the biggest lesson, that there's so much potential in everyone, no matter where you come from and even some of our most affluent children never reach that potential.

Towards the end of the interview I asked her:

> Kristy: So do you think social class matters in schools?
>
> LuAnn: (Pause) No…. I think it only matters as much as grownups make it matter.
>
> Kristy: Tell me more about that.
>
> LuAnn: What do you mean? I think in my experience, as an educator, children will rise to your expectations and my experience as a principal, teachers will rise to your expectations, too. Most teachers want to do right by their kids. Some of them don't know how and some of them have been allowed or have been helped to go off, in my mind, in inappropriate directions.

In this moment, our words were not the only thing being heard; our bodies were holding their own conversation (Jones, 2013). When I asked her if she thought social class mattered in school, her body tensed as she sat up taller in the leather chair across from me. It was interesting how she could say class does not matter yet right outside her office walls pictures valuing different types of family work (the photostory project Dr. Vagle conducted) still hung proudly on the front hallway. The walls at Pine Tree told conflicting stories adding additional layers to the complexities of this phenomenon. Her words contradicted so much of what I personally believed and knew to be true and I, too, reacted by sitting up a bit taller in my own chair. The leathered chairs emitted crinkling sounds as we both repositioned ourselves, preparing for whatever came next.

Excerpt from bridling journal, March 2014

Today I held my first interview with LuAnn and I am filled with emotions. I'm angry, sad, confused. I'm unsure where this study is going to lead me. I came into this study with a specific agenda—to examine how the students and teachers were engaging with children's literature that foregrounded working-class lives. I spent so many months composing my prospectus, writing my IRB outlining my goals and methods for conducting research and now that's all gone. Dr. Phillips was so passionate about educating his staff about class sensitive pedagogies and now Mrs. Smith is on the opposite end of the spectrum. She sees his work as making excuses for the children; not as helpful and powerful work. She sees social class as not having a place in schools—that is doesn't matter. She doesn't see why it matters where students come from or about their family stories. She says she loves kids and loves what she does but can you fully love kids if you don't actively try to know them and understand their lives? And how can I as the researcher really try to understand and be open to others whose perspectives are so different

than mine? How can I write about them in productive ways without demonizing them because truly her words smacked harshly against my own beliefs, leaving an imprint within me. Feeling so lost and sad….

Vagle's instructions were to pay careful attention to the complexities—the "socially-constructed ways in which reality gets framed." Utilizing my bridling journal as a tool enabled me to see that I was not tuning in to the complexities and, in turn, I was thinking of Luann in deficit ways. I was focusing inwardly on my own feelings and beliefs, and I was not considering the ways this interview was positioning LuAnn. Perhaps I had unwittingly placed LuAnn in an uncomfortable and precarious situation when I asked her to engage in issues that possibly she had never given deep thought while I had given extensive thought. Perhaps I had placed LuAnn at the whiteboard, much like I had been so many years ago; spotlighted, vulnerable, and completely unprepared; and asked her to reflect on things she was not prepared to consider. Did her marker's fumes chant *failure* to her like mine did? I wondered if this reminiscence offered a partial understanding of the embodiment of defensiveness I saw in her.

Phenomenology urges researchers to be keenly aware that there is always a lot going on, both seen and unseen. While on appearances this seems like nothing more than an innocent interview between a participant and a researcher, phenomenology urges us to be present in the moment and see all that is happening and perhaps see what isn't happening as well. As Dahlberg et al. (2001) state we must "try and learn to see the invisible, listen to which is silent" (p.39).

The invisible, although not silent, was the dominant discourse that seemed to inform LuAnn. These narratives of class unconsciousness and "it doesn't matter where you come from" did not originate with her nor are they located solely within her--- she is a product of these discourses—she is shaped by them, influenced by them, much like we all are if we do not take an

active stance to work against them (Boler, 1999). These narratives burst forth, filled loudly with intentions and meanings (Bakhtin, 1982) and by unpacking them with thoughtful analysis I can see ways LuAnn engages and potentially understands the phenomenon of social class and possibly how others who are seduced by these narratives do as well.

It Doesn't Matter Where You Come From and Being Class-Blind

Throughout the interview, LuAnn reiterates this idea of it doesn't matter where you come from. Where we come from is usually a question offered when we meet new people, yet it is a loaded question that is "often code for social class affiliation" (Jones, 2006, p. 2). By proclaiming that it does not matter where you come from offers the promise we are all equal, we are all given the same fighting chance, that our backgrounds and our families are not definers of our potential successes. It offers self-empowerment that you alone are responsible for your successes, and offers the believers and espousers of this narrative a stamp of approval—that this is a person that will treat you fairly despite and in spite from where you come. However, like Jones and Vagle (2012) assert, we must "locate and disrupt social class hierarchies in school" (p. 130) and this narrative of "it doesn't matter where you come" needed to be disrupted and deconstructed.

It doesn't matter where you come from is reminiscent of people proclaiming to be colorblind. Discussing her experiences with white teachers, Ladson-Billings (1994) recalls the teachers repeatedly making statements such as, "I don't really see color, I just see children" and "I don't care if they're red, green, or polka dot, I just treat them all like children" (p. 34). She states:

> these attempts at color blindness mask a 'dysconscious racism,' and 'uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as

> given'….their 'dysconciousness comes into play when they fail to challenge the status quo, when they accept the given as the inevitable (p. 35).

Scruggs (2009) agrees, adding racial colorblindness is "the idea that ignoring or overlooking racial and ethnic differences promotes racial harmony" (http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-36-fall-2009/feature/colorblindness-new-racism). Asserting a colorblindness position works against the ways you are trying to position yourself by claiming to be colorblind by claiming "folks who enjoy racial privilege are closing their eyes to the experiences of others" (http://www.tolerance.ormagazine/number-36-fall-2009/feature/colorblindness-new-racism). Ladson Billings further explains the faults in adopting a colorblind stance by stating,

> The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same. But even within the nuclear family children born from the same parents are not exactly the same. Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. The same is true in classrooms. If teachers pretend not to see students' racial and ethnic differences [as well as class differences], they really do not *see* the students at all and are *limited in their ability to meet their students educational needs* (p. 36-37; words in bracket added and words emphasized).

Being color-, and I also add and argue *class*-blind is *choosing* to take an uncritical stance and accepting the way things are as they should be. Class-blindness is embedded in American discourses. Many Americans argue that we live in a classless society resulting in a reinforcement of class unconsciousness (Reay, 2005; The New York Time Writers, 2005). Yet, Reay (2005) argues, "Just like sexism and racism, social class inequalities do terrible damage, but unlike

sexism and racism they continue to be condoned, even accepted as normative" (p. 924). Classness is embedded in our everyday lives and interactions with others in ways we are conscious of and ways we aren't; it is not absent from our schools and our classrooms, "it pervades our inner worlds and outer practice" (Reay, 2005, p. 912). "Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being"(Kuhn, 1995, p. 98 as cited in Reay, 2005, p. 924). If class is something at the core of our being, it is impossible to separate us from it—impossible not to acknowledge it. Choosing to be class-blind is choosing to be blind to parts of yourself and others—parts perhaps that are too painful to acknowledge. Or perhaps, on a different level, choosing *not* to be class blind would mean having to confront the ways class privileges and marginalizes, how it chastises and polices, how it silences and gives voices. As Skeggs (2004) asserts, "to ignore (class) is to work uncritically with the categories produced through this struggle which always (because it is a struggle) exists in the interest of power" (p. 117 as cited in Reay, 2005, p. 924).

Power resides as a driving force of this narrative, but I question who truly feels powerful as a result. I wonder how many working-class and poor families would assert that it doesn't matter where you come from. I wonder how many people of color would say it doesn't matter what color you are-- that we are given the same privileges and opportunities. I wonder how many, when given careful and critical thought, actually find these words hurtful and damaging.

Delpit (1995) states, "the worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential" (p. xv). When we step back and look at *it doesn't matter where you come from* with a critical lens, we see that it provides power really only to those who speak it. Perhaps those who speak this narrative and believe in its words do so to articulate a point—that I'll treat you fairly, I'll accept

you for who you are. However, since most educators identify with middle-class ideologies (Hicks, 2002), this dismisses and silences the perspectives and voices of the working-class and poor students, telling them *not* it doesn't matter where you come from but instead it doesn't matter *to me* where you come from.

"You Can Rescript Your Life"

Charlotte is a white woman in her mid-thirties and a first grade teacher at Pine Tree. She is the mother to four children, and like Sarah, is also married to a civil servant. Born and raised in the town of Pine Tree, she had even attended Pine Tree Elementary as a student. She always had a smile on her face and always had an upbeat attitude. She took a lot of pride in her work and "loved teaching." Charlotte was a member of the professional writing development group I led and really enjoyed writing. During one session she shared with us a short story she had been working on for many years and seemed quite proud of her piece.

One afternoon during her planning time, we sat at her first grade-sized desks discussing an upcoming lesson when our conversational focus shifted to a discussion of our childhoods. A formal interview was not planned for the day but once we began talking I asked if I could record our conversation, to which Charlotte consented.

Taking a stroll down memory lane, opening yourself up to another, is filled with complications and risks especially in a place where you strive to be seen professionally—in a particular light. Your past self confronts your present self and these two selves can collide. This seemed to hold true for Charlotte.

Charlotte tells me she is from working-class/poor roots, not having a lot growing up. She is the daughter of a father who was (and is) addicted to drugs and alcohol and to a mother who was (and is) shy to the point of not wanting to leave her house and engage socially with others.

Charlotte's voice, usually high pitched and joyful, speaks in a lower register as she shares about her parents and growing up in poor conditions. As she shared about her upbringing and her family, I could almost tangibly feel the risk she was taking in sharing this with me; this "felt injury" of social class" (Reay, 2005, p. 916).

She stays with her pain for only a moment, and then almost catching herself, she is quick to point out that she has overcome a lot in her life. Her voice abandons the pain, replacing it with pride stating that she "overcame many many obstacles to be where she was today" further adding, "BUT you're not a product of your family. You can rescript life. And I believe that."

She describes putting herself through both undergraduate and graduate schooling and becoming a wife to a civil servant and the mother of four beautiful children. She strives to be the mother her own mother wasn't and speaks of all the things she does for her children including elaborate birthday parties and weekends filled with activities. Now, as a teacher with her specialist degree and the wife to a civil servant, she categorizes herself and her family as middle-class.

Sitting at the small table, it was just the two of us. Yet, I *felt* the presence of more. And in this moment-to-moment interaction (Jones & Vagle, 2013), I felt I *saw* her for the first time; her former self and her present self both manifesting at this table. Up until this moment, my interactions with Charlotte were always similar—a big smile highlighted her face, hiding her tired eyes, and her soft high-pitched voice reminded me of a Disney Princess. She appears jovial most of the time, saying how wonderful everything is, how amazing her students are, and how much she loves her job. Each interaction was upbeat and positive, yet left me feeling, in a way, uncomfortable. I got the sense that I was never seeing the real Charlotte but a façade of the woman she wanted me and others to see-- an image of someone who has it all together, a

perfected version of her true self. I read this in her because in a way I connected with her--I too have attempted over the years to project a similar façade in both my professional and personal life, masking my internal insecurities with feigned confidence and forced smiles. Smiling and acting upbeat were masks that I could safely hide behind, leaving others to see the projection I wanted them to see. Although we never talked about it, I sensed this was the same for her.

Charlotte, like all of us, was seduced by dominant American grand narratives (Boler, 1999; Jones & Shackelford, 2013; Reay, 2005) that through hard work, by pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, you can "rescript" your life and achieve social mobility. She held firm to these beliefs in meritocracy, stating it as a belief—and found power and pride in this. She made a conscious choice to be different from her family and "make something" of her life by putting herself through school, achieving some professional success, marrying a hard working man, and having four children. She speaks with pride as she details her achievements, her move from working to middle-class, and how she is an "overcomer." And this all sounds great—it *is* great that she achieved her dreams of upward mobility by becoming a teacher, getting married and having the family she wanted. Yet, Reay describes this feeling of pride and "overcoming" as walking an "emotional tightrope." Becoming different from "the natal family can evoke powerful feelings of anxiety, loss, guilt, and fear alongside the more accepted emotional responses of hopeful anticipation, excitement, and pride" (p. 921). While Charlotte expressed a sense of pride, she was also riddled with anxiety; always seeming quite anxious to make sure she has done and is doing everything right; something often felt by working-class women as they try to "pass" as middle-class (hooks, 2000; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Skeggs, 1997).

Her anxiety showed itself in several ways. Whenever I entered her classroom, Charlotte would be quick to approach me with a flood of explanations, explaining why I was seeing what I

was seeing. Once I entered about ten minutes later than I was scheduled, her lesson already in progress, and she was quick to come up to me detailing her reasons for changing her lesson plan and moving on to something different. Sometimes I wondered if she viewed me as another set of eyes to catch her doing something wrong (a fear many educators face thanks to teaching in a high stakes testing climate) or if she just needed validation for her choices. I always reassured her that it was fine, whatever the "it" was that I was seeing, and I genuinely meant it. But her anxiousness was just as embodied as her smile and assumed pride.

While she found alleged comfort in her social mobility and her achievements, research has shown great flaws in meritocracy beliefs, revealing the impossibilities and consequences that accompany it and making it more of a myth than a reality (Gans, 1995; Gorski, 2013; Jones & Vagle, 2013). Overcoming poverty and in some ways overcoming your family isn't necessarily the dream America promises. Hatt (2007) writes about growing up "as poor, white trash" (p. 19) and in her adult life achieving upward mobility and becoming a professor. In many ways, she achieved the American dream and overcame poverty, but she writes of the complications of doing so:

> I still struggle with meshing my working-class values of humility, family, and home with my lifestyle as a professor. When I visit my family, a part of me still longs to return. Although my income potential has been greatly enhanced, I wonder if it is worth it. I feel as if I am taking for granted what really matters in life: our relationships with others—my sense of community and family. By society's definition, I am successful, but in my heart I wonder if by investing myself in social mobility through schooling, if I have lost more than I have gained. (p. 27)

Hatt describes growing up in a working-class family with limited adult supervision but a family who instilled in her the sense of hard work, family pride, and community. As an adult, she finds having more money problematic as she finds herself in a place where more money affords certain things but it also draws her further away from others. Other researchers (e.g., hooks, 2000; Jones, 2008; Reay, 2005) also write about upward mobility and the mixture of experiencing success yet simultaneously a sense of loss. The notion of overcoming poverty is not an easy one. It's one full of pride and accomplishments yet equally full of complications and losses.

When we as educators share with our students how we overcame poverty by pulling up our bootstraps, I question the messages we are actually sending to our students. One afternoon, in the hallway outside of Charlotte's classroom, I passed Charlotte's paraprofessional (shared by the first grade teachers) hanging up student work of their pictures and writings of what they aspired to be when they grew up. Several students wrote and drew pictures about becoming football players or teachers. One student wrote, "I want to become a waitress like my mom. She works hard and I love my mom." As the paraprofessional hung up this young girl's work, she looked at me and said, "Bless her heart! She is so smart and going to be so much *more than* just a waitress!"

Jones and Vagle (2013) write about a similar situation where a young girl wants to become a waitress like her mother and state,

> Children and youth articulating aspirations for working-class futures are likely to hear responses similar to the one above. Such a response is formed by neo-liberal discourses of social class and the assumed purposes of schooling: upward mobility in status, income,

> and perceived contribution to national economic growth is the goal and anything else is a disappointment. (p. 129)

Again, I find the seductiveness of hierarchical discourses at play as well as the need for educators to critically reflect on their "students' experiences of class within broad social and political contexts" (Vagle & Jones, 2012, p. 131). It's not problematic or wrong for a student to aspire to be something different than their parent's profession. The problem is not in a different professional choice, the problem lies in the words *more than*.

Saying we want our students to be *more than* their parents implies that there is something wrong or lacking with their parents, infusing deficit perspectives into our students. If this young girl had heard this paraprofessional, and surely she will at some point in her educational journey, instead of looking to her mom as someone to aspire to, she now looks at her as someone to be *more than.* How damaging and heartbreaking. As educators we have to be critical analysts of our words and all the competing discourses that influence our "beliefs" (Boler, 1999). Boler explains,

> Rarely, if ever, do we feel something 'naturally,' in a vacuum removed from outside forces and structures and relations. Even sitting all alone in the wilderness feeling joy is related to other experiences of suffering, and what counts as suffering and joy is powerfully shaped by language, social customs and values. (p. 21)

We must be reflexive and thoughtful remembering that none of our beliefs are things that happened naturally or on our own. Thinking critically of issues of class within broad social and political contexts helps us to see the ways we are constantly being positioned with others' power being placed upon us and forcing beliefs upon us. We must remember that even things that sound good, like upward mobility, the notions of meritocracy, and achieving the American dream are

all constructs. These narratives are much like Dorothy's first encounter with the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. The Wizard attempts to position himself as a powerful being as the Great and Powerful Oz, a scary figure head with smoke and loud noises; but in actuality, the Great and Powerful Oz was just a middle-aged man behind a curtain running a machine. Thinking that the Wizard was something great and powerful made the people of Oz feel confident in his abilities—it gave the people something to believe in. But The Great and Powerful Oz, much like American hierarchical narratives, was just a construct—a flawed and impossible truth that left Dorothy feeling let down and without hope after learning the truth.

"All Work is Important"

Barbara is a white third grade teacher who was also in my professional writing group. She is in her mid-fifties and has wild curly black hair that seemed to have its own identity—wild and free. Barbara has three children, two-school aged, one in her early twenties, and is raising her eldest daughter's baby as her own. Born and raised in a nearby city, Barbara comes from a large family (her parents have thirty grandchildren) and nearly all of the family still resides in the town where she grew up. Even though Barbara describes her upbringing as "lower middle-class because we didn't have extras," she adds that class distinctions weren't as distinct as they are now. She grew up working-class, "but I don't ever remember wanting for things. We didn't have lavish things, momma would sew and make all our clothes and we didn't go out to eat. We didn't go shopping—it just wasn't part of our lives." While they didn't have a lot of extras, they had "a lot of love and a tight knit family."

Although Barbara states that class distinctions were not as noticeable when she was a child, she has a keen perception of them now. She describes her students as "pretty much know(ing) where they are—whether they have a lot or whether they don't." Many of the students

are transient and she adds, “they move around from school to school because they can’t pay rent and then after a month or two they get evicted. A lot of times they don’t tell you they are homeless or living in a car.” A third of her students take a backpack home every Friday filled with food and other supplies provided by local churches. More of her families could benefit from the food backpacks but “they don’t want anyone to know or they are too proud.”

The labels of living in poverty or being poor seem to narrate that being poor is something deserved, a result from laziness or unwillingness to work (Gans, 1995; Gorski, 2013). Some of the families were afraid of the potential shaming accompanying the backpack full of food, refusing it when they really could have benefited from it. I know my mother turned down free and reduced lunch for me in my early elementary years--something we more than qualified for--for fear of how I would be viewed by my teachers, how other students and their families would view me, and how consequently my mother would be viewed (see Walker, Kyomuehendo, Chase, Choudhry, Gubrium, Nicola, Lodemel, Mathew, Mwiine, Pelliserry, & Ming, 2013 for a discussion of similar perspectives).

Dorothy Allison (1994), an author of fiction, essays, and short stories writes about growing up as a working-class girl. She writes about the poor shaming she experienced as a child and the division she felt—the dichotomy of *they*:

> My people were not remarkable. We were ordinary, but even so we were mythical. We were the *they* everyone talks about—the ungrateful poor. I grew up trying to run away from the fate that destroyed so many of the people I loved, and having learned the habit of hiding, I found I had also learned to hide from myself. I did not know who I was, only that I did not want to be *they*, the ones who are destroyed or dismissed to make the "real" people, the important people, feel safer. (p. 13-14)

Some of the families at Pine Tree understood what it meant to be, as Allison describes, the *they that everyone talks about* while other families were the ones doing the talking. Families in Barbara's classroom made clear social class distinctions with their children by telling their children who they could and could not be friends with:

> Barbara: You start seeing the parents distinguish who you can and who you can't play with type of thing. And I saw it more when I taught fifth grade. Parents starting to separate who their child could be a part of their life and who couldn't. But we definitely have more of the lower socioeconomic in our school. There is getting fewer and fewer of the higher class. There are more and more falling in the lower end of it. There is just those few select of whose parents distinguish who you can and cannot play with. I don't see it as much of a race distinction, but I guess this goes along with the parents' cliques.
>
> Kristy: What do you say to the parents when they--
>
> Barbara: Oh, the parents don't tell us that. We hear it through kids' conversations and we are very intentional in our classrooms how we are all created different and that no one is better than anyone else. That we all have special gifts and special talents to contribute and that we can treat everyone equally and we go back to the golden rule…because each of us has something special to contribute.

I was compelled and drawn to Barbara and her words. Although in phenomenology, "the primary interest is not just the person as informant, but the phenomenon" (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p.185), I felt a sense of connectedness to her and what she said. Colleagues would joke that Barbara was just a good ol' country girl--a salt of the earth woman—a woman grounded in kindness, gentleness, and humility (Jones, 2009). I saw Barbara as a teacher striving to be critically engaged, tuning into what was happening in her classroom in ways I did not see other

teachers at Pine Tree. She knew class mattered and was seeing it lived out loud in her classroom through the students and their families. She was seeing that deficit perspectives not only existed in the school among fellow educators (Sugarman, 2010), but also existed within the students, their families, and the community.

Barbara actively incorporated and sought after the students' funds of knowledge in her teaching. Researchers Moll, Amanti, and Gonzalez (2001) define funds of knowledge as "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). These researchers elaborate that all students and families come to school with important experiences, skills, ways of doing things, and bodies of knowledge that need to be drawn on and not ignored. Barbara appeared to know the importance of learning from her students and actively sought what they brought to the classroom, or their gifts and talents, as she called them. She seemed to understand the sense of community and classroom collaboration that was required to make learning a successful and meaningful venture by stating, "the kids learn just as much from each other as they do from us." Her role as a classroom teacher was to learn from her students and offer opportunities for her students to learn from one another.

During our conversation, Barbara spoke about a major shift in her pedagogy which occurred last year after Dr. Jones (who had been working with the school for two years in collaboration with the former principal Dr. Phillips) taught the staff about engaging in class sensitive practices; specifically she speaks of learning to use books that feature working-class lives similar to the students at Pine Tree:

> Barbara: I never thought about using those books. I never looked at it through that perspective. But when Dr. Jones came in and talked about the working-class books and

> relating to our kids and where they are—I had never stopped to think about it. But then I was like, you are so right! It was like the book *Those Shoes* (Boelts, 2009). How many of our kids would die to have that pair of shoes that certain kids have? And how they look everywhere—the yard sales, the Goodwill desiring to have those shoes. And then it just clicked. But I thought where do you find these books? I never even thought about it. But then she brought in some and I was like, "oh my gosh!" And then we had a day when we met and she brought in a bunch of books and we got to spend an hour or two just looking through the books and making lists of which books we thought would benefit the kids.

Seeing her words in print does not capture Barbara's excitement when she recalled her introduction to class sensitive pedagogies through "integrating social class and marginalized perspectives into curriculum" (Jones & Vagle, 2013, p. 131). Her face lightened and her voice rose as she shared about the class sensitive training and incorporating the working-class books of the month. Last year she had run with many of the new practices she learned, utilizing the books and engaging in critical discussions with her class, but with the start of a new year and a new administrative team in place, these ideas seemed to gather dust in the corner. Through our conversations and my working with Dr. Jones, it seemed to relight her fire that burned the previous year. She remembered that using children's literature that places working-class lives in the foreground in critical and authentic ways could be a tool to engaging in powerful class sensitive conversations. Bringing these type of books into the classroom was another way to value students' ways of living and engaging with the world and presented opportunities to really learn about each other. Barbara articulated in our conversation that children learn as much from each other as they do the teacher; and as a teacher she was constantly learning from her students, so this was something she was eager to re-implement. During my time with her students (under

the National Writing Project Grant) she asked if in addition to the writings we were doing, I would teach her students, and reteach her, components of critical literacy and how to engage with texts in critical ways.

Through our discussions, I encouraged Barbara to read some of the working-class picture books that were a part of the book of the month program last year that she really enjoyed. She chose and read some great books such as *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007), *Family Pictures* (Garza, 2005), and *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1988). It always interested me that the ways she engaged or introduced the book were quite different than how I would have done it. Internally my teacher self would think of all the ways I would have presented the book differently or the different ways I would have led discussions. My researcher self was also frustrated for I tended to focus solely on my perception of the phenomenon, sometimes forgetting two important things. One, was what Rosenblatt (1988) refers to as a reading transaction, stating:

> Every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader…. occurring at a particular time in a particular context… the meaning does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text. (p.6)

Whatever meanings I had arrived at or however I thought I would engage with the book simply resided in the exchange between me and the text. At this particular moment in time, with these specific people who lived these specific lives, *this* specific conversation arose. It couldn't (or shouldn't be expected to) be duplicated again—it was a transaction between these participators and this book occurring in this unique moment. This was an important thing to remember when thinking about multiple conversations I had with different classes with the same book—that even if presented in the same manner, with the same probing questions, the experience with the book and the discussions that arise would always be a unique experience.

Secondly, I had to remember that there is always *something* going on—even when the conversations seemed to go in a way I would have preferred they didn't, phenomenology was always there to remind me to pay attention, to be open to what *was* happening (Vagle, 2010).

For example, after reading *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007) and *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) Barbara engages the class in the following discussion:

Barbara: So someone share where your parents work.

Several hands raised.

Alfonso: My dad fixes tractor parts and helps rent the tractors out to people.

Barbara: So it is important for us to have tractors?

Class (in unison): Yes.

Barbara: What do we use tractors for?

Alfonso: Farming.

Barbara: Farming, so people need tractors for farming. What kinds of things do they farm? What are some of the things people farm around here?

Sam: Wheat crops.

Barbara: Crops, you are right, Sam.

Barbara allows every student to speak who raises his or her hand, and the conversation took a similar course of Barbara asking what the student's parents did and asking the class and the student to think about why that particular job was important. In the moment while this back and forth conversation was occurring, as a researcher I felt frustrated in the ways the discussion was being led and what was garnering the attention. I wondered why she didn't get into more of the context of tight times, engaging in deeper conversations about students' own personal experiences with tight times while perhaps sharing her own. And what of the complexities of

having a parent work the night shift? Again, I was expecting a similar experience that occurred with Sarah's class where the classroom became a place of testimony. However, taking a step back allowed me to see that there was some important work being done through *this* conversation—that there is always something going on even when it feels that there isn't—that this conversation would teach me about the phenomenon in a different way I wasn't expecting—a different manifestation of class.

Through this conversation students were able to give a voice to what their families did and why they feel it is important, offering validation and a sense of pride. This is particularly seen in Tony. Tony is older than the other students (he was held back in an earlier grade) and he floats in and out of the class going to various remediation classes. Sometimes when I am in Barbara's classroom I look up and he is there and other times I look up and he is gone. His come and go presence is also felt in the students who don't know him as well as the others.

Tony is sitting in the back of the room and shyly raises his hand.

Barbara: Tony, what does your mom do? (Barbara knows that Tony is raised by his mother and his grandmother and makes a point to ask specifically about his mom instead of "parents")

Tony: My mom works at Waffle House.

Barbara: And why is her job important?

Tony: She is a waitress and a cook and if she didn't serve and make the food the people would be hungry!

Steven: Yeah, like me! Sometimes me and my dad go to Waffle House and eat waffles.

Tony smiles.

Barbara: Yes, being a waitress and a cook is very important!

Charlotte's paraprofessional regarded being a waitress as something you should aspire to be *more than*, but Barbara took the opportunity to make the work of a waitress and a cook important and validated. At first Tony seemed reluctant to share, but with Barbara's and Steven's validations he felt proud of his mom and her hard work. In one of Tony's later journal entries he writes, "*I love my mom. She works at Waffle House and makes waffles and eggs. She works hard.*" This conversation surrounding work provided an opportunity for Tony to share about his mother, feel proud of her and her hard work, and to extend his pride in a journal entry that may not have occurred if Barbara hadn't led the conversation in the way she did.

Students did delve into the deeper conversations through their writings and one-on-one conversations as I was hoping they would (as I will discuss in the next chapter). Through both whole group and one-on-one conversations, I noticed students had a lot they wanted to talk about which proved problematic for Barbara because with the new principal came new expectations for writing:

> Barbara: We don't have that much one-on-one time as we used to [with the students]. When we used to do writing, we would conference with them one-on-one, but now she [the principal] doesn't want you to do that. She wants whole group only. Which to me you cannot hit on every child's needs. I'm weaker as a whole group meeting teacher. You can't see the things you would with one-on-one. Because they open up more one-on-one. They are so fearsome of speaking out in groups that often if you don't have one-on-one you don't ever see those real significant needs they have. And I think a sense of trust comes when you're able to meet with them one-on-one. Because they do see that they can open up and they do see that they can trust you.
>
> Kristy: How do you go about building trust?

> Barbara: You have to be consistent with them. You greet them everyday with a smile and a welcome to class. And to know that even if you have a bad day today that there is always tomorrow. Tomorrow is a new day and we aren't looking back to yesterday. It's over. Everyday is a fresh start. Everyday is a new beginning to move forward. You just build them up all the time—that they are very smart, they are capable of making great gains, and that we love them and that we are here for them and that they can trust us.

Barbara looked for moments to learn about her students' lives, the ways class was lived and articulated by her students, and seized these moments when she could (Jones & Vagle, 2013). Where she used to rely heavily on the one-on-one writing conferencing interactions (LuAnn, the principal, felt the teachers spent too much time conferencing), Barbara had to find new ways to learn about her students' lives, as seen in the *Night Shift/Tight Times* discussion. This moment offered her and her students an opportunity to learn about work—what their families did for work and the importance of all jobs no matter how big or small. She validated each and every job and asked the students to also share the importance of each job. She challenged deficit perspectives where other teachers took them up. She worked hard to build trusting and positive relationships with all her students. She knew her students, knew the complexities of their lives outside of school. She wasn't afraid to do the hard work of engaging with her students to know them in a deeper authentic way.

It's Complicated

October 2014 Bridling Journal

Interviews done. Transcriptions done. Line by line analysis done. Now what to make of all of this? After the three faculty members engaged with the phenomenon of social class as lived

at Pine Tree, I now "see" the manifestations emerge. They pop off the paper, off my computer screen, and implant themselves into my being. These manifestations include:

- *It doesn't matter where you come from,*
- *Class doesn't matter,*
- *You can overcome poverty,*

Yet these manifestations offer contradictions:

- *Children come with gifts,*
- *Capturing moment-to-moments interactions/conversations,*
- *Knowing students and tapping into their funds of knowledge,*
- *Valuing all work.*

When I think of these manifestations I feel each could have its own book!

Through our conversations, the complications of being socially classed began to reveal themselves once again, reminding me that no one is a neutral product. Our ways of knowing—the things we know and believe about ourselves, our students, our pedagogies—are constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. In Luann and Charlotte I saw hierarchical narratives influence, including it doesn't matter where you come from, class blindness, and the idea that you hold the power and resources to rescript your life.

Luann's thoughts and beliefs were saturated in these hierarchical discourses and at times it was difficult for me not to think of her in a negative way. Returning to principle one of class sensitive pedagogies again offered me that her story can be situated into larger social, political, and economic contexts. Luann has lived a life a privilege and had ways of viewing the world that seemed to lack sensitivity concerning issues of social class ("social class only matters as much as

adults make it matter"). Perhaps for her, choosing to be class blind was a comfortable position to take because it allowed her not to have to confront the ways class is lived in her school and the ways it privileges some while marginalizes others. Being blind meant not having to see.

Charlotte also reiterated hierarchical narratives (you can rescript your life, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps), but I saw the effects in her of choosing these narratives. Research has shown there are great complications in "overcoming" your life and "class-passing" and I sensed the effects of these within her. In her attempt to be different from her family, she may have been walking an "emotional tightrope" for many years. I also saw this notion of wanting/needing to be "more than" your family. Becoming our own critical witnesses and listening to the ways we define our own understandings and examining the deficit perspectives we hold for our working-class and poor families is needed and important work.

Barbara, who I felt was often dismissed for being a "good ol' country girl," provided deep insights into the phenomenon of social class as she saw it operating in her classroom. She saw the importance of incorporating social class books and marginalized perspectives into the classroom (principle three), looked for moments where she could learn from her students and their lives (principle four), and worked to eradicate ideas that some work is more valuable than other work (principles two and five). Within her classroom she showed me practical ways to incorporate the five principles of class sensitive pedagogies into discussions and classroom life.

CHAPTER 6

THE STUDENTS GET THE FLOOR

"But wait… I want to tell you just one more thing…"

~Jake (Sarah's fourth grade class)

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore and engage with how the phenomenon of social class was being lived at Pine Tree specifically to the students. I strive to hear their voices, their stories, to learn how they are shaped "not only by the institutions…but also by their own histories, experiences, and temperaments" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. xxv). In moment-to-moment interactions situated in smaller settings, powerful exchanges occurred with the students where they served as my teachers, teaching me about the importance of trust, listening, and the need to have your voice heard.

Sanctioned Topics: Who Are We Really Protecting?

In Sarah's class (as discussed in chapter 4), I was amazed at the ways the students spoke about their classed lives, often with a great sense of pride as they shared about their families. Even when they spoke of hardships, it often was not filled with tears, nor was it discussed in deficit ways that made their families appear "less than." I marveled at the way the classroom transformed itself into a space where lives were being lived out loud and topics that may not usually be permitted in schools were permitted.

Recently this had not been the case in Sarah's class. Sarah and Linda spoke of an incident that happened a few weeks before I came—a time where they felt they needed to "shut down" a conversation:

> Linda: We were reading *The One and Only Ivan* and there was a part in it where the elephant is being abused. This started a conversation about animal abuse, which then one kid popped up and said, 'My mom hits me with a spoon when I'm in trouble.' And other kids started popping in with things about how their parents hit them and with what. Suddenly it was like they had taken over the classroom, shouting across the classroom to make their voices heard, chiming in with agreement to another student or extending what they said… me and Sarah were like whoa. And we had to squash that conversation. It felt like it was getting out of control. Like we didn't know what else was going to come out of that conversation and we didn't want something to pop out in front of a class full of kids. At one point I felt like it was getting to the point where they were trying to one up each other.
>
> Sarah: That is what they tend to do with a lot of things.

The One and Only Ivan (Applegate, 2012) offers possibilities for complex social discussions as seen with Sarah's students. This book blends fiction and nonfiction as it tells the story of Ivan, a silverback gorilla who spends twenty-seven years of his life alone in a cage at a circus-themed mall off an interstate in Washington. His "domain" is next to Stella, an elephant he calls his closest friend, who was sold to the mall after she injured her foot in a circus trick. The circus-themed mall is rundown and nearing its end when Mack, the owner, brings a new animal to join them—a baby elephant named Ruby. At first Ivan thinks Stella will find the arrival of Ruby as a happy occasion—another elephant at the mall, another of her kind--but

Stella reveals that this is anything but a happy occasion, for the baby is quite sad to be taken from her momma and she then reveals further darker truths:

> "She's too thin, Ivan," Stella says. "Poor baby. She was in that truck for days. Mack brought her from a circus the same way he bought me, but she hadn't been there long. She was born in the wild, like us."
>
> "Will she be okay?" I ask.
>
> Stella doesn't answer my question. "The circus trainers chained her to the floor, Ivan. All four feet. Twenty-three hours a day."
>
> I puzzle over why this would be a good idea. I always try to give humans the benefit of the doubt.
>
> "Why would they do that?" I finally ask.
>
> "To break her spirit," Stella says. "So she could learn to balance on a pedestal. So she could stand on her hind legs. So a dog could jump on her back while she walked in mindless circles."
>
> I hear her tired voice and think of all the tricks Stella has learned (Applegate, 2012, p. 77-78).

The students were impassioned by the abuse both elephants had experienced and the injustices/cruelty the animals endured living in cages too small for such large animals, and in this moment, visceral eruptions from the students occurred. The students exerted their power in the discussion of the parental abuse/punishment and were shouting across the classroom to make their voices heard, extending on one another's comments; in a sense beating their hands on their chests to express themselves much like Ivan did in parts of the book. The teachers felt powerless and uncomfortable in this "dangerous discourse," (Lewison, Leland, Flint, & Moller, 2002, p.

216) and regained the power in the way they felt they could at that moment by "squashing" the conversation and moving on.

However, moving on was not without some consequences. By squashing the students' conversation, the teachers silenced their students who were in the midst of sharing their experiences, feelings, connections, insights; perhaps learning from one another and seeing that their experiences are not always isolated and unique to them. Time and time again, teachers force students to make connections with texts and in this case the students were doing it freely and willingly, yet the teachers felt the need to protect their students and themselves from the topic of abuse. As Jones (2006) beautifully states, "The silencing of children's stories makes their lives seem worthless. No teacher says this explicitly, but perceptive students read teachers well, just as we read students" (p.43). When teachers silence, we send messages to our students--some parts of your life are welcomed here and some parts are not.

I can understand the discomfort Sarah and Linda must have felt when they felt this conversation moved in an unexpected direction with students sharing their experiences of being hit by family members as a form of punishment. The topic of whether a child should ever be spanked is a heated one garnering national debates. Writer and professor Paul Thomas (2014) writes about living in the Bible Belt South, or as he calls it the "self-defeating South" and the contradictions and hypocrisies of southern families clinging to the biblical verse "Spare the rod, spoil the child." He recalls teaching high school English in the height of the What Would Jesus Do fad and writes, "But I think *Who Would Jesus Spank* and simply cannot find a credible answer other than not one single child." Many people have conflicting opinions on spanking as a punishment. Some thinking spanking is never okay, some think it is always okay, and some think it is okay as long as you use an object to spank with and not your hand.

Lareau (2003) in her seminal longitudinal ethnographic study of middle-class and working-class families noted a difference in how middle-class families and working-class families viewed discipline. Her work found that the middle-class families tended to value reasoning with their children over physical discipline, while some of the working-class families such as Billy Yanelli's family, chose to incorporate physical elements of discipline such as hitting with a belt. After not listening to his mother's repeated requests, Billy's mother got out a belt and hit Billy on the leg twice. Lareau writes, "when the mother felt her son was not sufficiently responsive, she found the force of physical discipline to be a valuable resource" (p. 229). Yet Lareau emphasizes that not all working-class families in her study used physical punishments and, that like many things, there were variances within the social groupings.

Physical discipline is not a topic exclusive to home lives. Nineteen states still permit corporal punishment (including the state where this study takes place), allowing each county within the state to decide for itself it they will allow it and then leaving the decision to individual school administrators if corporal punishment will be utilized in their schools (Strauss, 2014). Strauss and Donnelly (2005) define corporal punishment as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behavior" (p. 3). Pine Tree's district handbook listed corporal punishment as a potential disciplinary action for violating the Code of Conduct, however, I found no evidence of this being performed at Pine Tree.

Corporal punishment was a topic that resonated deeply with the students. Many had experienced it within their own homes, heard others argue for or against it, and possibly could have experienced it at some point in their schooling career. The teachers felt these students needed protecting from the topic, yet they already knew so much about the world in which they

lived. These students had already spoken about hard topics such as large systematic injustices including immigration and the police, child abuse and DEFACS, parents in jail, murdered family members, molestation, economic hardships, family separations, and life in poverty. I did not see these students as needing protecting; they did not need to be censored or for their conversations to be "squashed"; what I felt they needed was to be listened to, to openly discuss a topic that was important to them, albeit dangerous and uncomfortable to the teachers. No topic needs to be shut down; multiple perspectives can be invited into the classroom. On an even deeper level, "when we silence children's experiences we are shutting off the growth of our society and the real possibility for critical consciousness and change" (Jones, 2006, p.43).

Can We Talk? The Girls Talk About *Tight Times*

While at Pine Tree, many of the students I worked with found moments to ask me, "*Can we talk?,* "*Could you please have lunch with us*?", "*Sit with me at recess-- I have something I want to tell you*", or, " *Can I share this* (writing, present, book) *with you?"* I always honored their requests if I was able. This is where being a researcher afforded me more opportunities than a classroom teacher possesses—on my research days I had no real place to be at any specific time. My only responsibilities centered on learning from and understanding the students as best I could. Being a researcher afforded *me* the power to be able to give *the students* the power and ownership of my time.

One May afternoon I sat with Sarah's class on the large grassy field for an extended recess time. The week's standardized testing had been completed and the students were running, laughing, and enjoying their freedom. I had been asked to judge an impromptu cheerleading competition, and it was interesting to note the power shifts. In the classroom, Jasmine, a fair skinned blond haired girl, was on the outs with the other girls due to her recent suspension;

Jasmine had crafted a letter to classmate and best friend Mary saying that she wanted her to die and that she was going to kill her. The girls in the class were weary of Jasmine, worried what she might do to them. While in the classroom Jasmine seemed out-casted, on the playground she was a leader. Drawing on her cheerleading experience and knowledge, she was guiding the girls, directing who needed to do what, and excluding younger girls who wanted to join in. *Freire's theory of the oppressed becoming the oppressor being acted out in front of me*, I thought.

Sarah blew her whistle from a top the hill, and the other teachers stood to collect their things, signifying the end of recess. Becka, Angela, and Brittany, who were playing on the slides nearby approached me and asked once we were inside if we could talk more about their tight times. Sarah granted us permission and suggested we sit in the cafeteria since lunchtime was over. The four of us nestled into one of the booths reserved for families who come and eat with their children during lunchtime. Angela sat on my side of the booth while Becka and Brittany sat across from us.

Becka, a petite freckled face girl, said she and the other two girls desired to extend our prior classroom conversation surrounding tight times. Before I gave them the ownership of the conversation, I was curious how they defined tight times. I knew *tight times* was one with a "surplus of meaning", and that each girl drawing from her own life, would define it differently (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 117).

Kristy: So what would you say tight times means to you?

Brittany: Like when you are going through hard—

Becka: When you don't have a lot of money.

Angela: Or when your mom got fired, your dad got fired, all that kind of stuff.

> Becka: Everything's falling apart. I'm going through tight times right now. We can't really pay off our house and, Brittany knows this, we have to start packing this weekend, and I'll be spending my whole weekend packing. Since the divorce my dad moved out and so did my sister because she's eighteen and my mom is technically paying the rent and she can't pay all that. We are moving into an apartment…. There's a lot of things you can't do at an apartment but in an apartment it's easier for us to pay off.

Each girl had a differing definition for tight times, for each had populated tight times with her own understanding and intentions (Bakhtin, 1981). Becka describes tight times in terms of *economic* hardships. Her mother, a newly single mother of two, had to move her family into a space that she could afford. In the opening conversation Becka defined tight times as "when you don't have a lot of money" and added further explanation with the upcoming move/possible eviction. Raising children on your own with or without support is a difficult endeavor (Luttrell, 2006) and working-class mothers are pathologized as less ideal than their middle-class counterparts (Jones, 2007; Jones & Shackelford, 2013).

Many students at Pine Tree faced similar dilemmas as Becka of having to move homes quickly due to financial constraints. Third grade teacher Barbara described Pine Tree as a highly transient school, stating that it was common for students to be in class on Friday and be un-enrolled on Monday without warning. Often families simply could not pay their rent and would be evicted or forced to quickly move.

I encountered students moving in and out of Pine Tree several times in my study. One young girl in Barbara's class went to visit family in Mexico over the Winter Break and never returned to school in January. Reports from friends stated that her car broke down while in Mexico, and they did not have the funds to repair it. Then at the end of April the young girl

returned to the classroom after many months away. The class was very pleased to see their old friend return and she was surprised to see several new faces that had joined the class as well as a few friends who had moved away. Becka would be moving to one of the apartment complexes near the school, which was heavily populated by Pine Tree students and she was glad she would not have to move schools.

> Brittany: I had tight times when my mom and dad got divorced and they started arguing over stuff and they went to court. I barely get to see my dad. I get to see him four times a month. Forty-eight times a year. I live with my mom but it's hard not to see my dad. I wrote a message to my mom saying all kinds of things about how much we get to see our dad and it's hard for me to say goodbye when he leaves. It's so hard for me. When I get off the bus, it's usually just me and my brother because my mom's at work and my dad's at work… It's just a lot of tight times I'm going through. It's like a stressful life.

Brittany, who also has a lot of economic tight times like Becka, defines her tight times *emotionally*. For her, the pain of not getting to see her dad is tremendous. She knew exactly how many times she would get to be with her dad and I was struck by her describing her life as stressful. She spoke and carried herself in a way that made me almost forget I was talking to a young girl. I could connect with her pain, knowing the pains I felt with my own parents' divorce. Becka joined Brittany in her conversation and together they shared struggles of having divorced parents, the pain of moving homes, and the ways their younger siblings offered comfort; feeling and exerting their power as they took over the conversation and made it their own (Boler,1999).

Noticing that Angela has been silent for the majority of the conversation, I turn to her and ask:

> Kristy: Angela, would you like to share about your tight times?

Angela: Well, my mom is pregnant and both of my parents have lost their jobs and we are going to have to find a--- we just moved from our current house because since they both lost their jobs we are kind of living far away from school. So it's really hard for me. And my mom's pregnant and it's really hard to keep up with the appointments and stuff….

My older brother, my grandparents all live in my house. My grandpa is really old and he's been getting stressed since he almost lost his job and everything and their house is about to get taken away by the bank. And that house is really special to me because that's where I grew up (Angela begins crying).

Angela responds to tight times as a combination of *economic* hardships as well as *emotional* ones tied to the systematic classed complexities of obtaining health care and housing for the working-class and poor (e.g., Gorski, 2013). She began by stating that her mother was pregnant and she was worried about her getting to all the appointments and "stuff." Earlier, Angela's teacher Sarah had told me that Angela began the school year in a homeless shelter with her family. They had been evicted from their home and had to live in a shelter for some time. Now Angela faced the terrifying prospect that her grandparents' home may also become the property of the bank—that once again those with all the money would take something away from those who have none. In Angela's family money is a huge issue because there is so little of it. While a new baby offers excitement, it also brings on additional bills for doctor visits and a hospital stay, and an additional person for whom to provide. And while our country is making advances with health care for the working-class, there are still a lot of out of pocket costs that are required.

The girls continued on with their conversation, crying as they shared and bonded together over their tight times. As they spoke they seemed to forget I was there, yet I was there and I was

fully there. I remained open, allowing the girls to be powerful constructors and articulators of their understandings as they revealed their classed wounds. While they spoke of sadness, they equally spoke of hope and the love of their family. Where they came from not only mattered, but it shaped who they were. Where they came from was *family*. It was *home*. It was a place that privileged their ways of being--a place they were loved and cared for. It mattered to them where they came from. They made that quite clear because at every chance they got, they wanted to talk about their homes and their families and where they came from. It *mattered* to them and it mattered to me. Telling students it doesn't matter where you come from is damaging to working-class and poor families—*that's* a conversation that needs to be squashed.

Trust and Listening

Throughout my time at Pine Tree, the words "trust" and "listening" were spoken repeatedly by the students. Students spoke extensively about the importance of trust and listening throughout the study, at times linking the two words together synonymously, and I noted that trust and listening were two nonnegotiable and foundational themes involved with testifying and critical witnessing for these students.

Many of the students including Becka, Brittany, Melinda, and Jake all spoke about not really trusting people in the school (classmates, teachers, and counselors). Below is a conversation I had with Becka, Angela, Brittany, and Valencia on defining trust and linking it to the importance of listening:

Kristy: So what does trust mean?

Becka: Trust would mean if I tell them I could trust them, or I give them something I could trust them with it, and they aren't going to do anything with it or tell anybody.

Kristy: Is it just keeping a secret?

Becka: No, it's a lot more than that to me. It's way more than that. If I give them something I could trust them not to lose it or…

Angela: I think when you're confident about somebody, and you can rely on somebody for stuff.

Kristy: I like the way you said that Becka, when you described trust as a gift. I feel you trust me. Why?

Becka: Because of the kind of person you are, and the kind of person you are being to us and actually listening to us.

Angela: Taking the time.

Becka: Taking the time and not rushing us through everything. You are listening to what we are saying instead of ignoring or looking around everywhere.

Valencia: The thing that gets me…

Becka: I don't think you'll tell anybody what we've said. I can just see it in you.

Valencia: One think I do get curious about, and I get scared, is are you going to show this to everybody? What we've talked about and what you've recorded?

I recognize the question I posed to the girls was a bit prompting and assuming when I said I felt they trusted me, because while Valencia shared stories about her life with me, she did not fully trust me. I was an outsider coming in to her space, and she repeatedly wanted to know what I was doing and what I would be doing with the information I learned. We spoke for a lengthy time about my research (including why I was recording, what I would be doing with the recordings, who would hear them), and how they could help me to help teachers become the best teachers they could be. This prompted the girls to say:

Amber: I don't really trust teachers at all.

Valencia: Teachers don't really listen.

Becka: No they don't.

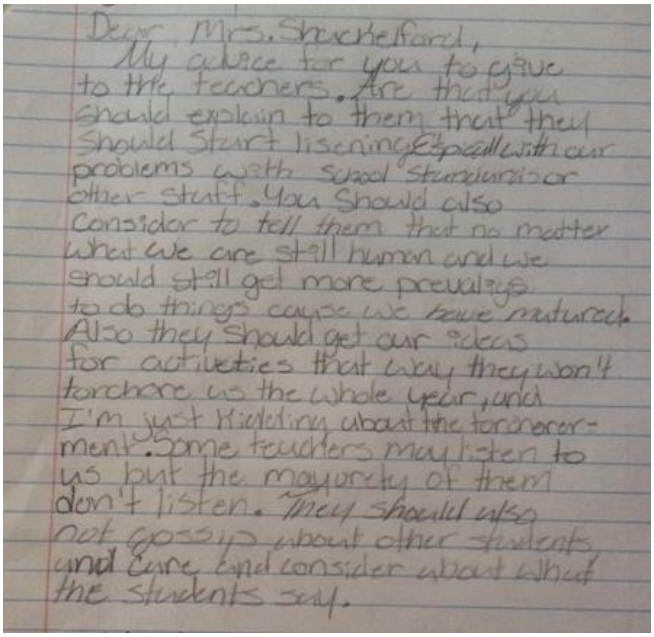
Angela: Like when I try and talk to [Sarah] she's always on her phone!

Becka: Yeah, she does that a lot! She'll be on her phone and I'll ask her if I can go to the counselor, I need to talk about stuff, and she'll say, what? She's on her phone and I know she's not listening to me. She's texting her husband or whoever she's texting. She's looking through it and everything. And I'll say "Can I go to the counselor?" and she'll be like, "Yeah, just go ahead and go." She didn't listen to a word I said about what I was going for! But I was glad she didn't hear me because I don't really trust teachers at all.

The students felt distrustful about educators because they felt they did not listen or betrayed them when they did. The girls read Sarah as a teacher who doesn't listen to them because she is always on her phone. As a mother and a wife, I understood Sarah's desire to check in on her baby and her husband whenever quiet moments allowed. However the students, limited only in their own understandings, read Sarah as just being on her phone all the time and not having time for them.

Melinda shared with me a time she confided in the school counselor and then witnessed the counselor sharing with the teacher what they had discussed, making her feel quite betrayed and resentful. Boler (1999) states, "the absence of a listener, or a listener who turns away or who doubts, can shatter testimony's potential as a courageous act in truth's moment of crisis," (p.168) and that as listeners we are "co-owners of the traumatic event" (Laub, 1992, p. 58 as cited in Boler, 1999, p.168). We have a responsibility to our students, to be active and critically witnessing their testimonies for them.

After our conversation, Angela wrote me this letter offering advice to give teachers:


Dear Mrs. Shackelford,
My advice for you to give to the teachers. Are that you should explain to them that they should start listening. Especially with our problems with school standards or other stuff. You should also consider to tell them that no matter what we are still human and we should still get more prevaliges to do things cause we have matured. Also they should get our ideas for activeties that way they won't torchore us the whole year, and I'm just kidding about the torcherement. Some teachers may listen to us but the mayority of them don't listen. They should also not gossip about other students and care and consider about what the students say.

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Tight Times **with Barbara's Third Grade Class**

After Barbara read *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) to her students and engaged in a discussion, students were asked to write, draw a picture, create a comic, whatever medium they desired to convey the ways they connected or disconnected with the book. Students appreciated this freedom of choice and many took up various artistic forms to represent their understandings and connections to *Tight Times*.

Students made connections with the book, some in what seemed to me to be surface ways and some in what seemed like deeper ways. As I made my way around each table to talk with students (if they wanted to), at first I noticed a theme that many made connections about wanting

a pet (the main character wants a dog and finally at the end of the book rescues a cat from the garbage that he names Dog). Addison, a Hispanic boy, connected in a deeper way and had this to share:

Kristy: Addison, can you tell me about your picture?

Addison: My dad came home and said his boss died and he couldn't work no more.

Kristy: His boss died?

Addison: Yeah, and the whole entire company couldn't work.

Kristy: What was his job?

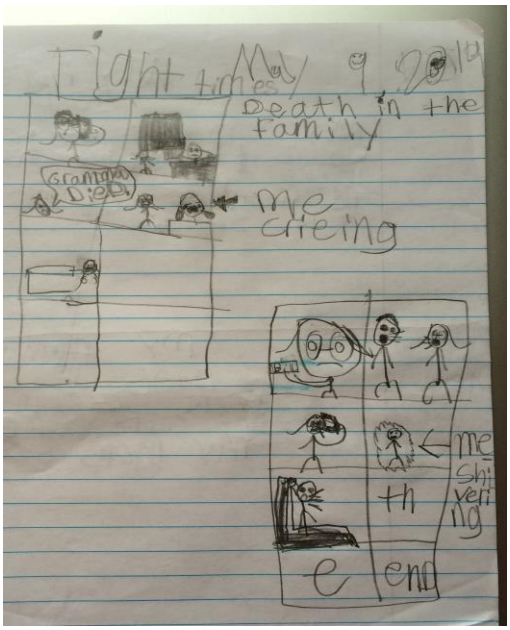
Addison: Building waterslides.

After Addison shared with me about his tight time, he returned to his drawing, turning away from me and signaling the conversation was over. His actions made me feel uncomfortable, yet served as an important reminder. I wondered if he had only shared his piece because as an adult authority figure I had asked him to, but I questioned if on his own he would have testified about his life. I quickly scrawled myself a note on the top of my field notes notebook—*Be careful, be cautious, be open.* I felt I needed the reminder to be careful and cautious when engaging with the students for this work is so intimate and personal and not everyone desires to stand and testify about his or her life. Also being open in phenomenology is central; to turn and focus on what is being studied *but* to be sensitive is just as vital (Dahlberg et, al, 2001).

One event that happened in Barbara's classroom was quite similar to one I experienced in Sarah's. Once again I almost missed an encounter with a student that would impact me greatly. I was about to leave Barbara's classroom and head home as I did a quick eye sweep around the classroom making sure I did not miss anyone. There were two boys in the classroom that

throughout my time at Pine Tree I was forever confusing. They looked very similar (white, light colored hair, husky builds, and both wore glasses) and had similar names, Hoyt and Holt. I called for Hoyt and Holt came over, thinking I had called him. Seeing Holt come I realized I had completely overlooked him and seized the moment to speak with him.

The classroom had become quite noisy so Barbara suggested we sit in the hallway. He opened up his writers' notebook, and I was excited to see he had chosen to depict his tight times in comic form.



Kristy: Wow! Can you tell me about this?

Holt: (hard to hear)We can barely pay our bills right now.

Kristy: Tell me what's going on in your comic.

Holt: That's my mom talking and she's really angry at the people on the phone and I'm just kind of scared (points to the picture and caption of "me shivering")

Kristy: Who is she on the phone with?

Holt: I don't know. This was a few years ago.

Kristy: Oh, this was your connection from a few years ago…

Holt: Another time, it was kind of my fault because I didn't know I was supposed to do this, my mom was going to take a bath and she was going to do something while the water filled up in the tub. I thought she said something differently like come get me when…. And I said yes. But she said turn off the water and check it every now and then. Well the water overflowed and the ceiling basically collapsed. My dad got so mad that he threw one of my old remote control cars at my mom. I didn't talk to him the entire night because I was scared.

Kristy: Does he lose his temper a lot?

Holt: Yeah. Another time we were going to go on a hike and he almost started yelling at me because I couldn't get my shoes to stay tied. I just said they keep coming untied, and I can't tie them tight enough.

Holt and I sat on the cold hallway tile as he told me about his family and his connection to tight times. His eyes brimmed with tears as his voice spoke quietly, sometimes so quietly that I could not quite make out what he said and I had to lean in close to him and have him repeat things he probably would have rather not. I fought to keep my own tears from streaming down my face for not only was I hearing his wounds, I was seeing them in the comic—I was feeling them.

While I felt I was being open to Holt's testimony, I do not think I was being cautious. When Holt told me his dad threw the remote control at his mother in anger and I responded, "does he lose his temper a lot?" I see how effortlessly it is to act as a judge placing blame on others without deeper analytic thought. Boler (1999) urges me to question my responses and search for the ways I am evaluating others' behavior in binary terms of good or bad and "examine the history of a particular emotion…identify[ing] the taken-for- granted social values

and structures of my own values and structures of my own historical moment" (p. 170). My taken-for-granted social structures find me in a place where we could replace our ceiling if this were to happen to us either through our own resources or possibly through our home insurance. More than likely this would be an event that would be told repeatedly over the years and perhaps even with humor (Remember the time you tried to flood our whole house?). Holt opens his comic discussion by stating that they barely can pay their bills and then shared about the overflowing bathtub and for a family where every penny counts, unforeseen expenses can be very stress inducing. Again I saw my own tendency to ask questions/place blame on individuals and not the social conditions that produce their individual stories.

Holt explains that his mom and dad are actually his grandfather and grandmother. He lives with them in a small house. His birth mother has lived in another state "for a long time" and recently came back. She lives in the basement of the grandparents' house and Holt lives upstairs.

Holt: She (birth mom) got a job. Today's her first day. She is working at McDonalds.

Kristy: How do you feel with your mom back?

Holt: It's okay. She never wants to ride the bikes with me because she broke her arm because she used to live in a truck with my stepdad. One time she got out and she was holding on the side of the door and her arm got caught and snapped.

Kristy: Oh my goodness—ouch!

Holt: Yeah. (Holt tells a story about his mom giving her dog a Christmas stocking and how it was funny because the dog swallowed the ball).

Kristy: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your writings or your family?

Holt: Well, my dad's side is from Germany—not sure about my mom's (this is prompted because Barbara asked the students to ask their parents about where their ancestors are from).

Kristy: Do you know your dad?

Holt: I've had a few actually (small laugh). I'm not sure where my *dad* dad is.

Kristy: I'm not sure where my dad dad is either. I haven't seen him in a long time.

Using the comic format offered Holt the chance to visually capture his emotions ("me crying," "me shivering," frown faces) while he verbally told his tight times. The comic format provided him a vehicle for his voice to be not only heard but seen and read as well, offering opportunity for honest testimonies and witnessing (Jones & Vagle, 2013). Throughout our conversation, he physically holds his writer's notebook, which prompted the final discussion:

Kristy: Have you ever written about it (your family, your life)?

Holt: No, I really haven't had anything to write in. I've got some journals, but I use them to draw pictures.

Kristy: Drawing pictures is great! You are a very good comic.

Holt: Thank you.

Kristy: Comics is a great form of reading and writing—what if you drew comics about you and your family?

Holt (laughs): Well, then I've got to get a new journal!

Kristy: Do you have one?

Holt: No. My dad he got me a diary to help with my handwriting but I don't know where it is.

The bell begins to ring announcing afternoon dismissal.

Kristy: Thank you so much for talking with me. You've given me a lovely gift. I'm going to go and find you a journal.

I quickly asked Barbara if she had an extra notebook, which thankfully she did, and I placed it in Holt's hands. He smiled a big smile, said thank you, and gathered his things to go home. As he walked out the door, I noticed that he grabbed an extra backpack; I presumed one of the backpacks of food provided by the local churches for high need families.

Incorporating multimodal literacies into classrooms; such as comics, photostories, digital literacies, spoken word, and artistic representations (to name a few) offers alternative avenues for students to express their voices that differ from the traditional written storytelling format. When Barbara told the students they could draw a comic if they chose to depict their tight times, several students emitted a "Yes!" or a "Cool!" in response. Multimodal literacies provide fun and challenging alternatives and offer educators the opportunity to visually be in the world the students want to show us (see Johnson and Reed, 2015 for more on use of multimodal literacies).

Conclusion

In moment-to-moment engagements, students and I had real conversations about our classed lives. I saw each student's individual story intimately tied to broader social, political, and economic contexts, and I viewed each student as a teacher showing me the phenomenon of social class through their perspectives. I saw oppressive binaries deconstructed between me and the students, (i.e., teacher—student), further binaries rooted deeper in place (students mistrust of educators), and moments where emotions and lives were simply lived and felt. At times it felt risky, yet I was thankful for the "willingness to lean over the edge of predictability and be open to what might emerge beyond what has been in the past" (Jones, 2014, p. 7). It was a coming

together, a mutual collaboration, where the students invited me into small corners of their lives and taught me about the importance of trust, listening, and respecting their voices.

There were so many more stories and interactions with the students I could have added in this chapter. Other topics discussed with students included family structuring, unfairness with teachers, relatives who had passed away, things they felt that were beautiful in their lives, and friend and dating issues, just to name a few. As a researcher I appreciated the freedom of time to be with the students and listening to the stories they wished to share. These moments brought understanding to the phenomenon of social class in nuanced ways that I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

RETURNING TO THE WHITEBOARD: WRITING MY TRUTH

April 2015

Six years ago, Dr. Jones asked my classmates and me to find a spot on the whiteboard and write what we knew or thought we knew about social class. I stood by my spot at the whiteboard realizing I knew very little about social class. I felt awkward, fearful, embarrassed, and completely alone.

Six years have passed since that day and life has really changed. I became a mother to two amazing children, both coming into this world with a fight to be fought. Each was born with a rare intestinal disease known as Hirschsprung's Disease resulting in multiple surgeries and months in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Our family lost our beloved Nana (my husband's mother) to a decades long and grueling battle against breast cancer, and just as we were learning to cope without Nana, Papa (my husband's father) developed an extremely rare form of brain cancer and went to meet his beautiful bride. My parents faced discriminations that accompany older age, which made finding employment impossible, battled unjust and complicated healthcare expenses, thus suffering further financial stresses. I share these things to situate myself in a new context that by experiencing my own traumas my understanding of the world continued to be shaped, altered, and refined.

Now I find myself back at that whiteboard, asked once again to write about what I know regarding the phenomenon of social class and familiar feelings of fear and nervousness start to

mount. But this time I realize something important—I am not standing at the whiteboard alone. I now have a village beside me and behind me comprised of family, extended family, friends, mentors, students and faculty at Pine Tree, professors who challenged my thinking and taught me the power of considering new ideas, researchers whose writing pushed my thinking in new directions. As I pick up my marker, I look all around me at the faces who have been my teachers, who taught me so much about the phenomenon of social class, who encouraged me that this is a story that needs to be told. I uncap my marker, look at my blank whiteboard, and take one more glance at all the faces now cheering me on waiting for me to begin writing.

The marker once again freezes in my hand.

Failure it starts to whisper again.

I freeze at the board because while I have learned so much, I have equally learned there is so much more I want and need to learn. Social class feels as complicated and complex to me as it did six years ago. I have so many *more* questions than I did when I started this study.

Yet I have learned so much. Everyone surrounding me here at the whiteboard taught me so much about this phenomenon in ways I could have never anticipated.

So I throw down this taunting marker and pick up a new marker. I take off its cap and I begin to write my truths and my understandings of this phenomenon.

Asking Questions and Seeking Answers

Through this post-intentional phenomenological study I attempted to open up and understand, even in a small way, the phenomenon of social class as lived in Pine Tree Elementary. Through extensive data analysis, manifestations of how the phenomenon of social class moved and operated at Pine Tree began to emerge. Vagle (2014) describes post-intentional manifestations as holding, "equal and great promise of putting us in contact with something

incredibly deep and rich about living in the world" (p. 23) and I discovered these findings manifested themselves within me, showing and teaching me something incredibly deep and rich about social class. Themes of socially classed beings, classrooms of testimony and the imperative work of critical witnessing where students were challenging deficit perspectives, and trust and listening were major manifestations speaking to me in this study. These manifestations spoke to me loudly during the research--burst forth towards me, permeated my mind when it was quiet, and continued speaking to me long after I walked out the doors of Pine Tree. Using the five principles of class-sensitive practices (Jones & Vagle, 2013) as well as drawing from other scholars who challenged and deepened my thinking surrounding the phenomenon of social class (Bakhtin, 1981; Boler, 1999; Dutro, 2008, 2009, 2011; Freire, 2000; Gorski, 2996; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jones, 2004, 2006, 2013; Luttrell, 1997; Vagle, 2014) allowed me to see my findings as "multiple, partial, and endlessly deferred" (Vagle, 2014, p. 31), thus serving not as *the* truth but *a* truth. I will present each of my research questions below and detail my findings. *How is social class being lived, embodied, discussed, and experienced in this school and in what ways do students and faculty talk about their understandings of a socially-classed world?*

Six years ago, when I stood at the whiteboard and drew a dollar sign as my definer of social class, I failed to see all the other factors that contribute to the phenomenon of social class. Housing and housing arrangements (all the members who live in a house), different kinds of work, who gets targeted by the state and their interactions with state institutions (such as DFACS and the criminal justice system), different kinds of family kinships all add layers to the complicated ways social class is lived and revealing much more complexities than simply income alone.

Social class was lived in strong and powerful ways at Pine Tree. Upon entering the front hallway, students testified about their classed lives with photographs and descriptions of what their families did for work. Pictures of firefighters, chicken plant workers, food service workers, and commercial producers all stood together proudly on the wall showing the value and importance of *all* work. Children's books foregrounding issues of class were in every classroom (some being used and some not) and boxes of them sat unopened in the reading specialist's office just waiting for hands to discover them. Through assignments, writings, and conversations, students spoke about their lives—the happy, difficult, and sad times—showing me a slice of their classed life outside of the school's doors, and how those lives circulated with them inside the school building.

Educators displayed their own complexities with the phenomenon of social class with acknowledging class matters (as seen in Barbara), refuting its importance (as seen in Luann), and articulating that you overcome your circumstances by focusing on climbing the social class ladder and becoming "more than" your family (as seen in Charlotte). Comments made in passing, such as when the paraprofessional stated that her student could be so much more than her waitress mother, speak to the conflicting class discourses residing at Pine Tree.

Recognizing that we are all socially classed beings, I began to witness "how social class runs through systems, institutions, and relations" (Vagle and Jones, 2012, p. 322), The phenomenon of social class as it operated at Pine Tree was never stagnant or silent. Students testified stories from their lives, which often signaled class disparities and injustices. Students seemed to display sadness when their stories reflected outside family factors such as state institutions pushing in on their family (examples DFACS, Immigration, criminal justice system) and not because of their families. Traumas occur in everyday life despite class positioning, such as the loss of loved ones,

but I noted the psychosocial damages state intuition interventions seemed to inflict on the students. Jake was extremely angry that DFACS came and took his baby sister away from them—something he felt they had no right to do. Simon felt tremendous anger when "The ICE" came and deported his father leaving him, a nine-year-old boy, to be the man of the house. Several students, including John and Melinda, felt the loss of family members in jail, questioning systemic fairness.

Working-class and poor students and families are often viewed in stereotypical deficit ways but in this study the students' challenged this narration. These were not unhappy students who needed pity, but quite the opposite. These were students who appeared happy, loved their families, made jokes, acted silly, and revealed that "living on the poorer end of the social class spectrum does not equal unhappiness with oneself or with one's family" (Jones, 2006, p. 13). Through their testimonies in formal and informal ways, students defied that their lives were "less than" by giving voice to their experiences.

I discovered through testimonies and critical witnessing I could see the ways the phenomenon of social class was moving and operating at Pine Tree and even within myself. I recognized the challenges and imperativeness of being an effective critical witness and I often found myself wobbling, thrown off balance by the emotional landmines of the students' testimonies. The students revealed themselves to be intellectual beings that were more than competent to discuss hard topics because they possessed a keen awareness and understanding of the complexities of the world.

As a critical witness, I recognized that I too was a socially classed being with strong discourses and particular ways of viewing the world. I had to actively work to resist deficit perspectives, and in moment-to-moment interactions, sometimes I was not being very successful

as seen in my conversation with Jake around the word "deadbeat." Each time my own perceptions of normality came out, it allowed me to see that I am a classed and gendered being with judgments and assumptions that I have to constantly interrogate. My bridling journal served as a helpful and analytical resource where I constantly wrote and interrogated what I was seeing, thinking, and judgments/assumptions I was making.

The students identified two nonnegotiable foundational themes involved with testifying and witnessing—trust and listening. Students spoke extensively about the importance of trust and listening throughout the study almost linking them together synonymously. The students articulated distrust for teachers in general, for sometimes what seemed to me to be fair reasons (teachers betrayed their trust) and sometimes for unfair reasons or reasons that lied beyond their comprehension (Sarah doesn't listen to us because she is *always* on her phone). In interactions such as these (Sarah doesn't listen to us because she is always on her phone) I noted that student too can become critical witnesses examining their own biases and judgments.

What other forces or factors are at play influencing how social class is lived, embodied, and experienced at this school?

Drawing on principle one of class sensitive pedagogies offered me insight to other forces and factors at play influencing how the phenomenon of social class operates and is experienced at Pine Tree. By situating individual stories within larger social, political, and economic contexts I began to see some of the conditions that made what I was seeing possible. I realized how easy it is to place blame on individual people within individual stories without placing the story in larger contexts and how often this happens in our schools especially in regard to working-class and poor students and families.

Several times in my study I took a step back and examined all the factors at play in a particular moment. With my conversation with Luann, the principal, instead of just hearing her words *it doesn't matter where you come from* and *class only matters as much as adults make it matter*, I recognized I potentially placed her in a vulnerable spot asking her to reflect on things to which she had never given deep critical thought. As an affluent white woman, she had also ascribed to particular societal discourses of meritocracy and being class-blind, and she seemed not to see the ways class was operating in her own school.

With Jake and our "deadbeat" conversation, I saw all sorts of discourses colliding in a singular moment--how fathers are viewed in negatives ways in our society, my connections to the term deadbeat, a mother being constructed as a deadbeat, teenage pregnancy, issues of birth control, government control over sex education in states. In any moment-to-moment interactions so much is going on, both seen and unseen. So many components enter each and every conversation and taking a step back to realize the social, political, and economic factors that play a role is valuable.

Throughout my research I continued to see the complexities and complications of social class. My understandings of this phenomenon showed "complex and layered structural and institutional inequities" at play and I felt the weight of the realization that there are no easy answers (Dutro and Kanter, 2011). While in this study I attempt to recognize systematic, political, and discursive structures, I equally found myself in a place where there was still so much to learn. Digging into principle one of class sensitive pedagogies at Pine Tree provided eye opening pedagogical encounters, yet I recognize how much work I need to do moving forward in learning more about labor laws, immigration laws, criminal justice system, minimum wage, and DFACS to name a few. When students testified about their lives, I could not always place it in

the larger context because I did not have the knowledge I needed in order to do so. Moving forward, I see how important principle one is and how learning about the larger political and social context these stories are situated in would provide deeper analyses and understandings of social class in the future studies.

Another Thing Learned

Phenomenology offered me the gift of openness, to be present in the moment, to "consider new things," to be humble, and to quit "being so certain of what we know and think" (Vagle, 2014, p. 15). I approached this study with a certain arrogance that I thought I knew all the answers before I began, yet I was quickly, and humbly, corrected. Being open, and seeing that there was always something going on even when I felt there was not, immensely impacted my understandings of the phenomenon of understanding social class.

I felt equally as important to understanding the phenomenon of social class at Pine Tree is how *I* understood this phenomenon, highlighting the importance of taking a critical autobiographical stance regarding practices. I adopted a narrative stance while writing this dissertation to physically and visually acknowledge my embodiment in this phenomenon—that I was not separated from it like an outsider looking in, but I was living and engaging in it right along with my participants.

I attempted to be as vulnerable as I felt I could possibly allow, uncovering my socially classed being, exposing my own assumptions, mistakes, and judgments. As I noted in my opening chapter, I am fully aware in the knowledge that I am not alone in my prior ways of thinking regarding class and classists engagements. My hopes and desires for this research is that it reaches educators who also felt a bit unaware and encourages them to start a journey toward a

more class sensitive approach in their classrooms, opening themselves up to the process and allowing and permitting vulnerability.

Wider Implications for Class-Sensitive Pedagogy: Bursting Towards a Class Sensitive Classroom

Writing as Testimony

Many of the students at Pine Tree, as Jones (2006) poetically describes were "living in the borderlands—the in-between spaces of their working-poor homes and their institutional existence" (p. 8). Writing served as a bridge across the borderlands, a way to provide an invitation to bring home lives into the classroom. Through my work with the National Writing Project, I worked with students on a variety of writings each aiming to provide that bridge. Students wrote "Where I'm From Poems" depicting details about their homes, their families, and sights/sounds/smells associated with their homes. Students drew "neighborhood maps" (some adapted this to house/apartment/grandparent's home maps), and we discussed how we could pull out stories from our pictures to write about in more detail. Inspired by a chapter in Spinelli's (1998) book *Knots in My Yo-Yo String* called "Sixteen Things I Wish I Could Do," students created their versions of bucket lists describing things they wished they could do or things they wanted to do before a specific time. Students wrote about desiring to be parents, get married, perform certain jobs, learn a particular hobby, and several students (both girls and boys) wrote about wanting to lose weight or to get skinny. For each writing piece I would share my own, allowing students to serve as my witness to my stories.

Students also wrote in their writing journals in responses to some of the books read in their classrooms. Students engaged in several forms of writing including short stories, poems, long essays, comics, letters, and pictures. Students used their writing notebook as a tool to testify

often holding it in their hands as they shared a story about their life—sometimes reading what they wrote and sometimes just held it without looking at it. Each time a writing was shared, an invitation was presented to me to learn more about them.

In each classroom students had writing journals already in practice, but many of the classrooms were no longer using the notebooks in the way I think they had intentionally been designed. Instead of the notebooks being used as a tool for testimonies, many teachers were assigning prompts for students to respond to diminishing the possibilities for true testimonies. Due to my writing professional development work, I was able to persuade Sarah and Barbara to allow students more freedom over their notebooks, allowing them to view notebooks instead as "place for students (and writers) to save their words…a notebook can be whatever the writer wants it to be" (Buckner, 2005, p. 4). Through our students' writings, we can listen to them share about what is important to them—we can learn about the ways they make meaning and what they value in their lives (Calkins, 1994).

One thing I desired to do as part of this study and was unable to do was to invite the parents of my student participants to be involved through family home reading journals. I desired to hear the families' voices in this study, acknowledging that often times their voices are also silenced (Walkerdine et. al., 2001), but unfortunately I was unable to accomplish this. I do, however, think this would have been a tremendous contribution to this study to hear families discussing their experiences with the phenomenon of social class.

Understanding Where Our Students Come From and the Need to Incorporate Class Sensitive Children's Literature

In 2012, Dr. Phillips set up the working-class book of the month program at Pine Tree because he noted a disconnect between the educators and the working-class and poor families

they served. Socially class diverse books had been missing at Pine Tree and this was an effort to place them into the school, into classrooms, and into the hands of educators and their students. Teachers and students engaged with books such as Night Shift, Family Pictures, and Something Beautiful. Boxes of new socially diverse books sat in the reading specialist's office ready to be given as the new book of the month.

However, with a new change in leadership came an abandonment of this program. While all teachers had copies of the books of the month they had used the prior year, no new books had been given. In fact all the new books had remained in boxes the entire time I was at Pine Tree and were still there on my final day in May. The books sat on classroom shelves—just one more book on crowded shelves.

Yet I, like Dr. Phillips, knew the importance of using these type of books and knew that they could be powerful tools for student's and teacher's testimonies. Working-class and poor students often do not feel their lives matter or are welcomed in schools and by using books featuring economically diverse lives, all students are invited to consider marginalized perspectives in classroom discussion, offering moments for critical and reflective pedagogical moments. Each time students engaged with books featuring economic diversities, rich discussions were generated with the students, sometimes going on for many days. These books offered meaningful and valuable conversations and invited students to testify stories from their lives and share meaningfully about their families (such as what their family did for work).

When Barbara, Sarah, and myself read books foregrounding issues of social class (including *Tight Times*, *Night Shift*, *A Day's Work*, *Something Beautiful*), we used these books and the discussions as tools to analyze societal ways of making meaning, giving voice to perspectives that traditionally are not heard in classrooms, questioning why authors and

illustrators make the choices they do, and discussed ways to take action. Jones (2008) further explains that for working-class and poor children to "recognize themselves in children's literature is equally important as teaching them to reposition themselves as critical readers who recognize in/visibility in texts and speak out against representations that marginalize and devalue tens of millions of families' lived realities in the United States." (p. 50). In this study I advocate that educators rethink their literacy time—the books used and the ways writing is conducted—as a way to move towards class sensitive pedagogies in an effort to privilege students and validate their lives.

Implications for Teacher Education

Many teachers, like myself, have never received any class-sensitive pedagogical training as a preservice teacher or through professional development, and many would probably find themselves in similar conundrums as I was at the whiteboard realizing they know very little about social class. Education regarding class-sensitive pedagogies is a needed, yet missing component in teacher preparation and professional developments. Barbara had said that before Dr. Jones came to Pine Tree to engage the staff in class-sensitive pedagogies, she had "never thought about that before", and after she did think about it is was a big "aha moment" for her. Barbara realized that she could incorporate class-sensitive pedagogies and critical literacy in an effort to privilege her students' lives and challenge deficit perspectives.

As educators, we need to rethink classroom pedagogies and disrupt the current status quo. Teachers need deeper understandings of class-sensitive theories and pedagogies, critical literacy, and the importance of testimonies and witnessing and yet they are absent in most teacher preparation programs and professional developments. Class sensitive pedagogies are not simply for working-class and poor students and families, they are for everyone—classism hurts us all.

Daily, working-class students and families are being positioned and pathologized in harming deficit ways and with class-sensitive training, educators can challenge and work against classism. As a future professor, each class I teach will be grounded on social class-sensitive theories and pedagogies. Teachers need a language to understand the ways they are viewing the world and how their ways may/are perpetuating deficit perspectives and judgments against working-class students and families; they need an awareness.

A Final Word

As a classroom teacher, it drove me crazy when students would end stories with "To be continued…." yet I must confess the allure to do so is inviting. It seems hard to put a final concluding paragraph to this study because in many ways it seems far from over. This study is woven with Jones and Vagle's five principles of class sensitive pedagogies, and utilizes post-intentional phenomenological methodologies, which opened my understanding of the phenomenon of social class in nuanced, complex, and powerful ways. I have learned so much about the phenomenon of social class, so much about myself, that now I feel I could fill up a whiteboard with my discoveries. Yet, I've equally realized there is so much *still* to learn, so much important work still to do. So while I place a concluding paragraph here, my work is not over. In fact, it's just begun...

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APPENDIX A

CHILDREN'S BOOKS FOREGROUNDING ISSUES OF SOCIAL CLASS

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Many of the books found on this list were from extensive list collections found on http://www.childpeacebooks.org. In addition, other titles were added from:

Jones, S. (2008). Grass houses: Representations and reinventions of social class through

children's literature. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 4(2), 40-58. Available: http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2008_2/representations.pdf.