ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "SHOWING THEM WHO I AM": IDENTITY,

PLACE AND PERFORMANCE IN SEVENTH

GRADE LITERACY DISCUSSIONS

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Instruction

In this study, I explored the ways that a seventh grade teacher and her students interpreted literacy discussions in a multicultural school in Virginia. I examined influences of school culture and place on literacy learning and discussions, along with how teachers and students interpreted school culture and place.

I used ethnographic methods to study the teachers, students and school culture. Data sources included observations of language arts and reading classes from November 2003 through May 2005. I also interviewed students and teachers and collected instructional materials and state curriculum guides.

The language arts teacher structured group discussions and other literacy activities for efficiency; however, whole class discussions included open, analytical discussions about texts. Through modeling and literacy discussions, the teacher demonstrated her belief that writers must consider audience to produce effective texts. The teacher did not perceive that place affected literacy discussions; however, the teacher believed students' home lives or lack of reading experiences could inhibit students ability to analyze texts in discussions. The students perceived place and community as disconnected from school and literacy discussions.

Although this study pointed out possibilities for critique through literacy discussions, research is needed on how teachers and administrators encourage a spirit of resistance to hegemonic conditions that exist in schools and society. The theoretical implications of this dissertation include a need for literacy researchers to investigate place and school culture as part of teachers' and students' constructions of identity and literacy learning.

"SHOWING THEM WHO I AM": IDENTITY, PLACE AND PERFORMANCE IN

SEVENTH GRADE LITERACY DISCUSSIONS

By

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Middle school language arts teachers begin each new school year confronted with the task of helping students with diverse backgrounds and abilities to further their literacy knowledge and experiences. This diverse student population complicates literacy education for middle school language arts teachers because they need to consider how to prepare students for the increasingly difficult texts they will encounter in high school. As language arts teachers make daily decisions about curriculum and instruction, problems emerge when some students cannot read beyond a first or second grade level. Often in the same class, students who are skilled, critical readers must patiently tolerate texts and reading instruction designed for students reading at or below grade-level (Applebee et al., 2003; Leal, 1992; Welner, 2001). In middle schools with heterogeneous classrooms, teachers must grapple with decisions about how to best teach classes of students with diverse literacy abilities and backgrounds.

In order to offer a more equal education for all students, detracking programs have been attempted in many US public schools. Education scholars have discouraged placing students in classes based on ability (Allington, 1995; Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Applebee et al., 2003; Lyle, 1999; Welner, 2001). According to some education researchers, students of all literacy abilities tend to demonstrate improvement when they are placed in classes or peer groups comprised of students with mixed abilities (Allington, 1995; Allington and Walmsley, 1995; Almasi et al., 2001; Applebee et al., 2003; Goatley, Brock and Raphael, 1995; Guthrie, Alao and Rinehart, 1997; Lyle, 1999).

Heterogeneous class and peer group discussions provide students with opportunities to discuss opinions and evaluations while building on each other's analyses.

On the other hand, some researchers have found that heterogeneous classes or literacy groups have not been completely successful, especially for poor readers who struggle to keep up with more skilled group members (Allen, Moller, and Stroup, 2003; Moller and Allen, 2000). Even with teachers' best intentions, literacy discussions may not work to the advantage of all students. Some educators have speculated that such situational factors as school culture, peer conflicts, and socioeconomic conditions may impede literacy learning in small groups (Evans, 2002; Lensmire, 1994; Moller and Allen, 2000). While some teachers may be able to help students learn in spite of such conditions, researchers have not clearly documented how (or if) teachers are able to circumvent school influences on student literacy learning in peer groups (Alvermann, 1995; Evans, 2002). Evans (2002) called for studies that examine race, gender, power and social class at work within literacy discussions. How these influences shape literacy discussion need to be studied from students' perspectives. Literacy researchers have suggested that more descriptive studies on adolescents at work in literacy discussions are needed (Alvermann et al., 1996; Evans, 2002).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of issues related to literacy discussions and school culture that have not yet been investigated in detail. Specifically, I examine two areas of educational reform that have impacted literacy discussions and school cultures: detracking and state accountability mandates. Finally, I make a case for considering teachers' and students' perspectives on literacy discussion groups and school culture.

School Culture,Place and Literacy Discussions

Although literature discussions exist as private classroom experiences, all classrooms, curricula and schools are constructions of culture and place (Coulter, 2002;

Gruenewald, 2003; Lensmire, 1994; Moller and Allen, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995).

For the purposes of this investigation, I define school culture as the social patterns and

power struggles that occur in school, as they are informed by both local and theoretical

constructions of "school" (Giroux, 1989). Culture is also the meanings that teachers and

students give to these school patterns. Place is the physical and sociological background

in which the school culture is situated (Cresswell, 2004). Research in literacy education

often focuses on the private experiences of students and teachers in classrooms with the

school culture mentioned briefly as part of the background or setting (For one exception,

see Sheehy, 2002).

Schools exist within communities; however, political and social constructions

from outside of school cultures affect the teaching and learning that occurs within school

walls. State controlled curricula and tests have produced both intended and unintended

consequences on school cultures. Even cultural reforms, such as de-tracking programs,

which are designed to provide equal education for all students, can instigate further

problems and dissent from community members and educators (Darling-Hammond,

1997; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Welner, 2001).). School culture and society define

literacy--these meanings are essential to analyses of literacy discussions and power

struggles (Quantz, 1992).

For teachers who want to encourage lifelong interest in literacy, open discussions

about texts are important components of the language arts or reading classroom

(Applebee et al, 2003; Moller and Allen, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995). However,

school and community culture may affect teacher decision making about literacy

discussions and activities. The effects of school culture on literacy discussions have yet

to be investigated in depth. Further, schools do not exist in isolation from their communities—politics and values leak into classrooms and affect the teaching and learning of literacy, sometimes in unexpected ways (Apple and Weiss, 1983; Giroux, 1989). Thus, a school culture exists as a place and within place. Schools as cultures within places are defined by their histories, ideologies and lived experiences (Storey, 1993). Standardized curricula and tracking are two conditions that inform school culture and place.

State Mandates and Literacy Teaching

Education scholars have historically criticized unfair test uses and prescribed curricula (Darling-Hammond,1997; Giroux, 1988; Lipman, 2005; McNeil, 2000; Wraga, 1999). Researchers have indicated that most teachers are able to work with enforced state curriculum even though teachers have expressed feelings that their professionalism is constantly being undermined with every new system of accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1997; McNeil, 2000). In some cases, instruction has deteriorated when teachers feel that they must focus their instruction on test-preparation for skill-based standardized tests. If teachers must prepare students for standardized tests of literature terms or grammar rules, the culture of the school and classrooms may become more skills-based, mirroring the lower level skill and drill classes that have been criticized by education researchers (See for example, Allington, 1995; Giroux, 1988; Lipman, 2004, McNeil, 2000). Conflicts emerge when teachers want to increase student participation and critical analyses through literacy discussions but must also follow a list of curriculum guidelines and prepare students for a standardized test.

Tracking, Ability Groups and Literacy Discussions

Ability grouping and tracking have been criticized as perpetuating divisions by race and class. Researchers have found that African American and working class students dominate the lower tracks in schools of mixed races and classes (Lipman, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Welner, 2001). Further, low-tracked students have been negatively affected when placed in ability-grouped classes over time. (Allington, 1995; Applebee et al, 2003; Finn, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Welner, 2001). Lower tracked students who are excluded from academically stringent classes may not be able to compete for white-collar jobs or attend college (Hall, Prevatte and Cunningham, 1995; Lyle, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Welner, 2001). This same trend toward detracking has influenced teachers' organization of peer groups within classrooms. Some researchers have encouraged the formation of heterogeneous literacy groups within classrooms; however, teachers and students may become frustrated with the range of literacy abilities at work in each discussion group or classroom (Allington, 1995; Allington and Walmsley, 1995; Applebee et al., 2003; Finn, 1999; Lyle, 1999; Welner, 2003).

Whole class discussions in classrooms that are organized heterogeneously by ability, may also produce problems. Teachers struggle with decisions about whether to require higher levels of literacy by teaching above average readers or lower the reading levels and expectations. Education researchers have documented positive results when teachers encourage high expectations from students of all literacy levels in language arts classes. When teachers provide support for students who need assistance in academically challenging classes, even poor readers are able to enhance their literacy skills and demonstrate success in heterogeneous classes and literacy groups(Applebee et al, 2003;

Lyle, 1999). Specific processes and conflicts experienced by teachers and students as they work in heterogeneous language arts or reading classes are not frequently reported. Detailed analyses of how students and teachers work together in group and whole class discussions are needed to help teachers anticipate problems that arise from working in classrooms with a variety of literacy abilities and academic skills.

Teacher and Student Perspectives on Peer Group Discussions

Within the past five years, literacy teachers of all grade levels have shown an interest in incorporating peer group discussions in classes. In a survey of literacy professionals, Commeyras and DeGroff (1998) found that 95 percent believed that peer group discussion was valuable. Of this 95 percent, 77 percent were interested in using groups but only 33 percent reported actually using peer group discussions. Commeyras and DeGroff (1998) suggested several reasons why literacy professionals may choose not to use groups; for example, teachers might not want to relinquish control to students. Or, most teachers realized that effective literacy discussions require a long period of "trial and error," and teachers were not sure how to teach effective group communication. Descriptive studies that demonstrate how effective teachers explicitly address these periods of "trial and error" may encourage educators to incorporate literacy discussions in their classrooms.

Heterogeneous literacy discussion groups take a variety of forms that evolve and change according to the instructional goals of teachers. Some teachers simply transfer whole-class discussion pedagogy into smaller versions, creating mini, teacher-centered peer groups, instead of allowing literature discussion groups to gradually become student-controlled. Practitioner publications on literature circles, book clubs, and peer workshops

offer clear instructional and assessment methods, and describe solutions to anticipated problems (See, for example, Daniels, 2002; Hill, Johnson, and Noe, 1995; Samway and Wang, 1996). While maintaining a tight structure early in the process seems acceptable, teachers may have specific reasons for setting up and maintaining groups in specific ways. School culture may influence the way teachers structure groups. Teacher and student interpretations of school influences and how these influences seem to affect literacy groups may call into question theoretical perspectives contributed by previous literacy researchers.

Teachers and students are infrequently asked to interpret their school cultures and potential effects on classroom activities. Researchers versed in critical theory often assume that teachers and students seem unaware of underlying ideologies that may inform school cultures (Moller and Allen 2000). While teachers and students are quoted in scholarship on literacy groups, they are not asked to analyze student experiences in discussion groups from their own perspectives. For example, where researchers view student responses as shallow or strained, teachers may observe the same responses as increased enthusiasm for talking about books. Teachers' and students' analyses of school culture and literacy may differ from current theories about how literacy activities in classrooms reflect or contradict school and community values concerning literacy and education.

Purpose of Study

Assuming that class and group discussions about text are common activities for at least part of the language arts or reading classroom, research is needed on how teachers and students work and interpret their work in these discussions. This study describes the

literacy discussion activities that occurred in language arts and reading classes at Hartford Middle School. Further, this investigation explores the ways that school culture and place influenced literacy instruction and discussions.

These questions guide my research:

1. How does the teacher interpret instructional purposes for literacy discussions?

2. What are students' perceptions about how they experience literacy discussions?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of school culture, and how do teachers interpret influences of school culture and place on literacy learning and discussions?

4. How do students interpret their school culture, and what impact, if any, does this culture seem to have on identity and literacy experiences?

By examining closely how teachers and students view their work in literacy discussions in one school culture, my goal is to open up conversation about the possibilities and problems of teaching and learning literacy with peer groups. Finally, much can be learned from the ways in which teachers and students recognize influences of school culture on literacy learning as they work in literacy groups. Teachers' and students' understanding of policies, education and community will contribute to theories about how students and teachers work best to enhance literacy learning and how community policies work with or against effective student learning. The next chapter presents a review of scholarship related to literacy discussions through the lenses of transactional, place and critical theories.

Chapter Two. Classroom Contexts, Place and Identity in Literacy Discussions: A

Review of Relevant Literature

Introduction

Before considering how I will address my research questions on teacher and

student interpretations of literacy discussions, I examine scholarship that has contributed

to knowledge about literacy discussions.   Most scholarship I discuss centers on literacy

discussions; I also included research on writing workshops that involved students talking

about drafts and writing processes. I was most interested in research that contained

analyses of the relationships between school contexts and literacy discussions because the

focus of my research is how teachers and students interpret the impact of school culture

and place on literacy discussions.

Within the last ten years, literacy scholarship has moved beyond discussions of

reading and writing strategies to include considerations of the social, political, and

historical contexts in which these strategies are taught. According to Galda and Beach

(2001), "Literary response researchers in the 1990s have focused increasingly on

response [discussion and writing] not simply as a transaction between texts and readers

but as a construction of text meaning and reader stances and identities within larger

sociocultural contexts" (p. 66). Research on oral discussion frequently includes

references to transactional theories and sociocultural or critical theories. In their review

of literacy research and teaching, Pearson and Stephens (1994) asserted that research

questions about "what works" in the classroom are also questions about power and

politics. "Even place matters" (p. 37). Keeping in mind that place is also a

reconstruction of power and politics, I also review research that has critiqued or

questioned school or classroom structures at work on group literacy discussions.

Along with literacy scholarship on discussions in which context is analyzed, I

examine research that examines literacy discussions as performance. Few researchers

have emphasized the oral and performance characteristics of literacy learning. Although

research on performance and identity construction exists, analyses of performativity in

literacy discussions are often limited to identity construction in terms of race and/or

gender (Broughton, 2002; Dutro, 2003; Evans, Alvermann & Anders, 1998; Lewis, 1998;

Sutherland, 2005; Wortham, 2004; Young, 2000). One exception is Lewis' (2001) work,

which I discuss in the last section of this chapter. This literature review takes several

turns as I work toward making a case for analyzing literacy discussions through the lens

of "place" and "performativity."

In the first section, I examine literacy discussion research that specifically

addressed the issue of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping by reading ability;

these studies on heterogeneous groups provide information on how teachers have used

literacy discussions with students of various literacy abilities. In the second section, I

discuss the inter-relatedness of transactional and sociocultural theories and how they have

played out in recent studies on literacy group discussions. Discussions do not occur in

isolation, but are affected by school place and culture. Acknowledging this relationship

between readers' transactions of text and classroom context, some literacy researchers,

especially those who have published in the 1990's and later, have analyzed literacy

discussions through the lens of both transactional theories of reading and sociocultural or

critical theories. Next, I present "place" theory as it has informed school curriculum and

policy, and I discuss recent researchers' work on literacy group discussions, analyzed

through the lens of "place." Finally, I review scholarship that includes analyses of

identity and performativity in order to synthesize the connections among place,

performance and identity in literacy discussion research.

Ability Grouping, Heterogeneous Grouping and Literacy Discussions

Critical theorists and literacy scholars have argued that ability grouping

exacerbates literacy problems for poor readers and perpetuates divisions by class and race

(Allington, 1995; Applebee, 2003; Chinn, Anderson & Waggoner, 2001; Hall, Prevatte,

& Cunningham, 1995; Lyle, 1999; Porter, 1998; Welner & Oakes, 1996). Although

ability grouping and tracking currently exist in various forms throughout the US, there

have been increased attempts toward heterogeneous classrooms in elementary and middle

school language arts classrooms (LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimize, 2003; Welner & Oakes,

1996).

The elimination of whole class ability grouping or tracking in some schools has

created a new set of problems for teachers who are faced with classes that include

students with a variety of reading levels. Poorer readers have been shown to disengage

from whole class discussions (Agee, 2000; Allen, Moller & Stroup, 2003). Peer

discussion pairs or groups (heterogeneous by reading ability) are often suggested as one

solution for motivating students of all reading levels to enhance their literacy skills.

Mixed-ability peer groups enable poorer readers to learn from their more able peers as

they talk about books (Allington, 1995; Applebee et al., 2003; Chinn, Anderson &

Waggoner, 2001).

Previous research on peer discussions has demonstrated that readers of all literacy backgrounds can benefit from peer discussions that move beyond literal comprehension to higher levels of synthesis and analysis (Almasi, 1996; Almasi et al., 2001; Alvermann et al., 1996; Applebee, et al., 2003; Ares & Peercy, 2003; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Gambrell, 1996; Lloyd, 1998; Lyle, 1999; Marshall et al., 1995). However, problems with mixed ability whole class and small group discussions have also been documented (For example, Evans, 2002; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Lensmire, 1994; Lloyd, 1998). Some researchers have observed that whole class discussions worked better than small group discussions in classes with students of mixed abilities (see for example, Freedman, Delp and Crawford, 2005).

Two studies on discussions in heterogeneous classrooms worth mentioning were conducted by Freedman, Delp and Crawford (2005) and Moller and Allen (2000). The classroom teachers in both studies were successful in their work with heterogeneous students in literacy discussions. One reason, consistent in both studies, was that the classroom teachers were able to work with low-level students separately when they felt these students needed help or were not working well in whole class discussions. For example, one teacher in Freedman, Delp and Crawford's study led whole class discussions part of the time, then the teacher worked individually with low-level students when she felt the low-level students needed additional help. Other times, the teacher assigned more skilled peers to work individually with low-level readers. Similarly, in Moller and Allen's study, the teacher was able to assist lower level students because the researcher met with low-level students in a separate discussion group while other students remained with the teacher for whole class discussions. In this situation, the students were

successful in analyzing and interpreting a novel because they received support and attention from a teacher who was able to spend extra time with the students apart from the regular classroom. Both of these studies demonstrated that what works may depend on how the teacher structures literacy discussions or how the teacher monitors the successes and struggles of low-level readers.

Maloch's (2005) study also focused on two learning disabled students in third grade, and how these students worked within heterogeneous peer discussion groups and whole class discussions. Maloch found that the two boys were not successful in peer group or whole class discussions unless they were prepared. Preparation involved reading the text, then responding in a journal according to teacher guidelines. When the two boys were assisted by the instructor or the learning disabilities tutor, they contributed actively in the discussions. The two boys also had to learn the "conversational norms," which they did through the support of the teacher. The teacher also monitored their participation in the group, making sure the two boys were recognized for their contributions. This study opens up questions about how teachers effectively monitor their students' contributions without interfering with their independence and engagement in peer discussions.

The above research also suggests that teachers need to think carefully about how literacy discussions are structured. Poorer readers need to be closely monitored, which may be difficult for teachers who work with a class of heterogeneously grouped students. Lyle's (1999) research portrayed a fourth grade classroom in which small group literacy discussions, where students were grouped heterogeneously by ability, were successful for most students. In Lyle's study, each group had a student teacher that monitored the

group's progress and taught them how to work effectively. By the end of the study, low-level readers felt that they learned more from the joint activities and discussions because everyone shared ideas. The high-level readers acknowledged that they learned "democratic decision making" and they became aware of their own literacy skills when helping others (1999, p. 294). Both groups expressed some frustration with accomplishing the group projects; however, none of the students in the group felt cheated because they were required to help less able readers.

Lyle's study also raises several questions for future research about how groups work together. Each student group was monitored throughout the study by one student teacher; student teachers were responsible for instructing students how to work together to solve problems. What would have occurred if the students were not constantly monitored by student teachers? Other than supporting respect and courtesy, how did the student teachers support active involvement? What led to the positive experiences that these students described? How do higher-level readers feel about tutoring roles they may be forced to play with lower-level readers? In schools where gaps in student literacy levels are wider, what problems may arise as students work together to accomplish a task? Beyond the description of positive outcomes for these heterogeneous groups, Lyle's (1999) study is important methodologically because students' opinions and responses were highlighted. The students, who were the focus of this study, talked about the benefits of working in a group. Few studies in the US or UK have focused primarily on students' perceptions of heterogeneous groups in as much depth as Lyle's case study (for one exception, see Evans, 2002).

Applebee et al (2003) sought to describe effective literacy discussions in a variety of settings by collecting data on both heterogeneous and homogenous small group and whole class discussions in multiple classrooms in various middle schools and high schools across the US. Applebee et al (2003) defined "effective" whole class and small group interactions and discussions as those that contained one or more of the following characteristics: authentic teacher questions, questions with uptake and open discussion (Applebee et al., 2003, p. 700). According to Applebee et al (2003), all three of these characteristics illustrate a method of dialogic instruction that goes beyond the initiation-response-evaluate pattern (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Authentic teacher questions were questions in which the teacher did not expect a specific answer from students. The next characteristic of discussions, questions with uptake, was defined as questions that respond to a previous speaker. These could be questions posed by either teachers or students. Questions with uptake could have occurred in either whole class or peer-led small group discussions because a teacher did not have to be leading discussions or asking questions. The third characteristic, open discussion, referred to conversations about literature in which students contributed the most dialogue. Open discussion was defined as the "free exchange of information among students and/or between at least three participants that lasts longer than thirty seconds. . . Open discussion tends to be marked by the absence of questions, from both teacher and students, except for the purposes of clarification" (Applebee et al, 2003, p. 700). Applebee et al (2003) used these criteria to gauge amount and quality of discussions.

Applebee et al's (2003) results on the characteristics of low ability group discussions are especially relevant because they illustrate the possibilities for open

discussion for all literacy levels. Less open discussion occurred in lower literacy-tracked classes. Further, students in lower tracked classes did not improve literacy skills as much as students in heterogeneous or higher tracked classes. Improvement was documented from researchers' analyses of student writing assignments and reading test scores. The lowest measures of improvement occurred in the lower-tracked classes where observations indicated that engagement and performance on literacy activities was not as dramatic as in other classes (Applebee et al., 2003, p. 710). Applebee et al (2003) suggested several reasons for these results. First, discussion in low ability groups may focus more on students' personal experiences and less on literary analysis than in higher tracked groups. Where there is less emphasis on literary analysis, discussion activities may impede students' ability to analyze literature effectively in writing. Second, results for the variable "open discussion" indicated that lower-tracked students participated less frequently in conversations than high-track students across grade levels; this may indicate that lower-tracked students were not as engaged in reading and did not complete assigned literacy assignments as frequently as students in higher tracked classes. Future ethnographic or case study research on specific classroom discussions may reveal explicit differences in open discussions among poor readers and high-level readers, which would provide insight to teachers and researchers interested in literacy discussion groups.

The problem with discussion research to date is that there is not a clear picture of how students in heterogeneous and homogenous groups actually work together. Research is needed that includes the teachers' and students' interpretations of how group or whole class discussions work. If teachers value heterogeneous small groups and classes, how do the students experience these groups? If literacy researchers continue to advocate

heterogeneous literacy discussions, then a closer examination is needed of how students work within these groups or in whole class discussions. A close, ethnographic description of how students or teachers perceive success in literacy discussions may produce a clearer picture of successes and problems. In the next section, I go beyond analyses of literacy discussion results to examine literacy discussion research with transactional and critical theoretical frameworks. Also, I offer a closer examination of teachers' beliefs about literacy discussion activities that teachers and researchers have deemed beneficial for enhancing student literacy.

Transactional Theory and Reader Response: An Overview

Reader response teaching methods, which are often the result of transactional theories interpreted by practitioners, have been implemented into literacy programs in various forms since the 1980's (Allen et al., 2003; Broughton, 2002; Dressman & Webster, 2001; Spiegel, 1998). Following the lead of literary critics such as Rosenblatt (1978) and Fish (1980), reading researchers began to explore children's meaning making through a literary lens (Martinez & Roser, 2001). Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) and Fish (1980) placed the reader toward center stage of literary analysis where previously the "text" had played a lead role. In Rosenblatt's (1994,1995) and Fish's (1980) views, readers are "creators" of text through processes of individual interpretation. Reader response-based discussions continued to inform teacher practice as described by recent literacy discussion researchers (for example, see Martinez & Roser, 2001 Moller & Allen, 2000; Samway & Whang, 1996).) Further, "Literature circles," one of the practical outgrowths of reader response theory, have incorporated Rosenblatt's transactional theories and practices (Daniels, 2002; Samway & Wang, 1996).

"Literature circles" allow students to control discussions while teachers work as mentors. Although literacy researchers advocate allowing students more choices, a clear picture of how much control teachers are willing or able to give their students has not been clearly documented. Also, research is needed on how school culture affects teacher control and student agency in literacy discussion groups.

Scholars on classroom discussion groups have continued to reference reader response theorists such as Rosenblatt (1978, 1994, 1995) and Fish (1980). Most literacy researchers within the past few years take a broader view of groups as interpretive communities, going beyond the individual reader as the creator of the text (Fish, 1980). Within the last few years, literacy research has expanded from an emphasis on literacy discussions as intimate, "interpretive communities," toward a broader view of how groups, classes and schools work within, and are acted upon by politics, culture and ideologies of power (Dutro, 2001; Lensmire, 1994). With this in mind, I analyze studies on literacy discussion groups that provide analyses of social structure through lenses of transactional theories and sociocultural or critical theories.

Transactional theory, sociocultural criticism, and literacy research. Literature discussions are meant to "empower the reader by allowing him/her to participate in the decision-making process" (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002). Readers have been shown to enhance their own understanding by talking to others even if their own literacy skills are poor (Burns, 1998; Gilles, 1998; Lyle, 1999). The premise of transactional theory is also "empowering" in the sense that the truth of the text's meaning exists within the reader, who participates in an interpretive community.

Literacy scholars have emphasized the connections between reader response activities based on transactional theories of reading and reading engagement (Beach and Marshall, 1991; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002; Villaume, et al., 1994). In their textbook designed for teachers of literature, Beach and Marshall (1991) offered examples of "higher order questions" to begin student discussions about literature in small groups. Almasi's (1995) study on peer-led discussion groups emphasized the importance of encouraging students to bring up conflicting opinions to their group and request the help of their peers with readings that are confusing. According to Almasi (1995), students were able to experience "conceptual change" by "solving {their} own incongruities" within peer-led literature discussion groups (p.341).

In their study of peer discussion groups through the lens of transactional theories of reading, Almasi, O'Flahavan & Arya (2001) anticipated counter-arguments from researchers and teachers who may claim that responses that are too reader-centered detract from critical textual analyses. In their research study of more proficient and less proficient discussion groups, the teacher of the less proficient group suggested "that students should use the text to clarify their understanding of events" (Almasi, O'Flahavan & Arya, 2001, p.27). The teacher of the more proficient group did not need to make this same suggestion because the members of this group already used examples from the text to demonstrate their understanding. However, this study did not explicitly illustrate if or how the teacher of the more proficient group taught her students to use the text to clarify understanding during literacy discussions. This study demonstrates that students may need modeling or explicit instruction beyond personal reactions to texts. Students may

need to be taught to support their analyses with text examples as they work in whole class and group literacy discussions.

In some cases, when teachers allow students to take control of discussions, students are more successful with analyzing texts (Gilles, 1998; Short et al., 1999). However, what happens when individual readers are not allowed the freedom to contribute to this meaning-making community of the peer group? Allen et al.'s (2003) case studies of two struggling readers addresses this question. Similar to Applebee et al (2003), mentioned in the previous section, Allen et al. investigated readers in whole class and small group discussion situations, documenting problems that emerged when poor readers experienced literacy discussions in heterogeneous classes. Allen et al. studied two low-level fifth-grade readers in depth across four different discussion contexts. Allen et al. also explored the social conditions of the classroom, along with students' constructions of themselves as readers as they worked in mixed-ability groups and in homogenous pairs.

After experiencing problems with other students in peer groups silencing their participation, the two students in Allen et al's study joined two other struggling readers to form a group in which one of the teacher-researchers led discussions. Allen et al. suggested that small group discussions might not work well for poor readers who are not provided with socially and academically supportive conditions. Rosenblatt (1995) has recommended that teachers set up groups that are supportive and informal where students feel safe to discuss texts in ways that allow "unself-conscious, spontaneous and honest reactions" (p.228). And, as Allen et al described in their research, heterogeneous groups may not work as supportive environments for all students.

In this same study, Allen et al. analyzed the two focus students' problems through the lens of critical theory, explaining that the group and class contexts may have contributed to these students' problems, at least in the beginning. For example, Allen et al. (2003) described the "social positioning" and "silencing" that occurred in one heterogeneous peer group where two high level readers constantly criticized the two low-level readers. When the two poorer readers asked questions about reading content or vocabulary, these questions were ignored or criticized by the two high-level readers. Although the two poorer readers resisted positioning themselves as "poor" readers, they could not maintain the pace set by the other readers. This led to constant argument and criticism from the more able readers. When the two struggling readers were placed with two other low-level readers, a teacher-researcher monitored them closely. As this teacher-researcher worked with these students, all four of the poor readers became "successful at meaningful discussions" and practiced comprehension strategies such as "asking questions, referring to the text for answers, and marking interesting or difficult passages for discussion" (Allen et al., 2003, p. 245). It was not clear in the study whether or not these reading strategies had been explicitly taught to these students previously by the classroom teacher. In either situation, Allen et al. (2003)'s observations indicated that even after struggling readers have been taught how to work in discussion groups, teachers may need to continue to monitor students as they practice literacy skills in groups.

Allen et al (2003) also suggested the possibility that higher-level readers may become frustrated if poorly skilled readers in their peer groups are struggling to maintain a reading pace set by high-level readers. Allen et al recommended that teachers impose structure and monitor students at least in the beginning if students are not comfortable or

experienced with peer or whole class discussions. Other researchers have supported this recommendation (Blum, Lipsett & Yocum, 2002; Short et al., 1999). Some researchers have also recommended that teacher modeling of class discussions is necessary before students can direct discussions in peer groups or participate successfully in whole class discussions (Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999).

Even though students in Allen et al.'s (2003) study were in heterogeneous classrooms, these results raise further questions about how (or if) poorer readers will continue to improve over time if they work only in homogenous discussion groups. Working in homogenous peer groups allowed these two students to improve literacy skills without feeling forced to keep up with students whose literacy skills were more advanced. However, how well will these students be able to keep up with their peers in future whole class discussions or in situations where they are required to work in heterogeneous groups? Allen et al. analyzed the two students performances in several classroom situations, but did not discuss the effects of the classroom or school culture on these groups. Although this was not the focus of Allen et al's study, perhaps school culture or place contributed to the problems that these students experienced in whole class discussions and peer groups? Studies that examine literacy discussions as affected by a broader cultural arena are the focus of my next section.

Next, I make a case for going beyond cultural criticism to include analyses of literacy discussions through the lens of "place." Few literacy researchers have examined "place" and "public sphere" theories and how they may inform literacy practices in classrooms. Although some literacy theorists have referenced "place theory," it has remained somewhat distant from individual classroom investigations. The studies I

examine use ethnographic research methods to analyze literacy discussions and curriculum from a broad perspective. As literacy researchers continue to use ethnographic methodologies, place theories should not be ignored in analyses of the effects of school culture on classroom literacy instruction.

Place, the Public Sphere, and Education

In this section, I present "place" theories and discuss the relevance of these theories to future research on literacy discussion groups. First, I discuss scholars that merge place with public sphere theories in analyses of school curricula and contexts. In the following subsections, I discuss the southern US as a region characteristically defined by place in literature and politics, and then I analyze how place and context worked as the theoretical framework for two studies on literacy discussions. Finally, I suggest how place theories can be used in ethnographic research, specifically in the area of literacy education.

Coulter (2002), a curriculum scholar who analyzed the workings of public and private arenas in Canadian public schools, asserted that teachers have the daunting responsibility of instructing students to excel as private individuals while they develop their own identities and interests. At the same time, teachers prepare students for active participation in public settings outside of school, such as community, family, state, etc. Schools are situated within communities and states all permeated by underlying political ideologies; however, each school is unique as a place within society (Coulter, 2002; Grunewald, 2003; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). Public and private boundaries become blurred within school contexts as teachers perform multiple roles characteristic of both spheres (Coulter, 2002; Felski, 2000). Teachers are trusted to prepare students for success

in public arenas, yet their parental role mirrors the private sphere. This public/private

role of the teacher is often ignored in education research except in analyses of teachers'

work with state mandated curriculum or tests or in critical analyses of school districts and

community relationships (see, for example, Albert & Jury, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2005;

Lipman, 2004, McNeil, 200).

In his philosophical history of place, Casey (1997) discussed Heidegger's

rejection of the translation of the Greek word, polis, as "city-state." Heidegger insisted

that the actual meaning of polis is "the place, the there, wherein and as which historical

being-there is. The polis is the historical place (Geschichtasstatte), the there in which,

out of which, and for history happens" (cited in Casey, 1997, p.262). Casey (1997)

interpreted Heidegger's discussion of place and polis as a defense that there is power in

public places. On the other hand, power must have "limits that do not confine but allow

for the most effective building-up of world within the place of the polis" (p.262). These

historical and political characteristics of "place" are not often discussed in literacy

research. Further, how educators perceive, anticipate or reject such "limits" has not yet

been investigated in literacy scholarship.

Also, as Coulter (2002) argued, educators experience conflicts between public and

private arenas in their work in schools. If schools and communities are interpreted as

places, the public and private spheres may not create as much conflict for educators.

School and community become meeting places for both public and private. However,

with the No Child Left Behind Act in the US, standardized tests and public scrutiny of

schools and teachers has become the norm. Coulter (2002) recommended public

dialogue between educators and public policymakers. Dialogue of this nature will be

difficult to achieve in the current political climate of the US where top-down control has become the solution to the perceived necessity of teacher accountability.

In his article on critical pedagogy and "place," Gruenewald (2003) asserted that critical scholarship must synthesize the effects of community and politics on the educational environment. Place theory can also help researchers analyze change in communities and how these changes affect schools (Albert & Jury, 2005).) Gruenewald (2003) applied place and public sphere theory to educational curriculum and practice. Similar to Coulter (2002), Gruenewald calls for scholars and educators to participate in conversations with policymakers. Gruenwald, in his analysis of US schools, reminds us that with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, any local participation will "be eclipsed by the tripartite banner of education reform: standards, testing and accountability" (p.621). However, it benefits educators and schools to become more conscious of place education because it enables students to experience local life and participate—and perhaps even change—the politics that occur within the community. Gruenewald provided some examples of place-conscious education such as problem-posing education, environmental/ecological education, service learning, and experiential learning. Promoting local participation in education is necessary to connect schools with their communities.

At first glance, Gruenewald's (2003) recommendations for place-conscious education seem removed from classroom literacy discussions. However, literacy activities and discussions that connect students with their communities probably occur frequently in classrooms—perhaps without teachers and students consciously acknowledging the connections. One problem that Gruenwald's (2003) place education

does not seem to anticipate is that community structures and politics are not easily changed or deconstructed. At the very least, literacy research should analyze how place and community work with or against students' literacy and learning.

According to Kincheloe and Pinar (1991), curriculum theorists need to be conscious of the concrete world in which education takes place. "When events take place they are infused by place" (p. 7). Looking beyond this theoretical notion of place, literacy discussions are affected not only by readers and educators' interpretations of text and culture, but also by the permeating politics and sociology of the school and community. If, as Kincheloe and Pinar suggested, place affects education research and researcher, a description of place should become central to analyses of literacy discussion groups. After all, literature is created in a place. Although Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) connect literary places with curriculum theory, I view literary places as symbolic of feelings and ideas that student readers may associate with their lived places—school, community and family. I center my discussion in the next section on Kincheloe and Pinar's (1991) analysis of place especially as it is defined in southern history and literature.

Place and the southern public. In southern literature, place is central to the actions of the story (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Perez, 2004). Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) argued that southern writers have created their own literature of place that has "portrayed the belief that the present is continually instructed by a living past" (p.9). Casey, (1997) discussed in the previous section, also emphasized the connection between history and place. The southern US is situated in a place with a history of sociological and political conflict since the Civil War; these conflicts become evident through the sense of place

created in southern literature. As Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) suggested, "Southerners possess a distinctive way of knowing, and epistemology of place" (p. 11). Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) discussed several characteristics of Southern epistemology that they believe support their argument for including place in educational scholarship. I focus here on three characteristics that seem most relevant to education. First, Southerners tend to reject reform based on theoretical generalizations and tend to mistrust "scientism." Second, Southern conception of justice is personal. They do not trust those who act merely on "social conscience" (p.11). Third, Southerners are locally oriented—they have emotional attachments to specific places. While these are broad generalizations, Kincheloe and Pinar 's (1991) description of Southerners' value of place and community seems especially valid in the state of Virginia where top-down educational policies and other interferences in local politics have not been met with enthusiasm.

Perez (2004) made the case that the South has been forced to consider issues of multiculturalism, assimilationism, and identity much earlier than other areas of the US. This is evident in southern literature by both African American and Caucasian writers in which identities, history and place are explored through characters and themes. As characters in Southern literature are defined by place, so is education, according to Perez (2004). Theoretically, this means that the school is defined and "controlled" by the community (p.200). In small southern towns with socioeconomic and racial divisions, community and school control may be in the hands of upper class, Caucasian residents. How this theory of "place" and community play out in any school will not be apparent on the surface. In the next section, I discuss researchers that have connected school culture and "place" with literacy discussions.

Place and literacy discussions. Lewis' (2001) ethnography of a suburban white school provides information about the effects of "colorblindness" on place and school culture. There were few minority students in this school system, and Lewis interviewed three students who described experiences with subtle forms of racism. The teachers seemed to deny the existence of racism in their mostly white school and "racist putdowns [were] glossed over as not really being racial. . . " (p.790). Lewis provided examples from observations of one teacher's classroom discussion of multicultural history. This teacher discussed past injustices experienced by minority groups in the history of the US. Because this teacher did not critique present problems, the students seemed to view injustices as problems that had already been solved. Discussions about present racial realities did not occur. The place and culture of the school as "colorblind" seemed to contribute to these uncritical class discussions of historical texts. The underlying ideologies of meritocracy coupled with a colorblind mentality were perpetuated in class discussions about historical texts, according to Lewis. From her ethnographic investigation, Lewis suggested that a closer examination of the effects of place and school culture can lead to underlying causes of racism. Students and teachers may perpetuate unintended ideologies about race and gender in literacy discussions simply by excluding or focusing on specific texts.

Sense of place and school culture also directed Sheehy's (2002) observations of whole class and small group literacy activities as she interpreted the contradictions of a class project that both provided power to students and limited students' autonomy. The purpose of this study was to critique the unintended consequences of social change designed to enhance student learning. Sheehy's ethnographic methods included

observations and interviews of students and teachers in a middle school. Sheehy's role as researcher changed as she implemented an interdisciplinary project with two middle school teachers. The middle school where Sheehy conducted this research was going to be closed the following year, and a new school would be built in its place. As a result, Sheehy developed a project that required two classes of seventh grade students to design a "new school" to replace the current one. Sheehy and the teachers worked together to help the students on this project. Students were videotaped working on these projects in groups and during class discussions. Sheehy interviewed the students and teachers before, during, and after the project was completed.

This group project, envisioned by researcher and classroom teacher, called "build a new school" was implemented to allow students to interrogate power structures in place in school and community while enhancing their literacy, research and analytical skills. Students in two focus groups demonstrated resistance to this project by verbally opposing it and by creating conflicts within their discussion groups. The reasons for these oppositions were unclear. The classroom teacher and researcher worked to help students solve problems; however, Sheehy suggested that the students were controlled by the disciplinary boundaries and rote memorization/skill and drill classroom patterns common in this school culture. These boundaries seemed to interfere with the students' willingness to cooperate in groups and complete the project. For example, the students expressed dismay at having to write an essay on their scientific and mathematical research findings—students felt that writing essays was central only to English classes. Students were required to pass a proficiency exam, so teachers were required to prepare the students for these tests by drilling facts through worksheets and classroom lecture format.

Sheehy's (2002) description of data sources and results illustrated that an analysis of connections between school culture and discourse is a complex process. In her final analysis, Sheehy concluded that school culture and its effects on literacy activities within classrooms are important to examine. While teachers' and students' interpretations of their culture were not included as part of Sheehy's (2002) analysis, these results raise questions about how teachers and students in other school settings may interpret the power structures within their school cultures. In the next section, I examine critical theories that turn toward identity and performativity, and suggest the relevance of these theories in analyses of race, class and gender in literacy discussions.

Critical Theory,Identity and Performativity

Understanding race, class and gender as intersections that contribute to identity is essential to viewing identity as a continuous process of construction and re-construction. Identities, schools and teachers work within politically contested spaces. Critical theorists, including critical race theorists, see individuals as shaped by a dominant, culture that exerts economic and social control (See, for example, Delgado and Stefanicic, 2001; Johnson, 2003). This control affects the structure and culture of schools, including the ways teachers and students work together or against each other, or more likely, a combination of power and cooperation (Apple, 2004; Kincheloe, 2004; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Although critical theorists currently view schools and classrooms as products of politics and economics, Apple (2004) emphasized the potential for teachers and students to become agents of change.

For many critical race theorists and teachers of African American and/or working class children, changes are necessary in urban schools, where poverty and low

expectations, among other problems, deter students from academic success. Although

my research setting is not urban, there exists a split among race and class lines that seems

to offer students and teachers situations where these lines are constantly reproduced and

contested.   Since Brown vs. Board of Education, small southern cities, such as the one in

my study, have faced challenges inherent in a split of this white/black student population.

The racial and economic make-up of small city schools in southern communities may

offer insight into identity negotiations that adolescents and teachers of adolescents may

experience in bi-racial schools.   Critical pedagogy theorists suggest teaching methods

and curricula that are "culturally responsive" (Gay, 2000) and teach students to question

the ideologies that shape the texts they read, write and discuss. Some critical and place

theorists recommend teaching students to improve the cultures and communities where

they live and work (Delpit, 1995; Kincheloe, 2004; Lewis, 2000; Street, 1995). What this

looks like in classrooms, and what students and teachers believe about such pedagogies

has been documented in urban schools, but not as frequently in smaller city schools that

contain a black/white racial split.

Some literacy researchers have addressed gender and/or social class issues and

how they have affected the place and culture of classrooms; however, studies on African

Americans and gender in literacy research are infrequent. For example, Guzzetti et al.

(2002) reviewed thirty studies on literacy discussions and gender, and only four of these

studies addressed issues relevant to African American students. The other studies either

studied only European American students or did not mention the ethnicity of the research

participants.   Although studies of African Americans and identities in literacy

discussions are limited, there are some studies worth mentioning. Several studies

portrayed African American girls as successful in peer group and whole class literacy

discussions (Hinchman & Young, 1996; Smith, 1998; Sutherland, 2005). One exception

was Fordham (1993) who found that African American girls in predominantly white

classrooms silenced their voices to become academically successful.

In her study of African American girls' discussions of Morrison's The Bluest Eye,

Sutherland (2005) analyzed the connections between literature and students'

constructions of their own identities. Sutherland (2005) interviewed African American

female students and observed these students in an advanced placement high school

English class. The results of Sutherland's (2005) study suggested that Eurocentric

definitions of beauty and others' assumptions of who they are as African American

women created boundaries for their own identity constructions. The students were able

to negotiate these boundaries by "positioning themselves in their writing and interviews

as actors with complex identities. Literature provided a context for them to discuss issues

that were important to them. . . " (p. 390). Participants used narrative as a way to analyze

the complexities of the text. Sutherland (2005) concluded that further research is needed

on the "significance of multicultural literature in the lives and identity constructions of

students" in classroom situations (p. 397). Sutherland's research also suggested that

African Americans responses to literature by and about African Americans will be unique

to each individual; however, discussions of African American characters allow students

to reconstruct their own identities. Further, the possibilities exist for African American

students to analyze texts in personally meaningful and critical ways.

In Johnson's (2003) critical analysis of the ways that race is played out in our

culture, he argued that "blackness" is a performance determined by complex

significations. Johnson writes, "'Blackness' does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather Individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to   circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude others, identity becomes political" (p.3). In a mixed-race school environment, racial relationships are complex and are not easily and visibly analyzed. Johnson's descriptions of racial performances have implications for research on how African American and Caucasian students and teachers work together in classrooms. Literacy discussions offer opportunities for creating and deconstructing boundaries of race. Johnson (2003) also suggested that performance should be a part of teaching literature, recommending that students "experience" texts through oral reading and other artistic presentations of literature. Through these experiences, cultural critiques are possible during the experience of listening, discussing and interpreting literature through oral activities. Other researchers support this call for analyzing race through the lenses of performativity and critical theories(hooks, 1990; Ladson-Billings,1994; McLaren,1999).

Beyond theories of race and gender performances, education and curriculum theorists have suggested the values of applying performativity to educational research. For example, Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos (2005) make a case for studying "repetitive actions plotted within grids of power relationships and social norms within the context of education and schooling" (p.2). By studying students and classrooms through the lens of performance, education researchers focus on everyday communication, and analyze schools as sites of practice and culture. Teaching is a performance and teaching and learning are performative events in that actions are repeated and values and beliefs

about teaching are reproduced in everyday classroom activities (Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos, 2005; Butler, 1990; Denzin, 2003).

Broughton's (2002) study, which analyzed gender and identity performances, illustrates how social constructions of gender can affect literacy discussions. Broughton, who interviewed four female students and observed them in discussions, was also interested in how sociocultural issues affected the students' identities and literacy both in and out of school. Her research purpose was to analyze cultural and social identity at work as these students talked about literature in one "book club" group. In order to achieve this purpose, Broughton observed and interviewed four sixth-grade girls in book club discussions, then interviewed family members about their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Broughton also spent six months observing the girls in classes and in school-related activities, such as an orchestra concert and pep rally (p.8). As Broughton observed the four girls' group discussions, she analyzed the ways they "performed" their identities. For example, one girl who was characteristically quiet outside of school also chose to talk infrequently during group discussions. When Broughton and the other girls asked her questions, "her responses indicated that she had given serious consideration to the issues" (p. 21). Broughton suggested that students learn and participate in groups in a variety of ways. This girl's responses indicated that she was listening and participating in the literacy activities even though she did not always talk during the discussions.

In the end, Broughton's (2002) study provided in-depth analysis of the girls' identities and how they reconstructed and performed their identities as they talked about characters, themes and actions in books. Broughton led the book club discussions, so she

encouraged the girls to share personal thoughts and feelings about books, and she monitored the progress of the discussions.

While Broughton's (2002) study focused more on how individual identities are shaped by identity and culture, Broughton's conclusions echoed Allen et al's (2003) suggestions (discussed earlier in this chapter) that teachers need to work closely to enhance students' productivity and learning in small groups. If culture and society construct readers' identities and position within literacy group discussions, what does this look like and how does this play out in a classroom where the teacher is unable to consistently monitor all students?

Lewis (2001) conducted an ethnographic investigation of fifth and sixth graders engaged in a variety of literacy activities. Lewis documented students' responses to literature in class and peer discussions and analyzed these discussions within the context of power and performance. Lewis explained, "Individual and group identities are defined through repeated performances (ways of talking, listening, and writing and using one's body) as participants 'perform the self,' which is always in relation to the group" (p.13). I focus on two sections of Lewis' book in which she analyzed the performances of students in peer group discussions and whole class discussions.

Similar to Lensmire's (1994) study on power and peer writing workshops, the student peer groups in Lewis's (2001) study perpetuated some already dominant students' power positions. However, Lewis and the classroom teacher observed several of the students critiquing the social norms portrayed in the texts. As students became more comfortable with peer-led discussions, some discussions "interrupted status and power relations as they existed in the local classroom and community" (p.116). All members of

the classroom reshaped the thinking and analysis of literature in unique ways. The classroom teacher was able to listen to Lewis' audiotapes of discussions and respond to her taped discussions on the variety of discourses and identities that shaped and were shaped by the discussions, ranging from teen slang to literary criticism. Through the lens of performance theories, Lewis (2001) and the classroom teacher were able to interpret the possibilities for students to become involved and engaged in a variety of literacy analysis discourses in peer-led discussion groups.

In the teacher-led whole class discussions, Lewis (2001) observed that students spent less time contesting each other's power and conflicts were limited because the teacher maintained the control. However, the students were not directed to personalize the literature analysis as much as they did in peer group discussions because the teacher tended to move personal discussions toward more analytical analyses. Engagement was less evident in whole class discussions because the students were not as personally involved with the texts. The teacher believed that this distanced analytical response to literature was necessary for the students to improve skills of literary analysis. The teacher in the study also encouraged the students to question cultural assumptions and hidden norms in whole class discussions, which some of the students seemed unable to do in peer-led discussions. Lewis suggested that critical discussions of text are often overlooked in the teaching of literacy; however, other ways of reading are also valuable. Lewis also recommended an approach to literacy instruction that teaches students to "listen to multiple voices" in texts and critique texts that silence certain voices and cultural perspectives.

Lewis (2001) focused on oral literacies in her analyses of literacy discussions, reminding researchers that how students speak about texts can tell us about how they are reading and defining their own identities in relationship to other students and their cultures. Although literacy research conducted through the lens of performativity depends on the oral performances of texts in the form of discussions, there is little research on students who perform their own written texts orally. Research that analyzes final presentations, such as Lyle's (1999) study has not focused on the performativity of these presentations. In his analysis of oral reading and religious text, Elster (2003) reminded teachers and researchers that oral reading, performance and ritual work together to enhance meaning and build community when texts are read aloud together. This does not need to apply only to religious communities, but could also apply to classroom situations where students work together to listen and/or read texts aloud, then discuss meanings of texts.

Researchers that conducted studies in classrooms with adolescents should not ignore the oral processes involved in writing and interpreting texts. Further, literacy research with adolescents should include considerations of theories of identity and performativity as adolescents are observed in processes of identity (re)construction within classroom settings and communities outside of school.

Conclusion

In this review of theory and research on literacy discussion groups, I have attempted to connect several areas of scholarship. First, the effects of perceived literacy abilities of students, along with ability grouping vs. heterogeneous grouping have directed researchers to study literacy groups as situated within these contexts. Second,

other researchers have analyzed literacy groups by applying transactional theories of reading and cultural criticism to study how group discussions work to enhance student learning. Third, I discussed place and public sphere theories and how these theories have been used and could be used in analyses of the effects of school culture on literacy discussions. Finally, I synthesized literacy studies on performance, suggesting that further research is needed on oral performances in and out of classroom settings. In the next chapter, I describe the methods I used to address my research questions on teachers' and students' perceptions of literacy discussions and school culture.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

As discussed in chapter 2, Casey's (1997) conception of places as sites of "power with limits" open up the possibilities for classroom researchers to investigate the connections between place and classroom literacy discussions. In this chapter, I begin with an interest in literacy groups and their workings within one school culture, and I consider the limits and possibilities of ethnography as research methodology for exploring literacy discussions and school culture. Creswell (1998) defined ethnography as a "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system" (p. 58). The ethnographer's purpose is to discern patterns within a culture, a process that involves observing behaviors and language (Creswell, 1998). To establish patterns, an ethnographer spends time in the field or culture observing and interviewing.

With ethnographies, a descriptive, "cultural portrait" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61) is possible if the ethnographer is able to spend extensive time in the field interviewing and observing participants. In the case of school settings, researchers are limited by school structures such as class periods, standardized tests, and participants' willingness to allow intensive observation and interviewing. To document a culture ethically and honestly, ethnography must contain detailed accounts of the researcher's interactions with participants, context, and methods. An ethnographer should "faithfully report the multivocality (or cacophony)" of voices that emerge within a culture (Altheide & Johnson, 1998, p. 293). As I spent time in the field for this study, I attempted to recognize the ways cultural assumptions seemed to act on participants and settings (Altheide & Johnson, 1998), inviting the study participants to interpret their school and classroom cultures.

With these definitions and limitations of ethnography in mind, I describe the methodology I used to respond to the research questions. I also create a portrait of my role as "researcher." As Wolcott (1994) suggested, I attempt to open up the research process in this chapter and in other chapters, demonstrating where my voice is located in relation to participants' voices. Along with a description of the research setting, and participants, I include a description of why I chose this methodology. Finally, I describe my data sources and methods of analysis.

The framing question for this study is: What are teachers' and students' perceptions of literacy discussion groups and the impact of school culture on these literacy groups?

These subsidiary questions also guided this study:

1. How does the teacher interpret instructional purposes for literacy discussions?

2. What are students' perceptions about how they experience literacy discussions?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of school culture, and how do teachers interpret influences of school culture and place on literacy learning and discussions?

4. How do students interpret their school culture, and what impact, if any, does this culture seem to have on identity and literacy experiences?

Researcher and Context

Ethnographic methods allowed me to describe how individuals work in literacy discussions within the classroom, and how the school culture worked with or against the

daily classroom activities as experienced by both teachers and students. Following the lead of interpretive education ethnographers who view people as part of a unique sense of place, time, and culture, I describe the ways in which I locate myself as a researcher in this school (Coulter, 2002; Grunewald, 2003; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). I place my research perspective within critical and cultural theoretical frameworks. Critical feminists and cultural theorists recommend research that critiques positions in power while advocating and giving voice to those who do not usually dominate the public sphere (see, e.g., Apple, 1990; DeVault, 1991; Edwards & Ribbon, 1998; Lather, 1991). Edwards and Ribbon (1998), qualitative researchers who have conducted investigations on women's interests, redefined their roles as researchers as they worked within private and personal arenas. According to Edwards and Ribbon (1998), "Discussions of epistemology and methodology do not consider … issues raised by researching the private and personal and seeking to voice it in (the) public" (p. 15). The researcher works in multiple realms simultaneously.

Likewise, my research participants (teachers and students), move in and out of public, private, and personal arenas. Specifically in the United States, the realms of private and public are in constant negotiation politically and socially. Teachers have the daunting responsibilities of teaching students to excel as private individuals as they develop their own identities and interests (Coulter, 2002). At the same time, teachers attempt to help their students learn to succeed in school and in other public settings outside of school, such as community, family, state, and so forth. As a researcher and a former teacher, I will enter the private arena of another teacher's classroom. The classroom exists within a "public" school—public in the sense that place, community,

and political ideologies inform school culture and discourse. Elements of the private and personal come into being as teachers interpret and (re)interpret their public and personal responsibilities to their students through daily interactions in the classroom.

As a researcher, I listened and responded to the personal nature of teachers' and students' conceptions of classroom discourses and actions. As I discussed in chapter two, Sheehy (2002) illustrated the complexity of interpreting school culture and discourse involved in her research process. Different from Sheehy's (2002) focus, I center my analysis on literacy and school culture from the perspectives of the teachers and students. As a private–public–personal observer, I entered the research setting with the hope of protecting and supporting, as well as informing about, the private and personal within public schools.

Research Perspective: Teacher, Critic, Researcher

Acknowledging that my research perspectives have evolved with experience and knowledge, it is important that I define my current perspectives and how they are situated in current education, literacy, and critical theoretical frameworks. Critical and interpretive ethnographers agree that researching lived experience is a subjective process that involves the researcher's interpretation of other people's private and public lives and voices (DeVault, XXXX; Edwards & Ribben, 1998; Grumet, 1990; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1990). Although my goal is to try to uncover the teachers' and students' meanings; ultimately, I am responsible for the (re)interpretation of the language and contexts of my research participants

As a former high school English teacher in an upper-middle-class suburb of Des Moines, Iowa, I had experienced the high stakes nature of standardized tests, curricular

controls, and philosophical disagreements between teachers and administrators. Frustrated with the lack of curricular control I experienced as a high school teacher, I chose to obtain a Masters Degree in English, and then teach in a community college. Although I have always been comfortable with the academic freedom I have experienced teaching for Northern Virginia Community College, I chose to further explore my interests in literacy research by reading scholarship on literacy and literary criticism. My desire to conduct research in public schools eventually led me to pursue a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Maryland. As I teach secondary education students at the University of Maryland—students who are idealistic and enthusiastic about teaching—I am often haunted by thoughts that I abandoned public school teaching without learning how to successfully subvert political and administrative power.

My high school teaching experiences did not prepare me for a recent research project I conducted on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) mandates, with its tightly structured curriculum and mandated standardized tests that turned teaching into "drilling" and test preparation into rote memorization (Smith, 2006). As I compared the Virginia SOL with what I thought was "curriculum control" in Iowa, I realized how much curricular freedom I had been offered as a high school English teacher in Iowa. At that time, in the late 1980s, there were no state curricular mandates; however, we were required to teach grammar and sentence structure skills so our students would perform well on the Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Our Iowa school district employed a curriculum specialist who assisted us in designing and writing our curriculum.

Hartford Middle School

I chose Hartford Middle School (pseudonym) because it is located in a racially and economically divided town in Virginia. Social and racial issues in small cities are not frequently highlighted in education research. Conflicts in small cities are often dismissed as unimportant when compared with urban conflicts. Of course, considering the expansive social and economic problems that exist in urban schools, the focus on urban education is more urgent. Although education opportunities and community support seem more available to people in small cities when compared with opportunities in urban areas, small city dwellers can experience other kinds of oppression that may not be immediately visible to a nonresident.

Hartford Middle School has a population of about 750 students in grades four through seven. The socioeconomic makeup of the school is diverse: About 50 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches whereas the rest of the students are from middle- to upper-middle-class families. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 47 percent of the middle school students are African American, 51 percent are Caucasian, 1 percent are Hispanic American and 1 percent are Asian American, Middle Eastern, or American Indian. Hartford Middle School recently received notice from the state of Virginia that they will maintain their accreditation because enough students scored high enough on the Virginia SOL tests (interview, Mr. Hoffman, principal, October 10, 2004)

Located in the small tourist city of Hartford (pop. approximately 21,000), Hartford Middle School is the only middle school within the town's boundaries. Although there are small private religious schools in the town and surrounding counties, most city residents send their children to the public schools. There is a small state liberal

arts college located near the center of town, offering an array of cultural activities. Within the downtown area, musicians, artists, and antique dealers run their shops and studios. About 50 percent of African Americans live in segregated neighborhoods. The African American people in Hartford have a history of high profile involvement in city politics and church-related activities. One of the political and economic priorities of Hartford residents has been to control development and sprawl directly outside of the city; at the same time, residents have been working to increase economic opportunities for city residents while maintaining the historical integrity of the city.

Hartford middle school and the Virginia SOL. In this section, I highlight some features of the state-mandated curricula and tests called the Virginia SOL. Although this study is not about state mandates or systems of accountability, the Virginia SOL affected the daily lives of the teachers, students, and parents in my school setting. With school accreditation and high school graduation tied to the Virginia SOL test scores, the culture of the school appeared to be under constant surveillance by the state and community.

The Virginia SOLs were originally designed and implemented by Governor George Allen, who was governor of Virginia from 1994–98. An underlying assumption of Governor Allen and the politicians in power at the onset of the Virginia SOL was the belief that results will occur if specific requirements are "demanded" and that students and teachers will achieve state or national expectations by conforming to these demands as enforced (Fore, 1998; Koradalewski, 2000). What began as a program designed to raise the standards of student performance in public schools escalated into public criticisms of the SOL "high stakes tests." The Virginia state education program was also

composed of a standard curriculum (Duke & Reck, 2003). Since its original design, the SOL curricula have been revised and reformed by state policy makers; the language arts curriculum remains abstract enough that most teachers are allowed freedom to design activities that they think meet the literacy needs of their students while conforming to the curricular blueprints.

By the beginning of the 2003–04 school year, the SOL tests were firmly in place, and Hartford Middle School had been officially "accredited" by the state of Virginia. Students had scored well in all areas of the SOL tests. However, the mandated curriculum and upcoming tests meant constraints on teachers' time and instructional choices because the possibility always existed that schools could lose their accreditation if test scores decreased over time.

Participants

I chose Hartford Middle School for my study because it is located in a small city where members of the community have a reputation for actively supporting the public schools financially and socially. Participants were chosen through a process of "purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 1998). First, I met with a "gatekeeper," the middle school principal, Mr. Hoffman. We discussed my study, and he recommended two teachers who used group discussions in their language arts classrooms. I contacted both teachers, who were open to working with me and willing to allow me to observe their classes and interview students.

From November 2003 through March 2004, I began observing Language arts classes taught by two teachers. One teacher, Mrs. Campbell, teaches gifted and talented (GT) students from grades four through seven. I observed her seventh grade GT class, an

interdisciplinary class that served as the GT students' "reading" class. All seventh grade

Hartford Middle School students are required to take both reading and language arts

classes. The other teacher I observed, Mrs. Lake, teaches 7th-grade language arts and one

low-level reading class. I observed Mrs. Lake's low-level reading class and two sections

of her language arts classes. Initially, I spent one to two days each week observing both

teachers' classes twice a week from December 2003 through February 2004.

By March 2004, I chose to focus my observations on Mrs. Lake's reading and

language arts classes because I was able to observe students with a range of literacy

abilities. I observed Mrs. Lake's classes from December 2003 through May 2005. The

GT classes replaced reading classes, but some of the GT students were interspersed in

Mrs. Lake's language arts classes. Some of Mrs. Lake's students in her low-level reading

class were also in her language arts class. I learned that students are placed in reading

classes according to reading tests, previous grades, and teacher recommendations.

Students are placed in language arts, science, and social studies classes randomly, so

language arts, science, and social studies classes are heterogeneous by literacy ability.

When I first began my study, I looked for problems that emerged in the small-

group discussions. As I observed the classes, I took notes on the behaviors and language

of students and teachers as they discussed literature in small groups and in whole-class

discussions. I also took notes on literacy activities in class. After about three months of

observations and teacher interviews (by March 2004), I chose to refine my questions to

those stated at the beginning of this chapter. Discussions with the teachers and principal

indicated that one main challenge to student success in this school seemed to be the

extreme differences in socioeconomic classes among students. As mentioned in the

research-setting description, this school comprises mostly upper-middle-class and lower-middle-class students. Most of the lower-middle-class students are African American and most of the upper-middle-class students are Caucasian.

I spent two to three days a week in each class, depending on my own teaching schedule. By March 2004, I had observed that the teacher followed an instructional pattern according to days of the week. One exception was Friday—Fridays were often spent catching up on previous material or on "open mike" poetry performances. Students could choose to read poetry they had written. I chose to observe regularly on Mondays and Wednesdays from March 2004 through May 2005.

Methods and Data Sources

In this section, I describe my methods and sources of data. For this investigation, I drew from feminist ethnography,(DeVault, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; D. Smith, 1987), interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1996; Lareau & Schultz, 1996; Wolcott, 1990), and performance theory (Denzin, 2003; McLaren, 1999). Lareau and Shultz (1996) note that most ethnographies include the use of participant-observation[DAVN1] and in-depth interviews. Guided by my research questions, I participated in classroom activities by observing and interviewing teachers and students. Occasionally, I assisted the teacher with classroom discussions and activities if the students and teacher desired my help. I took notes on my research process, and I noted which days I participated more actively as a teacher. For example, on five different days, I noted that I read drafts of student papers while they were working or walked around the class with the teacher and answered students' writing or grammatical questions.

There are a number of data sources I collected in this study: teacher handouts, state curriculum materials, and interviews and classroom observations. Table 1 includes my research questions and the data sources I gathered to answer each question.

Table 1. Research Questions and Sources of Data

Research Question	Data Source
1. How does the teacher interpret instructional purposes for literacy discussions?	Teacher interviews; class observations; class handouts
2. What are students' perceptions about how they experience literacy discussions?	Student interviews; Class observations
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school culture, and how do teachers interpret influences of school culture and place on literacy learning and discussions?	teacher interviews; class observations class handouts; state and school curriculum documents
4. How do students interpret their school culture, and what impact, if any, does this school culture seem to have on identity and literacy experiences?	Student interviews; Classroom observations

Interviews I conducted interviews with the learning disability teacher, the GT

teacher (Mrs. Campbell), Mrs. Lake (language arts and low-level reading teacher), the

school principal and two assistant principals. I interviewed a minimum of four students to

represent each focus group. Table 2 includes an explanation of the three focus groups. I

include the pseudonyms of each student and his or her focus group in Appendix B.

Table 2. Student Groups

Group 1	Students in Mrs. Lake's low-level reading AND language arts classes (2003–04 only)
Group 2	Students in GT class AND in Mrs. Lake's language arts classes
Group 3	Students in Mrs. Lake's language arts classes but NOT in GT class or in Mrs. Lake's low-level reading class.

Note. GT = Gifted and Talented.

These focus groups include students that represent the various literacy levels that

are defined by Hartford Middle School. Similar to Applebee's (2003) research on ability

and heterogeneously grouped literature discussions, including participants from these

three groups helped me to compare and analyze students' responses with literature in

different classroom conditions.

I encouraged open conversation during interviews, and interviews were

audiotape-recorded when the students felt comfortable with this. There were three

students who were willing to be interviewed, but they did not want to be audiotape-

recorded, so I took handwritten notes during these interviews. I began each conversation with opening questions (see Appendix A). To conduct in-depth interviews with students and teachers for the purpose of understanding student and teacher interpretations of literacy and school culture, I allowed students, teachers, and administrators to choose the direction of the conversation once I asked initial questions (Johnson, 2002). Sample opening questions are listed in Appendix A. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) described research interviews that move toward conversational forms to avoid constraining participants' text and discourse (p. 168). Recognizing that students' and teachers' perspectives have often been "eclipsed" by the voices of those who hold more political power, I encouraged teachers and students to talk about any issue that affected their work with literacy discussions (DeVault, 1993).

Observations. Although I originally began by observing Mrs. Campbell, the GT teacher, and Mrs. Lake, I soon focused my time on Mrs. Lake, who taught 7th-grade language arts and low-level reading. Similar to Allen et al. (2003), who observed four students in a variety of discussion situations, I spent time in two language arts classes and one reading class on each observation day to observe some of the same students in a variety of literacy activities. I took handwritten field notes during my class observations. In my field notes, I wrote down the time to determine the amount of class time spent on discussions. I also labeled discussion notes as "Questions with uptake in whole class," "Questions with uptake in small groups," "Open conversations in whole class," and "Open conversations in small groups[DAVN2]." These labels are borrowed from Applebee et al. (2003), discussed in chapter 2. I chose these labels to focus my attention

on student and teacher behaviors to determine themes and patterns as they occurred across types of literacy discussions.

Written products from teachers.   Materials such as teacher-provided handouts, assignment explanations, discussion rules, or any other documents that the teacher felt comfortable allowing me to examine were collected as data sources to provide information about school and classroom cultures.

State curriculum materials.   State-mandated curricula and tests are part of the current culture of the school. The Virginia SOL curricula and tests have affected the sense of "place" in my research setting in a variety of ways. Both historically and currently, the Virginia SOL as a form of accountability have been open to public debate and controversy. I read the SOL language arts curriculum objectives as they were stated on the Virginia Department of Education web site to become familiar with the 7th-grade language arts curriculum.

Data Analysis

In inductive research, analysis occurs throughout the field research process. Before drafting the research report, I analyzed observation and classroom artifact data by memo writing and writing interpretive comments on observation notes. I reviewed my observation notes once a week, and wrote a memo analyzing any patterns I observed. I also noted any changes in the ways I participated in the class or school, and I documented any revisions to my research processes.

To manage and analyze interview and memo transcripts, I used NVivo (ver. 2.0), a computer software program for qualitative data analysis. I transcribed each interview, then I entered the documents into NVivo to code. I also entered my memos into the

program. I used words or "codes" that I thought captured the issues that were present in classroom literacy discussions and in students and teachers' beliefs about literacy discussions (Lareau & Schultz, 1996; Lather, 1991). These "parent tree nodes" in NVivo, that is, the central coding categories that I observed, illustrate my coding structure: Power, Performance, Mother-ing, Visibility, Place, and Poetry/Identity.

After the first round of coding, I reread class observation notes, writing "parent codes" (mentioned above) in the margins of the observation notes. Next, I returned to NVivo to refine codes into themes. First, I deleted the "mother-ing", because after reviewing interview and observation data, this code did not seem to describe Mrs. Lake's beliefs about how she taught literacy or worked with literacy discussions. Then I combined and added to some of the other "parent codes." For example, I merged "power" codes with "performance," and used more specific performance coding to interpret the kinds of performances I observed. These specific codes were: performance/race; performance/social class, performance/literacy discussions; performance/writing process, and performance/ nonparticipation.

After refining my codes in NVivo, I recoded my observation notes accordingly. As I recoded my observation notes, issues of identity, place, and performativity in writing and literacy discussions became the central focus of my analysis for chapters 4, 5, and 6. I began thinking about how school culture, place and identity are performed and reconstructed by teachers and students in discussions of literature and writing.

Research Validity

First, I acknowledge that "there is no perfectly transparent" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 123) method of portraying any culture, and no account or

interpretation or "truth" is superior to any other. Altheide and Johnson (1998) suggested a perspective of validity they refer to as "validity-as-reflexive-accounting" (p. 291). The basic idea is that the research process is opened up through a process of memo writing. The interpretations of participants, relationships between researcher and participants, and relationships between local culture and larger community are all considered as part of the research process and analyses. Other ethnographic researchers have used words such as *trustworthiness* and *understanding,* which I also reference to define validity. Triangulation of multiple data sources (see Table 1) enhanced the trustworthiness of my interpretations and analyses.

Some postmodern researchers question the concept of "validity," describing this term as a construct developed to exert power over others (DeVault, 1999; Wolcott, 1990). With this in mind, I have attempted to present my data as honestly as possible, recognizing that I described and interpreted this data from my perspective (Lather, 1991; Wolcott, 1990).

Member checking. Although I did not exclude information that was personal in nature, I left out information that I thought might be damaging to any of the teachers' relationships with their colleagues or administrators. I also sent a copy of chapters four, five and six to Mrs. Lake to read and respond to. I asked her to tell me what she thought about my analysis of her classroom. So far, she has responded to chapter four. Mrs. Lake's response was positive, and her comments were directed mostly toward the students' language and analysis of the whole-class discussions. Mrs. Lake said she did not realize how much the students enjoyed participation in whole-class discussions. In the future, Mrs. Lake thought she would allow more time for students to talk about what they

read as a class instead of cutting them off to move on to the next topic (personal email, January 17, 2006).

Conclusion

I am uncomfortable with the idea that research is conducted in a place, then the researcher leaves again never to return, and I have continued my communication with Mrs. Lake. My admiration and respect for Mrs. Lake as a teacher and a person may affect judgment in some people's eyes; however, I cannot imagine conducting research with a person I do not admire and respect. This does not mean that I agreed with all of Mrs. Lake's instructional choices or beliefs about teaching. The Hartford 7th graders were also willing to put their trust in me and talk with me, and I respected their candor. According to Denzin (2003), "The ethnographer's tale is always allegorical, a symbolic tale, a parable that is not just a record of human experience. This tale is a means of experience, a method of empowerment" (p. 118).

I believe that my next chapters will allow others to learn from the experiences of my research participants. I also understand that any readers of these chapters may perceive the data differently than I, and I look forward to future conversations about other perspectives. In the next chapter, I introduce Mrs. Lake and her 7th-grade students and begin my data presentation and analysis of literacy discussions.

Chapter 4. Performativity and Literacy Discussions

In this chapter, I argue that Mrs. Lake and her students viewed whole class and small group literacy discussions as important for enhancing reading comprehension and reading enjoyment. As I conducted my observations and interviews, the themes of performance and presentation emerged as essential components of discussions about texts for both students and teacher. Discussions about writing processes and products were also necessary steps to literacy learning for both Mrs. Lake and her students. Teaching students to consider audience when writing was a key component of Mrs. Lake's literacy instruction; student presentations and performances for peers were intended to enhance students' written and verbal communication with an audience. The performances of final writing products in the form of class presentations also served to motivate student learning and enabled Mrs. Lake to gauge students' literacy learning. The gifted and talented (GT) students were exceptions in that they did not value discussions as much as the other students.

In spite of conflicts that emerged in small group discussions, Mrs. Lake and her students interpreted these conflicts as steps toward learning to collaborate effectively. As I describe small group and whole class discussions in this chapter, I interpret the ways that Mrs. Lake and her seventh grade students perceived literacy discussions in terms of their purpose and importance to success in school. First, I provide an overview of the nature of whole class and small group discussions in Mrs. Lake's classes. Following the overview, I describe how Mrs. Lake perceived literacy discussions and how her approaches to teaching literacy included "literacy performances" for both herself and her

students. Also, I examine her students' perceptions of whole class literacy discussions as "performances."

Next, I focus my analysis on the students labeled "gifted and talented" because these students interpreted literacy discussions differently from other students. Finally, I compare and contrast the ways Mrs. Lake and her students perceive performances of writing processes and products. Toward the end of the chapter, I compare and contrast the similar and different meanings that Mrs. Lake and her students gave to literacy discussions, then explain how performances contributed to these literacy discussions by becoming part of students' conversations about writing processes and literacy comprehension.

Nature of Discussions: An Overview

In chapter 2, I described the Applebee et al.[DAVN3] (2003) research on conversation in language arts classes. I used two discussion variables from Applebee et al.—Questions with uptake and open conversations—to focus my observations on the types of conversations that occurred in Mrs. Lake's language arts and reading classes. I also examined small group and whole class discussions because both occurred regularly in Mrs. Lake's language arts and literacy classes. For the purposes of this study, I noted the following modes of discussion during class observations: Questions with uptake in whole class, questions with uptake in small groups, open conversations in whole class and open conversations in small groups (Applebee et al., 2003). To review the Applebee et al. (2003) definitions, questions with uptake, referred to questions in response to a previous speaker. Either teachers or students asked or replied to questions. Also,

Questions with uptake occurred in either whole class or small group discussions because a teacher did not have to be leading discussions or asking questions.

Open discussion was defined by Applebee et al. (2003) as the "free exchange of information among students and/or between at least three participants (may include the teacher) that lasts longer than thirty seconds. Discussion tends to be marked by the absence of questions, from both teacher and students, except for the purposes of clarification" (Applebee et al., 2003, p. 700). Open discussions are those conversations that tend to veer in a variety of directions, and occur in both small group and whole class settings. Literacy researchers have found that open discussions allow students to reach higher levels of literary and expository analysis and evaluation in their conversations (Almasi, 1995; Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001; Gilles, 1993, 1998; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995).

In Mrs. Lake's classes, discussions occurred in both small group and whole class situations. Included in Table 3 are the percentages of classroom time spent during each school year on each conversation pattern. Percentages were based on total classroom observations of three 50-min periods of language arts, observed twice a week, and one 50-min reading class, observed twice a week. For purposes of comparison, I observed the 7th-grade GT reading class three times each school year to[DAVN4] get a general picture of the nature of GT classroom activities and literacy discussions. Reading classes were not observed during the second school year because Mrs. Lake did not teach reading during the second year. Percentages of conversation patterns observed in language arts and reading classes are included in Table 3.

Table 3

Conversation Patterns in Reading and Language Arts Classes

Dates	Class	QWU—whole class (%)	QWU—small groups (%)	OD—whole class (%)	OD—small groups (%)	Total OD (%)	Total QWU + OD (%)	OA (%)
November 2003–June 2004	LA	5	4	5	4	9	18	82
November 2003–June 2004	R	6	3	7	4	11	20	80
September 2004–April 2005	LA	5	4	4	3	7	16	84

Note. QWU = Questions with uptake from Applebee et al. (2003); OD = Open discussion from Applebee et al. (2003); OA = other activities (e.g., tests, reading, or projects); LA = Language Arts; R = Reading.

I arrived at the percentages in Table 3 by first noting occurrences of questions with uptake and open discussions for each day in my observation notes. After tabulating the number of minutes in my notes, I estimated the percentages of each type of discussion observed based on a 50-min class period for each school year as indicated in Table 3. This was needed to show how much time was spent on the different discussion patterns and to determine how much time was spent on whole class and group discussions.

Small group discussions in Language Arts and Reading. Small group

discussions occurred in both language arts and reading class; however, the

nature of literacy discussions in small groups differed from whole class literacy

discussions. In both language arts and reading classes, Mrs. Lake organized

groups to encourage both cooperation and competition. In the first few months

of the semester, Mrs. Lake formed the groups herself, changing group members

when she observed behavioral problems, such as frequent arguments,

nonparticipation, or incomplete assignments. As the semester progressed, I

observed that students were allowed more choices about group membership; at

the same time, students learned to work out their own compromises. Mrs. Lake

constructed new groups approximately every 6 to 8 weeks.

As each new group was organized, each student on each team chose one

of the required roles to improve efficiency and allow for optimal learning. One

example of these roles was "enforcer," whose job was to make sure everyone in

the group listened to the teacher and contributed to the group discussions and

activities. The role of "encourager" included "keeping team happy," "assigning

team seats," and "substituting for missing team members" (observation, October

13, 2003). Descriptions for each role (encourager, enforcer, quality control, and

scribe and supply manager) were posted in front of the classroom.

The[DAVN5] percentages of class time Mrs. Lake allowed for questions with

uptake in small groups (4%) and open discussion in small groups (4%) across three

language arts sections were limited when compared with[DAVN6] other classroom

activities (see Table 3). Other researchers have also observed that only a small proportion of class time is spent on literacy discussions (Applebee et al., 2003; Commeyras & DeGroff, 1998).

In Mrs. Lake's classes, students worked in groups to help each other with basic reading comprehension or writing activities. Open discussions occurred slightly more often in whole class discussions than in small groups (see Table 3). Most of the activities that occurred within language arts small groups were designed to improve students' understanding of a text through collaboration with peers; however, these activities were not extended conversations. To give an example, Mrs. Lake asked language arts students to find descriptions of the setting of a short story they were reading called "The Landlady" (Dahl, 1996) and students worked as a group to locate these descriptions in the text. Then Mrs. Lake called on students individually to provide descriptions to the whole class (observation, May 10, 2005). As with this example, students were often given only about 5 min to talk with other students in the team. Small group members served as consultants for each other to test reading comprehension before they were called on to respond to Mrs. Lake's questions for the whole class. As with this literacy activity, most small group conversations followed this pattern and were structured around specific teacher-generated questions or tasks.

Whole class discussions in Language Arts and Reading. In Language Arts, percentages of whole class time spent on questions with uptake were similar to uptake discussions in reading. Questions with uptake patterns in both classes were common when Mrs. Lake had planned several different activities during one 50-min class period. Mrs. Lake wrote the class activities for each period on

the board, so students were aware of the schedule before the class began. The following example from a language arts class illustrates the question with uptake pattern that was common in reading and language arts. Students provided brief responses to the questions, then Mrs. Lake refrained from asking another question until she seemed satisfied with the response. To engage students in further discussion, Mrs. Lake asked questions such as, "anything else?" or "any other ideas?" When Mrs. Lake asked such questions to elicit further responses, a "question with uptake" discussion pattern occurred. This discussion pattern is illustrated in the following class example as Mrs. Lake and her students discuss a poem:

Mrs. Lake. So what happened in the poem?

Danielle. He was married and he loved his wife and she died.

Susan. In the third stanza, it says about the wind—did the wind blow and kill her?

Danielle. Maybe the wind was too cold for her.

Henry. I think she was a witch or people thought she was.

Mrs. Lake. Any other ideas?

Rick. She was too beautiful for anyone to have her.

Susan. The angels were jealous.

Mrs. Lake. That's right, Susan. (observation, March 14, 2005)

Mrs. Lake allowed the conversation to continue until Susan provided a theme statement. This whole class conversation pattern was typical in reading and language arts

classes where several short texts were discussed or a new text was introduced during the middle of the class period.

Open discussion, in which students chose the direction of the talk, occurred slightly more often in Mrs. Lake's homogenous reading classes comprising[DAVN7] poor readers, when compared with her heterogeneously grouped language arts classes (see Table 3). This contrasted with Applebee et al. (2003), who found that little open discussion occurred in lower tracked language arts classes except when teachers viewed their lower level students as capable of higher levels of literary analysis. In Mrs. Lake's reading and language arts classes, whole class open discussions allowed students to analyze texts with the guidance of Mrs. Lake. In the following example from a reading class, students became involved in an open discussion after Mrs. Lake asked a question about the book they were reading, *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 1992). The students had just finished reading a poem written by one of the characters in *Bronx Masquerade.*

Mrs. Lake. Let's talk about Diondra's poem. What did the "pool" stand for in her poem? Matthew, what do you think?

Matthew. I don't know—I know she's trying to draw?

Anthony. She started out and didn't like drawing much. . . When she saw all the colors she realized she wanted to draw more and work on it.

Andy. When she said she was "leaving the kiddie pool," she's trying to get to an adult level of art. When she's going on a ladder, she's entering several different levels.

Matthew. When she says, "I had to hold my breath," it means she got the

courage.

Gloria. I think she said 'to be continued'[DAVN8] because she's not finished learning how to draw.

Mark. Or she's not finished telling other people about her drawing. (observation, April 4, 2004)

This example illustrates an open discussion pattern that was typical in low-level reading classes when Mrs. Lake allowed students to interpret specific images or text details beyond her initial question. During this open discussion, the students tested individual interpretations of the poem, often working off of each other's comments. Once Mrs. Lake asked a question, the students chose examples from the poem, interpreting the specific images aloud. Low-level readers are able to show marked improvement in reading comprehension when they are taught to use text examples to support interpretations (Applebee et al., 2003). In whole class literacy discussions that included open conversations, Mrs. Lake's students demonstrated the ability to cite text examples to support their interpretations.

Generally, Mrs. Lake used small groups for team building and opportunities for students to help each other with literacy activities or reading comprehension. Mrs. Lake allowed extended, higher levels of literacy analysis to occur in whole class discussions in both reading and language arts. In whole class literacy activities, Mrs. Lake moved around the classroom to work individually with students. Freeman, Delp, and Crawford (2005) found that a similar classroom environment worked well for heterogeneously grouped language arts classes where the teacher led whole class discussions, then worked

with students individually during class. In some ways, Mrs. Lake's small groups or "teams" provided a system of surveillance whereby Mrs. Lake could maintain order and control as the students performed their roles. Mrs. Lake's constant monitoring of individual students may have prevented problems initiated by students attempting to exert power over others (Allen, Moller, & Stroup, 2003; Alvermann, 1996; Evans, 2002; Lensmire, 2004).

Mrs. Lake's Purposes for Literacy Discussions

The meanings that Mrs. Lake gave to the value of literacy in her own academic and personal life affected her beliefs about how literacy should be taught. Her beliefs about how students improve literacy learning were also shaped by her knowledge of the diversity of her students in terms of their families' educational background, race, and socioeconomic status (Lewis, 2001; Street, 1995). In this section, I argue that Mrs. Lake believed that literacy should be a shared, cultural experience, and small group and whole class discussion contributed to this experience by enhancing students' enjoyment and improvement in comprehension. Performances and presentations of texts were important means of sharing literacy enjoyment and enhancing literacy comprehension for Mrs. Lake.

The primary purpose of using small group discussions, according to Mrs. Lake, was to ensure that students worked to the best of their abilities while receiving support from team members. Mrs. Lake said, "They need to make sure each group member does not get behind so the whole group gets behind—that's why I make sure each group has some success or they'll get behind and give up." (interview, October 22, 2004). Mrs. Lake ensured group success through the thoughtful structuring of mixed ability groups,

and she believed that she constructed groups so that students would work well together academically and personally. "I think very carefully about which students will work well together. It's[DAVN9] difficult at the beginning of the year when I don't know them well" (interview, November 25, 2004). Mrs. Lake explained that her small groups in language arts were heterogeneously grouped by ability: "I try not to put too many low kids in one group or too many high kids in one group—they'll end up doing all of the work" (interview, November 25, 2004). Mrs. Lake believed that it was her responsibility as a language arts teacher to monitor students' individual learning; however, she understood that allowing her students to talk about texts with peers was a necessary step in improving reading engagement and comprehension (Almasi, 1997; Alvermann, 2003; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002).

Mindful of her students' varied family environments, Mrs. Lake thought students needed practice reading aloud and silently during class because many students did not read enough outside of school. Literacy discussions before and after the students read texts contributed to this reading practice as students reviewed the texts in groups or whole class discussions. According to Mrs. Lake, the root of the problems experienced by poorer readers in language arts and reading classes were caused primarily by lack of practice. Mrs. Lake explained her analysis of the causes of poorer reading skills in this way:

> They [poor readers] just don't read enough. Nobody read to them when they were little. They never read those books; they never sat on anyone's lap and read books, so they come to school behind and they never catch up and they never learn to like it. That's just a pet peeve of mine. I always thought that when I

retire, I could go do a slide presentation—and go into the churches and into the community centers and say, "look how much fun this is, reading to your kids." (interview, March 29, 2004)

Recognizing that the desire to read had not been nurtured by many of her struggling readers' parents, Mrs. Lake seemed to be aware of the benefits of encouraging social and emotional responses to texts in literacy discussions. Allington and Walmsley (1995), along with other researchers, recommend reading aloud with children at home and at school. "Reading aloud to a child is a social process as well as a process of communication. … Social integration surrounds and influences interaction with printed text" (Allington & Walmsley, 1995, p. 102). Mrs. Lake seemed to believe that literacy discussions provided students with social and intellectual interaction about texts and that some of her students would not experience these interactions outside of school.

Literacy presentations or performances were regular activities in Mrs. Lake's language arts and reading classes; discussions about text occurred before and after these presentations. For example, students presented their own writing and research projects, and then Mrs. Lake opened up the class for feedback and critique on the content of the texts and style of presentation. According to Mrs. Lake, these activities were designed to teach students that texts could be meaningful to their own lives:

Some kids are very dramatic in their reading; this allows them to showcase their talents. It creates a close classroom atmosphere and opens the way to the poetry unit when they are really baring their souls to each other. (interview, October 10, 2004)

Performances [DAVN10]and presentations were important components of teaching literacy for Mrs. Lake, and literacy discussions about these performances were ways for Mrs. Lake to teach students how sharing interpretations in discussions about texts can build community and increase knowledge about self and others.

Discussions about presentations and performances occurred in both language arts and reading classes; however, Mrs. Lake encouraged more unstructured conversations in reading classes. Mrs. Lake believed open, unstructured conversations were especially beneficial during low-level reading class literacy discussions, and she seemed to encourage more explorative talk in low-level reading classes than she did in language arts. To Mrs. Lake, reading and writing were activities that were essential to her own intellectual self-fulfillment, and she believed that students could also be taught to connect with literature personally. As Mrs. Lake explained,

I try to do that [open conversation] more in reading especially with that low group because I really want them to love the books, and people don't really love books unless they get a chance to talk … especially beginning readers … which is really what these guys are, I mean they are … basically, they're just really learning what reading can do for them, and I want them to be able to talk about the books. They're thinking more in reading. Reading allows for more discussion. The way I try to do it is … we talk about things (interview, March 10, 2004).

Providing a comfortable environment for students to talk about personal reactions to texts was requisite to nurturing students' further interest in literacy, and Mrs. Lake believed that her low-level reading students would not improve comprehension and critical understanding unless they practiced reading—and they would not have the desire

to practice reading unless they could talk about their personal connections and emotional involvement with texts.

Mrs. Lake valued whole class open discussions, believing that students needed at least some guidance to reach higher levels of analysis. Applebee et al. (2003) found that the encouragement of "exploration and multiple perspectives" in discussions contributed significantly to student achievement in literacy (p. 722). According to Mrs. Lake, explorative, open discussions were especially beneficial for low-level reading students:

> In reading, when it's[DAVN11] grouped, you allow those kids who never shine anywhere else—to shine—because they're with their intellectual peers rather than with a group of kids who always have everything right, so you may as well not even say anything. I'm sure it is different in reading—I'm sure they are more confident or verbal or they say things … maybe … that they wouldn't in language arts. (interview, March 10, 2004)

Perhaps because students felt more comfortable in reading, they attempted to try out interpretations in this class. Mrs. Lake believed that low-level readers risked incorrect responses or misinterpretations in heterogeneous language arts classes, losing authority in a class with mixed literacy abilities. However, the students felt more comfortable sharing opinions with peers of similar literacy knowledge and abilities.

From what I observed, Mrs. Lake was able to plan literacy activities and discussion that engaged her students, moving smoothly between the homogeneous reading classes and heterogeneous language arts classes. She maintained high expectations for each class. Although Mrs. Lake allowed more socioemotional discussions in reading classes, she did not lower her standards for comprehension and

analysis. Although Mrs. Lake believed that both small group and whole class discussion contributed to students' literacy learning, most higher level analysis took place in whole class discussions. In the following section, I examine the students' perceptions of literacy discussions. Although Mrs. Lake was aware of students' interests and concerns about how they related to their peers, Mrs. Lake's goals for her students were more academic than social. However, most of the students were more concerned about appearances and getting along with their peers. This was especially visible in the way the students talked about their work in small groups.

Students' Perceptions of Literacy Discussions

Students' perceptions of literacy conversations in small groups differed from Mrs. Lake in that their primary focus was to get along with everyone and complete assigned literacy tasks with a minimum of explorative discussions. Whole class discussions were less constrained, perhaps because students' behaviors were monitored by Mrs. Lake. In this section, I explore the adolescent students' concerns about how they appear socially and academically to both teachers and peers, and how these concerns seemed to affect students' perceptions about their participation in small group and whole class discussions[DAVN12].

From the students' perspectives, successful small group discussions occurred when everyone accomplished their assigned tasks, and they still managed to cooperate and "have fun." One student, Tyrone, said, "I like groups that like to work. It's not even really about winning or having fun—I like those kinds of groups, too. I don't know. I like everybody in the class—I would never hate them. I just might have some days where I can't get along with them" (interview, April 4, 2005). Tyrone appeared to get

along with all of his group members, perhaps because he believed he was able to both socialize and accomplish assigned literacy tasks effectively.

For students who seemed insecure about their literacy skills, small group discussions helped them audition interpretations of literature before being called on in class. For example, Carlos, a struggling reader, said, "I like groups because you get to say how you feel and hear other people say how they feel, too" (interview, April 6, 2005). Another student, Mark, also believed that groups were helpful "because if a person doesn't really understand what's going on in the book, we can figure it out all in a group" (interview, April 4, 2005). Mark and Carlos viewed small group discussions as opportunities to check understanding and monitor their reading and writing processes by listening to and talking with their peers.

Some students believed small group discussions hurt their ability to learn and improve literacy skills if group members were not actively participating. Henry commented, "Well, I like working in small groups, but some groups can be aggravating because some people might not want to work or pay attention or help with team activities" (interview, April 4, 2005). Students realized that Mrs. Lake would be checking on their progress and would intervene in problems; however, the students generally wanted to solve their own problems. For example, Monica talked about how they worked out disagreements in one of her groups:

Monica. Sometimes there are answers we like but other people don't like, so we have to discuss it. We ask—'should we do this or not?'[DAVN13] And people raise their hands to show whether they want it or don't want it. (interview, May 9,

2004)

Monica acknowledged that conflict was a natural part of group discussions, and disagreements about interpretations can occur. Literacy research supports the idea that conflict negotiation through discussion can enhance literacy comprehension. When thinking is verbalized and reinterpreted with others' responses, comprehension and literary understanding by all group members is enhanced (Almasi, 1995, 1997; Almasi et al., 2001; Blum et al., 2002; Kasten, 1997; Gilles, 1993, 1998; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

In whole class discussions, students seemed more concerned about whether or not they knew the "correct" answer. For example, Stacey, a student in the GT program admitted that she was "nervous" when called to answer questions in class (interview, April 16, 2005). Although she was an above average reader and writer, Stacey rarely volunteered a response during whole class discussions. When asked about answering questions in front of the class, Carlos said, "Sometimes I don't mind; sometimes I don't like it. I'm not the best reader" (interview, April 6, 2005). Insecurity about reading skills or feelings of self-consciousness seemed to limit some students' desire to respond in whole class discussions.

Even students who were secure about their reading skills seemed self-conscious about volunteering responses because they risked being "wrong." Even though Mrs. Lake encouraged multiple interpretations of texts, this right–wrong dichotomy continued to dominate most students' thinking. For example, Ron said, "When I know it—when I'm fairly sure about the answer, I'll volunteer" (interview, April 18, 2005). Likewise,

Shameka did not want to attempt an answer she was unsure of. Shameka explained her

feelings this way: "If I don't know the answer, it's really embarrassing, but if I know it, I

like to volunteer. I say, 'I know the answer,' but if I don't it's hard" (interview[DAVN14],

April 14, 2005). One student, Bryan, said that he felt comfortable presenting and being

called on in class. Bryan explained his feelings this way: "It doesn't bother me at all to

talk in front of the class. If I'm going to say anything out loud, it's[DAVN15] going to be to

everybody. I'm not going to say anything I don't want to say, so I might as well just say

it" (interview, April 18, 2005). Bryan was new to the school, so he may have already

been working at masking feelings of insecurity to make a positive impression. Bryan

appeared confident and comfortable in Mrs. Lake's language arts class, and he

participated actively in small group and whole class discussions.

Mrs. Lake seemed to be aware that the students could be self-conscious about

being called on in class. For example, Mrs. Lake described one student, Laura, who was

a low-level reader in Mrs. Lake's reading and language arts classes: "Laura comes in [to

language arts] and really tries very hard—tries so hard—but it doesn't always work out

for her. You look around and see people like Elizabeth and Caroline, and they get it done

in half the time and it's[DAVN16] always right. It must be very frustrating" (interview,

March 29, 2004). I observed that Mrs. Lake created a place in her reading classes for her

low-level reading students to audition various interpretations of text. With the exception

of Stacey mentioned earlier, most of the GT students were comfortable volunteering in

whole class discussions. However, small groups created different problems for GT

students. Next, I examine GT students' responses to literacy discussions, along with non-

GT students' beliefs about how GT students participate in literacy discussions. GT

students responded uniquely to small group discussions, and other students had their own perceptions about GT students and how they participated in whole class and small group discussions.

Performing Giftedness in Literacy Discussions

Educational theorists and researchers have contested separating high academic achievers from others. Although completely homogenous or tracked classes have been criticized as counterproductive—and even harmful—some researchers have recommended that students be separated into ability grouped classes for at least part of the school day (e.g., Lloyd, 1998). Students labeled "gifted and talented" at Harford Middle School were grouped into a separate class during their reading class period. GT class was interdisciplinary; however, reading and writing were the primary activities because the GT class replaced the required reading class. To enter the GT program, students needed teacher and parent recommendations and high scores on a battery of pretests; however, parents could push the issue and recommend their students for the GT program. According to Mrs. Lake, GT students were labeled GT in kindergarten or first grade, and they could not be "un-gifted[DAVN17]" without parental agreement (interview, December 15, 2004).

"Gifted-ness"[DAVN18] is also a socially constructed label, affecting the ways "gifted" and "regular" students perceive themselves and construct their identities. Critics of GT programs have criticized[DAVN19] these programs for perpetuating class and race boundaries by harboring the white, upper-middle-class students in classrooms that allow for higher levels of literacy learning, whereas those students labeled "nongifted" engage in lower levels of comprehension, or at the very worst, "skill and drill" (Delpit, 1995;

Finn, 1999; Lee, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004; Weinstein, 2002; Wilcox, 1982). Located in a school where gifted and talented students are only "GT" for one period a day, the GT students seemed to constantly negotiate their identities, auditioning and revising performances in GT and "regular" classes. During interviews, the GT students discussed their perceived differences between literacy activities in GT and language arts classes, and I interpret these perceived differences and performances in the next subsection. Next, I focus on other students' perceptions of how the GT students performed in small group and whole class discussions because students' perceptions of GT students seemed to affect how GT and "regular" students worked together in literacy groups and whole class discussions. Finally, I compare and contrast the students' perceptions with my own understanding of how students performed their roles in literacy discussions.

GT Students' perceptions of literacy discussions. The GT students interviewed believed that their "regular" language arts classes were not sufficiently challenging. For them, creativity and higher levels of literacy analysis existed primarily in GT class. According to GT student, Carolyn, "GT moves faster—we complete things faster because we already know how to do a lot of things. In Language Arts, you have people who take longer to pick out answers. In GT, we read more challenging things" (interview, May 16, 2004). I asked Mark to describe an activity or assignment they were working on in GT class that would probably not be possible in language arts class:

Mark. Well, we have a culture fair going on right now … that we're finishing up on.

Interviewer. Why do you think this wouldn't be done in language arts?

Mark. A lot of it is research, display, and hands-on[DAVN20] stuff.

Interviewer. Why do you think everyone is able to work well together in GT

class?

Mark. In GT, everyone is pretty much aware of what the end result will be if we

don't get along. We can pretty much quiet things down by ourselves—Mrs.

Campbell rarely has to say anything.

In comparison[DAVN21], Mark described literacy group conversations in his language arts

class that did not work well: "Everybody had different opinions—everyone was set on

their opinions, so we had a lot of arguments. We couldn't ever agree on anything. We

finally figured out ways to make it work, but we had some violent episodes where people

would scream at each other" (interview, April 18, 2005).

According to Mark, when Mrs. Lake checked on them, everyone in the group

pretended as if they were working well together and that problems did not exist. Mark

seemed to willingly participate in these cover-up performances even though he was

frustrated by what he referred to as a "dysfunctional" language arts group (interview,

April 18, 2005). Students resolved conflicts more quickly in the GT class, perhaps

because GT students shared similar academic backgrounds or values in terms of

academic success. Mark explained, "We don't have as many problems getting along in

GT class" (interview, April 18, 2005).

Discussions in language arts were often frustrating for the GT students because

they were required to interpret texts that were not challenging. According to Caroline,

who described herself as a "good reader," some people in her language arts classes were "just not good readers" and "needed to have stuff pointed out to them" (interview, May 16, 2004). Working in small groups could be especially aggravating. Caroline explained, "I feel like I'm two years old—talking about books. When I don't get to choose who I'm with, I get bored. It's frustrating when they don't want to do it or they can't figure it out as fast—or they depend on me to do it" (interview, May 16, 2004). The GT students seemed to resent any implications that they were the ones who did all of the work in their groups.

GT students seemed to feel conflicted when they thought they were the only group member who could contribute adequately to group discussions and assignments. Rusty said, "I try to let them do the work, but it's frustrating because you have to hold in your answers and opinions" (interview, May 16, 2004). GT students had to negotiate the fine line between leading and dominating group discussions, and Caroline and Rusty believed they were able to use their literacy skills and intelligence to help their group, but only when their group requested their input.

"Regular" Students' Perceptions of GT Students. Both teachers and students referred to non-GT students as "regular" kids. Referring to GT students as the "smart kids," the "regular" students generally expected GT students to help their group in discussions without dominating the group. For example, Dorine, who was not in the GT program, claimed that one GT student, Steve, always insisted that he had the "right" answer in language arts.

Doreen: He [Steve] tries to take over the whole group and tell us he's right and

stuff.

Interviewer. He's not always right, is he?

Doreen. No, but he thinks he's always right because he's smart.

Interviewer. So don't you think you're as smart as Steve?

Doreen. Not in school work … but in other things. (interview, April 4, 2004)

Doreen seemed to recognize that Steve's academic skills were stronger, but Doreen also performed well in literacy discussions. It seemed that Doreen felt that she could perform as well as Steve if she were provided sufficient opportunity to be heard.

Steve was regularly "punished" by his peers for his refusal to follow the GT code of behavior that Caroline and Rusty, mentioned above, chose to follow. For example, Caroline and Rusty seemed to know when to assert their intellectual power and capitalize on their literacy skills in discussions and when to allow the rest of the group to take control. In small group literacy discussions, Steve's GT authority was constantly questioned by his peers when he dominated group discussions. When GT students did not live up to other students' expectations, their GT-ness was called into question. Although Rusty and Caroline admitted that they had more academic experience and advantages than other students who had no been labeled "GT," it seemed easier for GT students to accept the intellectual prestige associated with GT by defining themselves as "smart." The GT students, who were both academically and socially successful, performed according to the school's definitions of GT-ness by following school and classroom codes of behavior.

GT students seemed to perform more successfully in whole class discussions in which Mrs. Lake was able to successfully monitor responses so that GT students contributed without dominating discussions. Literacy researchers have shown that higher level literacy discussions are possible in heterogeneous classrooms in both peer groups and teacher-led discussions, and GT students, with their higher level thinking and academic skills, contribute much to whole class discussions (Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005). Although neither Mrs. Lake nor the students acknowledged this, higher level conversations about texts existed predominantly within whole class discussions. Small group discussions were limited in scope and content. One exception to this was when students discussed their writing in small groups, which I discuss in the next section.

Also in the next section, I analyze conversations as they occurred during writing processes and peer draft workshops. Small group discussions became more successful for students when they discussed their writing processes with peers.

Writing to Perform and Performing to Write: Literacy Discussions in Process and Product

In this section, I focus on the idea that writing processes are performances, because Mrs. Lake wrote for herself and shared her writing processes and products in class. Discussions about writing processes and products were important components of Mrs. Lake's literacy instruction, and she initiated discussions during various stages of the students' writing processes. Also, Mrs. lake modeled her own writing processes and products, initiating feedback from her students during class conversations.

Research is limited on the effects of teacher modeling on student writing processes; however, teacher educators have recommended that teachers write with their

students because practicing the art of writing will help teachers to become better writing instructors (Reif, 1994; Rickards & Hawe, 2004; Steinberg, 1994). Mrs. Lake regularly wrote poetry and essays, and read them aloud with her students, encouraging students to give her revision suggestions. These writing performances emerged as visual intersections of Mrs. Lake's teaching and personal selves. As Mrs. Lake modeled her own interests in writing about events, feelings, and people important to her, I argue that the students felt comfortable performing identities through their own writing. I also interpret the ways Mrs. Lake and her students viewed their roles in these literacy conversations and presentations through the lens of performance theory.

Some researchers who draw from critical theory, view performances as social actions and behaviors that are constructed by both social codes and identity (Lewis, C., 2001; McLaren, 1994). "Speakers and writers take up positions in relation to expectations of others and the social codes and discourses available within a given context" (Lewis, C., 2001, p. 213). Some feminist and critical race theories view identity, including gender and race, as performances that follow the social codes of a given time and context (Butler, 1990; Johnson, 2003). As I observed Mrs. Lake and her students, I was struck by the students' contradictory behaviors, as they seemed to both violate and reflect the behavioral and academic requirements of what it means to be successful writers in school.

Writing for an Audience: Mrs. Lake's Perceptions About Writing and Discussions

Mrs. Lake viewed writing as a recursive activity that involved discussion, revision and presentation (Langer, 2002). Mrs. Lake demonstrated her views on teaching and talking about writing in a number of ways. Along with performing her final drafts, Mrs.

Lake also believed she should share her own writing processes and personal writing to create a comfortable environment for students to talk about their writing processes, then present polished drafts to the class. As Mrs. Lake explained, "I have found that when I read my own work, the students are more likely to write truly meaningful things and read them aloud. It also makes them more comfortable presenting in front of an audience. That is why I give them 90 points just for 'pride and courage" (interview, November 25, 2004). When students asked questions about how or why she wrote a piece, she thoughtfully answered them. Mrs. Lake's writing performances and discussions about writing created a place for students to rehearse their own processes and practices in the classroom.

Mrs. Lake believed that she could teach students to critique each other's writing best by modeling. After a student performed his or her writing, Mrs. Lake would comment—usually one positive comment and one suggestion. Then she would open up the floor to other students, who would volunteer to critique both writing and presentation skills. Mrs. Lake explained, "when students listen to each other read their writing, they get practice in giving specific feedback. Once they see how I give feedback, a lot of them give the same type of responses" (interview, November 25, 2004). Although postpresentation conversations were not the only opportunities to receive feedback, Mrs. Lake believed that when students heard the writing, then listened to her revision recommendations, students would learn to help each other in small groups and with partners.

Getting[DAVN22] students motivated to begin a writing task involved strategic planning, and Mrs. Lake recognized the need to engage her students in thinking about

writing beyond the classroom. To Mrs. Lake, writing played a part in her personal life outside of school. For example, she wrote about family experiences, especially her high school–aged son. Mrs. Lake talked to her students about feelings of frustration, fear, sadness, and anxiety that affected her writing processes and style. When she shared her final drafts of stories, essays, or poems with her students, Mrs. Lake thought it was important to describe the feelings and ideas that led her to write a draft. This was frequently evident when Mrs. Lake introduced a writing assignment. She would read a final draft that she had written, and talk about the experiences that led her to decide on the subject or her approach for writing. For example, to prepare her students for a narrative writing assignment, Mrs. Lake read a story she had written about a student who had put a snake in her desk drawer during her first year of teaching. "I like snakes," she said, "but it surprised me when it was in my desk drawer, so I shut my door very quickly and quietly—then I pretended nothing was wrong. It was my first year of teaching, and I didn't want anyone to know … How many of you have had experiences with snakes?" (observation, March 29, 2004). This story encouraged some of the other students in the class to talk about experiences with snakes and other topics for their narratives (observation, March 29, 2004).

Journal writing comprised much of the students' in-class writing activities and homework. Mrs. Lake emphasized the idea that journal entries were springboards for paper ideas and could be revised into final drafts later. For example, Mrs. Lake required students to revise a couple of their journal entries into narrative essays to submit for grading. Mrs. Lake reminded students that she required journal writing for this purpose. On one occasion, a discussion about writing processes centered on journal writing. Mrs.

Lake explained that journal writing was a good way to keep track of writing ideas for later. "Write them down right away when you get the idea," Mrs. Lake told the class. She held up the folder she used to keep track of her own writing ideas and drafts.

> Mrs. Lake: How many of you keep journals or writing folders?
>
> (Three[DAVN23] students raised their hands.)
>
> Mrs. Lake. Sara, I'm surprised you don't keep a journal.
>
> Sara. I do, but I don't get back to it usually for a month.
>
> Mrs. Lake. That's OK.
>
> Sara. Its so awkward to start—You have to say, 'my name is Sara, and today I did … '
>
> Ron. You don't have to say that.
>
> Mrs. Lake. Right. I write about things that happen with my son in my journal and how I felt about it. I write about a lot of things that have happened to me (observation January 5, 2004)

In this example, Mrs. Lake demonstrates her beliefs about writing for her students—writing does not have to be school sanctioned or occur in school. For Mrs. Lake, writing is personally rewarding, something she does to contemplate and make sense of her life experiences. Sharing this with her students was important to her. As Mrs. Lake talked about her own writing processes in language arts classes, she created the sense that writing is a circular, discursive process that shapes and reflects personal and community identity.

Mrs. Lake seemed to feel that whole class discussions could also be valuable for helping students begin to write. Often, Mrs. Lake would begin a paper, and she would prewrite on the chalkboard or overhead projector by writing input and ideas from students. In this way the whole class contributed to each other's early writing processes through conversations with each other and Mrs. Lake. During one class, Mrs. Lake introduced an opinion paper assignment on the Salem witch trials, which the class had been studying for a few weeks. She wrote this sentence on the board: "We believe the Salem witch trials … " Students volunteered answers, then Mrs. Lake asked students to provide examples for how they would support their opinion statements. Then the students were to use similar statements to begin drafting their opinion papers.

Mrs. Lake. How could you complete this sentence?

Jose. Harsh.

Mrs. Lake. "We believe the Salem Witch Trials[DAVN24] were harsh" (writes on board). What would you have to do to back this up?

Jose. Go into detail about all of the deaths and why they happened.

Mrs. Lake. Any other ways to write your first sentence?

Bryan. I would say "rushed" because they arrested people without proof and the judges didn't take the time to research, and the people didn't have time … (observation, October 27, 2004).

Next, Mrs. Lake told students to work with a partner and write a first draft together; students discussed sentences, then wrote them together, orally drafting their paper

through discussions with each other. As they wrote, they talked about their opinions and understanding of the Salem witch trials they had been reading about in several different texts. "Every time I hear you say something good, I'll write it down." As the students worked together and talked to each other, Mrs. Lake documented their processes by writing some of the students' sentences on the board. This way the students could read more examples or receive feedback on their own paragraphs from partners and the class.

Opening up writing processes to whole class discussions was a reflection of Mrs. Lake's belief that writing involved talking and reading. As Mrs. Lake modeled her own writing processes, she exhibited her values about writing and talking about writing. For Mrs. Lake, literacy was a part of her personal life and academic–professional[DAVN25] life, and these overlapping roles emerged as Mrs. Lake read her writing and talked about her processes (Pineau, 2005). Finally, Mrs. Lake provided a public arena for students to share their writing to an audience of their classmates through presentation. Believing that feedback was necessary for writing improvement, Mrs. Lake encouraged discussion during writing processes and before and after student presentations.

"Showing Them Who I Am": Students' Meanings of Writing and Discussions

As the school year progressed, the students seemed to recognize that writing did not necessarily occur in isolation. Although journal writing was personal, students' desire to share their writing for an audience increased as more students performed and presented their writing with Mrs. Lake's encouragement. The students seemed to respect Mrs. Lake's comfort with her own identity performances, and writing became a source for sharing identities through discussion and presentation. One student, Henry, explained, "In my poems and stories, I'm showing them who I am" (interview, April 4,

2005). This process of presenting writing to the class was important to the students. They seemed to recognize that although the writing was about them, their texts needed to speak to other people, especially their classmates.

From the students' perspectives, being mindful of processes was necessary because they knew they would discuss their drafts with each other in groups, and then perform final papers for the class. Discussion of drafts often occurred with partners or teams. Most of the students mentioned that they preferred sharing early drafts with partners or with Mrs. Lake instead of group workshops. For example, Matt said that he preferred working in partners on earlier drafts because he received "helpful, individual advice" (interview, March 6, 2005). Another student, Isabel, said:

> I like reading to partners better. You don't have to say the whole thing—like you don't have to pronounce words—they'll say that word or I'll just say, "just read that paragraph. … It's[DAVN26] better, but its kind of hard because you don't want to tell her, "Oh, this doesn't sound right" (interview, April 26, 2005).

Isabel was the only student who mentioned that she was careful not to hurt anyone's feelings by criticizing too harshly. The other students seemed to realize that editing advice was helpful, and their verbal comments to peers reflected Mrs. Lake's combination of praise and suggestions for revision.

During early drafts, most students seemed to believe that Mrs. Lake's opinion mattered more than their peers. Both good and poor writers asked Mrs. Lake to read drafts to receive constructive criticism before submitting final assignments. Most students volunteered to read their final drafts aloud once they knew how Mrs. Lake had graded them. Even when students did not receive high grades on their papers, some of them

volunteered to read anyway, perhaps to hear what their peers thought about their writing. Three students mentioned in their interviews that they felt nervous about reading their work aloud, and one shy student said, "I'll read out loud if Mrs. Lake says I should read mine" (interview, April 18, 2005). A couple of times, Mrs. Lake would encourage students to read their work aloud by saying something like "I was hoping you would read yours—it was so descriptive, and I enjoyed reading it." Usually, the student could not resist this call to perform for peers. Most students seemed to believe it was important for them to contribute to the class conversation.

Most students trusted Mrs. Lake to restrict harsh criticism in postperformance discussions. As a matter of practicality, once the students received grades, their primary goal was to share their writing with their classmates. The students did not seem to desire criticism; however, fear of criticism by peers did not deter students from reading aloud. One student, Ron, mentioned criticism in his interview:

>
> Ron. I know some people are just going to criticize, and I don't want them to hear it but then I want everyone else to hear it. It turns me into a nervous wreck.
>
> Interviewer. But when you're finished, do you usually get pretty good feedback?
>
> Ron. Yes. Sometimes I get mad when somebody criticizes it (interview, April 18, 2005).

Like Ron, some students seemed conflicted about reading aloud, perhaps because presentations in front of class can be stressful. Most students seemed willing to risk

negative criticism for the positive feedback or revision suggestions they would receive from other students and Mrs. Lake.

Some of the better writers seemed to believe that reading aloud motivated them to produce even better work. For example, Bryan told me he liked reading his writing to the class. He explained his reasons this way:

Well, it really makes you put your heart into it because you don't want to stand up there and look like a fool. And just that you can be proud of what you wrote. All the other classes—this is the first one that we read out loud. We would write, but we would never read out loud. We would write, turn it in, get a grade, then it was over. I never used to be proud of my work—I got bored of it. Now that we're doing this, I'm proud of it. It's good speaking practice when I get to read it as well (interview, April 18, 2005).

Bryan was aware that he was speaking to a social community beyond the teacher. In reading aloud his work, Bryan reenvisioned himself as a writer and speaker, reaching out to a classroom community. As a new student to Hartford, Bryan seemed concerned about making new friends (interview, October 9, 2004). Bryan may have felt that his writing performances allowed him to play a more visible role in his new community.

Students[DAVN27] also recognized when their work was not up to either Mrs. Lake's or their own standards, and chose not to read their work. In these situations, students offered reasons, such as "I don't think this poem is very good," or "I still need to work on this." Students rarely said, "This is too personal to read aloud." Students seemed comfortable taking emotional risks in their writing, then taking more personal risks to read for their classmates. For example, Andrea read her narrative essay about

past family abuse and her accompanying emotional struggles.   Andrea's desire to expose her difficult experiences seemed to be a step in the process of (re)constructing[DAVN28] her own identity as more than a quiet victim of a dysfunctional family. In her interview, Andrea said that reading the narrative essay to the class was important for her "because I wrote a lot of stuff that people didn't know about me— When I read it, they understood. A lot of people tell other people about it even though they weren't supposed to, and they make fun of me, but I still don't care" (interview, April 16, 2005). It was important for Andrea to receive acceptance from both her peers and Mrs. Lake. Even if some of her peers "made fun of her," Andrea seemed to need to perform this private identity for the class. Along with the other students, Andrea seemed to feel that Mrs. Lake created a safe place to perform and negotiate identities through writing and presentation.

Students seemed to view their class as a writing community, and conversation about writing extended beyond the language arts class period. If Mrs. Lake read one of her own essays to one class, but not to another class, some students seemed to feel that they were missing out on some element of the writing community. For example, one day Jeff asked,

> "Mrs. Lake, how come you didn't read that story about the cat to our class? You read it to fifth period? I heard you cried!"
>
> Mrs. Lake laughed, "You mean the story about my dog that died? Yes, that was a sad story—I almost cried while I was reading it out loud." (observation, January 10, 2005)

When the other students in the class heard this conversation, they requested she read that story, too. Although class time was coming to a close on that day, Mrs. Lake read her story aloud to that class later in the week.

Researchers have both praised and criticized peer writing workshops (Lensmire, 1994). In the case of Mrs. Lake and her students, presentations and whole class discussions worked well because Mrs. Lake created a class community that supported talking about writing in the early stages. Mrs. Lake's peer workshops, which included two or three students, may have reduced unintended power struggles that emerge when more students compete for attention. At first glance, Mrs. Lake's close monitoring of peer workshop and whole class process discussions seemed to limit student creativity. However, by taking control of the criticism and comments during students' writing processes, Mrs. Lake taught students that they are writing for readers and listeners. When students wrote expository and argumentative texts, Mrs. Lake talked about possible readers and audiences outside of their peer group.

In a school with an economically and racially diverse population, Mrs. Lake may have felt a responsibility to control negative feedback and power struggles to create a positive classroom community and nurture students' desire to enhance their literacy skills. I analyze Mrs. Lake and her students' perceptions of class and school community within a broader social context in the next chapter.

In conclusion, Mrs. Lake believed whole class and small group discussions were important components of literacy instruction. Although open conversations were only a small percentage of class time, Mrs. Lake's instructional choices reflected her beliefs that other literacy activities were necessary for student learning. Small group and whole class

discussions seemed to serve different purposes for Mrs. Lake. Whole class discussions offered students opportunities for higher level literacy discussions. Small groups more frequently served as peer support for students, to make classroom learning more efficient. For example, students could consult their peers about assignments and drafts in process as Mrs. Lake walked around the classroom and worked with other students. Finally, Mrs. Lake believed that literacy learning involved more than technical skills—students learned to develop their own personal and academic identities through processes of reading, writing, talking, and presenting.

In this chapter, I focused on descriptions of Mrs. Lake's classroom and literacy activities. I also concluded that Mrs. Lake and her students seemed to understand that literacy learning occurs within complex processes of reading, writing, talking, and presenting. I observed that personal and peer group identity was tied up in these literacy processes for both students and teacher. Although literacy discussions sometimes served different purposes for teacher and students, the students seemed to believe that growth occurred in literacy learning, and literacy learning was connected to personal as well as academic identities. In the next chapter, I analyze Mrs. Lake and her students' perceptions of the relationships between literacy and school. Also, I examine the school culture and community of Hartford from Mrs. Lake's perspective and my own analysis of the political and social climate of the school and city of Hartford.

Chapter 5. Performing in Place: School Culture and Community

The place in which Hartford Middle School is situated is the focus of this chapter, along with how the teacher interpreted influences of school culture on literacy instruction and class discussions. Literacy discussions were indirectly affected in various ways by the place and culture of Hartford Middle School. In this chapter, I describe community–school connections acknowledged by Mrs. Lake. I synthesize Mrs. Lake's and her students' interpretations of school place with my own analyses of how community and school culture seemed to contribute to and remain disconnected from literacy learning and discussions in Mrs. Lake's classes.

As mentioned in chapter 1, I define *school culture* as the social patterns and power struggles that occur in school, as they are informed by both local and theoretical constructions of "school" (Giroux, 1989). *Place* is the physical and sociological background in which the school culture is situated. Places are sites of history and identity (Cresswell, 2004). I describe characteristics of Hartford's culture as a *place* and within the *place* of Hartford community.

I focus my analysis of Mrs. Lake's and the students' view of place and school culture around several themes: (1) Mrs. Lake's vision of her students' literacy success depended on her ability to manipulate the state Standards of Learning (SOL) requirements and work with the students' experiences; (2) Mrs. Lake and her students seemed to view the place of Hartford city as dynamic, but unaffected by history; (3) Mrs. Lake believed that students' home identities were often impediments to literacy learning; and (4) discussions of *Bronx Masquerade* allowed students to confront race and identity—at the same time, these discussions allowed both teacher and students to

reconstruct "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991; Perez, 2004). Before examining the ways that Mrs. Lake and her students perceived the school culture and influences of place on identity and literacy experiences, I examine the connections between place theory and the city of Hartford.

An Overview of Place and Hartford

I look to the students and teachers to interpret the realities that compose the town of Hartford. Also affecting my analysis in this chapter are curriculum theorists who interpret *place* as a context for school and community in which realities are socially constructed and open to the interpretations of individuals (Apple, 2004; Coulter, 2002; Cresswell, 2004; Grunewald, 2003; Hutchison, 2004; Kincheloe and Pinar, 1991; Perez, 2004). Identities are also tied to *place.* I use *place* to analyze Hartford city and school culture, along with the meanings Mrs. Lake and her students gave to the school and city. When I refer to Hartford city as a *place,* I am describing the location and history of Hartford as well as the " 'sense[DAVN29] of place,' which includes subjective, emotional and personal connections that people have to place" (Agnew, cited in Cresswell, 2004, p. 7[DAVN30]). *Place* is also "a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11) The place of Hartford city fuses with Hartford school in terms of emotion, ideologies, histories and community identities, creating a school culture that worked continuously with and against Mrs. Lake and her students' conceptions of place (Casey, 1993; Cresswell, 2004; Hutchison, 1994). Also, the state-mandated Virginia SOLs contributed to the place of Hartford Middle School, working for and against the teachers and students, who interpreted these standards and tests in a variety of ways.

The Virginia SOL state curriculum and tests also added to the background of Hartford Middle School's *place.* As discussed in chapter 2, Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) interpreted the South as a place where people value where local and community control over the state. Family connections and networks are necessary to mediate against potentially hostile surroundings. Especially for southern African Americans, family, church, and community are part of the definition of place (Dimitriadis, 2005). When the state of Virginia implemented the SOL curriculum and assessments with little input from local leaders and educators, conflicts occurred in a variety of public forums (Fore, 1998; Smith, 2006). Although there were many reasons for these conflicts and criticisms of the SOLs, for those parents and educators who valued local and school control, this sense of control was violated by the top-down implementation of the SOLs. In the next section, I examine Mrs. Lake's interpretation of the SOLs and how they affected literacy learning.

State standards and the place of Hartford middle school. The Virginia state SOL curricula and assessments affected the place of Hartford Middle School because teachers were expected to follow the curriculum guides and prepare students for SOL tests. Mrs. Lake's vision of her students' literacy success depended on her ability to manipulate the state SOL requirements and work with the students' literacy skills and experiences. The Virginia SOL language arts curriculum was broad, which allowed for a variety of interpretations of what should be taught. However, the Virginia SOL tests, which were supposed to test students on the curricula, contain mostly rote memorization questions; however, Mrs. Lake explained that one 8th-grade essay test was added to the objective portions of the test. The history of the SOLs was predominantly negative.

Teachers and parents spoke out about the tests and the high stakes nature of the tests (Duke & Reck, 2004; Fore, 1998). Before analyzing the place of Hartford, it is necessary to provide some background on the Virginia state SOL to illustrate the state context of Hartford Middle School.

The Virginia Sols began as a method of accountability instituted by Governor Allen in Virginia in the early 1990s. The SOLs consisted of a standard curriculum, spelled out for each grade and subject area. The standardized tests, designed to match the curricula, were given to students in alternate grades. For example, the civics test is given to 7th graders while the language arts test is given to 8th graders. Criticisms of the Virginia SOLs have been published by education scholars and local journalists (see, e.g., Duke & Reck, 2004; Fore, 1998; Stallsmith, 2000; Werner, 2001). By the time of this study, the Virginia SOL curriculum and tests had been in place for approximately four years. Although 7th grade did not have language arts exams, Mrs. Lake was expected to prepare her students for the 8th grade language arts tests, which she occasionally discussed with her students (observation, September, 22, 2004). The Virginia SOL curriculum and assessments were viewed by Mrs. Lake as intrusions on literacy planning only when last-minute changes occurred without warning, such as when Mrs. Lake received a last-minute e-mail telling her for the first time that she would be piloting a test of a computer version of a future 7th-grade language arts exam with her students. "I'm supposed to figure out how to do this all by myself," Mrs. Lake said (interview, May 2, 2004),

Another problem occurred when the administration required changes in the curriculum with which Mrs. Lake disagreed. I discuss one problem, the "reading/writing

split", in more detail near the end of this section. All of these top-down decisions that consumed the teachers' planning and class time, appeared to create extra anxiety for the teachers, whose planning times were often taken up by team meetings, which I observed occurred at least once a week.

Generally, Mrs. Lake believed that the 7th-grade Virginia SOL curriculum guide was broad enough so that she was comfortable choosing her own literacy materials and activities for her students. Mrs. Lake explained her beliefs about the SOLs in this way:

Well, when I taught fifth grade, we really had to follow the S.O.Ls closely because that's when we had to give the tests. We had to cover everything that was on the tests because there would be no other way for the students to "get it." Because there are no S.O.Ls in seventh grade … we're covering it, but if I want to spend some time doing something else, I can. (interview, November 24, 2004).

Mrs. Lake was required to give midterm exams, prepared by a testing company that published test questions for the SOLs. Mrs. Lake did not think these tests were valid measures of what her students could do, and she believed these tests took too much time away from reading, writing, and literacy discussions. She said, "I guess they don't trust us to do our own tests. These fact and opinion questions are too basic for my students. Gone are the days when you can ask essay questions. They want questions patterned like SOL tests" (interview, October 25, 2004).

Although Mrs. Lake seemed to believe the SOL tests were something she had to tolerate, she was comfortable with the content of the 7th-grade language arts SOL curriculum:

One thing I like about the language arts curriculum is the spiraling—if you're

doing a lot of the same things over and over again like theme, inferences, foreshadowing, that appear in a lot of the stories—the writing, the speaking, and listening … you do it over and over again. That's what I like about the language arts—it's not a huge amount of stuff to cover. The only problem, I guess, is grammar and you never know really what they're going to ask on that—it's a hard thing to teach. I don't think I would do too much differently—I might spend longer on things I like—like poetry (interview, November 25, 2003).

Mrs. Lake believed reading and talking about literature could be incorporated to both cover the SOLs and help students improve their literacy skills through discussion and presentation.

During the 2004–05 school year, the curriculum director split the language arts curriculum along reading and writing lines. To ensure that all of the 7th-grade language arts (reading and writing) SOL curriculum was "covered," the curriculum coordinator gave all reading curricular requirements to the reading teachers and all writing requirements to Mrs. Lake and the other language arts teachers. Mrs. Lake was responsible for teaching language arts classes during the 2004–05 school year—reading was taught as a separate class by other teachers. To focus the language arts curriculum on writing, Mrs. Lake added several essays and eliminated some literature because she was told she needed to focus on "writing" (interview, September 9, 2004) Although Mrs. Lake did not question the reading–writing split at the beginning of the school year, she seemed certain that it was not working well by December 2004. Mrs. Lake explained, "There isn't enough reading going on. The reading teachers are doing more study skills. I'm definitely going to include some literature before they write their personal essays"

(interview, December 13, 2004). Mrs. Lake believed that students also needed to read good models of literature and discuss them if they were to become effective writers (interview, December 13, 2004).

Mrs. Lake also seemed to believe that reading aloud during class also helped students become better readers and writers. Often, whole-class literacy discussions occurred during a break in reading aloud—when Mrs. Lake paused to ask a question—or after the students finished reading a text aloud or silently. Education research supports Mrs. Lake's beliefs about reading practice. Students do not spend enough class time reading either silently or aloud (see, e.g., Allington, 1995).

The reading–writing curriculum split turned into a problem when Mrs. Lake and the 7th-grade language arts teachers were "caught" overstepping their boundaries by teaching "reading content." In between classes, another 7th-grade language arts teacher, Mrs. Anderson, told Mrs. Lake about her recent observation by a school administrator. Mrs. Anderson explained that she was "in trouble for teaching theme because theme is a reading SOL objective—not a language arts objective." Mrs. Lake responded, "I'm teaching theme whenever we talk about poetry or short stories, and I'm going to continue to teach theme. It doesn't hurt to repeat a literature term like theme" (observation, January 16, 2005). Both teachers agreed that it was impossible to dichotomize language arts into writing and reading activities; however, Mrs. Lake did not seem to be discouraged by this mandated reading–writing split. Although Mrs. Lake's primary focus was writing, the students continued to read literature and nonfiction relevant to their writing assignments. Mrs. Lake believed it was important to work within curriculum

guidelines, but it was also important for her to trust her own judgment and expertise about what students needed in terms of literacy activities and discussions.

    Outside school walls: The community of Hartford. Before I analyze Mrs. Lake and her students' interpretations of place and literacy, I describe the sociohistorical characteristics of Hartford city, Virginia, and their contributions to the place and culture of Hartford Middle School. Although Virginia is not part of the deep south, it has a history as a confederate state during the Civil War. Later, school desegregation did not occur in Hartford without public conflict.

    Today, Hartford city's neighborhoods remain split along race and class lines. Before the 1960s, town historical documents and oral histories suggest that it was possible to see the exact line downtown that separated the African American neighborhoods from Caucasian neighborhoods. Caucasian and African American children regularly crossed the boundaries to play and socialize in opposite neighborhoods. Although there is no longer a clear line that separates African American neighborhoods from Caucasian neighborhoods, there are still pockets of communities composed of low-income African American and Hispanic people. In the middle-class and upper-middle-class neighborhoods, Caucasians outnumber African Americans and other racial minorities three to one.

    The middle school retained the name of the separate African American High School that existed before desegregation—the school was named after a prominent African American who began the school and served as its principal for a number of years. Hartford has a visible African American community, with leaders that serve as elected officials for the city government. Leaders of African American churches and social

organizations work to establish community centers that offer tutoring and other educational, spiritual, and financial assistance to African American youth. Descriptions of these community centers are published in the city newspaper. Although many of the problems associated with inner cities are rare in this small city, occasionally violence and crime affect lower income neighborhoods, bringing negative attention to African American communities. The public schools function at the center of this diverse city, and Hartford Middle School is the only public middle school within the city limits.

Hartford Middle School is located in the outskirts of Hartford city away from residential neighborhoods. Likewise, Mrs. Lake and her students seemed to view Hartford Middle School as a place separate from their neighborhoods and communities sociologically and culturally. For example, Mrs. Lake mentioned that it was difficult to get parents to come for conferences or other school-related activities (interview, March 29, 2004). Also, students' friends at school were often those from their neighborhoods (observation and interview, June 2, 2005). Hartford city has a history of racial conflict; however, on the surface, there seemed to be an acceptance by both Mrs. Lake and her students that these conflicts no longer existed. Or at least these conflicts were not as visible as they were during the era of school desegregation. Generally, Mrs. Lake and her students seemed to view the place of Hartford city as dynamic, with possibilities for future change, yet unaffected by history. Mrs. Lake's explanations for school problems were rooted in the present. For example, Mrs. Lake believed that students' home lives contributed to learning problems when parents did not support or supervise their sons' or daughters' learning. Mrs. Lake's African American students seemed less willing to participate in school-sponsored community activities such as "SOL night." When Mrs.

Lake asked for student volunteers to read poetry, few students volunteered because they were not sure if they or their parents would be attending. However, the "SOL night" event attracted more people than Mrs. Lake had anticipated. Hartford holds a variety of activities to draw in the community, but I focus on "SOL night" because Mrs. Lake interpreted this event as successful in bringing together people from diverse neighborhoods.

In February, 2004, the middle school provided food and information about SOL tests for parents and students of grades 4 through 7. Although Mrs. Lake would not be giving SOL tests in 7th-grade, she believed it was important for her to attend "SOL night." Mrs. Lake described the "SOL night" activities in an interview. For grade seven, tables were set up so that science and social studies teachers could hand out information and study tips. Also, Mrs. Lake asked some of her students to read their poems aloud.

Mrs. Lake and the other language arts teachers participated in "SOL night" by meeting with parents in a casual atmosphere, which Mrs. Lake believed was important in terms of getting parents interested in their children's success in school. Mrs. Lake believed that more parents needed to encourage their children's literacy learning at home (interview, March 29, 2004). Although Mrs. Lake did not criticize parents of specific classes or races, she was aware that neighborhoods were separated by race and class. Mrs. Lake described her experiences with "SOL night" in this way:

> I would not have expected it to turn out … of course we had food there, but there were almost 500 people here. It was nice to see all kinds of people here—black, white, middle class, upper class, lower class—all mixing together and sitting there eating with each other—and they're friends talking to each other and moving

through the school with each other, and kids introducing each other to their parents that they would normally never see out in the neighborhood because they live in such completely different areas. It's getting better, I think. But this [the Sol night] was a nonthreatening type of activity, and we got a lot of people in and maybe that will help our community. But its pretty separate. … (interview, March 29, 2004)

Mrs. Lake interpreted the "SOL night" as a positive way to bring the community together, acknowledging that the community was separated into neighborhoods along race and class lines, and some people preferred not to cross these lines to attend school functions (interview, March 29, 2004).

Although the SOL tests were state-instituted measures, Mrs. Lake seemed to believe that the teachers had a voice in how to help their students score well on the tests. She also seemed to believe that it was important for parents to see teachers as advocates for their children, then parents could reinforce this advocacy at home. Slater (2004) described a democratic place as one in which "people can position themselves in roles that are not circumscribed by class and status by common ends and common goals" (p. 45). Likewise, Mrs. Lake characterized "SOL night" as a place in which community members could meet to discuss the common goal of helping their children to pass the SOLs. Mrs. Lake's positive interpretation of "SOL night" may also suggest that for parents who view the school as a public place separate from their neighborhoods, community-oriented school activities could be one way to strengthen a diverse community. However, the teachers and parents could also be viewed as acquiescing to the power of state definitions of accountability simply by attending "SOL night."

Generally, language arts students' responses to "SOL night" and the SOLs were not as visible, perhaps because 7th-grade SOL tests were only given in science and civics. One student wrote in a journal that he "did not like having Language Arts homework on nights when they had to study for Civics SOL's" (journal responses, June 13, 2005). Robert was the only student that mentioned the Sols in interviews:

> Robert. In this state, teachers focus too much on the SOL tests. The curriculum is all centered on the tests now. They even have the teachers just teaching to the tests.
> Interviewer. How do you think that hurts you?
> Robert. They should be teaching things to help you in life—not just teaching to help you pass a test … or get a good grade.

Robert's parents held advanced degrees, so perhaps this explained why he was the most analytical about the SOLs. For the most part, the students accepted the SOL tests, along with other required standardized tests, as part of the place of school.

Although Mrs. Lake viewed "SOL night" as a positive experience for both parents and students, the students did not seem as willing to participate publicly. For example, when Mrs. Lake asked students to read poems at "SOL night," there were few volunteers. Mrs. Lake thought this was because most students were not sure if their parents were planning to attend. My thought was that perhaps students were uncomfortable performing at a school-sponsored event in which they would not be protected by the private arena of

the language arts or reading classroom. Mrs. Lake described one African American student who reluctantly read a poem at "SOL night":

> So she came, and brought her poem, and I called her—second to last, and she whispered to me, "do I have to read this?" And I said, "No, you really don't have to, but you're standing up here, you may as well." She was right up by the microphone. … She did it, but she read it real fast like she just wanted to get it over with instead of projecting out the poem and doing a great job (interview, March 29, 2004).

For some students, school and community may continue to be viewed as separate spheres. Students who feel comfortable discussing and presenting literature in the classroom may not feel as safe presenting in front of their communities. Language patterns and expected behaviors may be different in the homes of students who are not white and middle class (Delpit, 1995; Hanna, 1982; Heath, 1982; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Speaking in front of a community of "others" may also be a cause of tension for adolescent students. As I will discuss in the next chapter, students seemed to feel safe discussing their interpretations and reading their writing aloud in Mrs. Lake's classroom.

For parents and teachers who viewed the SOLs as "the enemy," the "SOL night" was a way to combat this enemy by uniting the community for at least one evening. Teachers provided parents with suggestions for how to help students perform well on the SOL tests. For the language arts teachers who did not have to prepare students for 7th-grade SOL tests, this was an opportunity to showcase student learning through students' poetry performances. Although the atmosphere was not exactly carnivalesque, characteristics of universality and liberty associated with carnival were visible.

According to Bakhtin (1984), "Carnival marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal" (p. 10). Parents, teachers and students set aside anxieties about their own lives and about the high stakes results of SOL tests and examined study strategies for the SOLs; at the same time, they celebrated the students' successes as they listened to students read poetry.

It was obviously not possible for me to capture all of the nuances and complexities of Hartford community, and I am not familiar with every neighborhood in the city. Characteristics of place are not always visible. Rural researcher and educator Robert Brooks (2003) explained, "Local communities, regions, and histories are the places where we shape our individual lives, and their economic and political and aesthetic issues are every bit as complex as the same issues on national and international scale" (p. 4). How much race, class, or identity played a part in the parents' and students' community relationships and in their participation in "SOL night" is not clear. However, constructions of race and identity become slightly more visible within the privacy of the classroom. In the next section, I begin by connecting place with identity. Critical race theory, especially as it is applied to southern experience is also discussed.

Place, School Culture, and Racial Identities

Hutchinson (2004) connects place and identity in his discussion of education and place: "Place can be understood as an individually constructed reality—a reality informed by the unique experiences, histories, motives, and goals that each of us bring to the spaces with which we identify" (p. 11). Here I use the definition of *identity* that is most closely linked to poststructuralism and standpoint theories, which is the recognition that

identity is more than socially constructed. Identity also depends on an "other," which "opens up the theoretical space for marginal or oppressed groups to challenge and re-negotiate the identities that have been forced upon them in the process of domination" (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999, p. 187). In other words, possibilities existed for Hartford students to constantly negotiate and renegotiate identities within and outside of school contexts.

Although Mrs. Lake had not studied identity or standpoint theories in depth, she was aware of the race, gender, and class power struggles that existed within her school and community. Reflecting on the definition above, I observed evidence of emerging identity negotiations in students' daily classroom experiences. Mrs. Lake also recognized some of these identity negotiations problematized by race and class, and she believed that students bonded according to their neighborhoods. Mrs. Lake pointed out some groups in the cafeteria, "Its interesting to see which kids are friends—they seem to be sitting together by neighborhood" (observation, May 4, 2005). Some of the middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans seemed to seek out friends of both races, perhaps because middle-class neighborhoods were more racially diverse in this city.

In spite of the neighborhood boundaries that some African American students created within the school, Mrs. Lake believed that Hartford Middle School was a supportive place for students of all races and cultures. As some educational researchers have noted, schools are not always supportive environments for poor and working-class students (Delpit, 1996; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Price, 2000). It is worth noting that racially diverse schools in the U.S. South may be quite different from racially diverse schools in the U.S. North. On the one hand, some researchers have argued that

southern whites have been forced to confront racism directly by examining their families and their places of privilege in southern society. On the other hand, northerners have remained detached from the southern civil rights turbulence (see, e.g., Jones, 2004; Shipler, 1997). Mrs. Lake, a Caucasian woman who grew up in Virginia, appeared to be comfortable working in a racially diverse school.

Mrs. Lake was concerned when academically gifted African American students isolated themselves from Caucasian, academically gifted students. She explained, "There are kids like Adrian and Samantha, black kids who come from upper middle class families. … They have some trouble because they try to fit in with both groups [working-class African American students and upper-middle-class Caucasian students] and it's hard for them." Mrs. Lake described African American students who were academically gifted, but experienced difficulties "fitting in" with other African Americans. To maintain friendships, these students hid their intelligence and academic strengths. Mrs. Lake provided an example of one student:

> Alexandra always acts like she's not very smart, and if you didn't know she was smart by looking at your grade book in class, you would not know it because she doesn't want to appear that way. She said the other day to me, "I can be me no matter who I'm hanging out with." I've been trying to get her to join the honor society, but she said she's "too busy." I told her the only way that I'm not going to keep pushing you is if you bring a note from your mother saying that she gives you permission NOT to be in it—because I want to know that this form got home. I want to know your mother saw it." So she brought me a note back from her mother, saying "——doesn't want to be in it." So, you know, she's not in it.

Straight A's, and she's not in it (interview, March 29, 2005).

Mrs. Lake believed that Alexandra would not become as successful academically if she was not publicly recognized through participation in the school-sanctioned honor society. Scholars of African American education have noted that individual identity struggles occur for African American students who want to succeed academically but also want to maintain positions of power within their African American peer group (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Johnson (2003) emphasized the importance of allegiance to race in communities that are "politically charged" (p. 6). For some African American students, visible academic success is associated with "being white." In small cities in the South where schools such as Hartford Middle School are split along racial lines, allegiance to race may be necessary for community survival, especially for African Americans, who must fight for socioeconomic and political power. The histories and present conditions of these splits along racial and class lines affect the processes of change and the place of small cities. The visible and subtle boundaries between Caucasian and African American students and lower and upper classes are constantly renegotiated and in process in Hartford city.

Mrs. Lake was aware of students' academic struggles, and the power of community and family to both impede and support African American students. For example, Mrs. Lake posted a newspaper article on her classroom door about four community centers that offered free tutoring services. There was a picture of Isabel, an African American student in Mrs. Lake's language arts class. Mrs. Lake told me about the benefits of the community center for Isabel and other students who sought help with

schoolwork outside of the school day (interview, February 16, 2005). According to Mrs. Lake, students who experienced the most academic problems came from homes where parents did not monitor their children's homework or encourage them to attend tutoring sessions in their neighborhoods. For example, one student, Eric, refused to go to the community center even though Mrs. Lake talked to him privately about the tutoring. Eric's parents had told Mrs. Lake that they had started a new business, and were not home to help Eric in the evenings, but they agreed he should attend tutoring sessions (interview, November 20, 2003). Mrs. Lake offered individual assistance to students during lunchtime and after school, and she promoted the community tutoring services by recommending them to individual students.

Mrs. Lake also recognized the importance of community to some African American students. She seemed to understand that school was not a successful or comfortable place for all students. African American students seemed more open to seeking out academic and emotional support in their own communities. African American students, especially those who struggle academically, may choose community support over school services because their own homes and communities are experienced as places that provide comfort and emotional support (hooks, 1990).

In terms of literacy discussions, critical race theorists recommend that conversations about oppression should be part of language and literacy instruction (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Although Mrs. Lake initiated little discussion about oppression in contemporary society, historical and literary contexts provided opportunities for students to analyze past and present oppression. Mrs. Lake worked to

ensure positive outcomes for all students, although these outcomes were not clear-cut in terms of reestablishing or critiquing the status quo.

Although reading and language arts classes were racially mixed, students in language arts classes seemed less comfortable than reading students in whole-class discussions, perhaps because language arts consisted of a variety of literacy levels. Play and humor helped ease tensions for students and teacher. At the same time, some issues were covered over. Kevin's project presentation was an example of these contradictions. Kevin, an African American student, conducted research on Thomas Jefferson for his language arts biography project. Kevin's presentation included information on Jefferson's relationship with his African American slave, Sally Hemings. Kevin began his presentation with background information about Jefferson, then he turned to Jefferson's relationship with his slave:

Kevin. "And there was this slave, Sally Hemings. He thought she *looked good,* I guess."

(Class laughs)

Mrs. Lake (laughing). "Now Kevin, Thomas Jefferson will be rolling in his grave—he really felt something for her, right?"

Kevin. Oh yeah, sorry. He wanted to marry her, but he couldn't—they had some kids.

Mrs. Lake. Why not?

Kevin. Because white and black people couldn't get married. (observation, April 7, 2004)

Although Kevin brought up Jefferson's relationship with Hemings, Mrs. Lake encouraged him to tell the story of a relationship that had been "whited out" of school history texts (Wineburg, 2001; VanSledright, 1996). By the end of his presentation, Kevin had provided sufficient background on Jefferson's political and social accomplishments, and he subverted Virginia cultural norms that celebrate the white male in history (Fore, 1998). At the same time, Jefferson's desire for his slave was romanticized—the issue of master–slave abuse remained unquestioned.

Ladson-Billings (1994) recommends that students whose educational futures are the "most tenuous" should be assisted in becoming leaders in the classroom. Kevin, who was from a lower socioeconomic background, was encouraged to actively participate in class, and Mrs. Lake nurtured his leadership role in language arts. Mrs. Lake told me that his father had been killed a few years ago. Mrs. Lake said, "He lives in a bad neighborhood. I'm surprised he can even focus in class. His writing is excellent" (November 10, 2004). Kevin often received positive reviews from both Mrs. Lake and the students on his writing and presentations. Kevin was able to maintain his social position with his friends as the class comedian; at the same time, he experienced academic success in Mrs. Lake's class language arts class.

In some cases, students' identity negotiations were at odds with the culture of the school. Conflicts in the form of verbal and physical fights occurred about once a month, usually in the school hallways. Most of the students interviewed mentioned fighting as a reoccurring problem in school. It was not clear whether the black–white racial split at Hartford contributed to the fighting and disagreements among the students. None of the

Caucasian students, and only one African American student, Andrea, mentioned racial issues as the root of student fighting. According to Andrea, problems emerged when Caucasian students tried to "act black" and African American students "tried to fight them." Andrea described the conflicts: "They [Caucasian students] dress a certain way—and talk—like that. They're trying to fit in and a lot of people … like … they'll say the "n" word—then they [African American students] think its against us, so they don't like it" (interview, April 16, 2005). Andrea's description seems to suggest that African American students used aggression to maintain power over others. And Caucasian students may not have been sensitive to their own cultural power. When Caucasian students infringed on African American cultural territory, African American students chose to speak out or use physical threats.

Johnson (2003) interprets Caucasian imitations of African American language and culture as a "fetishistic escape into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness" (p. 5). It is possible that Hartford African American students perceived Caucasian students' imitations of African American culture as stereotyping or stepping over racial lines.

Both African American and Caucasian students described fears of other students who started fights outside of classes. For example, Stacy, a Caucasian student, said, "There are some mean people who will like push you around and they just don't … think of you and stuff." Stacy's friend, Sara agreed, "Yeah, people are really pushy, and they'll try to fight you for no reason. I'm just like, 'leave me alone—I didn't say anything to you' " (interview, April 16, 2005). Henry, an African American, talked about other students who tormented or started fights with other students in the hallways, "Some of

the kids are nice and some are not, so you have to watch out and stand up for yourself from the first" (interview, April 16, 2005).

Students were most concerned about the power plays and fighting that occurred outside class in school hallways. However, students appeared comfortable with race and identity construction within Mrs. Lake's classes, where a spirit of cooperation was encouraged. Within the confines of the language arts and reading classrooms, personal conflicts were set aside or students would have to listen to Mrs. Lake's reprimands, or even worse, receive in-school suspension. A few of the students mentioned teachers they did not like, but most of the students agreed that the one positive thing about Hartford was that the teachers cared about them and wanted to make sure they learned. The classrooms were safe places where students felt that they could trust most teachers to intervene when necessary.

Although Mrs. Lake reported problems that occurred in other classrooms, students in her classes were cooperative. Mrs. Lake seemed to be able to negotiate conflicts among students before problems escalated into emotional arguments or physical fights. For Mrs. Lake, engaging students in productive literacy discussions meant teaching students to argue respectfully. In the next section, I focus specifically on literacy discussions of the novel, *Bronx Masquerade*. Discussions around this novel seemed to allow students to negotiate identity, race, and place in a comfortable and safe environment.

Place and Identity in Discussions of Bronx Masquerade

In Mrs. Lake's classes, students of color seemed comfortable voicing their opinions in class especially during discussions of literature by and about African

Americans. Discussions about race in novels with African American and Hispanic characters allowed the 7th graders to explore thinking about racial identities (Iser, 1978 ; Jones, 2004). This was especially evident in class discussions about the novel, *Bronx Masquerade.* In *Bronx Masquerade,* most of the characters are African American or Hispanic. Although *Bronx Masquerade* obviously does not take place in a small city school in the southern United States, I observed that the students at Hartford were able to connect with most of the characters' experiences in literacy discussions. In analyzing students' responses and identity constructions, I apply theories of southern literature and place because southern literature often addresses critical race issues (Jones, 2004; Perez, 2004). Critical race theories also contribute to my analyses of literacy discussions.

Discussions that centered on African American characters seemed to provide opportunities for African American students to establish authority, especially if they identified with the characters' feelings and experiences (McGinley et al., 1997; Moller and Allen, 2000). Skin color, along with adolescent response to color and other physical appearances was one underlying theme in *Bronx Masquerade*. This theme set the stage for students to talk about issues of race and physical appearance through open discussions about characters' experiences in the novel. In one reading class, for example, students discussed a character in the book *Bronx Masquerade* who described herself as a "light-skinned" African American female with "good hair" (Grimes, 2002, p. 74–77):

Mrs. Lake: Who can summarize what Taneisha is like?

Jeff. No one likes her because of the way she looks.

Andy: She's pretty and popular.

Laura: She thinks she's better than everyone else because she's pretty, so she's

not that popular.

Michael. Guys try to talk to her and call her "caramel cutie," but she doesn't like it. She wants to be darker.

Mrs. Lake. Yes, that's right, Michael. Why did she describe her ancestors who were "at the trunk of the tree"?

Laura. One of her relatives had a white master, and her mother is white, so she has white blood but is still African American.

Mrs. Lake. Yes, and remember she mentions that a white master raped her great-grandmother.

Andy. Its also like she's saying that everyone has different physical characteristics. She has white blood in her as well as black ancestors (observation, March 3, 2004).

This conversation may not have been as comfortable if the students were asked to talk about their own physical characteristics; however, both black and white students discussed characters' interpretations of color and physical appearances. Mrs. Lake critiqued white slaveholder oppression by reminding students about the character's ancestor who had been raped by a white master. Although Mrs. Lake did not call into question the symbolism of light and dark in the novel, she focused on history, physical appearance, and race. Color and physical characteristics are part of identity negotiations for students in Hartford. The character in *Bronx Masquerade* wanted to be dark skinned, and not defined by her physical appearances. Although this was not discussed in class, this character's poem called into question the literature on "passing" and the desire for

black people to be lighter (Jones, 2004; Morrison, 1990). Although it isn't clear exactly how the students connected to these ideas about appearances and color individually in this discussion, the students seemed comfortable with critiques of physical appearances and race that occurred during this open discussion.

Perez (2004) asserts that contemporary southern literature is a reflection of a society that has changed dramatically since the Civil War. Southern literature written since the civil rights years speaks to all of the United States in the ways the narratives critique issues of race and class. In comparing southern literature with school curriculum and race, Perez (2004) claims that U.S. schools today are not dealing effectively with racial inequality (p. 201). Although racial identity was not publicly addressed in Hartford Middle School, issues of race and racial identities were discussed within the privacy of Mrs. Lake's classroom. Of course, administrators and teachers did not ignore any problems that emerged; however, I did not directly observe open discussions about race and identity except in Mrs. Lake's classroom.

Perez (2004), in his critical analysis of southern literature, suggests that "1960's ethnicity and individual identity has replaced community and regionalism" because the media has caused "regional boundaries to disappear" (p. 199). Thus, visible racism in southern history and in southern literature allows African Americans of all regions to connect to the feelings of those characters and people of the South. The possibilities exist for readers of literature to build new identities by thinking about what Perez (2004), citing Anderson (1991), refers to as "imagined communities" (p. 199). For example, African American literary characters struggling with identity negotiations can be analyzed as symbols for African American people in similar circumstances across the

United States. Dimitriadis (2005) also referenced Anderson (1991) in his ethnography of

African American adolescents in a small Midwest city. Two of the boys were originally

from the southern United States, and "created a kind of traditionalized discourse about

the South … and "recreated the sense of a caring, stable community" (p. 51). In Mrs.

Lake's and her students' discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade,* the students were

able to make connections between the school in the novel and their own experiences in

Hartford city.

In the novel, *Bronx Masquerade*, the "imagined community" comprised mostly

African American and Hispanic students, who learned to respect each other's

individualities through poetry. Near the end of *Bronx Masquerade*, a chorus of characters

(black and white) performed a poem in hip-hop style, called *News at Five*. The poem was

a "freestyle" poem in which one person starts to rap, then another person joints in, and so

forth. One of the characters that joined in the rap was white. One character, Tyrone, did

not want Steve, the white character to join in on the rap and said, "Boy, sit your white

butt back down before you hurt yo'self" (Grimes, 2002, p. 129). The white character

insisted that he could rap, so three boys performed their rap. The theme of racial and

cultural acceptance emerged in this line from the rap performance: "Its time we knocked

the wall down between black and white" (p. 131). In Mrs. Lake's class, the students read

this rap aloud. Class ended before the students had a chance to discuss this rap, and I

wondered what they would have talked about if provided the opportunity. Although this

"imagined community" in *Bronx Masquerade* was somewhat romanticized, the 7th

graders in Mrs. Lake's class seemed to accept the possibilities of identity reconstruction

through poetry, along with the potential for people of all races and personalities to coexist

peacefully and respectfully. How Mrs. Lake and her students created community through poetry presentations and the seventh grade poetry slam will be analyzed further in chapter 6.

Another issue brought out in the novel *Bronx Masquerade* was the way in which the media perpetuates the construction of African American neighborhoods—and African Americans—as violent criminals. Apple (2004) points to the media as one way marginalized groups become further marginalized in the ways they are "routinely stereotyped or maligned in public representations in the media …" (p. 165). *Bronx Masquerade* also reminds readers that "negative press" about inner-city schools or about African American neighborhoods, plays to Caucasian fears of African Americans. In *Bronx Masquerade,* the students at the fictional school participated in a poetry workshop presented by a professional poet. Then the students presented their own poetry. This event was publicized in a *Bronx* newspaper, and one of the characters mentioned that he was happy that for once their school wasn't receiving negative press—that someone was interested in the "good stuff going on" (Grimes, 2002, p. 122). After reading this section of the novel, Mrs. Lake asked the class, "What does this mean? What do reporters usually cover?"

> Jeff: Bad stuff.
>
> Michael. At least they're interested in good stuff because reporters are usually talking about bad things that schools do.
>
> Matthew. Normally, they would dig up dirt.
>
> Mrs. Lake. The newspaper in our town covered the poetry slam this year, but bad things sell papers (observation, April 26, 2004).

In this conversation, Mrs. Lake reminded students that public criticism of schools and students should be questioned. However, at least in Hartford, moving into public arenas could also produce positive results. Perez (2004) suggested that in southern African American literature "action, through speech, was a way out of oppression" (p.198). Likewise, the public performances of poetry in *Bronx Masquerade* empowered students of all races to express identities and publicize their talents. In Mrs. Lake's class, most students seemed to recognize the potential of their own and classmates' creativities, along with possibilities of identity renegotiations through performances of poetry and other writing.

Open discussions about *Bronx Masquerade* appeared to engage students of all races in recognizing their own problems and experiences by reading the characters' fictional lives. After students finished reading *Bronx Masquerade*, Mrs. Lake asked the students what they liked about the book.

Gloria. It explains us and how we feel and how we experience what we're going through.

Andy. It teaches us that the next time we read a poem we'll look deeper into it to see meanings.

Mrs. Lake. I was thinking that there was someone in this book that everyone can relate to.

Gloria. Every person in this book has a problem that one of us can relate to.

Matthew. She put a lot of races together to see how they get along.

Mrs. Lake. What made the kids get along?

Anthony. They knew each other from the poems.

Michael. This story remind me of the life I live because the characters in the book act like people I know.

Mrs. Lake. For example?

Michael. Different groups of different races act like that. I know a girl who is pregnant and does not want the baby like Diondra in the book.

Anthony. The author always gives a character a problem, then she has them resolve the problem by the end.

Mrs. Lake. Why do you think she does that?

Anthony. Because she wants you to see that problems can be fixed. (observation, May 18, 2004).

In the above conversation, all of the students explained their connections to the characters in some way. They saw teens in the novel struggling with identities; they also saw these characters faced with complex problems—pregnancy, abuse, family problems, and so forth. By the end of the class discussions on *Bronx Masquerade*, the students seemed to understand that identity does not exist on the surface—it is forever changing and reconstructed. As Anthony mentioned above, "problems can be fixed." Perhaps the students recognized that identities can be reconstructed by talking about literary characters and how they live in places where similar conflicts occurred. The fictional student community in *Bronx Masquerade* offered possibilities for students to imagine healthier communities of their own. Class literacy discussions offer students

opportunities to come to these conclusions through analyses of characters and talking through their understanding of the characters' experiences.

Mrs. Lake appeared to create a safe place in her classroom for students to talk about their own segregated neighborhoods; at the same time, students could envision communities that were less segregated and more culturally diverse by discussing the characters' experiences in *Bronx Masquerade*. Discussions of history and culture offered chance for open critique, although open criticism was not a central part of class discussions about historical texts. Students appeared to be more comfortable discussing issues of race and identity during discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade* because critiques about race and community could be analyzed through literary characters. As I observed in class discussions of *Bronx Masquerade,* discussions about place, community, and race were possible even when a novel's setting was distinctly different from the students' own community and school. In the next chapter, I continue my analysis of students' discussions of poetry in *Bronx Masquerade.* I also discuss the students' responses to writing their own poetry and presenting or "performing" their poetry for audiences.

Chapter Six. Public Poetry: Performativity, Invisibility, and Class Discussions

Underlying cultural critiques of school, community, and society emerged in students' poetry writing, performances and discussions. Poetry writing and oral presentations of poetry also provided students with opportunities to audition individual identities and become visible in the community, especially during the poetry slam event. At the same time, some students chose to remain "invisible," or to not participate in the public presentation of the 7th-grade "poetry slam." I argue that when students performed their writing publicly (and even when they chose not to perform), this provided students with a sense of agency (McLaren, 1999).

Whether invisible or visible, students experienced agency in their writing choices and in their levels of participation in literacy discussions and other class activities. Students' presentations in class and in the poetry slam were the catalysts for literacy discussions as students talked about poetry and writing processes before and after their presentations. These pre- and postpresentation literacy discussions, along with processes of writing and presenting poetry, were important means of literacy learning for the students.

Understanding Performativity

As a result of Mrs. Lake's focus on "performance" especially when students read and wrote original poetry, "performativity" emerged as a central theme in my study. Mrs. Lake also used performances to engage students in discussions about reading and writing. As students talked about the art of poetry and presented original poetry to their classmates and in the Seventh grade Poetry Slam, the students' performances helped me to understand the ways in which students re-created and reconstructed their identities

through the processes of writing, discussions and presentations. I use several definitions of *performance* and *performativity* to interpret these students' identity negotiations. A "performative" as defined by Austin (2005), is a "semiotic gesture that is a being as well as a doing. Or, more accurately, it is a doing that constitutes a being, an activity that creates what it describes" (p. 6). The meanings of language are embedded in culture (Austin, 2005; Denzin, 2003).

Performances can also become critical, exposing social constructions (Butler, 1990). Johnson (2003) refers to race as a performance and cultural construction: "Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning" (Johnson, 2003, p. 9). Students do not perform identities out of contexts but are reconstructed by their culture and communities.

The place and culture of school also elicits ideological and ritual performances that reflect and contradict a "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004[DAVN31]; McLaren, 2004). Denzin (2003) analyzes cultural performances that are political, historical, and transformative. Literary texts can be performative for writer and reader or performer and listener (if the text is oral). For example, Denzin (2003) describes an experience of listening to a performance text: "Through performance, I experience [the writer's] feelings, which are present in her performance text. Thus performed experiences are the sites where felt emotion, memory and desire come together" (p. 13). I also use *performances* to refer to art forms that are rebellious and critical of canonical definitions of what it means to be "artistic" and "literary" (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005; Denzin, 2003).

The Chicago Poetry Slam.

An important public performance in the school lives of Mrs. Lake and her students was the Hartford Seventh Grade Poetry Slam[DAVN32]. In this chapter, I compare and contrast my observations of the Chicago Poetry Slam, the "poetry slam movement's" place of origin, to the Hartford 7th-grade poetry slam. The purpose of these descriptions is to interpret the two poetry slams as they are situated in two different cultures. As I describe the seventh grade poetry slam, I analyze the meanings that Mrs. Lake and her students gave to the seventh grade poetry slam. In the final section of this chapter, I synthesize the meanings Mrs. Lake and her students gave to the poetry performances with my own analysis of these performances as they occurred during the poetry slam and within the classroom.

I focus on the Chicago poetry slam in this section to contrast the Chicago poetry slam, intended for an adult audience, with the Hartford Middle School poetry slam, performed for an audience of seventh graders and invited guests. Speaking as an experienced audience member of the Chicago Poetry slams at the Green Mill Jazz Club, I interpret the meanings of the Chicago poetry slam as ritual and carnival for both participants and audience (McLaren, 1999).

The National Poetry Slam is described as a "movement" that originated in Chicago by Marc Smith, who currently hosts a poetry slam every Sunday night at the Green Mill Jazz Club in Chicago (National Poetry Slam, 2005). After each evening's judging, the top poet advances to the National Poetry Slam competition. A "poetry slam" is traditionally called a "slam," because audience members critique poems as they are

performed live by the poets (National Poetry Slam, 2005). Smith and Kraynak (2004)

define poetry slam as a "festival, carnival act, interactive class, town meeting, con game,

and poetic boxing match, all rolled into one" (p. 1). Poets "perform" their poems for the

audience in a carnival atmosphere because a slam is "designed for the audience to react

vocally and openly to all aspects of the show, including the poet's performance, the

judges' scores, and the host's banter" (National Poetry Slam, 2005). Marc Smith, the host

of the Chicago Poetry Slam, chooses the judges from the audience. The judges are

typically instructed to give a numerical score on a 0–10 scale, on the basis of content and

quality of both poems and performances. The Chicago slam typically commences with

Marc Smith entering center stage. "Welcome to the poetry slam. I'm your host, Marc

Smith."

"So What????" yells the audience in unison.

This "So What?" response supposedly developed as a reminder to "everybody taking the

stage, including Marc himself, that they were on an equal footing with everyone else"

(Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 11).

The poetry slam is a revival of the oral tradition, and is about both the text and the

performance. If a poem is exceptional, the audience nods quietly or applauds. If the poem

lacks depth or description, or if the poet does not engage the audience's attention with his

or her performance, the booing and other critical noises fill the room creating a

Dadaesque atmosphere that continues throughout the evening. The ritual of the poetry

slam suggests an underlying critique of the *intelligentsia* or the academic elite who

perpetuate the notion of a literary canon. Two tenets of the Chicago Poetry Slam that

disrupt the idea that poetry, in the Western canon, is predominantly a written, literary

form are: (1) The poet onstage is no more important than the listening audience," and (2) "Poetry is not to glorify the poet, but rather to celebrate the community around the poet" (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 7). The poets, through performative acts, must prove to their audience that their poetry is worthy of being heard.

The audience is composed of "regular" people, who may or may not include the college educated. The essence of the poetry slam is both antiestablishment and anticanon in its ability to attract a variety of poets and audiences. The poet–performers in the poetry slam view writing and performing as a process. Through the ritual of the slam, poets audition language and performance, noting the audience's reactions to their poetry. The poets—and perhaps the audience members—engage in what Turner (1986) refers to as "performative reflexivity, a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting as representatives, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves … and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves" (p. 24). The slam performance is never final—slam poets continuously revise their work, respecting the responses of the audience, who may or may not be part of the dominant culture (Smith & Kraynak, 2004).

The poetry slam is carnival—everyone plays an equal role in the slam experience (Bakhtin, 1984). Because the poetry slam is always about oral presentation, the written text is subordinate to oral language, and the norms of the dominant literary and intellectual culture are subverted (McLaren, 1999). This carnival atmosphere contrasts with the seventh grade poetry slam, which I analyze next.

Hartford Seventh Grade Poetry Slam.

The seventh grade poetry slam exhibits none of the Dadaesque qualities of the Chicago poetry slam. Of course, Mrs. Lake and her students worked within the confines of what is socially and legally acceptable in a public middle school, yet possibilities for cultural critique existed under the surface. Mrs. Lake and her students interpreted the "poetry slam" differently than those involved in the National Poetry Slam movement, which was, of course, initiated by and for adults. However, the experience of performing identities, and feelings for a public audience allowed for Mrs. Lake and her students to move beyond logical definitions of school-sanctioned performances. These identity-exposing performances through original poetry provided students with a sense of agency—they controlled and redefined their own academic identities by performing and listening to others performances. The students were not passively waiting for teachers to provide them with knowledge (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 1999).

Parents were invited to attend the slam. In contrast to the Chicago slam, the seventh grade slam audience played a passive role during poetry readings. Mrs. Lake sent invitations to all seventh grade parents, but only about 15 to 20 adults came to each of the two slams I observed, perhaps because it was a week-day afternoon when most parents were working. The six student judges sat with the other language arts teacher, Mrs. Anderson, at a table near the front, not far from the microphone where the poets performed. Students were chosen to read their poems at random. Mrs. Lake drew a performer's name from a jar, alternating between her own team and Mrs. Anderson's students. Mrs. Anderson, who was in charge of the student judges, sat at the judge's table while Mrs. lake hosted the slam. Earlier in the week, students had signed up if they wanted to read a poem, and their names were put in a basket. Students were not required

to read, but they received extra credit points simply for signing their name. The top ten poets, chosen by student judges, received prizes. Similar to the Chicago Slam, students competed with each other and the other seventh grade team (students taught by Mrs. Anderson).

As each student's name was called, the other students breathed a collective sigh of relief. The students knew that their name may or may not be called because the slam was limited to the last two hours of the school day. An enthusiastic few wanted to read. After all, they had prepared for this public ritual in class, and this final performance seemed to be characteristic of their acceptance into a community of artists. For example, one student Henry told me that he was disappointed that he was not called to read (interview, April 16, 2005). After each student read a poem, the rest of the 7th graders clapped and cheered enthusiastically. At about one half hour before dismissal time, Mrs. Lake called on the judges to add up the total points. Then the top ten winners were announced, and prizes awarded. Neither Mrs. Lake nor Mrs. Anderson spoke to the judges, so their influence on the judges choices could have only come indirectly from their language arts instruction.

Obviously, Mrs. Lake and Mrs. Anderson would not be able to allow seventh graders to openly criticize each other in the ways the Chicago poetry slam encouraged. There would be hurt feelings and possibly angry parents. However, a less-structured slam would have been possible. The seventh grade audience was unlike the Chicago slam audience during the performance process in that there were no verbal critiques. However, the spotlight was shown on the seventh grade students; there were no teachers or professional poets reading their poems to the students to teach them about "good poetry." The students were not being tested or graded by their language arts teachers, only given

extra points to participate. Their poetry presentations showcased individual creativity and literacy learning. Mrs. Lake and Mrs. Anderson provided opportunities to perform in class and for a more public audience, and it was up to the students to take up this challenge.

Although creative risks were possible, most students seem to follow teacher guidelines. In a sense, the teachers sanctioned the poems that the students performed—students chose their own poems, but their teachers had already graded these poems. Of the performed poems that I recognized, I knew that none of the students read poems that received anything lower than a grade of "B" from Mrs. Lake. However, Mrs. Lake's definition of "effective poetry" was broad. "Speak from the heart," she would tell her students, and they seemed to trust her enough to produce some honest poetry within the confines of what is culturally acceptable in a middle school. There were a couple of instances where students critiqued the cultural norms of school. For example, one student's poem compared school to prison. Another student read a poem that criticized the teachers and school. One line from his poem was "teachers are preaching when they should be teaching" (observation, March 10, 2005). Only the "prison" poem made it into the 2004–05 Hartford book of seventh grade poems, published by Mrs. Lake and Mrs. Anderson. Perhaps the second student decided this poem was not his best work, or he was encouraged to choose another poem for the published collection (Seventh grade poetry, 2004). It was not evident how much power the seventh grade teachers' definitions of "good" poetry affected the poetry slam choices or the final publication of the poetry book.

The poems chosen by the judges for the top ten prizes were strong in terms of poetic elements and language, and the poets also presented well. The first prize winner in 2004 went to an African American female, Lauren, whose poem was about the death of her mother three years before. There was an incredible audience reaction to the poem—the auditorium was completely silent, and students clapped reverently after Lauren's performance. The top ten poems both years were expressions of students' conflicts and experiences, from hurt feelings to family problems. Some poems were reactions to violence and death (observation, February 22, 2004). These poems reminded audience members that many of these adolescents have difficult home lives, and they have experienced pain and loss.

Poems about violence and family abuse were shared by Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American students, troubling the stereotype that African Americans are violent and delinquent. At the same time, students of color expressed pride in self, affection for friends, and hope for their future. Students of all races addressed issues of school, friendships, and family support. In these poetry performances, oral narratives, in poetic form, challenge stereotypes and white-black binaries. Students' experiences crossed the white–black color line (Fraser, 1999). The parent audience, viewing these performances, observed the complexity of race, identity, and experience.

Mrs. Lake's primary goal for the poetry slam was for students to learn that poetry can be artistic and cathartic, and students can learn about each other and themselves. "I think it is important to write for an audience," Mrs. Lake said. "It makes your writing better. I also think it is important for them to see how their writing affects others" (interview, May 10, 2005). "I think the experience was good for them," Mrs. Lake said.

"If anything, they won't be afraid to present in front of people next time. The kids who read said that it wasn't as frightening as they thought. They felt like they could do it again" (interview, March 14, 2005). Without Mrs. Lake's own enthusiasm for poetry as an art form, the students may not have wanted to actively participate.

The poetry slam also showcased the students' writing. During both years, the poetry slam was mentioned in the city paper, creating positive publicity for the students and Hartford Middle School. Mrs. Lake also mentioned that the poetry slam activities helped the seventh grade teachers to perform their obligatory SOL preparation. Eighth graders had scored low on SOL poetry questions in 2003 (interview, February 24, 2004).

Student interviews corroborated Mrs. Lake's comment that the students who read aloud in the slam were glad they had a chance to read. Bryan said, "In my mind I was reading too fast, but I was nervous. I felt good, though, and glad when it was over" (March 21, 2005). Likewise Robert said, "It was fun—I was nervous because this was the first time I had talked in front of a large group" (interview, April 14, 2005). Some of Mrs. Lake's students had signed up to read their poems aloud, but their names were not called. In spite of this, these students commented positively about the experience of listening to their classmate's poems. Henry said, "I thought—just like any other judge would think— there were some bad, but there some really good ones about how they feel. They expressed in their poems how they feel, and expressed their personalities in their poems" (interview, March 21, 2005). Shameka said, "I thought that the poems were like mine. When they read all their poems, some of them were like mine, and some even better" (interview, April 14, 2005). Generally, the students commented that listening to students read poems in class and at the poetry slam allowed them entrance into the lives and

thoughts of their classmate, and may have bridged the isolation from school that some students feel.

Not all students seemed to value the poetry slam or in-class poetry experiences. Some students chose to participate less enthusiastically or maintain power by remaining silent in class discussions. In the next section, I analyze the theme of "invisibility" as I observed some students' nonparticipatory behaviors as they negotiate positions of power and subvert stereotypes.

Invisibility and Public Performances

Unlike the Chicago poetry slam, public criticism of poetry did not occur during the slam performance; however, it is not clear whether or not it was the fear of public criticism, the gaze of others, or defiance that affected some students decisions to remain "invisible." Here, I discuss invisibility both as a construct of race and performing race, and as a condition of nonparticipation in poetry discussions and activities.

Excelling in any form of academics might be viewed by some African American students as "selling out to the white establishment" (Myers, 2005, p. 123). (See also Delpit, 1995; Franklin[DAVN33], 2004; Johnson, 2003). Poetry—both writing and performing—seemed acceptable to most African American students, perhaps because rap, with its poetic lyrics, is written and performed by African Americans. Critical race theorists claim that rap and hip-hop are controlled by Caucasian Americans, and African American culture is commodified for Caucasian enjoyment (Haymes, 1995; Johnson, 2003). In spite of these critiques, educators recommend that teachers consider the cultural interests and contexts of their students, which for some African American students is reflected in their enthusiasm for studying hip-hop and rap as art forms. (Delpit,

Tatum,[DAVN34] 2005). In the mixed-race classroom of Mrs. Lake, poetry was not categorized as either African American or Caucasian. All types of poetry genres were encouraged—rap and other rhyming poetry as well as free verse.

Neither African American nor Caucasian students demonstrated interest in writing one particular pattern or type. Although these genres were encouraged by Mrs. Lake, Rap and hip-hop are not considered school-sanctioned forms of poetry. Rap and hip-hop stand in stark contrast with the poetry included in school literature anthologies, and is not often studied as part of the required literary canon. Perhaps some students felt uncomfortable demonstrating too much interest in these forms even though Mrs. Lake did not place limits on poetic form. African American students in Mrs. Lake's classes may also have avoided writing something "too black" knowing they will perform for the gaze of a mixed-race audience. At the same time, they risk a "sell-out" performance by acting "too white" in front of African American peers. Perhaps if Mrs. Lake would have initiated discussions about rap or hip-hop, students' rejection or acceptance would have been visible.

The gifted and talented (GT) students in Mrs. Lake's classes—both African-American and Caucasian—generally participated less enthusiastically in poetry writing and performances than the "regular" students. Only two GT students of the nine in Mrs. Lake's language arts' classes (from both years) volunteered to read in the poetry slam. African American students who want to excel academically may choose not to participate in anything that may seem to perpetuate African American stereotypes or would call attention to themselves in front of their peers (Bernascnoi, 2000). In a small city, such as Hartford, African Americans who desire economic and political prominence must be

doubly concerned about how they look to the public; they will be invisible as African Americans until they are visibly constructed by other community members.

Unfortunately, only one African American GT student out of four African American GT students was willing to be interviewed. Although I felt comfortable interviewing the other students, it seemed that Jacob was especially uncomfortable talking to me. I did not want to press him with too many questions, so it was a brief interview; Jacob provided clear, succinct responses without elaboration even when I encouraged him to elaborate. Of course, this was my perception, and Jacob's behavior during the interview could be caused by any number of reasons. I had not observed Jacob to be overly talkative in class or in the hallways, so I did not view his behavior as hostile or rude, and I am sure this was not his intention.

When I asked Jacob about his favorite activity in language arts, he said he liked the poetry unit the best. This surprised me because he did not seem as enthusiastic as the other students. I asked him to explain why he liked the poetry unit. Jacob explained, "Before [referring to his previous school] I had to pick a certain subject, but here we could pick anything we wanted to—for poetry." Although Jacob indicated his interest in poetry, he chose not to read at the poetry slam. I asked Jacob why he didn't want to read at the slam.

> Jacob**.** I didn't think I had a poem that stuck out from the others.
>
> Interviewer. So what did you think about everybody else's poems?
>
> Jacob**.** I thought they were good.
>
> Interviewer. So what did you think about listening to Jacob. It was fun (interview,

May, 5, 2005).

Jacob seemed to anticipate my questions in the above conversation. Also, his reason for not volunteering to read, "I didn't think I had a poem that stuck out" may have been because Jacob chose to be visible only under certain conditions. He seemed comfortable being associated with the GT program, and he appeared to be comfortable, but reserved, in language arts. When Jacob was presented with an opportunity to become "visible" in terms of a public demonstration of knowledge or creativity, he chose to remain silent.

Critical race theorists have suggested that invisibility for African Americans is critical to maintaining social inequalities (Bernascnoi, 2000; Collins, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Johnson, 2003). Franklin (2004) writes that "invisibility is burdensome to black men's souls because it implies that we have been tricked, deceived, or compromised into humiliation, disgrace or victimization" (p. 5). However, there are circumstances in which students of all races may choose not to participate in public performances for a variety of reasons. African Americans may experience what Franklin (2004) referred to as a "double consciousness," a condition in which African Americans feel they must constantly decide whether or not to perform intelligence or unintelligence in school (p. 96). According to Franklin, schools especially perpetuate this "double consciousness" for athletic African American males when schools emphasize sports programs, "providing a context of visibility" (p. 98).

In Jacob's situation, independence in academics was important to him, but not necessarily academic visibility. I asked him to compare language arts with the GT class:

Interviewer. In GT class, is there anything the teacher does that you would like to see in language arts?

Jacob. She [GT teacher] lets us be on our own.

Interviewer. What do you think about that?

Jacob. I think it's pretty good because if you need help, she'll give it to you. And if you want help, you just ask for it (interview, May 5, 2005).

Jacob's assertion of his independence seems to reflect the irony of visibility versus invisibility that Ralph Ellison addresses in his fiction and essays. According to Ellison, "The obligation of making oneself seen and heard was an imperative of American democratic individualism" (2003, p. 355). Yet, Caucasian Americans may render African Americans invisible in their inability to see past skin color.

Students can also choose invisibility by their unwillingness to participate in school-sanctioned performances. Students may also perceive that if their own creativities are unique, it is not worth the risk of competing against the class'or teacher's definition of creativity. For example, Rick, a Caucasian student who preferred to work alone or participate in whole-class discussion rather than work in small groups, said "I keep to myself. I tried GT in third grade, but I didn't like it" (March 21, 2005). However, Rick liked reading his poetry aloud in class. "I like being an author—I like to be in control," Rick explained. "Reading aloud is expressing yourself—it gets my ideas out and let's everyone know who I am." Although Rick did not sign up to read for the poetry slam, he wished that he had participated, "I had a good metaphor poem …" (interview, March 21, 2005). For students like Rick who choose to remain somewhat invisible, poetry may be a

creative outlet. Rick's participation occurred on his own terms and reflected his personality and goals of independence.

Criticism of "performances" existed during the poetry slam class rehearsals, but not during the slam itself. Critics of the poetry slam remained invisible. Matt was honest in his criticism of the poetry slam performances: "Some of them were good. Some people's were just … whiny like every other poem" (interview, April 16, 2005). Similar to Rick, Matt had "auditioned" for GT, but did not score high enough on the tests to enter GT classes. "You had to get an 80—I got a 70--or something like that. My parents wanted me to get in. I wouldn't have minded getting in, but that test was hard" (interview, April 16, 2005). Students like Matt remain invisible when they don't have advocates to support their quests for creative outlets. "Sometimes I get in trouble because I'm bored," Matt said. Matt chose not to sign up for the poetry slam. "Poetry is not all that … I don't really like talking in front of … audiences" (interview, April 16, 2005). In Matt's case, he preferred the role of critic, but this was not a role that was encouraged during class poetry readings. If Matt was able to provide constructive criticism for the poets, he chose not to verbalize these criticisms in class. Although Mrs. lake modeled constructive criticism for her students, verbal criticisms were brief and often "performance" centered. Partners and small group workshops seemed to provide the best opportunities for students to help each other with text revision.

On the surface, some students may appear to choose to remain "invisible" in certain school situations because of disinterest or disengagement. However, students' reasons for refusing to participate in certain school-sanctioned activities may not always be a result of individual personalities and identities. School and society participate in the

construction of students' racial identities and definitions of self-worth. Underlying messages of what it means to be "intelligent" still reflect school-centered definitions of academic knowledge. In the present political climate in which test scores are valued over individual creativity, constructions of intelligence will reflect a knowledge-centered curriculum. In the next section, I explore students who choose to quietly critique constructions of school, identity, and intelligence through their poetry writing. I focus on poetry writing and performances that occurred during class literacy discussions and presentations in Mrs. Lake's language arts classes.

Discursive Poetry and Class Performances

The 7th-grade students produced discursive cultural and social critique through their poetry performances. Although these critiques were not conscious and direct, neither are the underlying conditions that reproduce the values of what Apple (2004) refers to as the "authoritarian populism of the right" (p. xxiv). As students rewrote and performed identities in poetry, the processes of public poetry performances called attention to the conditions that produced and refigured identities and experiences. Mrs. Lake's role in these performances was to allow the students to express their voices in poetry and performance. "[DAVN35]Some kids are very dramatic in their reading," Mrs. Lake said. "This allows them to showcase their talent" (interview, May 10, 2005). Although Mrs. Lake neither discouraged nor encouraged cultural criticism, the students' own language, spoken through poetic form and oral performance, formed the essence of cultural critique. Identity negotiations and cultural critiques became public in class discussions about poetry and in students performances of their own poetry writing.

"Open Mike Fridays" provided students with a forum for presenting poetry written outside school requirements. Students could volunteer to read a poem they had written in their free time and receive extra credit points. Although this did not occur every Friday, there were always at least two students that volunteered to read poems they had written outside of class during the Fridays designated as "open mike." (interview, November 25, 2003). However, "Open Mike Fridays" were no less critical or personal than when students read poems they had written for class assignments. When students read their poems aloud in class, they opened themselves up for criticism, often on subjects that were personal in nature.

During "Open Mike Fridays," and other poetry presentation days, students responded to classmate's poems by explaining how they could relate to the subjects and imagery of the speaker's poem, making personal connections to the writing. For example, when Laura read a poem about her grandmother dying in a hospital, several students talked about how they had felt when someone close to them died. Mrs. Lake said, "I'm sure your grandmother understands why you weren't there in the hospital with her. I liked your simile, 'empty as a box' too."[DAVN36] Laura, a low-level reader, often exhibited problems getting along with other students in groups, especially in language arts. For example, I observed a couple of instances in which Mr. Andrews, the learning disabilities teacher, asked Laura to step in the hallway, so they could talk privately. When Laura read her poem about her grandmother, her identity was renegotiated in the sense that she became an *author* reading her work. Her poem was personal, and by responding to Laura's writing, her classmates also identified with Laura's experiences. Mrs. Lake

pointed out the poem's strengths, and Laura performed a different self—one that connected with instead of opposed her classmates (observation, November 3, 2003).

Although Mrs. Lake did not say directly that she encouraged students to negotiate identities through writing, her actions demonstrated that poetry was a means of communicating and negotiating identities. During a language arts class when students were revising poems independently, Mrs. Lake happened to notice Jeff's poem. Jeff was also a low-level reader. "Let me read Jeff's poem—it's great—he has a simile in every line," Mrs. Lake said to the class. Before Jeff had a chance to protest, she read his poem aloud. "Excellent images, Jeff," Mr. Anderson, the LD teacher, added. Jeff smiled proudly as the class complimented him (observation, November 3, 2003). Writing poetry provided some low-level readers opportunities to create and perform as well as their more skilled peers in language arts. If Jeff did not always succeed in traditional school-sanctioned literacy activities, writing and performing poetry were opportunities for Jeff to play with language and audition creative possibilities.

Mrs. Lake taught students about voice and how to use "feeling words" to make poetry more descriptive. She encouraged students to be authentic and "speak from the heart" when writing poetry. For example, Mrs. Lake asked students to talk about "feeling words" to describe pictures she showed them on transparencies. She put up a picture of a family standing around a piano and asked, "What feelings does this picture bring out in you?" Jacob, a GT student, answered in a cynical tone, perhaps illustrating his own discomfort with talking about feelings:

Jacob. "Happy" Because people are happy with each other and working together in a community.

(A couple of students laughed)

Mrs. Lake. Did you see that in a commercial? I want you to say what it means to you, not what you think I want to hear. Anyone else?

Kimberly. Inspired.

Ramona. She doesn't know what that word means

Mrs. Lake. Yes, she does.

Kimberly. Because I would like to learn to play the piano. (observation, February 2, 2005).

As the class continued, students' responses to pictures and poems seemed more honest, and Mrs. Lake allowed students more open discussion when they talked about the poem, "I, Too, Sing America," by Langston Hughes (observation, February 2, 2005).

As Mrs. Lake put up a transparency of the poem, "I, Too," she said, "Do any of you know who Langston Hughes is?

Mark. Yes—we studied the Harlem Renaissance last year.

Mrs. Lake. Good. If you remember the Harlem Renaissance and Langston H ughes, you'll like this poem.

Mrs. Lake read the poem aloud:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I too, am America (Hughes, 2004)

Mrs. Lake (after reading the poem). So what is he talking about? What is the symbolism?

Jose. Racism.

Mrs. Lake. And what does the family "at the table" and "brother" represent? What kind of family is he talking about?

Mark. All African Americans.

Mrs. Lake. Right. This makes me feel ashamed because of how black people were treated—now how does this make you feel when you read this?

Jose. Sad—because it was wrong what happened.

Karen. Sorry they had to go through that.

Serena. Mad because I don't like it when people tell me what to do.

Mrs. Lake. And you would have been told what to do a lot had you been and African American in the 1920's. Anyone else have something to add?

Mark. Loved—because my family and the world is [sic] more accepting.

Conner. Inspired—because he spoke his own true feelings (observation, February 2, 2005).

All of the students involved in the above discussion are African Americans except for Jose, who is Hispanic. The range of feelings the students expressed about this poem seemed to reflect their views of the world. Karen used the word *they,* separating herself from African Americans who had lived before her. Mark and Connor were more positive in their interpretations of their present conditions and identities. According to Mrs. Lake, this exercise was important in getting students to understand their feelings to communicate effectively through poetic language (interview,February 2,2005).

For students, writing poetry, then reading it aloud, provided opportunities for identity performances and for some students to critique community and society. Tyrone said that his favorite activity in language arts was reading and writing poetry.

Interviewer. Why do you like poetry?

Tyrone. It's a better way to—not rapping, but like poems, you can write about anything. Like this paper—you could make a poem about this paper sitting on the table. It's easy to do. You don't have to rhyme or nothing to do it (interview, February 2, 2005).

Tyrone was talented at writing rhyming poetry, and one of his rhyming poems, "Be Me One Day," was published in the 7th-grade poetry book. I observed a class when Tyrone performed this poem for the class. In his first stanza, Tyrone placed himself in a neighborhood known for its high crime rate:

Be me one day.

You think it's easy

No way!

If you was me for one day!

You would not last

In my hood your life will be taken away 2 fast (Seventh grade poetry, 2004–05).

After Tyrone read his poem, Mrs. Lake complimented him on his rhyming technique. Other students complimented Tyrone on the rhythm and sound of his poem, too. Then Shameka said, "That's how it is[DAVN37]. There's four places like that. …" Shameka listed the names of the low-income African American neighborhoods. No one else said anything until Mrs. Lake called the next student to read his poem (observation, February 9, 2005).

Shameka added to Tyrone's identity construction by connecting her own experiences and knowledge of the African American neighborhoods. This performance became a form of public pedagogy (Denzin, 2003). The language, poetry performance, and response by Shameka, presented audience members with a picture of segregated African American neighborhoods; this picture allowed students in the class to consider the experiences of others who lived in neighborhoods unlike their own. And for those students who resided in those "hoods," they found that their fears—and perhaps anger—about the crime and violence were shared by others.

Tyrone's poetry performance both perpetuated and critiqued the social construction of what it means to be from a working-class or low-income African American family. Neither Mrs. Lake nor the students questioned Tyrone's analysis of his neighborhood, accepting the idea that if Tyrone is African American, he must naturally live in one of the four "hoods." When Shameka reminded students that this is the way it really is in a few African American neighborhoods, she called attention to the cultural significations and realities of what it means to be African American living in segregated, low-income neighborhoods. Tyrone doesn't just reside in his neighborhood—he also feels and experiences it. The possibility for critique existed as all students became aware of the problems experienced by African American's living in segregated neighborhoods in Hartford and other places.

Sharing identities with others was important to many of the students. The theme, "I want them to know who I am," emerged consistently in student interviews. Henry said, "I like writing my poems and reading them out loud so people can understand me. … Its better than just telling them, so I express my writing in poems better than just talking"

(interview, April 16, 2005). Henry said he wrote a lot of poetry outside of class. "I got a whole stack of it at home. That's why I don't want the poetry unit to end" (interview, April 16, 2005). Henry had a reputation of being a troublemaker in other classes, and had to serve "in-school suspension" a few times. However, in Mrs. Lake's class, his identity was self-constructed through his poetry:

Mrs. Lake. Henry, you're going to be sad when we stop doing poetry in two weeks.

Henry. Yeah! When?

Mrs. Lake. In two weeks—we're going to start working on an expository essay.

Henry. I wish we could keep doing poetry.

Mrs. Lake. I do, too. You're good at poetry, too. (observation, March 2, 2005)

In Mrs. Lake's 4th-period language arts class, Henry was the poetry expert. On poetry workshop days, Henry helped students revise their poems when asked. During one class, Henry helped Susan when she asked. First, he listened to Susan read her poem aloud, then said "I like it." Next, Crystal asked Henry to read her poem.

Henry. "I think you should change the ending. (reading) My friends …

Crystal. You think I should? I'm going to ask Mrs. Lake.

Henry. I like it; you just need to … (reads a couple of sentences aloud) "I love my friends; they're always there for me …"

Crystal. Well, it's got to be something that rhymes here (points to paper).

Crystal (to Mrs. Lake). He killed my paper—I can't read it.

(Henry reads Crystal's poem aloud to Mrs. Lake).

Mrs. Lake. That's good—did you write it or did Henry?

Crystal. I did, but he made some changes.

Mrs. Lake. OK. (observation, March 8, 2005)

In the workshop conversation, Henry and Crystal both demonstrate agency in their work together revising Crystal's poem. Crystal suggested some mechanical corrections in Henry's poem later. Mrs. lake demonstrated respect for Henry, Crystal and her other students as "competent readers, writers, learners, and human beings" (Tatum, 2005, p. 113).

Serena thought it was important for her classmates to know about her past experiences because this was part of her present identity. "I like people to know what happened to me and what life was like when I was a child" (interview, March 20, 2005). One of Serena's poems was about her experiences with a drug-addicted father. The first few lines set the scene for her childhood history:

Drugs are bullets

That shoot

Your family down

They could turn everything you love upside down

They feel like holes through your heart. (Seventh grade poetry, 2004–05)

Identities are more than the present self. Identities are multiple, shifting, and changing as a product of history and communities (Pineau, 2005). Serena seemed to recognize this identity construction process through her poetic performances of self as she connected with her past. In her current family situation, her father did not live with them, and

Serena indirectly criticized a society that allowed the destruction of families as she reconstructed her present family identity through her poetry.

Expressions of fear and self-doubt emerged as characteristic of identity reconstruction processes for some 7th graders. Isabel and Bryan, two students with different backgrounds and literacy skills, expressed similar identity crises in their poetry. In his poem, "Two Houses Down," Bryan expressed doubt about his ability to make new friends at Hartford. He had recently moved to Hartford, and Bryan reveals some sadness in these last two stanzas:

> I would walk to the pool or park
>
> They are only a mile away
>
> But as hard as I try
>
> I can only find
>
> Peace and quiet two houses away
>
> But now it's too late
>
> I have moved nine miles away
>
> And there are no friends following behind. (Seventh grade poetry, 2004–05)

Bryan's last stanza hints at his desire to meet new friends who will "follow behind" or will be part of his identity as he negotiates his new school and community.

Isabel, a learning disabled student, was popular with her teachers and the other students; she participated actively in class and requested and received tutoring at the community center (Mrs. Lake interview, March 9, 2005). In her poem, "I am Isabel," her

second stanza contained an underlying message of struggle and a desire for something better:

> I pretend that I am in a college classroom
>
> I feel butterflies in my stomach
>
> I touch my pencil, I shake
>
> I worry that I won't pass
>
> I cry inside when I struggle
>
> I am Isabel. (Seventh grade poetry, 2004–05)

Isabel expresses a fear of failure in her poem that may be shared with students who, like Isabel, carry a "learning disability" label. Her competing identities were performed in her strong exterior and inner feelings of insecurity. Isabel only "cries inside" and she copes by "pretending she's in a college classroom," suggesting that her academic struggles serve a purpose.

Isabel's "I am" poem was one example of an "I am" form poem that Mrs. Lake assigned in language arts. For the students, this "I am" structure encouraged student to be bold, authoritative, and sometimes confessional. Butler (1990) argued that by using the pronoun "I," women "speak themselves out of their gender" (p. 117). Butler (1990) focused on gender performances in her analysis of the power of "I," but this analysis could be extended beyond gender. When these 7th-grade students were granted the power of "I" as they wrote their "I am" poems, they asserted their identities, and through the process of performing these poems, recreated their identities. Isabel's and the other students' "I am" poem also critique the power of a culture that "produces and reproduces victims" (Denzin, 2003, p. 239). Pedagogically, these poetic performances empower

students to express their feelings of fear and victimization; in turn, students teach each other not to give up dreams and goals, and not to perpetuate a culture of repression.

The poetry slam and the class performances hint at the possibilities for change. Even when these performances do not directly critique society and culture, audience members hear these critiques in the language of the students' poems. As the student author of the following poem suggests, poetry is about "change," and the 7th-grade poetry slam is a ritual that creates a place for self-expression and cultural critique. The possibility of change begins with the individual presenting the poem. The poem below was presented at the February 2005 poetry slam and published in the *Seventh Grade Poetry* book.

Poetry Slam

I'm standing here today

Reading you a poem

I'm scared I'm nervous

But it doesn't show

I take my time

I read it slow

If I don't

You won't know

Thoughts are racing

Through my head

My face is flush

My hands are sweating

I'm scared, I'm nervous

But it doesn't show

I'm standing up here today reading you a poem

Reading you a poem that just may change the day.

(Seventh grade poetry, 2004–05)

The act of performing one's own writing is transformative for both performer and audience. The students become the teachers for themselves and others who choose to listen. Mrs. Lake and her students seemed to believe that writing poetry and public performances of poetry were powerful for all involved. Performing and writing poetry created possibilities for students of all literacy levels to participate and grow creatively.

Although evidence of these students' engagement in future literacy activities has yet to be observed, perhaps these poetry performances taught students to analyze text, author and purpose more critically from their own experiences as writers for a live audience. Poetry also created safe places for students to express and renegotiate selves, guided by a teacher who believed in their successes as students and as human beings. Finally, critical poetry performances by some students suggest that the processes of creating and performing literature provides opportunities for students to interrogate school-sanctioned "intelligences" and challenge beliefs about what it means to be literate, intelligent, and creative.

Chapter 7. Conclusions and Implications: Literacy Discussions and Masquerade

Throughout the previous chapters, I sought to answer questions about Mrs. Lake and her students' perceptions of literacy discussions. I also looked to the students and teachers at Hartford to interpret their perceptions of school culture and place on literacy discussions and experiences. As I analyzed my research data, I considered how both Mrs. Lake and her students negotiated identities, and how their identities were performed and reconstructed through literacy activities and discussions. Further, as I looked beyond the private realm of the classroom, I examined how identities seemed to be constructed by place and school culture.

In my search for the answers to these questions about Mrs. Lake and her students' perceptions of literacy discussions and activities, I observed the ways that students perceived literacy learning as important to their identity construction especially when class presentations or performances were required. Students performed identities through discussions and presentations of writing; I analyzed students' social and personal identity constructions through the lens of performance theory (Denzin, 2003; McLaren, 1999) In this chapter, I build on my analysis from previous chapters to propose a broader perspective of pedagogy and literacy research. I use the symbol of masquerade to open up the complexities of teaching and researching literacy discussions as activities that exist within cultural and political contexts.

Mrs. Lake's Purposes for Literacy Discussions

My first research question addressed Mrs. Lake's instructional purposes for literacy discussions. As described in chapter four, Mrs. Lake believed whole class and small group discussions served different purposes in enhancing students' literacy

learning. Small group discussions were used primarily for team building and for peer support. I observed that Mrs. Lake seemed to constantly monitor the small group discussions in order to help students resolve personal conflicts or assist students who were having difficulty with a task. In a sense, the small groups served as support for the students, which seemed effective in Mrs. Lake's heterogeneous language arts classes.

Beyond these structured small discussions groups, opportunities for analysis of texts was limited in peer groups. Although writing groups were less structured, Mrs. Lake's use of small groups in contexts other than writing groups seemed to be organized more for cooperation and efficiency than for purposes of teaching students to take responsibility for their own literacy learning. Perhaps if students were provided with more freedom over their discussion topics and methods, students would have viewed groups as opportunities to talk about interpretations of texts while maintaining the cooperation and structure that Mrs. Lake intended.

In some language arts classes, it may not be readily apparent whether or not cooperative groups are a reflection of higher levels of literacy understanding. Teaching adolescents to work together may be time consuming and difficult in public schools where efficiency and high test scores are valued. Further literacy research is needed on the ways teachers can allow students more freedom yet help students work together effectively for the benefit of all students.

Mrs. Lake went beyond the IRE (Eeds & Wells, 1989) pattern in whole class literacy discussions. Even in her low-level reading classes, she maintained high standards, encouraging her students to respond to themes and characters in discussions of fiction and nonfiction. In both language arts and reading classes, Mrs. Lake encouraged

socioemotional responses to literature in whole class discussions because she believed it was important for students to enjoy literature in order to become lifelong readers. Mrs. Lake was able to create a comfortable class climate for students in language arts and reading, which may have added to the success of her whole class literacy discussions. As with Mrs. Lake, some teachers may be more effective at engaging an entire class in literacy discussions and activities.

Most higher level literary analysis in Mrs. Lake's class took place in whole class discussions during both language arts and reading classes. Mrs. Lake explained that she believed open discussions were especially necessary for her low-level reading students because she wanted to teach students how to respond personally and analytically to literature. Mrs. Lake believed that her low level reading students were capable of literary analysis beyond basic comprehension. As mentioned in my interviews with Mrs. Lake, she believed that some of her low level reading students had not grown up with positive reading experiences or they had not been pushed to read enough in grade school. Because of these beliefs, Mrs. Lake encouraged reading students to participate in open discussions of texts. Open discussions in which low level reading students took some initiative on the direction of conversation worked effectively in Mrs. Lake's reading classes. Mrs. Lake provided individual assistance to students who struggled with comprehension instead of imposing skill-and-drill on the entire class.

Whole class discussions were also opportunities for Mrs. Lake to model writing processes and discussions about writing. Students asked questions and talked about their own writing processes. As discussed in chapter four, writing was an essential component of Mrs. Lake's personal life, and she believed it was important to share her writing with

the students. Also, when Mrs. Lake shared her writing processes, she often described changes she made before the finished product. She also opened up her own writing to suggestions from the class. Such writing performances and discussions about writing raise questions about how teacher modeling works to enhance students' own interest and improvement in writing. Also, how do discussions about thinking and writing processes help students to think about texts?

Mrs. Lake worked in ways similar to the teacher in Freedman, Delp and Crawford's (2005) study in that literacy discussions and activities usually occurred within the context of the whole class. During breaks from whole class literacy discussions, Mrs. Lake checked on individual students who asked for assistance or whom she felt may need additional explanation or support. At first glance, it seemed that Mrs. Lake was unwilling to give control to her students to initiate successful peer group discussions. However, Mrs. Lake, along with teachers in studies cited in chapter two, must make complex choices about what to teach and how to teach within tightly structured time frames. Also, a tight structure can also make teaching appear effective to a school administration that values well-behaved students and high test scores. Not all teachers who are aware of student conflicts will know the best ways to turn conflicts into learning experiences for students. Releasing imposed structure may increase power struggles and disagreements at least in the beginning stages.

Discussions before and after students' presentations of writing encouraged students to consider audience in writing and class discussions. Mrs. Lake also explained in an interview that she thought students wrote better when they wrote for an audience of their classmates. As noted throughout this study, Mrs. Lake encouraged students to read

their writing aloud to their classmates, and in some situations, Mrs. Lake required formal presentations. The poetry slam, discussed in chapter six, was another opportunity for students to perform their own texts. Mrs. Lake's primary goal for the poetry slam was for students to learn that poetry can be artistic and cathartic, and students can learn about each other and themselves. These poetry performances remind literacy educators that literacy is more than reading or writing words, but is also connected with identities, cultural expectations and rhetorical situations. Further research that considers how oral presentations help students think about writing for specific audiences is needed. Also, how might students writing processes and products change (if at all) when required to write for public audiences? Both oral and written literacies were valued in Mrs. Lake's classes and she taught students how multiple literacies can effectively work together.

Poetry writing encouraged students to critique cultural constructions that affected their personal identities. Although some students attempted critiques in poetry, Mrs. Lake did not appear to guide students toward critiques of cultural constructions of race, gender and class. Opportunities for such critiques occurred in whole class discussions of poetry, but Mrs. Lake did not direct students toward analytical discussions that questioned the conditions of school or society. Mrs. Lake's primary purpose for teaching poetry was to encourage students' explorations of personal identities. Teaching students to critique and explore culture and community through writing was not a primary goal. Although teaching students to explore individual identities as part of a community and culture is possible, Mrs. Lake's emphasis was on the individual student.

In teaching students to consider audience, it would have been possible for Mrs. Lake to move beyond individual and class identities to teach students to critique

cultural constructions through their own writing. Curriculum and instructional methods that encourage critical literacy do not dominate most school literacy programs. Although successful programs and critical instructional methods have been documented, as referenced in previous chapters, current literacy researchers have infrequently reported on teacher interest or concern with critical literacy instruction. If critical literacy methods and curricula are valued by educators, further descriptive research is needed on how educators have managed to implement critical literacy instruction in school settings where community support for these teaching theories and practices may or may not exist.

In summary, Mrs. Lake's instructional purposes for literacy discussions in small groups differed from whole class discussions. Group discussions and other literacy activities were structured by Mrs. Lake for efficiency. Students learned how to cooperate and assist each other with text comprehension and paper revisions. On the other hand, Mrs. Lake's purposes for whole class discussions were to engage students in response and analysis of texts. Whole class discussions provided opportunities for students to participate in open conversations about texts. Also, students responded to presentations of their classmates' original work. Mrs. Lake believed that whole class conversations about writing processes were essential to improving students writing, and she modeled writing processes and products, initiating response and critique from students about her work and their own writing.

Finally, Mrs. Lake believed that literacy discussions were important in teaching students to develop knowledge about self and identity through processes of reading, writing and literacy discussions. Nurturing students' individual enthusiasm for reading and writing was important to Mrs. Lake, but Mrs. Lake also believed that literacy

discussions occurred within a community. Literacy discussions contributed to the construction of a classroom community. Students' presentations of original writing and the public forum of the poetry slam also taught students to consider audience and rhetorical situation. Through modeling and literacy discussions, Mrs. Lake demonstrated her belief that writers must consider audience to produce effective texts.

Students' Perceptions of Literacy Discussions

In order to answer the second research question on students' perceptions of literacy discussions, I looked to student interviews and my own class observations. In chapter four, I presented students' interpretations of small groups and the problems that emerged, especially in the language arts classes, which were grouped heterogeneously by reading ability. In activities that required higher levels of comprehension, peer groups did not seem to work as effectively as whole class discussions. According to the students, they were more concerned about getting along with their peers and accomplishing the required tasks. The only exception to this was in writing workshops where students worked with partners or groups to provide feedback on drafts.

The students in Mrs. Lake's class seemed enthusiastic about presenting their writing to the class. This process of presenting writing to the class was as important to the students as it was to Mrs. Lake. As illustrated in interviews, students seemed to recognize that although the writing was about them, their texts needed to speak to their class members.

Identity constructions emerged as students presented poetry and other writing. The title of my study, "Showing them who I am," was originally an interview quote from Henry about identity performances in poetry; other students echoed this theme in their

interviews, emphasizing the importance of gaining acceptance—or at least understanding—from their peers. Poetry provided students with a sense of agency over their literacy experiences. Poetry presentations and literacy discussions were important means for students to convey multiple selves to their classmates, then renegotiate these identities through discussions and writing performances.

In a political climate where students' test scores seem more important in the political/public realm, it is often left up to classroom teachers to encourage individual creativity in their students. I observed that Mrs. Lake expected her students to explore their interests and future aspirations. Writing was a means of self-exploration for students in Mrs. Lake's classes. Further literacy research that focuses on students' perceptions, as well as teachers' interpretations of instruction, is needed.

For Mrs. Lake's students, discussions about writing processes and draft workshops were steps toward accomplishing the task of writing a final draft. Some students mentioned in interviews that the writing presentations motivated them to produce better writing. As illustrated by Mrs. Lake in my study, some writing teachers are constrained by institutional requirements as they help their students learn to write more effectively. However, LeCourt (2004) suggested that teachers "attend more closely to student writing as an act of cultural production that intersects with the identities students bring from other contexts" (p. 220). Mrs. Lake taught students to "write from the heart," and she modeled processes of thinking about personal experiences to incorporate into her writing. Although teachers may not be comfortable encouraging students to share personal information, student's personal and cultural identities need to be considered as teachers plan writing assignments and literacy instruction.

The students in my study did not appear to value social and cultural critique in their writing and discussions. However, this may have been because Mrs. Lake did not frequently move discussions beyond comprehension and literacy analysis. Although Mrs. Lake placed literature in historical contexts, she did not teach students to critique conditions or problems that existed in their communities. Interviews or other study methods that invite teachers to consider why they choose not to move students toward cultural and community critiques may help educators to understand the problems teachers and adolescents face when learning to critique and question society and culture.

Generally, students perceived small group discussions as problematic. Although students realized that they needed to learn how to cooperate, they did not view conflict or disagreements as conducive to literacy learning. An exception was group discussions about writing processes and products, which students believed were helpful for improving their writing. Whole class discussions about texts and presentations of original writing were most valuable to the students. Students explored personal identities through creative writing, and shared their identities with the class. Performing texts for the class, and listening to feedback from Mrs. Lake and other students helped them to think about rhetorical purposes for writing beyond exploring the self. Finally, the students did not see texts as a means for social or cultural critique. The purpose of discussions for the students was to audition private meanings and explore individual identities through reading and writing.

Mrs. Lake's Perceptions of Place and Literacy Discussions

Mrs. Lake believed the school and city community were isolated from one another. As discussed in chapter five, Mrs. Lake interpreted SOL night as an example in

which the school attempted to chip away at this isolation. Although "SOL night" brought segregated communities together in a school-sponsored, yet relaxed atmosphere, Mrs. Lake admitted that more work was needed to improve school-community relationships.

Mrs. Lake taught students that poetry writing and presentations could be opportunities to critique school norms and school-sanctioned definitions of literary texts. In discussions of historical texts, for example, race and class were open for critique. Although these criticisms were infrequent, the possibilities of school critique existed had Mrs. Lake chosen to lead discussions in critical directions.

Opening up texts for critique in the present political climate involves using class time and taking risks that some teachers may find uncomfortable. Teachers at Hartford were expected to follow the language arts curriculum, and prepare their student for SOL tests. Teaching students to critique school-sanctioned texts was obviously not one of the SOL curriculum objectives. Further research is needed on how teachers encourage students to engage in cultural critique while working within the confines of top-down curricula, such as the Virginia SOLs.

Mrs. Lake's expectations for her students were high, even for students she knew were from unstable or lower class family environments. Mrs. Lake seemed to have a natural ability for engaging students in literacy activities. Some students, reported by Mrs. Lake as troublemakers in other classes, became leaders in her language arts class. Although part of this may have been her years of teaching experience, Mrs. Lake showed respect and consideration for her students' learning and ideas while maintaining high expectations for her students' academic success.

In summary, Mrs. Lake did not perceive that place affected literacy discussions; however, Mrs. Lake believed students' home lives or lack of reading experiences could inhibit students' ability to analyze texts in discussions. Although Mrs. Lake taught students to write and talk about individual experiences and interests, the place and culture of home and school were not considered. Generally, school and community existed in separate spheres, and Mrs. Lake believed her responsibility involved teaching individuals to improve literacy skills and comprehension through literacy discussions.

Students' Perceptions of Place, Identity and Literacy Discussions

In chapter five, I described my observations of students' friendships with people in their neighborhoods, suggesting that they viewed their neighborhood communities as places that were more comfortable than school. In some cases, students' identity negotiations were at odds with the culture of the school. Conflicts in the form of verbal and physical fights occurred about once in a month, usually in the school hallways. Most of the students interviewed mentioned fighting as a reoccurring problem in school. It was not clear whether racism was a factor in the fighting and disagreements among Hartford students. However, the students indicated that they felt comfortable in Mrs. Lake's class. In interviews, students commented that few problems occurred within classrooms. Generally, Mrs. Lake's students thought disagreements during group discussions were problematic. Although Mrs. Lake negotiated group conflicts, it was not clear how much students learned about solving their own problems.

In the last section of chapter five, I analyzed the class discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade* and compared and contrasted the students' perceptions of race and community in discussions of the novel with their perceptions of their own communities.

Similar to the school in the novel, *Bronx Masquerade,* Hartford is a school affected by race and class. However, For Mrs. Lake's students, Hartford school was a place that seemed separate from their individual lives. Critiques of race and class in literacy discussions were infrequent.

Discussions that centered on African American characters seemed to provide opportunities for African American students to establish authority, especially if they identified with the characters' feelings and experiences (McGinley et al., 1997; Moller and Allen, 2000). Of course, each student's response to a text is unique, and teachers must choose texts and encourage the kinds of response that encourages students to improve literacy analysis skills and participate actively in discussions.

In chapter five, I noted that when students studied *Bronx Masquerade,* discussions about place, community, and race were possible even when a novel's setting was distinctly different from the students' own community and school. Although Mrs. Lake did not invite students to compare and contrast Hartford school with the Bronx school in the novel, she talked about the similarities in literacy activities, such as Open Mike Fridays and the upcoming poetry slam. If Mrs. Lake had encouraged discussions about the similarities and differences between places in the novel and in Hartford school, what would these discussions look like and how would they benefit students? As mentioned in chapter two, literacy research on place is scarce. Research that takes a broader view of literacy discussions is needed. Literacy discussions and other school learning and activities exist within political and cultural frameworks, and ethnographers and other researchers need to continue to analyze such frameworks.

Pinar (2004) has recommended that curriculum and education must connect the private classroom with the public. According to Pinar, students must study past oppression, acknowledge that society has changed, "that everything could change, that someday everything will change" (p.250). Teaching about the possibilities of positive change in a place such as Hartford is feasible through discussions of texts, as was demonstrated by Mrs. Lake and her students in my study. However, other instructional methods that consider community and place are needed, and research is needed that describes these school experiences and how these curriculum and instruction methods can be implemented in public schools in the south and elsewhere.

In the end, the students interpreted literacy discussions and writing performances as positive experiences. Classrooms were private spaces where students could negotiate identities and participate in a community of learners. Literacy discussions in school seemed separate from home and community except when students presented in public forums, such as SOL night and the poetry slam. During discussions of *Bronx Masquerade,* there were moments when students connected the characters' lives with their home and school lives. Generally, students viewed school and home as separate spheres.

The symbol of the masquerade, which I discuss next, worked as a literary device in the novel *Bronx Masquerade*. At the same time, the masquerade was part of the place and culture of the school in the novel. Literacy discussions on places in novels, along with historical analysis, provide a way to begin discussions of place with students (Pinar, 2004).

Literacy Discussions and Masquerade

In *Rabelais and his World, B*akhtin (1986) describes the metamorphosis of the symbols *masquerade* and *mask* and how these meanings have changed over time, from the medieval representations to the more romantic or contemporary cultural meanings. The poem by African American poet Lawrence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," illustrates the more romantic or contemporary definition of the word *mask*, which is associated with hiding or shielding. A m*asquerade* is a dance or celebration that involves the use of masks to hide identities of individuals in attendance. In this section I use Bakhtin's definitions of masquerade to analyze the students' discussions of *Bronx Masquerade.* I also suggest broader and more complex ways of looking at literacy discussions and literacy research through the lenses of performativity and masquerade.

The novel, *Bronx Masquerade*, included the romantic-contemporary definition of *masquerade;* the school culture in the novel was a *masquerade* in the sense that the students hid their identities in order to become a part of the school culture's façade. The school was a symbol for both control and rebellion, and the students' poetry became vehicles for reconstructing and performing previously hidden identities with classmates. In the end, the characters in the novel removed their masks in order to perform their authentic identities.

Bakhtin (1986) contrasted romantic meanings of "hiding" associated with the mask with earlier medieval folk culture meanings, suggesting that the romantic definition had lost the true meaning of the carnival spirit. For example, in earlier medieval folk carnival, the mask contained "the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar

interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles" (p.40). In the medieval meanings, the *masquerade* is a symbol for change and rebirth, and is "connected with the joy of reincarnation. . . to transitions, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries. . . " (p.39-40). To ignore the medieval associations of the word *mask* is to ignore the power of the mask as a symbol of change and rebirth. The novel *Bronx Masquerade* illustrates how both meanings work together. The characters in the novel produce their own masks of identity until they show their true nature through poetry, reconstructing their identities in performances for their peer audience.

In discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade,* the students in my study analyzed changes the characters in the novel experienced and interpreted the characters' poetry performances as identity renegotiations. The characters in *Bronx Masquerade* also experienced the meanings of medieval masquerade—students performed their poems and discovered change was possible as they crossed culture, race and gender boundaries. Mrs. Lake's students discussed the positive changes that were created in the school in *Bronx Masquerade*, as described in chapter six. Mrs. Lake's students also seemed to be able to envision changes and possibilities for themselves and their communities. One example existed in the poem written by a Hartford student called *Poetry Slam.* As quoted in chapter six, this student's poem included the phrase "this poem might change the day."

Some critical theorists discussed in previous chapters have sought to remove oppressive masks, critiquing underlying messages behind the masquerades that teachers and students play. Traditional literacy instructional methods or oppressive school structures can force teachers to perform masquerades that hide hegemonic curriculum and

school rituals (McLaren, 1999). For example, some teachers must teach novels that reflect a required literary canon or teach literacy skills to a standardized curriculum. I suggest that we look beyond the producers and the production of these masquerades to examine the ways that teachers and students use literacy discussions and writing to remove masks and create masquerades of resistance.

Further, in the medieval definition of *masquerade*, and in the carnival spirit as Bakhtin describes, we can begin to think about how literacy discussions can break down barriers and form new ways of knowing and thinking about literacy. For example, poetry writing and oral performances provided students with a sense of agency in my study, but how far did this reach into the students' own communities? How much (if at all) does the annual seventh grade Poetry Slam affect the place of Hartford? And how can students' own definitions of creativity, poetry and culture become part of the daily activities of literacy discussions and learning?

FurtherResearch

This study raises several questions for further research:

• Why do teachers choose to use small group or whole class discussions? In this study, Mrs. Lake was able to encourage student engagement in whole class literacy discussions and in some instances, small group discussions. Other research needs to address problems that occur in discussions. Also, what conflicts and issues concern students in terms of literacy learning and discussions? Perhaps students need to be taught that negotiating conflict is part of learning, and discussions—even those where disagreements are ironed out--can enhance critical literacy understanding.

• How do students interpret teacher modeling and how are students' beliefs about writing processes, products and identity constructions connected to   teacher modeling?

Identities are tied up in students' writing, thinking and talking about writing and literature. In this study, I described Mrs. Lake's modeling of writing processes, products and verbal critiques of writing. Teachers who model their writing processes and encourage discussions about processes and products offer opportunities for students to take an active role in evaluation and critique. If students are the creators—instead of the receivers of critique—students may take more responsibility for their own literacy learning.

•How do teachers encourage students to take creative and personal risks in writing and interpretation and how much does class climate contribute to creative risk-taking?

Although this study showed that some creative risks were possible in poetry writing and performances, critiques of school and cultural constructions were infrequent. Further research is needed on ways teachers can help students critique identity and cultural constructions that affect themselves and their communities.

•How can literacy researches consider teachers and students interpretations of place and school culture and how literacy learning is situated in school culture? Few literacy studies consider the ways place works to define school and teacher and student identities. Place is difficult to analyze because it is not a concrete concept, but place can be analyzed in the ways that the teachers and students express feelings and opinions about their communities and the roles of school in their communities.

Discussions of literary and historical texts are ways teachers can begin to help students question constructions of place, culture and school.

How can teachers and students in multicultural schools   effectively critique performances of race, class and gender?

The students in this study did not seem to view race or class as a dominant influence on literacy learning although they viewed literacy discussions and activities as activities that existed primarily within classroom walls.   Policy researchers need to address the marginalization of certain groups in small city schools divided by race and class. Critical race researchers have focused predominantly on urban schools, and have not described the nuances of race and class that exist in small city schools.

•How can teachers support literacy learning and engage   student interest through oral forms?

Students in this study became actively involved in their literacy learning when they wrote and performed their writing for classmates. Students also learned that writing poetry was personally meaningful, and connected to learning about themselves and others. Other teachers may consider different methods, forms and public arenas that involve students in literacy learning. Studies of literacy instruction that includes oral forms and public presentations in middle schools are limited.

•How might critical researchers move beyond the romantic symbol of the masquerade to examine examples   of resistance and encourage positive change in public schools?

Although this study pointed out possibilities for critique, research is needed on how teachers and administrators encourage a spirit of resistance to hegemonic conditions and values that exist in schools and society.

Concluding Thoughts

At the end of his book on Black youth and Hip Hop, Dimitriadis (2005), writes, "If texts and practices are always in performance, they are open to rearticulation by interested educators" (p. 127). Without extensive knowledge on Hip Hop or Rap, Mrs. Lake found ways to engage students in performing identities where their own definitions of poetry could be merged with the definitions of the academy. Granted, as a white teacher in a school of mixed races and classes, Mrs. Lake perpetuated the "hidden" curriculum by teaching students to analyze—and infrequently criticize—texts in a canonized school anthology. But these were not the only texts Mrs. Lake used in class discussions. And Mrs. Lake frequently reminded students to "write from the heart" as they produced their own texts. In schools such as Hartford, where student "audiences" are diverse, perhaps Mrs. Lake or other teachers will continue to find ways to further incorporate students' own backgrounds, cultures, and identities into literacy discussions and textual analyses.

The literary canon is constantly (re)negotiated and (re)constructed, and students and teachers need to contest any perceived canon or school-sanctioned texts by producing their own "texts." Of course, how teachers and students are able do this effectively—and in what settings—will need to be investigated further. Beyond society, culture and school-sanctioned curriculum, it is the individual student that matters the most. As

educators, we need to provide the opportunity for each student to develop personal,

creative, academic and public agency, or in the words of Henry, "Show them who I am."

Appendix A. Sample Interview Questions

Guiding Questions for Teacher Interviews

1. If you were asked to describe your school community at a national conference, what would you say?

2. Please describe an effective literacy discussion group.

3. In your opinion, what obstacles to effective discussion groups have you experienced? What adjustments have you made to the groups? Why?

4. What are your beliefs about discussion groups and how have they changed since you began teaching?

5. One day I observed . . . Why did this occur?

Guiding Questions for Student Interviews

1. If a relative or friend from another school district asked you to describe your school, what would you say?

2. How do you think your present group discussions are going?

3. Describe the differences between your reading class (or Gifted and Talented class) and your Language Arts class?

4. How do you feel about talking about books in small groups? With the whole class?

5. Describe a group you liked working with. Why did you like it? Describe a group you did not like working with? Why not?

Appendix B

Names of students from Focus Group Interviews

(See Table 2,p. 14).

Focus Group	Student name*	Race
Group 1	Andy	Caucasian
	Anthony	African American
	Jeff	African American
	Matt	Caucasian
	Olivia	African American
Group 2	Caroline	Caucasian
	Jacob	African American
	Robert	Caucasian
	Rusty	Caucasian
	Sam	Caucasian
	Stacey	Caucasian
Group 3	Andrea	African American
	Bryan	Caucasian
	Carlos	Hispanic
	Crystal	Caucasian
	Conner	African American
	Dorine	African American
	Henry	African American
	Isabel	African American
	Kyle	Caucasian
	Kimberly	Caucasian
	Monica	African American
	Rick	Caucasian
	Ron	African American
	Sara	Caucasian
	Serena	African American
	Shameka	African American
	Susan	Caucasian
	Tyrone	African American

*All names are pseudonyms

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