Reading, Writing, and Pedagogy: Teacher and Student Perspectives on Literacy in an
Urban Middle School Classroom

By

Betsy Mulet

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Curriculum and Instruction)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON

2019

Date of final oral examination: 12/12/2019

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
        Mary Louise Gomez, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction
        Dawnene Hassett, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction
        Kate Vieira, Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instruction
        Richard Halverson, Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mary Louise Gomez for her unwavering support and encouragement from day one of my graduate career, and for teaching me the many ways of seeing a story. Thanks to Audrey Trainor and Michael Apple who both taught me new ways of looking at the world. Thank you to Rich Halverson for his sage advice and help. Thank you to Dawnene Hassett and Kate Vieira for their support. I would also like to thank Sona Hoisington, Bohdan Rubchak, and Anna Lisa Crone for their guidance at the very beginning when I was trying to figure it all out.

Thank you to my mom Cary for her unconditional support, love, and unending belief in my capabilities. Thank you to my dad Roy who instilled in me a love for reading that continues to shape who I am today. And thank you to my big brother Albert, who always made me want to know more and more because he knows so much about all sorts of things.

Thank you to my grandma Helene whose inspiration and counsel know no bounds, to my grandpa Billy who always made me feel special, and to Ileane and Joel for their love and support. My thanks also, to Rae and Sydney Shepperd.

I would also like to thank Jane Pickell, Anna McGill, Naomi Olson, Joe Abisaid, Damiana Gibbons Pyles, and Bill Stewart for their friendship, and insight during my time in Madison and beyond.

Thank you to my dear friend, travel partner, and dissertation buddy Elizabeth Stern, who waded with me through the dark days of writing, as we commiserated by sharing our thoughts, motivation, photos of our furry family members, and fashion tips

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Article 3: The Art of Literacy: Creativity, Solace, and Self-Actualization in the Everyday Practices of Three African American Adolescent Girls

Abstract

This dissertation comprises a set of three connected articles framed by a narrative inquiry methodology, which explores the literacy practices of a teacher and her students in an English Language Arts middle school classroom at a midwestern urban public school. Part one investigates teacher practices and discourses that led to creating an inclusive classroom community in order to prepare the students for a peer-led fishbowl discussion. The teacher built an inclusive teaching and learning community through the use of classroom design, norms, strategic language, and transparent teaching. Part two explores how a teacher uses a Scaffolded Reading Experience approach to teaching short stories with students who were struggling to finish a full-length novel. In this case, short stories were a solution for struggling readers, and a teacher who wanted her students to have time to participate in peer-led discussions in spite of shortened schedules due to standardized test preparation and other challenges. Part three uses in-depth interviews to focus on three African American adolescent girls' personal literacy choices, and the roles that meaningful reading and writing play in their lives. The study found that the girls used literacy for creative release, as way to cope with different stresses, and as a means to gain membership to certain communities.

Introduction

It matters that we examine what kinds of conversations are occurring in our classrooms and how teachers might grow their discussions over time (Maloch & Bomer, 2012, p. 131)

When children have the opportunity to discuss the texts they read, they make a greater connection with the books and the lessons learned from them. They forge strong relationships with peers (Richardson, 2010) and have a chance to revisit the material from the perspective of others, which helps them to think critically and revisit their own social experiences (Bean & Moni, 2003). Making time for students to discuss fictional texts also pays dividends in other subjects, as they learn how to listen carefully, work collaboratively, and think critically (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010; Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2008; Richardson, 2010). Being able to talk about the situations and real life scenarios that they encounter in novels allows readers to develop the ideas that manifest during silent reading and gives them the skills to better understand the text (Gillam & Reutzel, 2013). When students have the opportunity to discuss books and share ideas with fellow classmates they achieve a greater sense of accomplishment and reading satisfaction.

Teachers who hold literature discussions in their classrooms strengthen their own practices by learning from their students' discourses. They also validate their students' experiences by listening and giving them an opportunity to discuss their opinions, concerns, and ideals which all contribute to identity formation (Bean & Moni, 2003; Gibson, 2010) In addition, teachers can learn from watching students discuss literature and adjust curricula accordingly (Maloch &Bomer, 2012). The way that children talk

about the fictional characters they encounter can guide our understanding of how they interpret and understand what they read. We can begin to understand how students approach a text by looking at the assumptions that they make about characters and the traits, thoughts, and actions that they attribute to them as they try work out aloud why the characters behave how they do. Listening to how students use their own stories to talk about the dilemmas that characters face also gives us insight into their lives, perspectives, and learning styles. Furthermore, teachers can learn a lot about their classroom's discourse patterns by paying attention to who does and doesn't speak during discussions and why this may be the case. They can also come to know what makes good discussion fodder by listening to silences and stops in the conversation. Not least of all, by observing students' discussions about literature teachers can get to know who their students are as readers, writers, and individuals.

Statement of Problem

There has been a steady decline in reading print media among middle school and high school students. A recent study on the digital media habits of adolescents found that eighth grade students spend about four hours a day on texting, internet, and social media during their leisure time (Twenge, Martin & Spitzburg, 2018). The same study also found that digital media is replacing the time that adolescents spend on books and other print media per day, noting a steep decline from 60% in 1970 to 16% in 2016. While students are spending time reading text on their electronic devices, it is a fragmented experience and arguably not immersive in the same way as reading literary fiction.

At this time, the Common Core State Standards have been implemented in forty-one states, the District of Columbia, four territories and the Department of Defense Education

Activity (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019). The English Language Arts standards focus mostly on developing skills for reading informational texts. The standards in place for fictional texts are a throwback to the formalist literary theory of new criticism which declares text to be a self-enclosed object containing its own inherent meaning and reality (Eagleton, 2001). New criticism states that a piece of writing should be approached and analyzed only through the text itself and any personal experience or social/historical context should not apply. While learning the structural forms of literature is imperative in the formal study of literature, limiting interpretation of a text to its structure is not a productive way for children to make connections to literature and therefore reading. Children find meaning in literature through their lived experiences and their ability to connect what they read to established schemas. Retrieving personal experiences as they read is how they connect to texts. To treat text as an object out of context is to assume that everyone will approach it with the same toolkit in hand to interpret it, and not in line with the sociocultural aspects of learning.

Students are spending more and more time preparing for standardized exams during class time which takes away from learning higher order thinking skills (Mora, 2011). Maloch and Bomer (2012) state that "rich literature discussion" has been pushed out of the classroom due to not enough allocated time during the day due to test preparation and other requirements. Taking the above conditions into consideration, classroom group literary discussions are one of the few, if any chances that students have to discuss their experiences, concerns, and social issues through their personal interpretations of the fictional characters and worlds they experience in books.

This set of connected articles is a three-part collection framed by a narrative inquiry methodology which illustrates research conducted in a middle school English Language Arts classroom in an urban public school. The studies are guided by the following questions:

1.What are some ways in which teachers use classroom space and discourse to prepare students for peer-led discussions?

b. How do teachers use the whole classroom as an inclusive social literacy space?

2. How can teachers use short stories to make time for meaningful literature study and discussion in multi-grade classrooms?

3. What roles do reading and writing play in the daily lives of adolescent girls?

b. How do reading and writing become meaningful to adolescent girls?

c. In what ways do adolescent girls see themselves as readers and writers?

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Space is the Place: Subtle Practices and Big Changes in Inclusive Literacy

Classrooms

Introduction

I was introduced to Ms. Ladd (all names of people and places have been given

pseudonyms) by the principal of East Grove Math and Science Academy, when I visited

to inquire about conducting research at her school. Ms. Ladd who self-identified as

African-American, was in her first year of teaching at East Grove. She had just

transferred from another school nearby where she had taught for seventeen years. She

offered to let me observe her middle school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom as

part of my research. Ms. Ladd introduced me to Ms. Ray, her student teacher who was

equally as welcoming. Ms. Ray, a young Indian-American woman was enrolled at a

master's program in a large midwestern university and was fulfilling her pre-service

teaching requirements at East Grove in Ms. Ladd's class. She performed numerous tasks

in the classroom which included teaching, grading, and curriculum development.

I began to observe Ms. Ladd's classes during a transitional time in the middle

school grades at East Grove Math and Science Academy. They had just moved to a block

schedule which meant that Math and English were now taught in ninety-minute units

instead of sixty-minute class periods. The change came about because Ms. Ladd and her

colleagues became frustrated with having to squeeze several different components of

their subject areas into a one hour slot. They felt that the students were not getting

adequate instruction time and that a quarter of their allotted time was going toward set-up

and classroom management. In the case of Ms. Ladd's ELA class, she wanted to have

some time for her students to read independently and allow for small group discussions of

literature. Before the change, her students did not have any independent in-class reading time at all, which she thought essential to nurturing and building a love for reading. She and a few other teachers lobbied for the change and their principal agreed to let them work it out and move to a ninety-minute block schedule.

For Ms. Ladd's class, the extra half hour made the difference to allow more independent reading time and longer designated time for writing instruction. She introduced short fiction into her writing component, which became the central texts in her students' peer-led literature discussions. Working closely with these short pieces allowed the students not only more discussion time, but also helped them hone their reading, writing, and comprehension skills.

I came into Ms. Ladd's classroom hoping to observe the patterns and practices of literary discussion and I realized that behind the pedagogy and the student talk in Ms. Ladd's classroom was a foundation of community and membership that built the identity and belonging of students in the class through the structure, language, and culture of the classroom. This foundation was built on mutual construction and understanding of classroom structures and expectations in the way of social rules and parameters that combined mutual respect and learning. Ms. Ladd's students ascribed to self-selected and agreed upon norms that were hanging on the wall as well as to the principles of accountable talk, which were also hanging as a reminder for ways to approach class discussions with fellow students. accountable talk is a collaborative approach to student-led classroom discussion. It comprises three parts which aim to ensure that all participants grasp the ideas being shared; that knowledge and evidence is provided to support those ideas; and that students are able to delineate their thinking and strategies in

the presentation of arguments and their explanations. It is a whole-classroom endeavor, meaning that both students and teachers are responsible for ensuring that the three parts of accountable talk are being encouraged.

Much of the research on cooperative learning and literature discussion looks at the roles and practices of teachers and how they use collaborative learning discussion principles during text discussions. The bulk of these studies focus on how to scaffold students during transitions into collaborative talk and learning, and/or the quality and nature of student dialogue (Almasi, O'Flavahan, & Arya; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Jadallah et al., 2011; Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000; Langer & Gamoran, 2003; Maloch, 2002). However, as Dwyer (2016) points out "….little is known about teachers' use of the principles and instructional practices of discussion during reading comprehension lessons outside of these established discussion group approaches" (p. 286).

In order to examine more closely how teachers use the principles of dialogic and Socratic approaches to discussions outside of designated discussion times, this study looks at how teachers actively use their whole classroom space as a social literacy environment to teach and prepare their students to act as social, critical, agents during peer-led discussions. This research takes a look at the marginal literacy practices of one teacher, her classroom, and her interactions with two different classes. This study focused on a middle school English Language Arts classroom for a period of five months and is guided by the following questions:

1. What are some ways in which teachers use classroom space and discourse to prepare students for peer-led discussions?

2. How do teachers use the whole classroom as an inclusive social literacy space?

The aim of this study is not to evaluate student literary discussions but rather the dynamic qualities, circumstances and discourses of the classroom environment which can be seen as preparation for participation in rich talk during peer-led discussions. I ascribe to the argument that in order to participate and achieve purposeful literary discussion, students need to first feel that they are part of an inclusive environment where they can share their thoughts and personal ideas about their reading experiences (Close, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1995). This research seeks to investigate teacher practices and discourse that can achieve these conditions through everyday practices.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study draws from two theories of literacy: Transactional reader-response theory concentrating on the works of Louise Rosenblatt and critical literacy with a focus on the theory of Paulo Freire.

Deviating from the New Critics who encouraged close reading as a way of deriving explicit meaning from the text through various literary devices, syntax and language, reader response and transactional theorists argue that there is not one correct meaning to be found in a text. The reader's background, identity, and experiences all play a part in the interpretation and meaning construction of a text. Rosenblatt (1995) refers to this process as a transaction with the text and it positions the reader as an active participant constructing ideas along with the text, rather than a passive vessel absorbing information from the text. She maintains that in order for a *poem*, (meaning or result of the transaction) to be evoked from a text, there must also be "a reader or readers with

particular cultural and individual attributes" (Rosenblatt, 1969; p. 35). The transaction involves a constant exchange between the text and the reader in which she "pays attention to the images, feelings, attitudes, associations that they evoke" (p. 34). The result is an exploratory interpretation, which is tested by negotiation with the text and through comparison with others and their own interpretations. For Rosenblatt, reading is a social transaction that should be framed experientially with the whole person in mind.

Similarly for Freire (1970), critical literacy assumes that reading and writing are inherently connected to one's social experience. The production of knowledge comes through the active reflection and questioning of one's own knowledge and culture as expressed through a common, collective dialogue. Critical literacy positions students as active learners who are essential to the process of learning and teachers as facilitators, rather than bearers of knowledge. Learners *read the world* and come to their own understanding based on their backgrounds, experiences and social positioning. This coincides with transactional theory in that the author does not pass on a specific knowledge through a text, but rather a reader creates her own knowledge via her own interpretation of the text based on her own personal narrative.

Freire's concept of banking education, a criticism of traditional education, positions learners as passive vessels who receive "gifts of knowledge" by those who consider themselves more knowledgeable. This idea supposes that others are ignorant, which is characteristic of oppression and "negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (p. 72). He argues that liberatory education or liberating education "consists of acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (p. 79). In a dialogic community,

people teach each other with discussion engendered and facilitated by the world and the experiences that it offers and imposes.

Critical literacy is not only about the abilities and skills to deconstruct texts and ideologies, it also aims to transform dominant discourses and create shifts in power in order to upend social and structural inequities. Critical literacy can be especially useful in this case if classrooms are considered a microcosm of society (Gay, 1978) as well as one of the most radical spaces of possibility (hooks, 1994). Critical literacy can be commonly implemented in literature discussions in the classroom. The study of literature has the capacity to create a trajectory toward democracy by bringing attention to the everyday practices that promote inequity (Bean & Harper, 2006).

Literacy skills are crucial in preparing students to assume their roles in a democracy (Ciardiello, 2004; Glenn, 2008; Wolk, 2009). The tenets of accountable talk ascribe to the democratic principles of critical literacy due to its community-based and dialogic nature.

Limitations of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Some scholars have noted (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Mingshui, 2008; Yenika-Agbaw, 1997) that transactional theory lacks a critical stance and therefore falls short in its application to multicultural literature. Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) similarly state that proponents of critical literacy take issue with the psychological and personal response that is the focus of transactional theory. However, Mingshui argues that the reader's transaction with the text "provides the subject matter for reflection and analysis" and allows for change of the reader's stance possibly leading to a critical

stance. Taking a critical stance can be done through incorporating a framework of critical literacy to supplement any perceived deficiencies of transactional theory.

The aesthetic response involves not just a acknowledging and responding to the words on the page but also complicated reaction to the experiences of the characters and situations presented in fiction. Part of the response involves an interaction with the stories and characters with their identities, backstories, and situations coming alive for the reader. The reader incorporates prior knowledge, experience, and emotion with the new information to process it and create new understandings from it. Fictional narratives are not devoid of socio-political issues and the reader can apply her personal beliefs to approach them in a critical way. Mingshui observes "the reader may experience ideological and moral conflicts with what is called forth from the text" (p. 215). A critical response may be applied to encounters with textual narratives, as they are applied to occurrences in real-life and real-time. A reader can experience Rosenblatt's transactional stance while taking a critical, Freirean approach as they read the world of the text. A student who learns to read critically will inherently incorporate those skills during her aesthetic reading experiences as part of her personal and experiential belief system. Rosenblatt sees discussion as the next logical step after the aesthetic response. During discussion, the reader can share the perspective they gained from the transaction, resolve the questions that arose during the readings, and learn from others as they share their own viewpoints. Rosenblatt (1995) asserts that it is these moments of sharing that lead to self-awareness and self-criticism" (p. 24). Critical skills can be taught and honed during in-class literature discussions in which students learn about social issues using the worlds of fictional characters and settings.

A main focus of both critical literacy and transactional theory is the aspect of the discussion of ideas that come after the reading and observing of the text and the world. Literature discussions should come with an aim at shifting consciousness through communal learning and discussion. Freire's notion of dialogic community supports this aspect of democratic learning as does Rosenblatt in her view that children revisit and reexamine their initial responses during discussions when they hear others' interpretations of the same text. She argues (1995) that these instances "lead to self-awareness and self- criticism" (p. 24), which further lead to reflection of self and societal structures. It is within these discussions that the real growth and development of ideas come from sharing and expanding on the observations of others and one's own.

Imperative to having a productive discussion is a safe space in which students feel that they can open up, be understood, and be validated. Ms. Ladd worked on providing such a space for her students by building a community in the classroom assembled on a framework of classroom norms and accountable talk, which encompassed respect for fellow classmates and awareness of self and others during discussions. She built this environment with an expectation that it would help prepare students to be open and engaged during literature discussions.

Literature Review

The scope of research on middle school classroom literature discussion is extremely vast, divergent and varied. Ranging from classroom research of discussion practices, pedagogies, and methods, to brief practical overviews in support of practicing teachers. For the purposes of this article, I have narrowed it down to a few themes around the practices of peer-led classroom discussion.

This article looks to build from Maloch's (2002; 2012) continued work which calls for a need for research concerning teachers, learners and the development of literary discussion. It focuses on the role of the teacher in the shaping and preparation of collaborative peer-led literary discussion group in a middle school class by building a social literacy space which prepares students for accountable talk during peer-led literary discussions. This paper will focus on the classroom community as a space for literacy rather than on the experience of the individual students, and the efforts and practices of the teacher. It also responds to the Socratic seminar aspect of accountable talk and the paradigms that it entails and prescribes as a social framework for the classroom.

Rich Literary Discussion and Accountable Talk

According to Lightener and Wilkinson (2016), in a productive literary discussion meaning and understanding is built from prior knowledge in a collaborative setting. Rich discussions begin with authentic questions that encourage students to analyze text rather than merely provide a summary. Students' responses build on their peers' comments. Similarly, Keefeer, Zeitz and Resnick (2000) state that the main goal for a literary discussion is "to obtain a clearer grasp of the topic through the understanding and accommodation of participants' divergent but informed viewpoints" (p. 59).

In their article about classroom discussion practices and accountable talk, a social approach to classroom discussion, Michaels, O'Connor, and Resnick (2008) maintain that productive talk in a variety of settings and circumstances comprise three categories of accountability to: 1. the community which involves listening carefully to your discussion mates, building from their responses, and asking relevant questions with the aim of clarification or furthering a thought; 2. knowledge and making efforts to get facts right

from the text and provide evidence and citations to explain and prove a claim. Discussants are expected to challenge each other when claims are unsupported or evidence is lacking; and 3. standards of reasoning which entails making logical connections and "drawing reasonable conclusions" (p. 286). Accountable talk by nature works best in a collaborative setting and in a critical environment where students are free to state and explain their opinions and duly be questioned by others. Ardasheva, Howell, and Magaña (2017) describe the principles of accountable talk (AT):

> The AT principles, regardless of the content area, serve as the mechanism for socializing students into communities of practice by setting up a discourse community that asks students to listen to others' perspectives in an effort to learn more, make reference to specific information, support their claims or understandings with examples or evidence, and question concepts they do not understand or agree with. (p. 671)

According to Ardasheva, the aim of these principles is to have a collaborative and democratic group discussion based on equitable terms that looks to the text and builds on the comments and prior knowledge of the persons involved. In order to achieve this during discussion, students need to learn not just to explore their interpretation and comprehension of the text with their peers, but also enact the social practices and behaviors that are required to participate in accountable talk. These are subtle skills that are acquired through practice and teacher modeling. In this paper I argue that these practices go hand in hand in achieving, the rich, productive, collaborative literary discussion that comprises the goals of accountable talk and a dialogical and critical classroom.

Peer-Led Literature Discussions in the Collaborative Classroom

Accountable talk is practiced in a collaborative group setting. In collaborative literature discussions, students are responsible for generating, facilitating, and maintaining the life and flow of the discussion centered on a specific work of literature that the participants have all read. The objective of peer-led discussion is for a group of students to rely on one another, in order to engage in conversation about a text (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth; 2010; Willis, 2007). This includes navigating questions that arise by referring to the text, building on knowledge about the narrative as well as comments and insights from peers that may spontaneously arise during the discussion. Ultimately, a peer-led discussion group should function without teacher guidance, fueled solely by the comments, insights, and contributions of the students.

Collaborative settings contribute to the social and learning growth of students and provide an environment with fewer management issues (Willis, 2007). In addition, studies show that peer-led discussions help improve reading comprehension skills and increase students' reading motivation (Almasi, McKeown, & Beck, 1996; Berne & Clarke, 2006). Students in peer-led discussions have been found to actively talk more, share personal insights, and develop the ideas of their peers to a greater degree than in situations in which teachers play a dominant role (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Almasi, 1995; Roser & Martinez, 2003). In addition, Almasi, McKeown, and Beck argue that student interaction promotes Rosenblatt's notion of reading as a transactional and interpretive process, rather than one where students extract meaning from the text.

Peer-led discussions are the ideal situation for critical reflection because they allow for students with varied backgrounds, viewpoints, and skills to come together and

share their ideas and interpretations concerning a piece of literature without a teacher framing the discussion. Berne and Clarke (2006) suggest that these discussions work well with Freire's concept of collaborative construction of knowledge, which opposes banking education. Group discussions are socially complex in that you often have students from different economic, cultural and academic backgrounds dependent on one another for text negotiation (Evans, 1996). In these diverse environments, children learn new strategies and skills by recognizing them as their peers apply them during discussions. Modeling and sharing these cognitive skills creates a collaborative learning environment for the students and increases cognitive development in learning (Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick; 2000; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick; 2006).

Possible Limitations of Peer-Led Discussions

While having a diverse group of voices being heard is ideal in a classroom during discussions of the social issues found in literature, this may sometimes lead to inequitable circumstances for some students. Evans (1996) posits that small group discussions can be overtaken by the dominant discourse practices found in teacher-led classrooms in which the teacher carries the most power. Students are likely to replicate these conditions and rely on an I-R-E (initiation/response/evaluation) pattern (Cazden, 1988) of questioning (McMahon & Goatley, 1995). There may also be issues concerning gender and student academic status or age which determine who speaks and who does not.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study informed by a narrative inquiry approach. I chose narrative inquiry for this study because its nature allows for a connection between the researcher and participant through its in-depth and conversational approach. It also

provides ways for the researcher to document the stories that come from the immediate practice spaces, institutional spaces, and the relationships between the participant and the researcher. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2004), narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that uses the spoken word, written word, artifacts, drawings, and stories to convey the participants' life experiences. People create meaning in their lives through the telling of their stories and experiences (Polkinghorne, 1991; Clandinin, 2006). Furthermore, they interpret their past experiences and shape their lives and the lives of others through stories as well (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative structures also can be used to make meanings of groups, systems, and institutions (Polkinghorne, 1991). Because of their experiential nature, classrooms are ideal spaces for telling stories.

Drawing from Dewey's philosophy of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2004) conceptualize the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry. This is based on the idea that people can be understood not only from their personal experiences, but also from the way they interact with others (Ollerenshaw and Cresswell, 2002). The three-dimensional research space in narrative inquiry according to Clandinin and Connelly (2004) is based on: 1. interaction, the personal and the social, 2. continuity, time in terms of past, present and future, and 3. situation, place or places of experience. This concept of the three-dimensional space lends itself nicely to the socio-cultural aspect of this investigation.

Ollerenshaw and Cresswell (2002) describe how narrative inquiry is used in the classroom, "The inquirer emphasizes the importance of learning from participants in a setting. This learning occurs through individual stories told by individuals, such as teachers or students" (p. 331). In addition to the narratives of the educators, I also look to

the narrative of the classroom space and its artifacts, structure and systems as enacted by the people in it.

Data Generation, Collection, and Analyses

Classroom Observations

This study concentrates on the pedagogical practices of teachers surrounding literature discussion, and aspects of discussion preparation. Formal talk about literature only occurred during a fraction of the time period. I came to find that most of the active participation of teachers surrounding discussion occurred outside of actual discussion events. I observed Ms. Ladd and Ms. Ray, during their 90 minute ELA classes which occurred twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, for an average of four days a week, accounting for assessment days and spring break. The classes took place in Ms. Ladd's home classroom, so it was very much her space, which she decorated, shaped, and built according to her discipline and ideologies.

During my four months in Ms. Ladd's classroom I quickly fell into the role of participant observer. Although I wanted to remain on the sidelines as much as possible, not wanting to impose myself on the dynamic of the classroom, I did help out in the classroom with some aspects, such as passing out books, papers, or on rare occasions helping students with activities. Clandinin (2006) makes the point that narrative inquirers also "live on the landscape and are complicit in the world they study" (p. 47).

Field Notes

I took brief notes during classroom observations concerning utterances, interactions, literature instruction and discussion. Sometimes I took informal notes about disruptions to established routines, such as outside noise, interruptions, visitors, etc. I also

documented the classroom space and its organization, practices, characteristics and objects.

After classes were over for the day, I often revisited my notebook and debriefed about my thoughts on the day's observations. These concerned classroom events, pedagogical practices, or my own approaches to the research for that day and suggestions for improvement in the future.

Teacher Interviews

I formally met with Ms. Ladd at the beginning of the study and at the end. These formal interviews were semi-structured, and were framed around questions about literacy teaching practices, goals for her students, classroom structure, teaching experiences and personal reading habits. In addition, I conducted one formal semi-structured interview with Ms. Ray, about her pre-service experiences, classroom discussion practices, personal reading habits and thoughts on teaching literature.

The semi-structured format of the interviews left space for follow-up questions and evolving conversation. In addition to interviews, there were informal day-to-day conversations that occurred during classroom work, lunch periods or in between classes which I recorded in my field notes.

Student Interviews

I formally met individually with each of nine students from two of Ms. Ladd's ELA classes twice during my classroom observations. These audio recorded meetings consisted of semi-structured interviews one month into my classroom observation and again toward the end of the study. I used prepared questions to explore the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and the role that reading plays in their lives. The

questions were open-ended which allowed for spontaneous discussion and tangential answers as well as follow-up questions. In addition there were informal and brief discussions which took place throughout the day in the classroom or in the hallways during passing periods.

Artifacts

I collected worksheets that the teacher gave to the students during class for the day's lesson. I also photographed some samples of student writing that was considered exemplary by the teacher and posted to the classroom bulletin board.

The worksheets were for the most part activity sheets that contained a short piece of reading with questions requiring brief answers, as well as sheets to map out literary characters and themes. There were also sheets for fishbowl discussions which contained students' questions and observations about the story to be discussed that day. These were given out along with observer evaluation sheets on the day of the discussion. These documents added to my understanding of the curriculum, lesson structure for the day, as well as the students' and teachers' approaches to instruction and learning.

Data Analyses

I transcribed the audio recordings of my classroom observations and interviews and read and reread them, taking notes, coding, and looking for themes, and details that stood out to me. In addition, I studied my field notes in which I wrote detailed descriptions of the classroom and its objects. Furthermore, I studied photographs I had taken of the classroom space looking at the posters, objects, signs, art, and writing on the walls, windows and bookshelves. I drew on both inductive and deductive methods of analysis (Merriam, 2009). At the beginning analyses were primarily inductive as I read

the transcriptions and narratives, becoming acquainted with the content, rereading and making notes on the margins. As I sifted carefully through the data for first cycle, I coded descriptively (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2003; Wolcott, 1994) to ascertain a larger perspective of the overall culture of Ms. Ladd's classroom. As I proceeded further along in the second cycle, I closely coded for practices and methods, as well as teacher and student utterances using an analysis of initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). I combined the descriptive codes and determined certain patterns of rules, language, and teacher and student practices. I then deductively coded from these patterns and read through them again, until I felt that there was saturation. I did this by hand to have a better grasp of my texts and create a more cohesive connection to them.

Setting and Participants

East Grove is an elementary magnet cluster Math and Science Academy located in a metropolitan city in the midwestern U.S. At the time of this study 86% of students were African American and 10% were Latino. Seventy-seven percent of students received free or reduced lunch (East Grove Academy website, 2017).

East Grove serves students pre-k through eighth grade. Middle school students (grades six-eight) are taught in classrooms on the second floor of the building, and change classrooms and teachers for different subjects. Each cohort has a homeroom classroom and teacher. Ms. Ladd's classroom was homeroom to an eighth grade class, many of whom were also her ELA students.

For this study, I sat in Ms. Ladd's classroom and observed two different English Language Arts classes. Each class consisted of about thirty students comprising grades

six through eight, grouped according to their Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reading and writing scores.

The curriculum in each class was almost identical except for the novel that each class read in the first half of the year. The morning class, which had the lower scores, read *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman while the afternoon class, with slightly higher scores read *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry. Both classes read the same set of short stories upon which the group discussions were based.

Participants

The educators in the study, Ms. Ladd the classroom teacher, and Ms. Ray agreed to participate, be observed and interviewed for this research. Ms. Ray left one month and a half before the study ended due to the end of her program. Nine students voluntarily signed up with parental permission to be interviewed and observed.

Classroom Settings

Environment and norms.

In order to have a an environment where students feel they can openly talk about ideas and concepts there needs to be a structured environment where students feel safe enough to do so and where they believe that their opinions and those of their peers matter (Close, 1992). One of the many large and visible handmade signs that hung on the whiteboard in Ms. Ladd's classroom is one, titled 'Norms'. Bertha Perez (2004) defines classroom culture as "the norms for social interaction and cooperation in the use of space and time, for the use of resources, and for valuing and behaving in a particular classroom" (p. 309). At the beginning of the year, Ms. Ladd's students settled on the following six norms as a group:

1. Presence
2. Safety
3. Active Learning
4. Equity of Voices
5. The Golden Rule
6. Open to Change

Of all of these norms, I heard two of them being addressed regularly during class and those were, "presence" and "equity of voices". Ms. Ladd would remind students to "be present" when their fellow peers were sharing something with the class, if a student appeared to not be paying attention. In instances when students talked over one another or interrupted each other, Ms. Ladd reminded them about everyone having an equal chance to speak. The other rules seemed to be implicit expectations of Ms. Ladd's classroom.

In a classroom setting where students are learning how to participate in group discussions, the concept of accountable talk is usually preceded and broadly defined by a set of rules that encompass the path to a reasoned (Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2008) meaningful and effective (Richardson, 2010) discussion. These rules are usually discussed and agreed upon by the class as a whole similarly to a classroom constitution. The norms that Ms. Ladd's students collectively agreed on at the beginning of the year were the foundation to approaching accountable talk as an outline for discussion.

In Ms. Ladd's class, the framework for literature discussion based on the principles of accountable talk was written in colorful markers with alternating font, capitalization, and underlined words on a giant sticky note. It hung on a window, backlit and illuminated for the students to see. There was no overlooking it or forgetting it was there. It glowed. It read:

Accountable/Purposeful Talk

*Focused collaborative talk meant to **Deepen** and **Extend** our thinking about the topic.
1. Hear **ALL** voices.
2. Say something meaningful
3. Practice **S.L.A.N.T**
Sit up, Look at the person taking, Act like you care, Nod your head, Take Turns talking
4. Listen with intent
5. Keep the line of thinking alive!
6. Be flexible in your thinking
Respect – Supportive –Feedback (constructive) – Growth Mindset – Open Minded

At first glance there are definite parallels with the class norms. "Equity of Voices" aligns with "Hear **ALL** voices." "Be Present" and "Active Learning" can be compared with parts of "**S.L.A.N.T**." and "Listen with Intent." "Open to Change" coincides with "Be Flexible in your thinking." "The Golden Rule" can be seen in the additions of "Respect" and "Support" at the bottom of the chart. These rules are reflective of the environment of Ms. Ladd's classroom. In a group that works as closely as Ms. Ladd, Ms. Ray and their students do, they are aware of the rules and they know that they are expected to abide by them. What seems at first glance to be ways to act during a literary discussion turns out to be a system of behavior and space-sharing for a collaborative, academic, and social community. Ms. Ladd paired the students' classroom norms along with the formal literary discussion principles of accountable talk to frame her classroom community.

Findings

As I analyzed the data and notes that I compiled and coded, I looked at the patterns that emerged. I noticed that literary discussion wasn't just one distinct part of Ms. Ladd's literacy curriculum designated to discussing a text, but a cohesive part of an intricate

classroom social structure based on community building, language, and students reflecting their environment.

Ms. Ladd often spoke of her classroom space as a "community" and a "culture." I came to see that building a community was important to Ms. Ladd and in that vein, collaborative work and Socratic literary discussion was a key way of bringing literary concepts to fruition. The classroom culture repeatedly showed efforts of respect, acknowledgement, and safety. These efforts were tied into literary discussions during fishbowls in the way of the rules of accountable talk and the class norms which appeal to community accountability and a democratic space. Rex (2001) explains that "Classroom interactions among classroom members take their meaning from and give meaning to the social and cultural ordering or "membership" of the classroom" (p. 310). The social and cultural ordering in Ms. Ladd's classroom emerged from the data in three categories: community building, language, and student behavior. These themes manifested from the everyday interactions between the students and teachers, the educational space of the classroom, and the pedagogical approaches. This triad of categories describe a three-part organization that built up to a peer-led literacy event, namely a student propelled and maintained literary discussion.

Category 1: Community Building: You gotta build that culture and climate within a classroom. - Ms. Ladd.

The first theme that emerged from that data is community building. In this study, community encompasses the classroom and its practices, decorum, behaviors, and the objects in it. I consider all of these as essential parts that have gone into building Ms. Ladd's classroom community and social landscape of learning and collaboration. Perez

(2004) argues that it is essential that teachers and students negotiate to create a classroom culture and community for literacy learning. Ms. Ladd recognized that for some people the school culture matches their own culture, while for others it does not. Along with her students, she created a separate culture in her classroom that attempted to reflect the students' interests while also creating a culture of literacy. Freire (2005b) argues:

> Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language, with which they defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it. (p. 137)

Ms. Ladd knew the community and background of her students and she included aspects of that community in her own classroom by surrounding the students with books by and about African Americans. She incorporated historical and current African American activists as models in her curriculum who the students could relate to. She also kept up with the shows and music that students were watching and listening to out of school. At the time, the students were all talking about the Netflix adaptation of the young adult novel 13 Reasons Why by Jay Asher. The program had become controversial and was being censored because it features the suicide of a main character. Ms. Ladd took a few minutes one afternoon to let the students talk about it after watching a brief news report concerning the controversial issues that surrounded it.

The practices in Ms. Ladd's classroom are a joint effort between a teacher and her students, from the classroom norms and rules of discussion, to the efforts, behaviors, and enactment of the civilities they agreed upon at the beginning of the term. All of these factors lead to an environment in which students can feel safe to express themselves

openly without fear of judgment. Rosenblatt (1995) suggests that:

> The classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should help create a
> feeling of security. He (the student) should be made to feel that his own response
> to books even though it may not resemble the standard critical comments, is worth
> expressing. Such a liberating atmosphere will make possible for him to have an
> unselfconscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction. (p. 64)

It is only if students feel safe and validated that they will be able to have a productive and
meaningful learning experience.

Within the category of community building, two distinct themes were identified
during coding and analysis: space and norms. Space defines the physical aspect of the
class; the objects contained within it. Norms define the social aspect, namely behaviors
and relationships. The next sections explores these themes.

The physical literacy space.

The first characteristic of Ms. Ladd's readers' community is the educational space
and how she prepares it for her students. O'Donoghue (2010) defines classrooms as
"spaces to be entered and inhabited that are structured in accordance with a set of
particular ideas about what constitutes teaching, learning and the learner" (p. 413). As
soon as you walk into Ms. Ladd's classroom, you can see that it is a place where stories
and readers are welcome. The top of the whiteboards and the windows are decorated with
the slipcovers of books of diverse subjects with mostly African American characters. In
order to attract students of all levels the book covers are varied from chapter books aimed
at young adolescents, to more colorful and whimsically illustrated covers that may ignite
the curiosity of even reluctant readers. The variety of covers accommodate the span of

grades and test scores of the students in her class and their availability allays any

hesitancy that may come from reading a book that is beneath the age of the interested

student. The covers depict a diverse range of characters and situations which the students

in the class may relate to. When I asked Ms. Ladd about the reasoning behind decorating

her wall space with book covers, she expressed that every little bit helps to provide her

students with motivation for reading. She stated: "I want to get them hooked on

something that they really like, and then hopefully it will spill out to them picking their

own genres. Like, "Oh! Like mysteries!" and "Oh! I like Sci-Fi!" And you know, so try

to get them hooked!" As she talked, she picked out a few that were her favorites from the

wall and talked with me briefly about what she liked about them and where she got them.

The affinity that Ms. Ladd had for books, one in which a book cover can evoke memories

of a reading experience, was the very thing that she hoped to pass on to her students.

The classroom had a small library comprising one large bookcase and three small

ones. Students may choose books if they have finished their assigned book, did not bring

one for silent reading, or if they are simply looking for something to read after they have

finished their in-class assignment. Ms. Ladd asked the students to fill these in between

times with silent reading, even if only for a few minutes. She recommended to her

students that they always have a book on hand that they are in the midst of reading. The

library was well used and the shelves were messy with books out of order, lying on their

covers, and resting on the top of the shelves. The students often got up and chose books

throughout the day even if for only a few minutes of downtime reading.

In addition to the classroom library, Ms. Ladd integrated the school library as an

extension of her classroom. It was a small library located directly across the hall from the

classroom. At the time of this study, there was no librarian and the library seemed

underused. Students knew that if they didn't have a book, and could not find one for

silent reading time in the classroom library, they could go across the hall and choose one.

Many times I observed students going there and coming back with a chapter book,

graphic novel, or a magazines, all of which were acceptable for silent reading. Students

also could go there if they needed a few minutes to regroup from an upset, or just needed

a brief session of quiet time.

Classrooms are immersive spaces and are predetermined in their design to be

experienced in specific ways (O'Donoghue, 2010). The physical aspect of Ms. Ladd's

literacy space is intentionally built by active efforts from her to surround the students

with objects that will make them feel that they are in an environment where reading is

natural, expected, and part of the everyday surroundings. Seeing books displayed

throughout the classroom, not just on the shelves where they are usually allocated, is

especially meaningful to students who may not have as much exposure to books and

reading experiences at home, due to a variety of reasons including but not limited to low

income (Lee & Croninger, 1994), unstable housing, or working parents who do not

always have the time to read to their children. Dynia et al. (2018) have suggested that

having books and other literacy materials in a learning environment encourages language

and literacy development. For some students access to books in the classroom

may be one of the only chances to expand their reading experience and development.

Community norms.

Goldman (2012) posits that in order to have engaging literary discussions teachers

must establish classroom norms that "invite students to develop their ideas, listen

carefully to the ideas of others, and use multiple perspectives to enrich interpretation of literary works" (p. 99). Ms. Ladd presented her classroom as literacy space in which students, based on norms and rules, negotiated not only their own literacy learning experiences but relationships as well. Bloome (1985) defines reading as a social and cultural practice that structures social relationships. The collaborative aspect of Ms. Ladd's classroom meant that there is a lot of small group work where students work together to complete assignments and projects. Gillies, (2015) states that in instances of collaborative learning, the quality of student talk may be poor if students are not trained in how to behave during group work. Ms. Ladd recognized that collaborative work can be difficult without the proper skills. She explained "Small groups can definitely be a…there can be a management issue with just getting them to stay on task, um…you really have to build a culture and climate around that". Ms. Ladd discussed the importance of respect in the way of being able to speak and be heard. This ideology is reflected in the class norms and in the rules for accountable talk that hung on the wall. She reminded her students of these rules if she sees them talking over one another or excluding someone during whole class discussions.

I noticed that as the semester went on, the students began to internalize the norms and talking points and were able to work in large group assignments during informative literacy lessons without supervision. On many occasions I observed students having conversations about the assignment at hand, talking about the questions, and listening to each other's perspectives in order to arrive at an answer. For example, during one group work session on informational literacy, the students were working in pairs on a worksheet comparing and contrasting biographical and autobiographical texts. There were two

paragraphs which talked about Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, and the moon landing. I overheard one pair of students arguing about who landed on the moon first. They had decided to split the reading and each had read one of the paragraphs on the worksheet.

> Student 1: No! Buzz Aldrin was the first one on the moon.
>
> Student 2: I politely disagree. It's Neil Armstrong. Buzz Aldrin wrote the story.
>
> Student 1: Wait who's talking there (pointing at the paragraph)?
>
> (They both look at the sheet together, their heads bent over the handout.)
>
> Student 2: According to the text, it says that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon and Buzz Aldrin followed him, so it means he was second.
>
> Student 1: Oh, my bad. You're right. I didn't read that part.

The two students were arguing about who was the first one to walk on the moon and conflated the authors of each paragraph. They figured it out together and were able to talk about the different perspectives of the writing and and why it confused Student 1. What's interesting about this exchange is the use of the terms that Student 2 uses to disagree with Student 1. He politely says "I disagree" and in order to support why he thinks so, he says "according to the text". These are phrases that Ms. Ladd and the students had agreed to use during fishbowl discussions. The students were not in a group discussion, they were doing pair work, but Student 2 had adopted some of the expressions used during literature discussion. Both students invoke the principles of accountable talk by listening to their partner, referring to the text, and arriving at a reasonable conclusion. The expressions that Student 2 used are hanging on the wall in a list of ways to talk about text next to the sign listing the tenets of accountable talk. Even though these phrases are imposed on the students and they will likely change their use with time, the meanings behind them set the

foundation for the language that eventually becomes a part of the student's discussion skill set.

In Ms. Ladd's classroom, the rules for accountable talk and classroom norms served students not only during literature discussions, but also during everyday interactions in the classroom, which is the medium for social learning and collaborative learning experiences. Even though students were experiencing fewer peer-led literacy events due to preparation for high-stakes testing, they were still leaning the skills they would need for future group discussion activities.

Category 2 Language: You gotta be it. You gotta do it. You gotta model it. You gotta show it. - Ms. Ladd.

The second category to emerge from the data is language. I came to see from my observations and from the transcriptions that Ms. Ladd used language in her class in specific ways to make her students feel they were a part of the classroom literacy community. Discourse practices have a direct effect on students' literacy performance and how they come to view themselves as readers (Rex, 2001). The language of Ms. Ladd's classroom is supportive and positive. Along the walls are bulletin boards with titles such as: "Powerful Masterpieces" which is decorated with colorful cardboard cutouts declaring "cool," "we rock," "bravo," (home to student work) "we shine," and "first rate." There is also an old handmade painting of a blue sky and shining white sun with broad rays, which extend to silhouettes of students in graduation robes holding diplomas and throwing their caps in the air. Their arms extend upwards and some of them are leaping. While this may be an often-encountered image, this was one was especially powerful in its use inclusive use of silhouettes. Every student can see herself or himself

as one of the graduates in the painting. This painting creates the expectation that all of the students will be graduates wearing caps and gowns.

From this category of language emerged three themes showing how Ms. Ladd built a discourse around teamwork and membership, identity building and transparency. The first of these themes that I noticed from coding were teamwork and membership. Ms. Ladd fortified her literacy community by addressing her class as a team and instilling in them that they were members of a collective. Ms. Ladd's classes contained students spanning three grades and several ages. Having her students feel that they were a part of a team made negotiation of space and language in her class easier to navigate. She structured seating for her students according to age and skill level. Rex, 2001 points out that "Classroom interaction among classroom members take their meaning from and give meaning to the social and cultural ordering or "membershipness" of the classroom" (p. 310). This arrangement resulted in older students helping the younger students at times, and other times students with a variety of talents working together to complete a project or assignment. Working as a team made it easier to meet the needs of students in a standardized curriculum, at different reading levels and developmental stages. Teamwork between students is essential within the collaborative classroom and in discussion groups. During discussion students explore literary texts and share interpretations to arrive at an explanation of a common text. Being members of the same team shows students that they are not competing but using different perspectives to investigate and discover new ideas. She helped them see that the success of one student depends on the success of others. Ladson-Billings (1994) posits "Encouraging a community of learners means helping the students work against the norm of competitive

individualism. The teachers believe that children have to care, not only about their own achievement but about their classmates' achievement" (p.69). To enable this sentiment, Ms. Ladd moved the students around frequently so that they could get to know each other and work with each other's strengths and weaknesses. She said "I try to get them to have conversations with different people, kinda break them up so they can learn from each other."

The second theme to come out of the language category is one I call identity building**.** Ms. Ladd's speech is parsed with identity-builders, inclusive words that remind students that they belong, that they are capable, and that they can be what they need to be to complete a task. When Ms. Ladd addressed her students she called them by titles such as readers, researchers, members, graduates, writers, representatives. This is a form of identity building for students who might not consider themselves to be these things due to social positioning, self perceived inadequacies, or poor self image. Middle school is a transitional time when children are building self-concepts and identities. Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson (1995) argue that "The construction of identity and the social rules that participants take up in communities is best understood in what people do in joint participation with one another" (p. 448). According to Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, this is an example of a "restructuring of classroom practice" in which teachers can shift roles and identities by creating meaningful contexts for learning. This was a critical approach on Ms. Ladd's part which sought to help students build identities as readers and academics with important social roles to play in their communities. She repositioned them by calling them by titles they did not always see themselves as embodying. It helped students claim ownership to things that they felt might not be possible for them,

and it also helped them acknowledge the responsibilities that come with taking on those roles which means they become more invested in them.

Ms. Ladd also demonstrated to her students ways in which readers behaved by modeling how readers act or through telling them anecdotes. One example is how she often read during her lunch break, even if she was often interrupted or it was only for a few minutes. Her classroom was open to students during lunch and recess to eat, work on projects or chat with friends. At times students asked about her book and she would tell them what it was she was reading and why she enjoyed reading.

Another example took place during class one day after students had read independently for fifteen minutes.

Ms. Ladd: How many of you people have ever seen some somebody walk through the grocery store or sit on a train reading a book? Or a bus?

Student: Or a playground!

Ms. Ladd: Or a playground! Good! Okay, so alotta people are doing it. I get so excited when I see a young man or a young lady walking through the grocery store with their parent, or whatever the case may be with a book and they're just following along reading. So, just to let you know, real readers do that. Okay? Adult readers. Children readers. Reading as their parents are walking through the grocery store, I've seen it, with a book in hand. Alrighty, so, when you get into something really good, sometimes it's hard to put it down. Okay? So just keep that in mind. Thank you for having that conversation. All of those things are important to us, reading.

This brief dialogue demonstrates to students a few ways that readers may behave. Readers carry their books with them. Readers read while accompanying their parents on errands. Readers read while traveling or while sitting on the playground. Readers come in all shapes and sizes and sometimes the connection to a book is so deep that you carry it everywhere with you and you can't put it down. Ms. Ladd is normalizing the act of reading in public for her students and she is reminding them that they too are readers. Projections of roles and titles help give students the encouragement to feel confident in taking on these attributes. Through the use of positive and inclusive language, Ms. Ladd created a discourse which supported literacy behaviors with which students could identify and take on as parts of their literacy identities.

Transparency: You really have to teach them the what and the why! - Ms. Ladd.

Ms. Ladd made a point of telling her students the reasons behind lessons and tasks in order to achieve goals. She thinks it is important to contextualize lessons so the students know that they're not just doing busywork. "…kids have to know why, you know, what's the expectation? They need to know what to do when you're not available or when you're sitting in a small group."

Transparency in teaching.

In addition to keeping her students on top of goals and lesson overviews, Ms. Ladd was clear with her students about the reasons they had to do the things that were required of them in school and how it impacted future success. She talked to them about mastering the skills to do well on standardized tests and using standardized language when it was required. Freire (2005b) explains that the language that people use involves "questions of power" which suppose that the standard is the educated and desirable and

the non-standard the uneducated and undesirable. He stresses that while children should be taught standard language, the language they use in their everyday lives should be celebrated and acknowledged as being "as rich and beautiful as the norm." Furthermore, Ms. Ladd explained to her students about gatekeeping practices that would stand in their way if they did not prepare in the present. She tried to make visible the systemic practices that could keep her students from succeeding in the future.

Ms. Ladd did not talk about being an activist educator, but some of her practices were indicative of her efforts as an activist for the success of her students. She was aware that many of her teaching practices, such as teaching to the test ultimately supported systemic structures that serve to oppress students rather than help them succeed, but she tried to balance those out by making her students aware of these structures and how and why they have to navigate them.

One morning, after the students were finished with their silent reading, Ms. Ladd asked them why they thought that silent reading was important.

Student 1: For our test scores.

Ms. Ladd: Okay so that's one thing. It helps to improve test scores.

Student 2: Uh, it just improves your reading.

Ms. Ladd: It improves your reading overall, your fluency, your stamina overall.

Student 3: Uh, it jumpstarts your day to get ready for reading.

Ms. Ladd: Good Jumpstarts! A warm-up. I like it. It's like going into sports. You gotta have a warm-up first!

Student 4: It helps you think more about the text and then uh like and ask yourself questions.

Ms. Ladd: Good.

Student 5: It helps your brain get warmed up.

Ms. Ladd: Yes! It gives you a few minutes not only to get your body settled but

get us ready for the next step.

This brief dialogue served to reinforce for students the value of silent reading and the

reasons that they do it most mornings. Having the students come up with the reasons

themselves and hearing their peers talk about why reading is important is another way of

normalizing reading and making it a habit. It also shows the different ways in which

students view reading as an activity. Student 1's response was practical by saying that it

improves scores, and it also reflects the conversations that Ms. Ladd had shared with

them about the need to do well on standardized tests. Student 4 shows evidence of

making connections to texts while reading that lead to self-reflection. Reading makes him

think and it also makes him ask questions of himself. His thoughts on reading

demonstrate aspects of Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory and aesthetic response to

reading which states that the reader participates in a transaction with the text that may

lead to introspection through the interaction of personal experience and textual

information. Rosenblatt writes, "In most cases a personal experience will elicit a definite

response, it will lead to some kind of reflection. It may lead to the desire to communicate

this to others whom the boy or girl trusts" (p. 68). The transaction brings up questions

which may ultimately cause the reader to change perspective or adjust opinions,

especially during an exchange of ideas with others. Additionally, Rosenblatt argues "One

of the most valuable things the student will acquire is the ability to listen with

understanding to what others have to say and respond in relevant terms" (p.68). In this

dialogue Ms. Ladd extends Student 3's analogy of silent reading being a preparation exercise for the day and incorporates a language of reading as parallel to sport. The children pick up on that correlation and begin to use it themselves in their own examples. In this instance we also see the first tenet of accountable talk in which a whole-class discussion is being conducted in a way to make sure that the students are on the same page.

Ms. Ladd was deliberate in her choice of words and language that she used with her students. Her aim was to make her students into people who develop a love for reading and who see themselves as readers. She also wanted her classroom to be a community of people who felt safe to discuss and explore ideas, while making their peers feel that they were being listened to and that what they had to say was important. She stressed this notion of community by creating a classroom discourse centered on teamwork, shared inquiry, a passion for reading, literacy identity building, stories about readers and transparency about requirements. She also wanted them to be successful and tried to instill in them an awareness of the obstacles that could get in their way and how they could plan ahead to avoid those difficulties.

Category 3: Students Reflecting Their Environment

Ms. Ladd made an effort to build a democratic classroom, in which reading was valued and people could collaboratively share ideas in a trusting environment. What were the impacts of Ms. Ladd's approaches on the students? While I cannot say that every student was a perfect conveyor of Ms. Ladd's ideas, I did notice some reflections of her efforts in the students. I observed a number of students who carried books around with them at all times and took them out every chance they got. They talked about their books

with their friends in class and traded books with each other once they were finished reading them.

The most common examples I saw enacted however were during peer-led discussions when students would feel the responsibility to keep the discussion going. Even though Ms. Ladd did not assign specific roles to the students during discussions, there always seemed to be one student who fell into the role of moderator. This happened by necessity when discussion became either too animated or too quiet. This also seemed to happen when the conversation got off topic or when a student's question was disregarded or ignored. Evans (1996) recommends assigning roles to specific students may be useful to ameliorate the inequities that may pervade in some student-led discussion groups. The students in Ms. Ladd's class had not been assigned roles and some were ready take on certain responsibilities without being asked. During an interview with one of the seventh graders, he talked about the role that he likes to take during the fishbowl discussions:

> I would give questions. Like I was more of a question person. I would like bounce ideas off them. And like if someone said a question I would answer the question, but then also like wonder what would that question probably mean to someone else in different contexts.

This student liked to take on the role of moderator during the discussions. If there was a lull in conversation, he would choose a question from the printed handout of students' questions and pose one to the group. He told me that he considered himself more of a "question person" than someone who discusses, however we can see from his statement that he is benefitting from the discussion, not just in moderating and learning how to coax

ideas out of his peers, but also in reflecting on the response and forming his own ideas about the questions that others posed to the group.

During discussions, for the most part students gave each other room to talk and built on each other's observations. When there was a conflict, they started their statement by saying, "I respectfully, disagree". If someone was rude they were generally called out by other students. At the same time there were also instances of silence, interruption, and students' observations and comments not being acknowledged.

The class norms and the tenets of accountable talk hung in Ms. Ladd's class as two aspects of having Socratic discussions. The norms, which were chosen by the class denoted the social behavior expected of the students during discussions. The tenets of accountable talk signified a method for approaching academic discussions in a collaborative way. While the students readily displayed properties of the class norms during fishbowl discussion, the tenets of accountable talk were seen less frequently. The students enacted the social aspects of behavior that the norms suggested, such as presence, equity of voices, and the golden rule. I observed these behaviors during peer-led discussions when students listened attentively and patiently to other students as they spoke, while waiting to disagree with them in a polite way. This was also evident when the students provided space for another student who hadn't spoken yet, to contribute their observations.

I observed accountable talk less often, with the first tenet being the one that was practiced the most. This was due to the strong parallel to the norms of the class. Tenet two came up during fishbowl discussions in a simplified manner, with less follow-up, and sometimes during class peer work as we saw earlier with students talking about the moon

landing. In other instances, students would provide page numbers to support one-word answers to Ms. Ladd during whole-class lessons. In an effort to have students internalize the basics of tenet two, Ms. Ladd would often refer to a chart, which hung on the wall in support of accountable talk. It was hand written and titled "Show Me the Evidence", with a drawing of a magnifying glass encircling the title. Beneath it, were some suggestions to help students use textual support during discussions, such as: On page __, it said…; The author wrote…; For instance…; According to the text; and From the reading, I know that… I often heard students say "according to the text…" in support of their answer, but rarely did students challenge each other to take the conversation further. I think this might have been due to the brief ten-minute time limit on the fishbowl discussions. While the students did have passionate discussions about the texts, they rarely escalated above initial challenges and rebuttals and seemed to be more about personal opinions, stories, imagined scenarios, or hypothetical situations. The students tended to speak about the characters and situations in the books, in the same way they recounted stories about themselves or their friends.

Ms. Ladd demonstrated acceptance and validation not just through her lesson plan and pedagogical framework and method, but also through her behavior and demeanor. It is up to the teacher to establish that everyone has valuable knowledge to offer and share with their peers and community. Other students observe this behavior and it encourages the process of instilling a democratic classroom, which includes everyone and acknowledges their contributions to the learning environment.

At the beginning of my observations I was looking for blatant examples of critical pedagogy in action. As my time in Ms. Ladd's classroom passed, I came to realize that

changing societal structures and practices can be done in quiet and subtle ways that blends in with everyday routine. It is the repetitive support for students and the unwavering stability in perception of who they are that helps them find their literate selves.

Discussion and Implications

In my first research question I set out to investigate ways in which teachers prepare their students for collaborative discussions. In my analysis of the transcripts and field notes, I uncovered a variety of teacher practices that can be classified as contributing to the sociocultural comportment aspect of productive collaborative literary discussions. They range from the indirect and subtle approaches of community building and language to the direct and purposeful pedagogical methods of whole class discussions, teacher-led discussions that were practiced during lessons, and finally student-led discussions that were created by and run by students.

There are several dimensions that come into play in successful literacy environments. Preparing students for a productive peer-led literature discussion is an all-encompassing process that involves classroom community, culture, text dissemination and best pedagogical practices. The community and culture that Ms. Ladd built in her classroom create a sense of safety and belonging for her students where they feel they can talk out ideas and concepts in their literature discussions without judgment.

In addition to making a comfortable literacy space, Ms. Ladd built a community of learners in her classroom by appealing to the backgrounds of her students. She shared an African American background with the majority of her students, she lived, worked, and worshipped in the community for many years, and on more than one occasion I saw

parents of former students stop by her classroom to say "hello." Ms. Ladd's ideas about collaborative learning were encompassing of the notion of the classroom as a family found in the concept of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

By thinking about the spaces, social structures, and the language they use with their students, teachers can reevaluate their educational spaces and make minor changes that can support their pedagogical ideals, and in the meantime make their classrooms a cohesive, supported learning experience. Ms. Ladd maintains that change begins at a basic level and structural change means systemic change. Teachers play a significant role in the socialization of their students. How instructors treat their students shapes the classroom environment and unavoidably, the overall social structure of the school.

Ms. Ladd deliberately set out to create a separate culture of acceptance, safety, civility, and success in her classroom. Additionally she, along with other teachers from other content areas were able to redistribute time in the middle school class schedule to focus on skills that they thought their students would benefit from. The following are some of the practices that Ms. Ladd undertook to establish a safe culture of literacy in her classroom:

- Communication and action with other teachers and administration resulted in time redistribution that best addressed students' needs.

- Making space for classroom culture that matched students' culture made the classroom as safe, relevant, and inclusive community.

- Modeling reading practices around her students which normalized and encouraged reading.

- Having conversations about what it looks like to be a reader instilled in her students that they too were readers and that readers don't look a certain way.

- Encouraging students to use the library, and making it an extension of their classroom established it as a safe place, and one to go to spend time with books or thoughts.

- Introducing and including lessons about young people who advocate for literacy made reading and writing significant and relevant to their peer group.

- Allowing the students to generate their own questions about the readings for literary discussions gave them agency over their literacy learning and practice, making the fishbowl discussions something that they planned and created.

Some of these seemingly small or insignificant choices and actions can be innocuously overlooked as "things that teachers do" but they are steps toward bringing the students closer to school administration and policy design. These subtle practices lead to significant changes in the ways that students experience their education and classroom community. Teaching students that they are part of something bigger, and showing them the roles they play, can lead them to care about the rest of that structure, and the ways they can contribute to it.

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A Transactional View of One Teacher's Use of Scaffolded Reading Experiences to Teach Short Fiction in a Middle School Classroom

Introduction

It's 7:45 a.m. on a warm and sunny Monday morning in June. There's a pleasant cool lake breeze coming in through one of the open windows at the far side of the classroom. The wind rustles the edges of a poster about literary devices, which hangs on the wall. I am sitting at Ms. Ladd's (all people and places have been given pseudonyms) work table off to the side at the front of the class. I'm watching her place piles of paper, on the tabletop, moving back and forth from her desk to where I am sitting. She brings a stapler and begins to collate bundles of worksheets. It is early. Classes for the day have not yet begun, but Ms. Ladd is handling three things at once while she sits for an interview with me. It has been a busy month with her middle school students and graduating seniors: graduation rehearsals, advice, class trips, cap and gown fittings, school talent show rehearsals, and after-school activities. This description may depict any teacher at the beginning of June working to meet her deadlines for the upcoming end of the school year. For Ms. Ladd, who on most days spends her lunch break helping her students with make-up work, or grading papers from earlier in the day with a sandwich in one hand and a pen in the other, this is just another morning.

When I came to East Grove Math and Science Academy, Ms. Ladd who identifies as African American, graciously agreed to allow me to sit in on her middle school classes. I had approached the principal of the school, introduced myself and asked if she would be willing to permit me to do my field research there. Ms. Ladd, who was in the

office at the time overheard my request and unasked, walked up and volunteered her classroom.

As I got to know Ms. Ladd, I came to see that opening up her classroom to me was another way that displayed her adaptability. Instead of my presence being something else to worry about, she offered without reservation to take me into her classroom space for the next several months. When I arrived, she was in the midst of accommodating scheduling and curriculum changes into her teaching rosters. Her students had been having some issues prior to those changes and were between books in their reading units. They had gotten halfway through *The Book Thief* by Mark Zusak but did not finish it. When I asked her why they had not finished, she explained that the students were unmotivated, disinterested and intimidated by the size of the novel. "*The Book Thief* is like…you know, the pages and the thickness of it… I must say, probably was the biggest downfall for that particular unit, which can happen." She said that she was still getting to know her students and that the 584 page historical fiction novel was probably not the best choice for them.

Ms. Ladd's classroom contained students from 6th-8th grade with varying reading scores, which made accommodating all of them trickier. Also at this time, the children would soon begin preparation for the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments later on in the year. In addition Ms. Ray, the student teacher who had been with Ms. Ladd since early in the year was getting ready to leave in a month which left Ms. Ladd with a heavier load in terms of classroom management, lesson planning, and grading. At the same time, there had been a recent

policy change which allowed Ms. Ladd to add an extra half hour to her writing block, so the structure of her classes was changing.

The students' struggles with *The Book Thief* combined with waning time for literature discussion due to upcoming testing and test preparation, inspired Ms. Ladd to combine aspects of her literature curriculum with writing and focus on both in her writing module which she called "Writing about Reading." She needed to prepare her students for spring testing but still wanted them to enjoy complete reading experiences without being discouraged. Ms. Ladd decided to teach short stories that could be finished in one sitting, taken apart, and discussed in one cycle. She described it as an intensive experience for the students combining reading, comprehension, writing, and discussion in a week per story. She also hoped that in the process the students might find stories that they liked and enjoy reading and discussing them.

In this paper I focus on how Ms. Ladd employed a Scaffolded Reading Experience (SRE) approach to teaching short stories in her English Language Arts classroom, which then culminated in a fishbowl discussion. According to Graves and Graves (1994) an SRE is a flexible framework which can be used to build a structured lesson around the reading, teaching and learning of a chosen text. This type of framework built around a condensed reading experience was a solution for Ms. Ladd's classroom when she found that her middle school students were having trouble finishing a full-length novel. This article focuses on how Ms. Ladd used an SRE as a means to provide a rich literary experience through short fiction and is guided by the following question:

1. How can teachers use short stories to make time for meaningful literature study and discussion in multi-grade classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

The instructor's function is…to help students realize that the most important thing

is what literature means to them and does for them. (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 64)

This study aims to look at a Scaffolded Reading Experience through a

transactional lens stemming from the works of Louise Rosenblatt and her approach to the

instruction of literature. Rosenblatt (1995) states that the aim of teaching literature is not

only to enable students to receive satisfaction from reading, but also to guide them into

learning how to critically self-reflect as part of a mutual interaction with the text. This act

of self-reflection will serve to develop understandings about the text "in the context of

their own emotions and their own curiosity about life and literature" (p. 63).

According to Rosenblatt (1982), transactional theory centers on the reciprocal

interplay of reader and text" (p. 276). Further, she states that there are two types of

stances that readers can take when they approach a text, an aesthetic stance and an

efferent stance. An *efferent* reading is one that that readers take when they seek

information from the text and are looking to "carry away" specific information and

accumulate evidence. An *aesthetic* reading is one in which the reader is not impeded by a

required task or objective and is free to experience the interplay of words, rhythms,

sights, sounds, and feelings evoked by the text. These feelings can be visceral, and

combined with the reader's background, prior experiences, and perspectives create a deep

engagement with the text which Rosenblatt calls a "lived-through" experience. This

emotive event activates several responses, which manifest in different ways. For

example, while reading fiction, the reader may experience fictional characters as

individuals to approve or disapprove of. The reader becomes enmeshed in the characters'

plights and the social and moral codes they follow, which generate questions about behaviors and social systems based on the reader's own experiences, affiliations, and practices (p. 270).

In the same way that the readers' background shapes and interprets the text, the text also adds to the reader's experience, so that she can make sense out of it based on the give and take of the transaction. Rosenblatt (1982) states:

> Reading draws on the whole person's past transactions with the environment.
> Reading, especially aesthetic reading, extends the scope of that environment and
> feeds the growth of the individual who can then bring a richer self to further
> transactions with life and literature. (p. 273- 274)

What the reader brings and what the text provides both lend themselves to achieving an aesthetic stance. Arriving at a deep engagement with reading can alter previously held perspectives, leading to more complex social and literary interactions in the future.

What Does an Aesthetic Reading Look Like?

Rosenblatt (1995) often refers to reading for pleasure as being part of attaining an aesthetic stance, meaning that for the reader there should be no preconceived proper way to read or an agenda to follow. It is characterized by an openness and vulnerability to become engrossed with the text, which leads to "spontaneity". Rosenblatt maintains that often times for young readers there is a screen between the student and the book, which inhibits a genuine response to the reading because of a preconceived notion of what is expected from children by teachers and their adult sensibilities (p. 59). For example, readers may approach a text with a specific task at hand looking only for clues that will

fulfill that text within the reading and therefore miss the connection that may come from becoming absorbed in the words and story.

Some ways that students may show that they've read a text from an aesthetic stance is by demonstrating a connection to the characters or situations in a book. These types of responses may appear during peer-led discussions when students talk about the characters as if they know them, are experiencing their issues, or are judging them based on their own values or experiences. According to Rosenblatt (1982), students that have experienced a text aesthetically may express a deeply emotional response to the plight of a character or make exaggerated statements about the story. They might ask questions, make comments and comparisons to their own lives. Some may reject the text if the experience is too intense, or does not offer any relatability to their own lives (p. 272).

An aesthetic response also may occur during read-alouds, when the students are listening to the teacher read to them from a book. These responses may be demonstrated kinetically and linguistically through, various movements, exclamations, questions, comments and sounds.

How Can Teachers Cultivate Aesthetic Reading in their Classroom?

Transactional theory in the classroom is entirely student centered. The teacher is there to guide and encourage the students' responses, situate them within the text, examine them reflexively, and analyze them intertextually (Probst, 1988). In order for teachers to encourage and nurture an aesthetic reading, certain conditions must be met. Rosenblatt does not prescribe a system, but does provide a few recommendations for a transactional approach to teaching literature, which can help students forge personal connections to literature.

Rosenblatt (1995) states that teachers often will confuse their students by using fiction to teach efferent reading skills, by asking them factual questions about the text and ignoring the questions that would require them to tap into their own lived experiences to answer. If students are looking for facts from the onset, then they will not fall into a spontaneous reading. She writes, "First is the necessity to not to impose a set of preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work. The student must be free to grapple with his own reaction" (p. 63). A student that is immediately searching the text for a signal that will lead her to the required answer, will not be open to a personal response from the text and often ends up skimming the text for answers.

Next, Rosenblatt talks about the importance of the classroom environment being a safe space so that the student feels secure in relaying her own reaction to the literature, and that this response is accepted as valid. According to Rosenblatt, this opens the possibility for the student to have "an unselfconscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction" (p. 64). A student who does not feel secure or believes her opinions to be invalid or unimportant will not feel free to react emotionally to what she's read, or share opinions, or observations.

Evidence of an Aesthetic Response During Peer-Led Discussions

Having a secure environment in which the student feels safe is instrumental in having and honing literature discussion skills in the classroom. Rosenblatt (1995) writes that "One of the most valuable things the student will acquire is the ability to listen with understanding to what others have to say and respond in relevant terms" (p. 68). Being allowed and able to make the personal and reflexive connections to text that reading aesthetically provides is key to building the capacity to share those feelings and

observations with others and in collaborative discussions. During these discussions, the students hear others' interpretations and perspectives of the same text and can once again revisit their impressions and reexamine an initial response. These instances "lead to self-awareness and self criticism" (p. 24), which further lead to reflection of self and societal structures.

Rosenblatt writes about the importance of cultivating the aesthetic stance in young readers when the efferent stance is more valued in classrooms. This is still applicable, as we see teachers like Ms. Ladd struggling for extra time for her students to read and discuss fiction, while maintaining a schedule in which high stakes testing preparation and compliance to Common Core State Standards for informational texts, takes precedence and the gathering of information and facts is the goal.

Literature Review

Benefits of Using Short Stories in the Classroom

Ms. Ladd told me that one of the main issues with her students not finishing *The Book Thief* was motivation. Short stories can be helpful in increasing reading motivation simply by their structure. Since they contain a beginning, middle, and an end (Erkaya, 2005) within a limited accessible space that students can reach, reluctant readers may find it easier to start reading and finish a short story as opposed to full-length novels. There is also a shorter time and space in which a student can develop and experience an aesthetic response, which may include an emotional bond with a character, and a chance to make a personal connection. According to Rosenblatt (1988) during an aesthetic response "the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus *during* the reading event" (p. 7). Rosenblatt states that this experience is one that only the individual can have with a text and comes

from experiencing the text as a work of art. It is through this response that readers become immersed in the story and begin to forge connections with the characters and situations in the narrative.

Short stories can also provide a manageable space to explore different cultures, histories, and traditions (Erkaya, 2005), which can lead to introspection concerning one's own cultures and identity. Smyth and Hansen (2010) suggest that teaching regional short stories from all over the United States create awareness of different American cultures and help students develop collaborative and interpretive skills. Similarly, Nairn, (2008) conducted a sociological study in which young people used short stories to explore their experiences in their rural community and in turn analyze their own social position.

Short fiction is an effective way to expose young readers to a variety of genres. Students who are still learning what they enjoy can shop around and develop a palate for their literary preferences. Jensen (2002) argues that short story anthologies contain a wide range of topics and readability levels for students who are still learning what they like. In the case of Ms. Ladd's multi grade level classroom this was especially pertinent.

Scaffolded Reading Experience (SRE)

Graves and Graves (1994) devised the SRE as a framework which draws from the instructional method of scaffolding and consists of two phases, the Planning Phase and the Implementation Phase. These two stages are carefully planned and built around a set of activities to help students engage, connect, comprehend, and learn from the chosen text. During the Planning Phase, the first phase, the teacher carefully designs and coordinates lessons around a set of activities that the students will participate in before, during, and after the selected reading. During this stage the teacher takes into account the

skills and needs of her students so that they can effectively engage with the text during

the planned activities. This includes also their backgrounds and prior experiences

(Rosenblatt, 1995). The choice of text and the purpose for the reading is carefully

considered (Johnson & Graves, 1997), as well as the overall goal in mind for the students

to gain from the activities and the overall lesson. All of the decisions made around each

of these components should effectively build upon each other (Graves & Graves, 1995).

The implementation phase is the second part of the SRE. During this segment, students,

teachers, and the text come into play through a variety of activities that take place before

(prereading), during (during-reading), and after reading (postreading).

Prereading activities are a way to introduce the text to the students and prepare

them to read. These activities can take a number of forms, including: suggesting

strategies, relating the material to the students' lives, or prequestioning, predicting, and

direction setting (Johnson & Graves, 1997) to name a few. Pre-reading activities can

improve reading comprehension by inciting readers to make connections to prior

knowledge (Denner, 2002). Prereading also actively involves the student in the material,

which aids comprehension and appreciation for the text (Smith, 2003).

During-reading activities are those that take place during the reading of the text.

These activities can include both the teacher and the students and are important in setting

the tone of the response and determining the type of experience the readers will have.

Some ways to approach a text include, reading aloud, reading silently, annotating,

questioning, as well as modifying the text. The activities that occur during-reading

greatly impact the experience that the student will have with the text. For example, the

types of questions that are asked of the student will affect how she reads the text (Fisher

& Frey, 2012). Questions that are primarily a search for facts may lead to selective reading and low engagement.

Postreading activities take place after the students have read the text and may include questioning and small group discussion, writing, and even working with art or dramatic performances (Clark & Graves, 2004). Post-reading activities help students synthesize and establish concepts from the text (Fournier & Graves, 2002; Smith, 2003). Students can form their ideas and impressions and work with their interpretations of the text alone or with other students during discussions. A study by Liang, Watkins, Graves, and Hosp, (2010) suggests that using postreading questions in teaching short stories helps foster middle school children's enjoyment of literature and increases comprehension.

Although SREs are structured, they are highly flexible and may take many different forms depending on the teaching techniques and the learning strategies used in the lessons. SREs do not have any essential forms and can be practiced at any grade level, with both complex tests as well as less challenging ones (Fournier & Graves, 2002). It is highly adaptable to different classrooms, content areas, and students. In Ms. Ladd's class using SREs was a useful way to account for the varying reading levels and learning styles in her multi-grade classroom, as different activities could be designed to accommodate various learners.

Approaching literature through SREs can be amenable to the aesthetic response because it takes into account the characteristics and attributes of the learner and does not impede them with too much structure. The assorted activities and approaches allow for varied fits for different styles of learning. It can provide the students opportunities to

work with and process texts as opposed to rote learning, digging for facts, or the Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE) (Cazden, 1988) model of teaching.

Data Collection: Context, Methodology, Methods and Analysis

Context

East Grove Academy is located in Central City a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. At the time of this study the students at East Grove Elementary were 86% African American and 10% Latino. Seventy seven percent of the students received free or reduced lunch. There was a 19:1 student to teacher ratio, with a little over 300 students enrolled. In their school mission regarding literacy, East Grove notes that they adhere to the Common Core State Standards and aim to meet and surpass the national averages in literacy. The school takes time to prepare and complete a series of NWEA MAP assessments. During my time there I noted that the curriculum tended to focus mainly on informational texts which were taught in small group settings according to reading level. There also was a literature component that was taught in small groups and these groupings would fluctuate according to the day of the week. Both the informational and the literature aspect of the small group instruction were conducted using worksheets with multiple-choice questions as a way to prepare the students for testing. Since there were four groups, three of them would have an instructor (Ms. Ladd, Ms. Ray, and a paraprofessional), while one worked independently for a while, until one of the instructors would come and check in and go over the work with them. In-depth literature instruction was done during the writing component of the class which comprised a separate block of study. This study focuses on the literature discussion aspect of the writing class.

The classroom had access to a special education instructional assistant as well as a special education teacher. Both would come during classes at varied times to shadow selected students and offer assistance as needed. In addition there was Ms. Ray, who was a pre-service teaching assistant of Indian descent achieving her certification requirements in Ms. Ladd's classroom. Ms. Ladd and Ms. Ray both agreed to be interviewed and participate in the study. Although, Ms. Ladd had been teaching for seventeen years in the same city, this was her first year at East Grove and she was still getting to know her students and the school climate when I arrived. At the time of the study she taught English Language Arts (ELA), and Social Studies.

I observed two of Ms. Ladd's ELA classes. Each class had about thirty students ranging in grades six through eight with varied reading levels. The first class had slightly lower MAP reading scores than the second class. Each class was given the same lessons and materials for the lessons in the study.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study framed by a narrative inquiry approach, which allowed me to use semi-structured interviews with the participants as they explored their thoughts on teaching through anecdotes and stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1990; 1996) use narrative inquiry as a method to explore the stories of teachers and their classroom spaces. I chose narrative inquiry because its nature allows for a connection between the researcher and participant through its in-depth and conversational approach. It also provides ways for the researcher to document the stories that come from the immediate practice spaces, the institutional spaces, and the relationships between the participant and the researcher.

The interviews took place in the classroom during teaching breaks, which allowed me to listen closely to the personal and professional experiences of teachers in the community of teaching and learning that they created and participated in. Conducting interviews in the classroom space was especially important in getting to know Ms. Ladd as a teacher. She strongly connects the classroom space and environment to the learning experience of her students and her identity as a teacher. Oftentimes during interviews, Ms. Ladd would be doing things around her classroom, such as preparing for the day or her students. Sometimes, she would point to or pick up books or other objects to support something she had said or just to provide me with a visual that had been part of a lesson. Her classroom environment was a toolbox which she incorporated in her teaching. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) argue that teachers see their classrooms as "home" and as "safe spaces, generally free from scrutiny, where teachers are free to live stories of practice (p. 25). The school space plays a central role in the lives of students and teachers and is influential in the practices and ideologies that take form in teaching and learning practices.

The institutional aspect and space of schools carry within it narratives and discourses that dictate and enforce certain roles, distinctions, and deficiencies on its members. Moreover, the teaching of literature is an interpretive subject in which relatable life scenarios are presented which can be applied and deconstructed according to the narratives and discourses inherent and allowable within the institutional framework of the classroom. Through the medium of literature, students can connect their own life experiences to these narratives in order to examine their roles and those of others within the structure of the classroom, schools, communities, and larger systems.

A part of narrative inquiry is also documenting the stories that are told by the spaces themselves. The nature of the classroom as a part of the larger institution of education makes it a prime environment to be examined for political and social patterns that contribute to larger structures. Gubrium and Holstein (1988) call attention to the "storying experience" of schools and point out that that they "provide narrative frameworks for conveying personal experience through time, for what is taken to be relevant in our lives, and why the lives under consideration developed in the way they did" (p. 164). Clandinin (2006) further elaborate on the power of school narratives, "Perhaps in listening and attending to children's stories as they live with teachers in schools we can create conditions that allow children to compose other stories of themselves, to change the stories they live by" (p. 52). The parallels between literary narratives and oral narratives are used by both teachers and students in the classroom to talk about literature (Juzwick & Sherry, 2007).

Methods and Analysis

I observed Ms. Ladd's classroom daily, four hours a day, for five months as a participant observer. I helped with classroom tasks and assisted students with questions about assignments when needed. The students, however did not seem to see my presence as authoritative and I was allowed into many of their conversations.

I took field notes and memos daily, during observations and at the end of the day when I had left the field and reflected on the day's events. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) call field notes "one of the primary tools of narrative inquiry work" and an "active recording of…construction of classroom events" (p. 5).

My interview process centered on a series of first unstructured and then semi-

structured interviews. Fontana and Frey (1994) state, "Unstructured interviews are used in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society with imposing an a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (p. 366). I conducted and recorded interviews, transcribed the recordings and then prepared for the next interview based on questions or need for further clarification from the first set of narratives.

As I sifted carefully through the data for first cycle, I coded descriptively (Miles et al., 2014; Salda*ña*, 2003; Wolcott, 1994) to ascertain a larger perspective of the overall issues in Ms. Ladd's classroom. As I got further along in the second cycle I closely coded for practices and methods, as well as teacher and student utterances using an analysis of initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). I combined the descriptive codes and determined certain patterns of schedule, methods, and technique by looking at my field notes and listened further to recordings to confirm and record details. At first, written descriptive notes were more indicative of structural patterns since these usually do not come through explicitly in transcriptions of recordings.

Once I narrowed down daily class structure and practices I was able to establish the detailed pedagogical methods and techniques. Together with the transcriptions of teacher interviews, I compiled, analyzed, and interpreted the data to assemble an account of Ms. Ladd's solution to circumvent various obstacles impeding in-depth literature discussion. The narrative comprised teacher interviews first, classroom observations and field notes, audio recordings, and various artifacts which were a part of detailing the SRE activities.

Findings

Internal and External Challenges

As I went through my field notes, transcriptions of classroom talk, and interviews I found that Ms. Ladd faced quite a few challenges in her classroom. During interviews she expressed many times that her main desire for her students was to help them find books that they enjoyed and would lead them to develop a love for reading. In addition she wanted them to be able to talk about them openly and fluently. She realized that this was not easy and so tried to address some of the issues that were keeping her students from attaining these goals. These internal (student based) challenges were 1. interest; 2. motivation; and 3. stamina. At the same time she was also facing external (administrative) challenges pertaining to: 1. the need to prepare her students for high stakes testing in the spring; 2. her student teacher leaving; and 3. diminished time for whole fictional texts as result of 1 and 2. While not all of her students had trouble finishing or comprehending books at a certain level, the students in the classes ranged from grade six to eight and had a variance of reading levels. All of these factors combined to make it difficult to meet the needs of all of her students as well as the goals that she had envisioned for them.

Ms. Ladd felt conflicted because she wanted her students to be able to read, write, and discuss literature academically, as well as for them to connect with books on a personal level and find a love of reading. She also felt that she needed to meet her responsibilities to help them raise their test scores and perform adequately on standardized tests. During one of our interviews toward the end of the school year she said, "I've gotta build that passion with these students…build a capacity to want to read and a love of reading. Um I've gotta get back to that…(chuckles nervously) instead of just teaching to the test". Ms. Ladd wanted to dedicate time to reading and discussing

fiction to cultivate that love of reading, but at the same time she realizes that a lot of her school day is taken up by policy requirements. She wants and needs her students to do well and succeed by meeting the established success markers of higher test scores, but she sees that it comes at a price.

Incorporating the SRE cycles of short stories in her classrooms helped fill the void of literary texts that was created by standardized testing preparations. At the same time, it also helped her use the diminished classroom time in a way that her students could read and finish fictional stories in their entirety with enough time left for peer-led discussions.

Ms. Ladd's Short Fiction SRE Cycles

There were a total of five SRE cycles which took place between March and May. Each of these culminated in a peer-led fishbowl discussion. The cycle of preparation to assessment took four class periods for each story. The first and second days were spent reading and learning the story through various activities, and preparing for the discussion. On the third day the students held a peer-led fishbowl discussion based on questions they constructed from the prereading, during-reading, and postreading activities of the SREs.

The Book

The stories were taken from an anthology called *America Street* (1993)*,* which features a collection of multicultural fictional selections written by authors from various backgrounds. The stories are aimed at middle school readers at a sixth-seventh grade reading level and feature young teen protagonists navigating social issues. They were all a manageable length varying from six to twelve pages which allowed them to be introduced and read to completion in one forty-five minute class period. The stories

selected were: *Thank You Ma'am* by Langston Hughes (1958), *No Guitar Blues* by Gary Soto (1990), *The All American Slurp* (*TAAS*) by Lensey Namioka (1987), and *The White Umbrella* by Gish Jen (1984). In addition, there was a fifth story, called *The Two Brothers and the Gold*, by Leo Tolstoy (1911), which was provided to the students as a separate handout. Ms. Ladd ordered and paid for the copies of *America Street.* She chose the anthology because it was her first time teaching middle school students and she was experimenting with reading levels. She also liked the issues and themes of the stories, as well as the multicultural aspect. Each of the stories had varying vocabulary difficulty and literary devices, with one including whole sentences in Spanish. Many teachers use multicultural literature to introduce their students to other cultures as well as ideologies of power and identity that may be new to them (Yoon, Simpson & Haag, 2010).

Daily SRE Practices

The following sections provide general overviews of each day of Ms. Ladd's SREs and its activities. Detailed descriptions of the activities are included in later sections.

Day 1: "Reading for Enjoyment"

On the first day of a new story, Ms. Ladd introduces the author to the class with a short biography and list of writings. Accompanying the presentation there is a photo and biographical bullet points on the Smart board. A brief introduction to the story is also included contextualizing the story for the students.

After the introduction, Ms. Ladd passes out copies of *America Street* to each student. Students volunteer to read, and then read aloud in the designated order round-robin style. Students are not chosen at random and only students who volunteer end up

reading aloud. Ms. Ladd or Ms. Ray read out loud if not enough students volunteer. At times one student may voluntarily continue to read until the end. During the reading, there are notes on the Smartboard for how to close-read and annotate. I've included a sample of these notes in the index.

In spite of providing annotation notes, Ms. Ladd liked to treat this initial introduction and reading of the story as a pleasure reading where students are free to listen quietly with their heads down, doodle, or follow along with the text. This approach falls in line with Rosenblatt's (1995) suggestion that there not be an agenda for the students to follow during the reading of a text in order to personally connect with the text. Many of the students took advantage of these choices opting not to read out loud, and listened quietly as others read. Some students drew pictures or patterns in the margins of their notebooks. Drawing is considered one of the ways that children can give form to an aesthetic experience during a literary transaction (Rosenblatt, 1982).

Day 2: "This is a Working Reading"

On the second day the students read with a purpose. Ms. Ladd calls it a "working reading." She says to the class "Let me just remind you that this is a working reading. So now we're closely reading and writing. You are really connecting what you read or what you hear today because you are listening, okay?" Ms. Ladd provides a focus question on the overhead around which the students can frame their reading.

Ms. Ladd passes out books to the students with a sticky note stuck to the back of the inside cover. There is a brief class discussion consisting of a question asking if anyone can tell the class what the story is about. A number of students are chosen who

describe unique aspects of the story. In spite of the different perspectives, the students' descriptions build upon each other.

Once again the students read the story or listen to a recording of the story being read by a professional reader. The students are provided with an activity to fill out as they listen. They are instructed to pay attention and actively work with the text to search for factual items for the graphic organizer. Ms. Ladd pauses the story in the middle so that the students can work on this. She asks the students to provide text evidence, page numbers, and other types of evidence in support of their answers.

After the second reading of the story, a literary activity and a teacher-led discussion, the students are given a few minutes to compose a relevant question based on something about the story that struck them one way or another. The question has to adhere to one of six types: speculative, evaluative, interpretive, background, or factual/vocabulary. Students write their questions on the sticky note that was provided and post it on a designated large sheet on the whiteboard. Ms. Ladd compiles the questions on a document, categorized by type. This document is passed out to the students right before the fishbowl discussion, to be used as a guide.

Day 3: Fishbowl Discussion

Fishbowls are mostly student centered apart from the choice of the story. The students write the questions and only they speak throughout its duration. They decide who begins, who joins, who leaves the discussion. I found that usually a student self-appointed as a moderator in order to keep the discussion flowing and the other students focused. The other students never challenged this arrangement and responded well.

For the fishbowl event, students move eight desks into the center of the and the rest of the desks are shaped into an outer circle along the margins of the classroom. Books, observation sheets, and a handout with the student-created questions are passed out to each student sitting in the outer circle. Each student chooses a card from a regular deck of playing cards. This is how they determine who the students in the outer circle will follow in the inner circle. For example, if one of the discussants in the center chooses a jack, everyone in the outer circle with a jack will observe that person and fill out their observation sheet accordingly. The card also determines whose place they can take in the inner circle at any time during the ten-minute discussion period.

Ms. Ladd prepares the students for the discussion, by going over the different behavior expectations for those sitting in the outer circle and inner circle. The class also goes over class norms, etiquette, and talking points, and ways of disagreeing with each other according to pre-established classroom norms. The students in the center hold a peer-led discussion for ten minutes, with their outer circle counterparts "tabbing in" to take their place. After the ten minutes are up, there is a brief debrief with the entire class led by Ms. Ladd about the fishbowl technicalities, while the students finish filling out their observation sheets.

Detailed SRE Activities

SREs consist of a series of scaffolding activities to help the students prepare, experience, comprehend, and process a text. Graves and Graves (1995) provide a list of activities that instructors may use in their SREs but state these as "possible components" and not mandatory. In this section I will describe some of the prereading, during-reading,

and postreading activities that Ms. Ladd used during the three parts of the implementation phase of her SREs.

Prereading Activities

Prereading activities can improve reading comprehension by inciting readers to make connections to prior knowledge (Graves & Graves, 1995; Denner, 2002). They can also create a schema of the topic for the student to revert back to during the reading of the text, which also helps comprehension and engagement. There are several types of prereading activities that Ms. Ladd used.

Get to Know the Author

At the beginning of the lesson, Ms. Ladd exhibits a photo of the author on the Smart Board, along with a short bio and bibliography. She reads the bio aloud and conducts a short discussion about the author's background. Ms. Ladd asks the students whether anyone has heard of the author or read her works.

Acquainting the students with the authors is useful because it adds another dimension to the text with which the student can relate or associate with the reading. In this lesson, it was especially relevant because one of the aspects of this anthology is that it contains multicultural stories and authors. Allowing time for the students to get to know the author and ask questions about their experiences helps them see through a new perspective. Some of the questions that came up a lot during author introductions were: Did this really happen to the author? Is this story about them? Are they still alive? These questions indicate that students harbor a natural curiosity about the people behind the stories they read.

Relating the Text to the Students' Lives

One way that Ms. Ladd utilized this prereading activity was by asking the students if they had ever experienced something that specifically happens to a character in the story. She asked the class: Have you ever been embarrassed by something a close family member did in public? This activity came up a couple of times in different forms during the reading of *The All American Slurp (TAAS)*. One was a free-write on the second day before starting the lesson and the other was on the last day after the lesson as the students shared their free-writes with the class.

This question specifically asked the students to place themselves in a situation where they might have experienced the same emotions or feelings of a character in *TAAS*. Activities such as these provide students an opportunity to relate with the character's experience and the text as a whole, leading to a more complex comprehension not only of fictional texts, but also of their own lives (Bean & Moni, 2003; Ahn & Filipenko, 2006; Peskin & Fong, 2006; Kraver, 2007; Roser, Martinez, Fuhrken, & McDonnold (2007)).

On the second day of *TAAS* the students had already read the story, and talked a little bit about it and so were familiar with the characters and the events of the story. Before the second reading, Ms. Ladd began the lesson with a brief discussion in which the students summarized the story and then she asked the students to relate to the main character and her family who had emigrated from China.

> Ms. Ladd: Okay. So we know that we're talking about a family. A family who basically bring their customs and their beliefs to an unfamiliar culture as an immigrant family. You can imagine maybe how it would feel to be new or even not to know the language, not to know the customs of a different culture or different school or just a different surrounding. What might you experience

feelings-wise if you were these people? What made you feel? So like being brand new to a school, how may people feel? How may students feel?

Farrah: Nervous.

Gary: Lonely!

Ms. Ladd: Lonely! Shawn?

Shawn: Uh, scared?

Kim: Shy.

Rianne: Isolated.

Ms. Ladd: So these emotions are not only right, but very profound to a person who is new. So, imagine, we're talking about just being a new student. Imagine being new to a culture!

Shawn: Hmmmm!

Ms. Ladd: Or to a country? And you and your family don't speak much of the language. Okay? All of those things, scared, shy, even angry are very raw emotions that a person may feel. I want you to think about that; take that into account as we hear our story being read to us today.

In this excerpt, Ms. Ladd is having the students revisit a time in their life when they were new to a situation or might have felt out of place in unfamiliar surroundings. By doing this she invites the students to re-experience those feelings, which may open them up to empathize with the characters in the story or in the very least imagine what it might be like for them. Louie and Louie (1992) argue that having empathetic reactions for fictional characters immerses readers in the stories and the dilemmas that the characters face. Students are also compelled to take on different perspectives when they listen to their

peers' observations. Hearing fellow students vocalize a spectrum of emotions may introduce questions of why someone might be scared in a new situation, while at the same time another might feel lonely, or isolated. This helps understand character complexity and the intricacy of human emotions. At the same time Ms. Ladd is providing direction for how one can approach reading fiction by comparing one's own prior experiences with those of a character, essentially giving the students tools to experience an aesthetic reading.

Prequestioning, Predicting, and Direction Setting

In the following excerpt, Ms. Ladd invites the students to determine what the story *TAAS*, may be about based on the limited information that they have received at this point. The students only know the title of the story and the a little bit about the author.

Ms. Ladd: Okay, just based on the title and what you know about the author, does anyone have any guesses? Any guess about what this story might be about?

Farrah: This story is about when she went to America and started trying certain foods and once she started doing that, she found similar tastes.

Ms. Ladd: Okay Natalie?

Natalie: Uh, I'm thinking it's about like food or something? Different food? Like a restaurant?

Ms. Ladd: Okay last one, Sam?

Sam: I'm with Natalie. I think it's about drinking an American drink. Like, I'm getting; it form the um word "slurp".

Ms. Ladd: Good! Those are all good guesses. Let's find out if you're right.

This strategy prepares the students to imagine scenarios or character traits that may or not occur in the story. The title and author set up a context from which the readers may build or detract from. In the case of *TAAS,* as with literature that brings up social or racial contexts, this may lead to critical interpretations of the text as the student works around certain expectations of held beliefs and how they are presented in the story. The students use clues from the words in the story's title to predict what they may find within the narrative. As we see from Farrah's answer, she goes a little further analytically, by expecting that there will be comparisons between the two countries' cuisines.

During-Reading Activities

Read-Alouds

It became evident to me that a major strategy in Ms. Ladd's classroom was the activity of reading aloud. Read-alouds were performed in a variety of ways and they were the most consistent activity in the SREs. While read-alouds are a common practice in elementary classroom, they are more infrequent in middle and secondary education (Sanacore, 1992; Albright &Ariail, 2005). Research has shown that reading aloud to students can help the student engage with the material, as well as create interest and motivation to read further (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Braun, 2010).

Throughout the selection of stories that Ms. Ladd's students read, they had different approaches to how they read the stories. In all but one instance the stories were engaged with on both days through some type of read aloud. The different methods were: the teacher read the story aloud, students read the story round robin style, or a recording of the story was played for the class. This last method was used mainly on the second days of the SRE cycle.

Varying Voices and Utterances

Ms. Ladd maintained that she liked to use a variety of voices for her read-alouds. I observed her reading aloud, as well as Ms. Ray, and sometimes students read aloud to their classmates for extended periods. Ms. Ladd also used recordings of actors reading the stories aloud to expose students to different types of animation, voice acting, and approaches to reading literature. Listening to a text being read aloud frees the student to experience the narrative in a different way and from another perspective. It can also be a way to model storytelling and how more experienced readers make connections with text (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Braun (2010) states that one important aspect of making read-alouds successful is teacher enthusiasm and eye contact to make connections with students. Using animated voices can enhance a literary character's personality and make them come alive for students.

Maloch and Beutel (2009) suggest that interactive read-alouds fall in the middle spectrum between teacher-led discussion and student-led small group discussions and that they can be used to model the meaning-making process during a textual reading when students are encouraged to spontaneously add to the conversation with peers and teachers. As I went through my recordings and field notes, I noticed that Ms. Ladd's classroom became an active space during read-alouds. What may seem as a teacher-centered practice and a passive activity is proven otherwise upon closer inspection. As part of a collaborative teaching environment, Ms. Ladd did not discourage her students when they reacted to the events of a story as it was being read aloud either by a teacher or a fellow classmate. For example, during a reading of Thank you, M'am, the students made several observations during the read-aloud. In the very beginning of the story, a boy

is knocked down as he tries to steal a purse from a woman. Various students made exclamations as their classmate read aloud the following sentence: "The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter" (p 44).

Student 1: Ohhhhhh!

Student 2: Blue jean sitter?

Student 3: He went down.

Collective students: (Laughter)

Student 5: Oh, man.

The reader took a second to allow for the comments and laughter but continuesd reading aloud fluidly without disruption. The rest of the students settled down quickly and continued listening and following along in their books.

Throughout the story, Hughes repeats the name of the woman in the story as a way to show she is a strong and memorable character. During one of these instances the students reacted to her lengthy and colorful name as it was read aloud by another student, "Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocket book to get some suede shoes said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones" (p. 52).

Student 1: That's a long name!

Collective students: (Laughter)

Students also reacted to the action being portrayed in the story, not just the word choices. In the very beginning of the story, Hughes sets a cautious mood, by describing the late night hour of the setting and the woman as she walks by herself in the dark. One student read, "It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse" (p. 49). One student responded to this

sentence by saying aloud: Oh no! While other students gasped and made "oooh" sounds. The students also reacted with "oooh" sounds when the boy in the Hughes' story tries to get away, but falls down instead. Hughes writes, "Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up" (p. 49). The students responded to this sentence with a mix of shock and laughter.

After the readings, the students returned to the instances in the story in which exclamations were made to follow up with questions about them. The students were especially surprised by the violence of the kick by the older woman to the young man, and about the unusual language utilized by Hughes. They were particularly inquisitive about the word choices in the story and asked questions about them as well as some of the situations in terms of how they would translate to the present day. For instance, in the story Mrs. Luella Bates takes the boy, Roger home with her to feed him, wash his face, and teach him a lesson. The students wondered if this would be considered kidnapping by today's laws and whether the police would have to be involved.

In Ms. Ladd's classroom, read-alouds create of a triad of involvement between the teachers, students and text. As the students listen to their teachers or fellow student's voice, some choose to just listen passively while some follow along in their books. There are at times vocal reactions from the students when they hear something they enjoy or find energizing. Sound effects, violence, unusual customs, were all things that made the students react vocally and then interact with each other. Spontaneous utterances of emotion, surprise, and disbelief were common. Reactions to onomatopoeic words were often met with laughter and a vocalization and mimicry of the sounds. In *TAAS* there are many instances in which Namioka uses onomatopoeia to add to the story. Many of these

sounds are tied to food and consumption. Words like "crunch" and "zip" are used when the families are eating celery. "Slurp" and "shloop" are used when the characters are slurping soup and drinking milk shakes. At the end of the story, as one of the characters drinks a milkshake, Namioka writes, "she pulled hard on her straws and went shloop, shloop" (p. 67). When this sentence was read aloud, the class erupted in slurping sounds and subsequent laughter. The students enjoyed voicing the sound effects in the writing and saw it very much as a part of the read-aloud. During a share-out of impressions after reading Namioka's story, one student said:

> Okay. I just wanna say I'm not sure about you guys, but that I really did like how the author put in a thousand sound effects which gave it a real nice touch. And they didn't need to, and I really enjoyed it.

For this student and others, reading aloud became a performance and immersive in a way that is different from reading silently. Sharing in the story with his fellow students as it was read aloud became a fun event in a way that it would not have, had it been introduced as a silent reading. Rosenblatt (1982) affirms that an aesthetic transaction can take place during a reading event that involves hearing the text as well as reading the print. Signs of this are evident during read-alouds when the students make spontaneous utterances, exclamations, sounds effects, vocalize thoughts or words that were read, or repeat sounds from the stories. These spontaneous reactions occurred multiple times during the read-alouds in Ms. Ladd's class.

I found that even though the students would interject with comments, sounds, and sometimes laughter during read-alouds by their teacher or peers, the exclamations were short and to the point. They did not interrupt the flow of the readings or the reader. The

students would return to listening closely to the words being read aloud and the objective would not be lost in the process. Only rarely would the students grow raucous and be told to focus. The students' real-time commentary about the text was an indicator of engagement with not only the story, but with each other and the overall environment of the class. The sharing of the story with their peers was indicated by how they would look up from the text during the interjections and utterances, and look for each other's gazes and expressions which showed that others too, had experienced the text in a similar way to them. These reactions and looks toward one another for validation were some of the things that made read-alouds an overall active experience.

Annotations and "Wonderings"

On the second day of the reading cycle, Ms. Ladd had her students write in their notebook something that stood out to them about the text, and also situations which were unclear to them. She also asked them to write questions on a sticky note that would later become a part of the fishbowl discussion document.

When Ms. Ladd asked her students to make a note of something that stood out to them from a text, she called these moments "wonderings" and she told her students to "document your wonderings" as they read. Annotating a text as you read can illustrate a connection with the writing and create a medium for further thought or idea development in the future, which can lead to critical thought and elaborate discussion opportunities down the line. Annotation can take different forms, such as: underlining, circling, or highlighting text; writing comments, questions, or symbols in margins, in a notebook, or on a sticky note stuck to the page; and even drawing an image pertaining to the text.

Annotating a text can bring clarity to a reader, point out intertextual connections, analyze

what is happening in a text, and make personal connections (Brown, 2007).

Post-Reading Activities

Turn and Talk, Writing Questions and Comments, and Share-Outs

Post-reading activities help students synthesize and establish concepts from the

text (Smith, 2003). They can contextualize impressions and questions within the whole

text experience. Students are naturally curious and will have questions about what they

read. They will wonder about things that are new or strange to them, question why a

character acted in a certain way that was unexpected or unfamiliar to them. Rosenblatt

(1982) suggests that post reading activities should "Deepen the experience…we should

help the young reader to return to, relive, savor, the experience" (P. 275). In the

following conversation, the students have just done a turn and talk and are sharing out

what they discussed with the rest of the class. The Gleasons are the American family in

TAAS and this instance describes their attendance at a dinner party at the Lins', the

Chinese family's house. The Gleasons are unfamiliar with Chinese etiquette and are

making some minor infractions.

> Natalie: I like what the author did where the Gleasons were eating Chinese food
>
> cause it showed how they don't know their culture either, so they can't judge. The
>
> American people can't judge them for not knowing how to eat their food 'cause
>
> they don't know how to eat their food. Like she said they were kinda like, I guess
>
> we're not supposed to put more food on our plate.
>
> Sam: Um, I kinda like how, like personally, how um like it was one side and then
>
> the other side to see like how it's difficult for one person to do something out of

their comfort zone and how the other person… because it will be different for

both of them…because they're not like each other, so it's wrong to judge them.

In this dialogue, Natalie picks up on the dichotomy of culture and expectation and

realizes that the same goes for the American family when the tables are turned. Sam adds

to Natalie's comment by alluding to the author's device of using a side-by-side

comparison of the two families experiencing dinner in each other's homes. Each family

missteps according to cultural practices, but Sam and Natalie maintain they shouldn't be

judged because they belong to different cultures, so they will do things differently and

that's okay. The students seemed to pick up on the assimilationist nuances of the story by

making comparisons between the two family's ways of doing things, and deeming them

both "correct."

Conversations like these can start critical approaches to viewing self and others. It

can be a simple thing such as helping a new student feel welcome, to taking new insights

out of the classroom and into the community to have conversations with family and

friends about how to treat marginalized or displaced populations. According to

Rosenblatt (2005), this is part of a meaningful engagement with literature and that it can

"contribute toward creation of the ways of thinking" (p. 58) that are needed for a

democratic way of life. These conversations may lead to an informed change in how

readers approach literature interpretation and how they come to know social systems and

institutions (Miller & Legge, 1999).

The Story and Literature Discussion

The All American Slurp (*TAAS*) is a story about a Chinese family who moves to

the United States. It focuses on the preteen daughter of the family and her experiences

settling into a new country, making new friends, discovering new ways of doing things while appreciating the old ways, and learning to accept her family's way of doing things in a new culture. The students self-reported by a show of hands, that they had not previously read this story.

TAAS contains a variety of themes which developed throughout Ms. Ladd's SRE and the students' conversations. Some of these themes are: alienation, shame, embarrassment, cultural differences, customs, friendship, family, and a struggle to fit in, to name a few. The students related well to the topics and brought up several comparisons to their own experiences during class discussions. Some connected to the predicaments of the main character and others questioned her feelings of discomfort and ways to help her work through them. *TAAS* was third in a series of five, so the students already had some experience and practice negotiating roles and strategies during peer led group discussions.

One the most talk-inducing parts of *TAAS* for the students was a scene that takes place in a restaurant, where the main character, the daughter becomes embarrassed at the way her family slurps their soup. The family also has difficulties ordering from the menu due to language differences. The author attempts a comedic tone and one might argue that the main character is detecting her parents' actions to be more noticeable than they actually are. Still, the scene revolves around the intense feelings of the main character and how she deals (or doesn't) with the situation. It is useful to state that the setting is a dimly lit dining room. The wait staff remains for the most part in the peripheries of the room and is not very visible or vocal. In fact the first course of food appears as if by magic without a textual description and without interaction with a waiter.

In the following conversation which took place during the peer-led discussion, the students grapple with the responsibility of the restaurant employees toward the Lin family as they experience a new environment.

Marie: Okay, who would like to start?

Sam: Me.

Marie: Okay.

Sam: Um, okay. Do you think the people at the Lakeside restaurant wanted to say something to the Lin Family? Or did the workers help them?

Shane: Um, I think that they kinda wanted to, but at the same time they kinda knew. I'm pretty sure like in China you know, when you first come, you kinda have an accent, so you sound weird, like we talked about that, so um I'm pretty sure they was like, "Oh, they probably don't understand English that good; there was probl'y no use trying to explain it to them.

Marie: I feel like they should have helped them even though I think they couldn't have, but in a foreign restaurant or something you'll go there and use chopsticks and you don't know how to hold it or something and the workers will usually help you because you look clueless.

Shane: I don't actually thinks so, I think they were just shocked, just wondering when they would stop. I don't …

Sam: They should've probl'y noticed that they were from another, I mean…

Marie: Well it's America, It's so diverse…

In this dialogue, we see Marie take on the role of moderator by asking someone to begin. The question that Sam poses is especially interesting because it places the readers in the

minds of the spectators and restaurant staff who are in essence non-characters who don't really speak or show themselves in the story. They are not given a voice by the author except as projected through the embarrassment of the main character. Sam places himself at the scene in the minds of the spectators at the restaurant (who aren't really characters, as they are never given voice in the story). This question puts us within the story, at the margins of the room, observing the Lin family as they are eating their dinner. When Sam asks if the workers helped the family when they did not, it is as good as asking, why did the workers not help the Lins? Shane attunes to this implication and offers an explanation as to why they didn't help, and why they might have wanted to.

During the explanation Shane attempts to explain what the staff might have been thinking about the Lins and in a roundabout way, he gives them the benefit of the doubt stating that they probably wanted to help, but thought that it might not do any good as they wouldn't understand them. He gives these non-characters voices and trains of thought where there are none. This example of creating silent stream of conscious conversation within the heads of the marginal characters in the story is evidence of thought and analysis, and of an aesthetic stance having taken place. In order to arrive at what a fictional character is thinking, Shane placed himself within the story and acted as inside observer and outside spectator in a back and forth within the fictional narrative.

Marie cuts in to the discussion give her own opinion about how she thinks they should have helped, even if they probably couldn't. According to Rosenblatt (1982), this moral offering, a disagreement with a social occurrence within the action of the text, is evidence of an aesthetic experience. To explain her viewpoint, Marie brings up an experiential comment about her time in a "foreign" restaurant and how the staff helped

her because she looked as if she needed it. With this comment she is stating that the waiters failed the Lin family by not helping them. Shane reacts, by once again defending the staff. He begins his statement by declaring a non-sequitur negation to Marie's statement, and explaining that they didn't react because they were shocked. Once again, he projects thoughts, expectations, desires, and shock onto the waiters.

In these few lines of dialogue, we see the layered thinking and expression that takes place during the literary interpretation and discussion process. We can see through his words that Shane, through a lived-through experience, spent time in that restaurant dining room, observing the situation, and feeling discomfort from the events that take place. We see him decipher the expressions of the faceless and mostly wordless waiters, read their thoughts, and attribute feeling, depth, and moral complexity to their actions and inaction. These observations reveal that there are layers and layers of complex spontaneous analyses that occur during the reading of a text. The reader has placed himself in a fictional social situation, experienced it according to the events, interpreted according to his own past experience and personal narrative, and retold it to others while arguing the integrity of the vague characters. These are all personifications that are a part of the world created from the transaction between reader and text (p. 270).

Discussion

Ms. Ladd led a very structured English Language Arts class, following scheduled lessons based on days of the week and time of the day. As I mentioned earlier, I was most interested in the literature discussion aspect of her class. As I was observing her classroom, I was not only paying attention to the everyday practices and talk around texts, both informational and fiction, but I was extra attentive to talk between students

which centered on fictional texts and the tactics and words used by the instructor to encourage those exchanges between students. I came to find during my observations that overall these exchanges between students and teachers alluding to fictional texts were few and far between. Ms. Ladd had mentioned introducing literature circles in the near future, but it seemed unlikely due to time constraints, testing preparation growing more rigorous, and the upcoming testing schedule. A few weeks into my research, she decided to introduce short stories as part of the writing block and this is when I began to see and hear students having more opportunities to talk openly about literature, informally during class as well as during allotted student-led discussion exercises.

A combination of the immersive power of short stories for struggling readers and an inclusive and safe environment for spontaneous reaction, discussion of ideas, and personal experiences motivated her students to become invested in the readings. The engagement was evident in the way the students responded during read alouds as well as their participation during fishbowl discussions. One way that I noticed through student talk that they were more immersed in the literature they were reading was that they began to insert themselves and their experiences in their own observations and perspectives about what they had read. For example, we see this happen with Marie when she talks about her prior experiences in restaurants. The implementation of short fiction in the curriculum in a way that allowed students to interact with the text in a multi-dimensional way, led to an immediate alteration in the way that students talked to one another. I expect that this would happen as well with novels and allotted discussion times, but in this case, short fiction and fishbowl discussions was an opportunity for the students to finish a piece of fiction and have a designated time to discuss it.

Before the fishbowl discussions, literature discussions were mostly limited to whole class teacher-led discussions, and turn and talk during lessons. The student-led fishbowl discussions gave the children a chance to build on each other's ideas and develop a layered conversation around an issue or a character in a story. Whereas before, the students were answering questions from the teacher, now in the fishbowl, they were responding to each other and developing conversations. For example, one day after the students had done their fishbowl discussion and finished their vocabulary lesson forty-five minutes later, I heard two students talking about the urban planning and socioeconomic factors of the story world in *The No Guitar Blues*. In the story, a boy named Fausto finds a dog named Roger and takes him back to his owners hoping to get a reward by lying and saying that he found him wandering by the freeway. Fausto thinks that Roger looks like the kind of dog who belongs to rich people because he has a shiny collar, tags, and he looks healthy and well fed. During the discussion, some of the students deduce that since there must be a freeway nearby and Roger is only six blocks away from his house, his owners must not be that rich since they live near a freeway.

> Shawn: Most freeways are near industrial stuff. Why would rich people live near a freeway?
>
> Natalie: I dunno. I think they gave him money when they thought he was poor.
>
> Shawn: Why do you think they knew he was poor?
>
> Natalie: 'Cause he told them where he lives.

This discussion began earlier that afternoon during the fishbowl but it had to end without being resolves due to time running out. Natalie and Shawn had picked it up again now that they had some free time after they were finished with their classwork and getting

ready to end the school day. They make astute observations about the neighborhoods of rich and poor people. Although, the couple that owns Roger have nice furniture and a big television set they only seem rich to Fausto, who actually comes from a lower socioeconomic class. When he tells the couple who own Roger that he lives by a vacant lot, the woman looks at Fausto and tells him he must be hungry. Shawn and Natalie are trying to work out why Fausto thought that the couple was rich and if they were, why they lived so close to a freeway next to factories. Natalie in response makes an observation about the nuanced text which subtly relays to the reader that the couple thought Fausto was poor and hungry because he was not White and lived in an undesirable neighborhood. Natalie doesn't say that in this excerpt, but during the fishbowl she stated that she thought the couple "felt bad" for Fausto.

The brief dialogue above illustrates that Shawn and Natalie were still thinking about the discussion their group had earlier in the day. Even forty-five minutes later they are still interested enough to bring it up again during their few minutes of free time. The student-led discussion allowed them to begin in-depth analysis of social and economic structures within the story. This all began with a ten minute session of student-led discussion. It spurred interest, curiosity, and a desire to analyze a text with the help of classmates. Even though Shawn and Natalie didn't have sufficient time to resolve their ideas about *The No Guitar Blues*, they remained in their thoughts along with a desire to know more.

Students are eager to discuss what they read, and they don't get many chances to do so during class instruction time. In Ms. Ladd's classroom teacher-led discussions were mostly structured in a way to aid comprehension during the brief instances between

reading and instruction. Due to time constraints, students were sometimes told to hold their questions for another time or to stick to the immediate topic. Ms. Ladd realized the importance of student-led discussions and that the preparation that comes with it is essential to processing texts and leaning how to interact with their peers. Early on in the study, she said:

> You know, the need to be able to express themselves, create questions and talk
> about literature. I wish I had more time. I wish I could do more things. I think it's
> really important that they foster conversations, learn to have conversations and
> you know, that it's okay to disagree with someone and not walk away like, "Arrr!
> He's mad!"

The short story units gave the students a space and time to bring up their self-constructed questions and to discuss them with their peers in a formal way, even if it was only for the ten-minute period of time reserved for the fishbowl discussions. The limitations of having students hold their questions for another time, is that spontaneity is quelled, students lose some of the wonder, excitement and interest if they must wait to the end of the week to share out their thoughts or observations. However, this does not mean, as evidenced by some of the conversations I witnessed, that these readers were not having aesthetic experiences and meaningful engagement with the texts and each other.

In this study I approached the term meaningful to indicate that some form of emotional or personal connection was inspired by the reading. To me this was indicated by a comment during a read-aloud, a desire to talk about it with others, or a question posed during a lesson. These responses to the readings often manifested as a desire to share a personal story, observing a reflection of self in the text demonstrated by

the reader recounting a memory of something that happened to them, or an event in their lives that they witnessed. In his work with African American adolescent male students Tatum (2014) compiled a list of ways that students determined that a text was meaningful to them. In the words of the students, some of the indicators were: I continued to think about after I finished it; made me think about moments in my life, I chose to talk about it with others; and I felt a connection with (it) (p. 36). Once a reader begins to connect the characters' experiences to their own, and vice versa the text has taken on some sort of meaning for them. Readers relate to the characters by recounting their own stories to explain why a character behaved a certain way or why events in the book unfolded the way they did. Rosenblatt (1982) explains that readers will make connections and begin to form moral opinions about characters during an aesthetic reading. These judgments and feelings are manifested orally during literature discussions becoming further elucidation of the reader's response during the aesthetic transaction.

Ms. Ladd stated that she could tell that students were making connections with books, not when they could recite facts, but when they started talking about the characters and events in the books as if they were people they knew, experiencing real events. She often referred to kids "getting hooked" on a book to describe when they found a text they wanted to keep reading on their own. This view is in line with Rosenblatt's (1995) idea that an efferent reading hinders connection through its goal to carry away details from a text, while an aesthetic reading is a meaningful reaction that leaves the reader free to grapple with their response. For Ms. Ladd, signs that a student was immersed in the story world of a book, making true-to-life connections, and talking about the experiences of the

characters was an indication that they were having a meaningful experience. Relating to the characters as if their situations were real indicated that they were "hooked."

Allotted peer-led discussion times are an important way in which manifestations of literary lived-through experiences can be expressed and developed. Students need a way to cultivate the ideas and experiences that come from engaging emotionally with text. Having conversations about fiction with peers is a productive way to do this. Ms. Ladd's classroom was an inclusive social literacy space. I observed that most students felt safe to express themselves and share personal observations and stories. Through the use of collaborative teaching and learning practices, her students were prepared to participate in peer-led discussions. They knew how to construct questions, express their ideas, and disagree in a civil way, however a time deficit remained an issue when it came to holding substantial peer-led discussion events.

During the months that I observed five cycles of short stories taught using SREs, I found that the shorter readings helped Ms. Ladd's student engage with the texts and participate in the discussion events. In addition, the students' increased participation during discussions can also be attributed to Ms. Ladd's efforts to provide an environment where the students felt that their experiences and opinions were valid. At the time of the study, Ms. Ladd shared a racial background with the majority of her students. She was born and raised in Central City not far from East Grove Academy and was a lifelong resident of the community in which her students lived. She was also a member of a local church in the community and attended at least once a week. Even though this was her first year teaching at East Grove, she taught for 17 years in a school just outside of East Grove's neighborhood. Living, working, and having been raised in the same community

as her students gave Ms. Ladd the experiences needed to attune to her students' cultural perspectives. She could relate to her students and could connect with many aspects of what life was like for them and how they might feel as outsiders in many situations including the classroom. She used this awareness and took measures to align the environment of her classroom and her curriculum to suit her students' backgrounds and needs. Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses that negative effects on African American children come from not "seeing their history, culture, or backgrounds represented in the textbooks or curriculum" (p.17).

While not all of the classroom textbooks or materials were entirely culturally applicable to the students, Ms. Ladd provided a classroom in which the students could see themselves reflected in the lessons and resources used in the classroom. In addition to reading short stories by diverse authors, the classroom was decorated with the slipcovers of books written by or about people of color. A majority of the covers depicted African American, characters. There was also art hanging in the classroom which portrayed African American students. Ms. Ladd used the times allotted for informational literacy to assign texts which introduced prominent current and historical African American figures who have made various contributions to society. The students learned about the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X, Henrietta Lacks, Maya Angelou, and their roles in American history. Additionally, Ms. Ladd also created lessons around contemporary celebrities that the students related to more closely. Among others, they discussed the philanthropic actions of Chance the Rapper, LeBron James, and the activism of Marley Dias who started the campaign #1000BlackGirlBooks. The students found it really inspiring that a kid their age could make such a difference and receive so much

recognition. A few days after they learned about Marley's campaign, I was interviewing a student and during a conversation about the power that books may have in changing biases in people, she brought up Marley's campaign saying:

> She collected books with Black characters and I feel that connects with people through fiction stories. And that's like a way of showing that if you have different races or if you have different point of views in here, it can teach kids what to do in the real world.

The student really connected with the lesson on Marley, recognizing the social change that could happen just by providing children with books that feature characters who are like them and whom they can relate to.

In contrast, some students talked to me about lessons that they were not inspired by or interested in. During another conversation with me about her likes and dislikes when it comes to reading a different student said "I really don't like historical things because if it doesn't connect, it doesn't apply to me, unless it's like oh, like Martin Luther King, then sometimes. Maybe about if it's like Black empowerment, I'll go for it." This African American student stated that she liked reading texts which she could relate to like those about Martin Luther King, or Black empowerment, however she relates most historical texts as not being ones she could connect with because they were not about the events that people like her had experienced. This is indicative of an issue with the amount of Black history studies that is generally prescribed for the American curriculum. Another African American student relayed the need for interesting and relevant subjects in the curriculum:

I need something to get my attention and with things like Amelia Earhart, yeah,

she's important, but she didn't really get my whole full attention, like some

things, I just need um, to work on that like, not everything's gonna interest you so

you just need to step up and just deal with it.

This student had moved frequently, attended many different schools, and had many

different teachers. She had come to see learning in some cases as something to be

tolerated in spite of disinterest or a lack of connection to the subject.

Ms Ladd's students were always on her mind. During my interviews our

interviews she usually answered questions or spoke with them in consideration. Even

when I asked her questions about her own literacy habits, her answers would ultimately

be framed around her students. For example, she told me that if she has time she will read

during her lunch break if only for a few minutes so that her students can see her with a

book in hand and reading.

Ms. Ladd's collaborative teaching and learning methods were the foundation of

building an environment in which her students could learn to speak about ideas together

in a respectful way. This courteous method of academic discussion was one of Ms.

Ladd's goals for her students and she taught then to disagree with each other in a civil

way. In addition, she would be a teacher to some of these students for the next three years

since some of them were sixth graders. Ms. Ladd displayed foresight by building a

community of readers whose skills would steadily improve under her instruction for the

next few years. She often told me that one of her main objectives was to help students

find that book, author, and then genre that would "hook" the student to a lifelong love of

reading. Ms. Ladd's first year teaching at East Grove was one in which she began to build the foundations to achieve these goals with her students.

Implications for Further Research

There is a need for further classroom research which examines the complexity of learning how children process fictional texts, and the conversations that they have about literature. Understanding how children experience and interpret fiction can lead to changes in policy design to make it easier for teachers to dedicate more time to fulfilling and more validating reading instruction, with more time for processing and discussing texts.

Textual analysis of the dialogues of student literature discussions can provide a means to examine the processes and layers that occur during reader response, interpretation, and the continuous re-living and re-creation of the literary world through the story-making and interpretation that occurs during literature discussions. This exploratory study gave rise to questions such as: How do children experience and explain the lived-through experiences from the worlds created in the transaction with the text? How and why do readers stay true to situations they encounter in fiction when they discuss them with their peers, and what does it look like in their interpreted story world, when their perspectives begin to change through talk with their peers? Reading can be seen as a social practice. When left to talk about the things that they read, children will often bring up topics to discuss that they might not when prompted by a teacher or during open class discussion. These unique conversations may guide teachers in their curriculum planning and pedagogical methods for future classes. Further classroom studies of such

discussions can begin to answer some of the aforementioned questions which are

imperative in learning how students critically navigate social and systemic issues.

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The Art of Literacy: Creativity, Solace, and Self-Actualization in the Everyday

Practices of Three African American Adolescent Girls

Introduction

It is the penultimate week of class for the middle school students at East Grove Academy. Some of them will be graduating and moving on to high school, others will come back next year to take their place and others yet are just finishing up their first year as junior high school students. It is an exciting and momentous time for all of them. The school talent show is taking place this afternoon and the students are excited to share their creative sides with their peers and teachers. Yolanda and her friend Shawn are practicing their dance routine in the hallway, while Shirley writes in her notebook, making last minute changes for her poetry slam performance. Daria sits chatting with her friends in class and when I ask her if she's excited about her song that she's singing tonight, she says that she'll be fine and doesn't need to practice because it's all in here, as she motions toward her heart.

Students preparing and performing for the talent show was one of the few times that I witnessed students in school sharing their personal literacy skills with their peers and teachers. It has been documented that often children and adolescents do not get enough opportunities to use their literacy skills in personal and creative ways in the classroom (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Muhammad, 2012; Tatum, 2010; Williams, 2013). Moreover, students often express desire to share the products of their out-of-class literacy skills in school, but there is rarely time or occasion to do so. These skills are varied and include creative writing, poetry, stories, song writing, and participation in the vast story worlds of video, card, or board games.

A study by Rogers and Elias (2012) found that young children already associate reading in different ways accordingly whether done at home or at school. The children mainly thought of reading as a collaborative activity regardless of where it was done, at home or at school. According to Rogers and Elias, the children came to see reading as being tied to "behaviors, rules, and procedures" (p. 278). Reading at home was associated with positive relationships, while reading at school was "a de-contextualized activity, connected with grades, work and comprehension questions" (p. 277).

In the present study, I focus on the voluntary and out-of-school literacy habits of three eighth grade girls from an urban public school in the Midwest. By voluntary literacy, I mean literacy practices that are chosen by the students during unstructured personal time. These practices are not done as part of a homework assignment or for a grade. I explore the roles that these habits play in the lives of the participants.

This article follows in the tradition of studies that observe the out-of-school and unstructured literacy habits of adolescents (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Moje et al. 2008; Richardson & Eccles, 2007) and is guided by the following questions:

1. What roles do reading and writing play in the daily lives of adolescent girls?

2. How do reading and writing become meaningful to adolescent girls?

3. In what ways do adolescent girls see themselves as readers and writers?

Theoretical Lens

It is safe to say that when we write we put a lot of ourselves into the words we relay on paper or screen. Just as we interact with texts when we read by applying our experiences and social environment in the act of interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1982; 1995),

we do the same when we write. Writing is one of the major components in the triad of reading, writing, and discussion of text. It is a logical step that follows from text interpretation whether the catalyst comes from reading paper, screen, environments or the world.

Drawing from transactional theory, I look to the works of Louise Rosenblatt (1988) to build upon studies that explore the voluntary literacy habits of adolescents. Rosenblatt's view is that the reader and text are always in mutual interaction in a process to gain as well as give meaning to text. This personal interplay of reader and words also applies when it comes to writing. Rosenblatt sees reading and writing as catalyst and support to one another. She writes, "The writer discovers the need to read in order to enlarge knowledge and experience, and the reader is moved to record, express, and clarify ideas and feelings that flow from reading" (p.11).

I approach this study with the idea that we bring our selves, our experiences, communities, and perspectives to every creative or social transaction. These selves are in flux, ever changing by our environments, institutions and their practices, as well the people in it. Rosenblatt (1988) reminds us that "human activity is always in transaction, in a reciprocal relationship, with an environment, a context, a total situation" (p. 12). We process these read or lived experiences by writing or talking about them with others.

Children's personal literacy habits often are called out-of-school practices, and these are taken to mean that they are performed outside of the instruction of the classroom and therefore, formal education. However, although these practices are performed outside of instruction they are still very much embedded and informed by the environment of the classroom, and community that make up the social world of the

student. Just as the student brings the whole self, home, neighborhood, and her experiences to the learning environment of the classroom, she also brings the understandings of the classroom, the institution, and the transactions within it to her reading and writing events.

Literature Review

The field of literacy and adolescent at-home literacy practices is vast and there are many tangents and documented studies following the personal literacy habits of adolescents (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Lewis,1998; Skerrett &Bomer, 2011;). A great many of them include digital literacies (Williams, 2006) which focus on online book clubs, and blogs; fan fiction sites (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Black, 2005) as well as social media and video games (Steinkuehler, 2010). Others focus on popular culture (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Lewis, 1998) in the literacy practices of adolescents.

In this section I build a literature review based on three aspects of literacy practices that include features of personal literacies consistent with the present study. The topics discuss studies which explore: the roles that personal literacy plays in the lives of adolescents, the way that these personal literacies shape identity, and the missing opportunities for adolescents to share their out-of-school literacy skills in the classroom.

Adolescents, Voluntary Reading, and Choice

Richardson and Eccles (2007) describe voluntary reading as the "reading that children and adolescents do for their own entertainment, information, and pleasure" (p. 342). Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) cite Mellon (1990) to define leisure reading, another term often used to describe literacy that is voluntary or takes place out-of-school

as "the reading that students choose to do on their own, as opposed to reading that is assigned to them" (p. 22). Park (2012) states that oftentimes "out-of-school engagement with texts involves activities and moves that differ significantly from most in-school practices" (p. 208). The main aspect of voluntary or leisure reading is that reading that is done on your own terms is reading that is free of rules, regulations, or assessment. It cannot be right or wrong, so there are no stresses related to achievement or failure.

The Roles of Personal Literacies

Adolescents use writing and reading for a number of different reasons and purposes. Lewis (1998) argues that students read outside of school as a way of participating in popular culture, group identities, and social circles. For example, in her study she explains how one girl in a popular group at school, tells her that another girl is left out of many conversations because she does not read a certain series of books that the group of girls likes discussing. Lewis explains that reading that particular series of books afforded the girls a social status and connection between them. In addition, in a study about what motivates urban youth to read, Moje et al. (2008) argue that adolescents read and write as a means to gain social capital, which allows them to perform identities, and self-actualize.

Finders' (1996) seminal piece on the roles of literacies in one junior high school between social groups of adolescent girls portrayed a vast and complicated status system which she calls "literate underlife", an oppositional movement that goes against the sanctioned practices of adults in authority. This system comprised both reading and writing to communicate, storytell, rank, and classify a number of social actions and people. These actions included note writing and passing, including and excluding others,

labeling people, and participation during lessons in class. In this case the young girls were using literacy to police what they deemed as socially acceptable or unacceptable as a means to membership in specific popular circles.

Strommen and Mates (2004) interviewed middle and high school students and found that many of the students who considered themselves readers said that simply "reading was a worthwhile way to spend leisure time because it was pleasurable" (p. 198). In her study about student songwriters, Williams (2013) found that students reported many uses for writing outside of school spaces including "writing to communicate, to relate to others, to preach, to create awe or inspiration, to fulfill themselves, to escape, or to vent" (p. 372). These students also saw reading and writing as a social medium, but as a way to create connection rather than control. It is based more on personal fulfillment and mutual experience.

Literacy Practices and Identity Shaping

Middle school is a transitional time for adolescents in which they explore and try on different identities as they grow older and find their place in society. Tatum (2008, 2014) discusses textual lineage and the importance that books have on adolescent identity development. He explains how "adolescents find texts meaningful and significant when they tap one of their identities" (p. 84). In a study of Black adolescent boys and textual relevance Sciurba (2014) reports the importance of adolescents reading books that they can relate to which will touch on multiple aspects of the reader's identity. She also found that these aspects which students find relevant and relatable, change over time as they grow older and develop new and different traits. Tatum (2008) states that these changes may be developed by meaningful and touching literature that allows readers to see

themselves in new and different ways. Tatum (2014) defines meaningful texts as books that restore belief in "texts as tools of human progress and development" (p. 45). He argues that many of the texts that African American boys and young men encounter in schools are "disabling" in that they "reinforce students' perceptions as struggling readers" (p. 37). In his study, in which he questioned African American male adolescents about meaningful texts, students described the effects of such texts using words such as "encouraged me," "showed me," and "helped me realize," among others.

Muhammad (2012) leads a writing institute for Black adolescent girls in an urban environment. She informs her teaching by looking to the literary practices of Black women in the 1800s who read "enabling" meaningful texts to hone their literacy skills. According to Muhammad, the women used literacy acts to "counter misrepresentation, dominance, authority," (p. 205) and the harsh conditions they endured. They believed that through reading and writing, they could improve their lives and those of others.

Missed Connections Between Students and Curriculum

Young people use literacy to make sense of their everyday lives and simultaneously engage in a variety of "texts, practices, and experiences" to "read, write, and, speak themselves into the texts" (Moje, 2002; p. 22). Writing plays an important part in identity and literacy development but Tatum (2010) argues that often, the writing adolescents are asked to do in school does not meet their personal needs.

Potter, McCormick, and Busching (2001) found that students framed their writing around their impending identity of adulthood. Furthermore, these same students stated the importance of curriculum standards not colliding with their identities and letting them express who they are in class writing assignments. On the other hand, in a study about

how Black girls can rewrite the social narratives and identities that are imposed upon them by others, Muhhamad (2012) relates the ways in which Black girls conceal themselves when they write in school to meet curriculum standards and the expectations of their teachers.

Broughton and Fairbanks (2003) argue that since literacy provides instances to respond to their own and others' life experiences, by nature it encourages the exploration of identities (p. 433). However, in their study about middle school girls' literacy and identity development, they found that the curriculum afforded few literacy opportunities for the students that were meaningful in any way. Luttrell and Parker (2001) found that students are aware of the rift between school-based literacies and their personal literacy practices and that they use these dichotomies to "form their identities within, and sometimes in opposition to, these figured worlds of school, work and family" (p.201).

In their study on the motivations of gifted adolescent writers, Garret & Moltzen (2011) found that curriculum and assessment practices dampened the student's innate desire to write. For example, students reported that their personal writing was inspired by their imaginations, dreams and fantasies, but the writing they were asked to do in school was based on the thoughts and feelings concerning the everyday world of adults. This dichotomy of interest led to a dwindling sense of personal motivation when it came to writing creative pieces outside of school. Similarly in a study on how young people relate to their personal writing projects, Olthouse (2012) relates that students associated creative writing with "individuality, freedom, and imagination," but linked academic writing with "structure, obedience, and perfection" (p. 75).

Many of the studies in this literature review discuss the voluntary and out-of-school literacy habits of adolescents by identifying the practices, and looking at creative processes and products. The studies also focused on how these practices conflicted with in-school requirements or could be used to improve curricula. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) conducted a survey of the leisure reading habits of low-income urban youth specifically because they wanted to give a voice to a demographic of students whose reading preferences had rarely been heard. They found that 78% of females were more likely than males (64%) to read for pleasure. The present study follows and expands on Hughes-Hassell and Rodge's survey, not only by exploring what urban adolescent females like to read, but allowing them to tell their in depth stories about how reading and writing affect them personally on a daily basis. This study also develops the discussion by exploring how literacy practices serve three adolescent girls in their daily lives by purposefully using reading and writing to fulfill personal needs and accomplish creative and emotional goals.

Methodology

Why Narrative Inquiry?

This qualitative study focuses on the personal literacy habits of middle school students. I drew from narrative inquiry, which allowed me to use semi-structured interviews with the students as they explored who they are as readers and writers through personal anecdotes and narratives. The ways that adolescents engage in literacy is very much tied to who they are and who they wish to be. I chose narrative inquiry as a method because it allows for in depth interviews amenable to personal histories and experiences revealed through conversation. These exchanges allow for introspection on the

participant's side and also result in opportunities for close and detailed listening for the researcher resulting in a rich source of data. Furthermore, conducting interviews in the school setting where the participants spend so much of their time sharing in the systemic practices of their educational institution allows for examination of the contrasts between the narratives of their school and home communities. The literacy experiences in educational settings, which are regulated by school practices and curriculum often conflict with at-home literacy practices. When students bring these different experiences together in their narratives during interviews it adds a complexity for both participant and researcher. These experiences brought out in story form during interviews, provide opportunities to examine the practices which comprise their literacy identities in the different contexts of their daily lives inside and outside the classroom.

The interviews involved a lot of talk about their day-to-day activities around literacy. Pasupathi and Weeks (2010) propose that storytelling is a way that adolescents construct identity. As they recount their experiences, they make connections to self. The storytelling aspect of narrative inquiry also helps the researcher and the student make sense of these everyday habits and identity aspects by examining them through the story narratives. When you ask people to talk about their every day lives they often talk about events or rituals that we take for granted. Bell (2002) explains that "Narrative lets researchers get at information that people do not consciously know themselves. Analysis of people's stories allows deeply hidden assumptions to surface" (p. 209).

The conversational aspects of narrative inquiry interviews encouraged the participants to talk about their habits, and how these practices reflect who they are as well as the trajectories they are taking for their future selves. The stories and details that the

participants relay are not random and are told for reasons that they think are important to the conversations in the moment or to the interplay between them and the researcher. Narrative inquiry is a natural and intuitive way of allowing the participants to talk about themselves and their everyday practices without feeling that they have to fulfill an expected role.

Data Generation, Collection, and Analyses

During the span of five months, I spent five days a week with an average of four hours a day in two of Ms. Ladd's sixth through eighth grade English Language Arts (ELA) classes. Each class had 28-30 students. This study concentrates on the literacy habits of three individual students from these classes. Two of the students were in the afternoon ELA class, and one was in the morning class. The students were three of nine total students who volunteered to participate in the study and consented to be interviewed. The students' parents and guardians consented to their participation as well. My primary sources of data were observation, field notes, and interviews.

During my classroom observations, I took field notes and audio recordings from a table at the side of the classroom. I often took on the role of participant observer in which I helped pass out books, took questions, and assisted the students with worksheets. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that participant observation "permits the researcher to hear, to see, and to begin to experience reality as the participants do" (p.100). In addition to becoming acclimated to the routines and community of the classroom, the students became used to my presence and came to me with questions about classwork, and included me in their conversations with one another. They also engaged in prohibited actions such as passing notes, playing with toys, and games behind their desks in front of

me during lessons. These actions indicated to me that I was not seen as one of the classroom's authority figures.

My field notes focused on students' behaviors, comments, demeanors and classroom participation. I also took notes on the classroom space, daily curriculum, and teacher practices. I often recorded my own reflections of the days' events and research processes.

I used two semi-structured interviews with the students to talk about their reading and writing habits. According to Polkinghorne (2005), during the interview process: "The researcher is interested in gaining a rich and inclusive account of the participant's experience" (p. 142). For my second round of interviews I focused on expanding the answers from the first, with space left for new tangents of narrative. These formal interviews took place with students individually on two separate occasions ranging from 50 to 75 total minutes. The interviews took place in the school library across the hall from Ms. Ladd's classroom or in the cafeteria during off hours. These meetings occurred during times when the students were free, or had finished their work for the class period. Informal conversations took place throughout the day during class, lunch, or passing periods.

I began analyses of the data by carefully listening to and transcribing the recordings of the interviews. I read over them carefully, line by line, taking notes and looking for patterns and themes. This first cycle of coding was descriptive (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Saldaña, 2003) and established broad overall themes in the students' literacy habits. These initial codes were tied to actions, routines, and other types of concrete practices. My second cycle of coding determined subjective signs of literacy tied

to personal identity, which indicated practices that were more particular to the individual students in terms of how they connected with the students' hobbies or activities. I combined these separate larger chunks of descriptive codes and examined them once again. In this focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) I began to see patterns developing in terms of the students' uses of literacy toward certain purposes and desires. Some examples of codes emerging from these patterns centered around self-image, soothing emotions, learning from past actions, future plans, belonging, validation, inspiration, and sharing. I further read the interview transcriptions and reexamined these codes in reference to student narratives and determined a set of categories revolving around the practices and uses of the participants' literacy habits. I collapsed the codes according to theme and ended up with three categories consisting of creativity, comfort, and membership.

Setting and Context

East Grove Academy (All names of people and places have been provided with pseudonyms) is a pre-K through eighth grade magnet cluster math and science academy located in Central City, a major metropolitan city in the midwestern U.S. East Grove is located on the periphery of Downing Hill, an old and affluent neighborhood which is home to a prestigious university attended by students from all over the world. East Grove is located in the northernmost section of Downing Hill, overlapping with Rosecraft neighborhood, which is primarily African American, with a median income of $44,000 (Central City Website, 2017). Most of the students who attended East Grove resided in Rosecraft.

At the time of this study 86% of students at East Grove were African American and 10% were Latino. Seventy seven percent of students received free or reduced lunch

(East Grove Academy website, 2017). All of the students I worked with were middle school students who identified as Black/African American, and/or Muslim American. The classroom teacher, Ms. Ladd also identified as African American.

Middle school classes were held on the second floor with the students going to different classrooms and teachers for each subject and homeroom. The students had many opportunities to socialize throughout the school day in between classes, and during lunch which most took in the cafeteria or brought back to Ms. Ladd's classroom. She kept her classroom open during lunch and it was a popular place for the students to talk and socialize while as they ate. The participants in this study were all students in Ms. Ladd's English Language Arts classroom.

When I first came to East Grove Academy, the United States had just inaugurated its 45th president. Following this inauguration, there had been a rash of deportations and targeting of Muslim Americans, as well as other people of color. Government officials were openly showing white supremacist affiliation and action. People of color became afraid, seeing how others who looked like them were being treated openly in society, in airports, on the street, and in their communities. Concern for everyday safety was growing and people were becoming visibly anxious and depressed. This is something that came up in class and even with some of the students I interviewed. Although this study is not about the effects of this unstable and fearful time, I do think it is important to mention the context of the time. All of the students that I observed and interviewed were people of color, including one Muslim student who had lost one family member to deportation. I want to contextualize that a lot of these students were feeling threatened and unsafe by the new U.S. administration. This fear was not entirely new as there had also been many

cases of police brutality against Black men and women in recent years, but recent events had intensified concerns. Being an adolescent during a time when people who look like you are being targeted by those in power is enough to make anyone feel unsafe and distrustful of those who are supposed to keep you safe and provide a secure environment.

Findings

During coding of the transcriptions and notes from my field observations I found that students really enjoyed talking about their personal literacy habits and that they used reading and writing in a number of different ways and for different purposes. Instead of being a passive activity of consumption, the students were actively using what may appear at first glance to be mundane everyday literacy practices as a means to an end. From their descriptions, three categories emerged stemming from the roles that personal reading and writing played for the students in the study. The students talked about connections between reading and writing as: 1. creative release, 2. comfort, or a way to cope with mental stresses which may include loss, change, and daily stresses; and 3. membership, or a means to gain acceptance in certain communities. These categories are manifested in different ways for different students but their results and goals were similar in the end for each of the categories in this study. I found that for some students these three aspects worked as part of a system to achieve a means of belonging, maintaining self as part of a community, as well as acceptance and friendship. Through the keeping of journals, diaries, writing fictional prose and poetry, as well as reading books and religious documents, students used reading and writing as ways to cope with daily personal, familial, and academic stressors. Through these acts of reading and writing, they also

composed creative pieces, built and maintained senses of self, and forged connections with groups and communities.

In this section I concentrate on three students whom I found provided good representation of the overall data set from the study. First, I begin with separate descriptions of the experiences and background of each student. Next, I show connections to the dominant categories that have emerged from the coding. Finally, I draw comparisons between all of the participants and further elucidate on the results in the discussion section.

Daria

Reading and Writing as a Means of Comfort and Coping

At the time of the study Daria, a Muslim American eighth grade student was preparing to graduate in the spring. She was one of the first students to express interest in participating in the study. I noticed her right away during my first days observing Ms. Ladd's class because she received a lot of attention from the other students in the class from both girls and boys. I later attributed her popularity in part to her being 15 years old and the oldest student in class. She explained:

> I had to repeat sixth grade because some of my transitions, I was not used to this. See I'm not really used to Central City schools. Cause I'm not, it's my first time going to a Central City school. So, I had to repeat that one, so that's one, two, then seventh grade then eighth grade, so that's technically four years.

This was Daria's fourth year at East Grove. Up to that point in her life, she had experienced much instability in her life which caused her to move around to different family members' households. She called these movements "transitions." She states that

having to acclimate yet again, to a new environment and school caused her to repeat the sixth grade.

East Grove Academy was the eleventh school that Daria had attended up to that point in her life. She explained that living in so many different households in different states throughout her life has been hard on her. She goes on to say that her mother was very young when she had her. She says her aunts and grandmother have raised her, but that her aunt has three boys and finds it difficult to raise a girl.

> I transferred because, before I came to Central City I lived with my other aunt and my uncle and my cousins, the four boys, um, and my grandmother but she passed away. And then I had to come back to Central City because my auntie didn't know how to deal with a girl. She had four boys, so 'cause I was a headache too, I had to come back to my auntie I live with now and my uncle and their kids. So, yeah, um, and then mostly my whole life my grandmother and my brother raised me because my mom had me too young, like [she's] 28 now. And then my uncle passed away the same year that my grandma passed away. I've lived everywhere but with my mom or my father, so it's just like really stressful.

In addition to living with many different family members, Daria has seen some of them pass away, and another aunt deported to her home country. She says that all of this stress and loss is what pushes her to write down her thoughts. She points to the notebook she carries around with her and says:

> Yeah. And I have my own diary and I like writing things down and like and if I hurt my feelings or whatever, I write it down because I know I really can't tell

everybody how I feel cause they might judge or whatever. And I don't have time for that. So I write it and um yeah.

Before Daria began writing lyrics to her songs, she wrote her thoughts down in a diary. She explains that she was going through a difficult time and acting out when her aunt suggested writing her thoughts down as a way to deal with her feelings. The notebook that Daria points to, is the one that I see her carrying around with her everywhere she goes. It's a blue spiral notebook that looks like it could be dedicated to any school subject. In it she writes her thoughts and ideas for songs, though she says that she keeps a separate one to write her song lyrics. She tells me that she likes to keep her notebook "close." She explains how writing has helped her manage her emotions:

> That's why I write so much. Like I brought my book now (laughs). I dunno. That's just me… I used to hold it in myself, but then I learned that you can't do that because then you gonna go crazy. And then you're gonna start acting different from what your personality is, so I just started writing. That's what my auntie suggested. That's the situation I live in now.

Daria sees writing as a way to release her emotions in a safe way. She can let out her thoughts and feelings without a fear of being shamed or embarrassed by anyone. She has insight into her emotional needs and finds that writing is an effective way to keep a stable sense of self and as she states "personality." For her, writing is a useful tool that takes the place of a confidante.

When I asked Daria if she considered herself to be a reader she answered, "It depends on the story." When I question what she means, she says that she likes mysteries and horror books because they "keep your mind going." She says she used to read more

when she was younger, but that it's harder since she has had to move around a lot and leave her books behind. She tells me that books bring her comfort:

Daria: I use reading to calm me down like that.

BM: How does that help?

Daria: I dunno, because like when you read a story, like for example, I believe it was called the *Vampire Twins*? All I remember to be honest, is I loved that book all the time. It was with me all the time. And it was like, it gives me other people's perspectives on different dimensions. Like oh this happened to you? What's the way you solved it? And then I would get books that related to my situation and I would read off their ways, their solutions, and stuff like that. And I'll take that, and I'll do what they did. And it would help me.

BM: Oh, so you would actually do it in real life?

Daria: Yeah even though it was dramatic or whatever, it helped me.

Daria related to the characters and the issues that they faced. She felt a kinship with them because they were going through problems as well and yet they found ways to solve them and move on. She looked to them for guidance as a way to get through her hardships. In a way, these characters became friends that she could relate to and learn from.

Daria not only found comfort in the words and scenarios depicted in the stories of the books, she also found security by physically carrying the book around with her. The characters and their experiences reminded her that she was not alone and that she could look to their issues for help when she needed it. Similarly, Daria carried her journal with her everywhere as well. The book and the journal became items of security for her and provided a constancy that she might not have felt in other aspects of her life.

These days Daria considers herself to be more of a writer, but she takes prompts from books still. She tells me that she has a few books of the *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* series and the looks to those books for guidance and comfort. When I ask her how those books help her she explains:

> 'Cause it's like, I'm a teenager now. It's like, okay, I could relate to these situations. And so, I write about those. If I have a situation just like those, I write about it. Then I'll feel better about it. 'Cause like, I'm telling my own self, like, okay you found what to do, or whatever.

She further explains about how they hit close to home for her, "But if the person dealing with mom problems or whatever then maybe I'll kinda get emotional." Daria takes cues from the stories of others' hardships and uses them to alleviate her own pain. In the same way that she found solutions consulting the fictional characters in the *Vampire Twins*, she is finding comfort hearing the real stories found in the non-fiction series. She finds a kinship from reading about others' experiences with their mothers. By writing her own narrative in the style of those that she reads in the Chicken Soup books, Daria is essentially rewriting her experience and taking control of her situations. She then takes her own counsel and tries to solve her problem. She told me that being able to write about difficult situations helps ground her. Reading and writing have taught her how to cope with some of the difficult issues in her life.

Membership/Connection

Daria uses her writing to navigate relationships with those around her. She writes a story to one of the boys in the class and takes pleasure when he tells her she should be

an author. She sees herself as an author and she tries to make a connection with him through her story. She says:

> I dunno. I just like writing, because I remember my friend, he was talking, like two days ago. I wrote him like a little story, like a quick story and 'cause, I write anything that comes to my mind. And then I was like just thinking of it and I started writing it, and then I sent it to him. And he was like (in a deeper voice) you should be a, a, um a author, or whatever. I'm like!

At this point Daria's face lights up and with a huge smile. She looks very proud and pleased that someone she likes sees her talent and calls her an author, something she already identifies as. She sees it a something to take pride in and she is validated by her friend's acknowledgement of her talent, and also by her sharing the story with me and therefore making it even more real.

Creativity and Community

The creative aspect of literacy for Daria manifested in different ways. First, there was her writing which took the form of journal writing, stories and poetry, but also lyric writing for songs. Daria belonged to an established choir group that was located in Central City. The choir traveled across the country to perform for different events. Daria wrote songs that were sometimes performed at these occasions. She explains why she enjoys songwriting and singing:

> I love singing! I know this is about reading but (laughs), I'm just giving you some background! I love singing 'cause it's like, I could put all of my feelings in one song, and I'm a songwriter too. I made a lot of songs.

Daria beams as she talks about songwriting and singing. She feels that it is an essential part of who she is and she wants me to know that. The choir provides a constancy and structure that Daria appreciates. She tells me how the choir meets every Monday and Wednesday and that she always looks forward to those days. Songwriting provides Daria with access and membership to this community that she feels proud to be a part of. It also gives her the identity of being a songwriter which she embraces and admits to without hesitation.

Yolanda

Yolanda is a sweet and animated, cheerful eighth grader. She identifies as Black. She is usually one of the first to speak up in class and has a lot to say during discussions. She is opinionated yet, appoints herself moderator of peer group discussions when there isn't one, just to make sure that "everyone gets a chance to speak and there are no awkward silences." Yolanda gesticulates and makes a lot of sounds when she talks, to get her point across. She likes to punctuate her speech with sound effects to relay a point or how she feels about something, or to evoke a memory and how she felt at the time. When she says something she feels is wrong or deems to be mischievous, she whispers her words. For example, she comes close and whispers to me that tap is the only dance she doesn't do because she tried it when she was eight and it "didn't work out." Yolanda is a trained dancer. She is tall and slender and athletic. Her family members are dedicated followers of a prominent religion and she is very invested in her religious studies.

Yolanda comes from a large family and she is the youngest of four siblings by six years. Her brother and sisters attended pre-K through eighth grade at East Grove Academy. She has also been a student there since pre-K and so feels a special connection

to the school, the teachers, and her fellow students. Even though Yolanda is sad about graduating and leaving the East Grove community behind, she is also looking forward to high school and the new experiences that come with it.

Writing for Comfort and Meaning

Yolanda has a very rich and full extra-curricular life. She is on the student committee, is active in her church, is a lifeguard at a local swimming pool, and she is a serious student of dance. Though she gets to sneak a book in here and there, she tells me that she doesn't get much time to read during her few off-hours. However, she says that she sees writing as a necessity as it helps her reflect and process the everyday stresses and emotions that come with such a busy life. Rosenblatt (1988) believes that we "make sense" of new situations, by reaching into our past experiences and knowledge, to make new meanings through writing and the reorganizing, revising, and deliberation process that it entails (p. 1366). Yolanda uses writing to process the feelings that come from being so busy and active in her school and community.

Yolanda writes poetry as a way to manage powerful emotions. She tells me that some members of her family have had issues with confronting and expressing anger. She explains that writing has helped her process these feelings and that it is how she automatically tackles her discomfort these days. "I write poems all the time. When I'm mad, when I'm sad, when I'm bored. It's just something I go to." She describes writing as a place or refuge where she can go and clear her head and process her feelings. In the following excerpt she explains how she feels about her impending graduation and the bittersweet feelings of leaving East Grove, a place she's known for the last ten years. She says:

Most of my stuff is like sad. I dunno. Cause, just graduating, I'm like "I can't

write anything happy." Cause like, I don't wanna leave the school. So I'm just

writing all like sad, like I'll miss you stuff and like, I don't wanna do this!

Yolanda writes about her sadness at having to leave East Grove as a way to express the

words she doesn't want to say aloud, and confront something she doesn't want to do.

These feelings are further complicated by the fact that she is the last of her siblings to

attend East Grove and therefore the last link and membership to a community that has

been a part of her family over the course of two decades. Just as East Grove is a place of

comfort, writing in her diary is also a place she can go to for refuge. Writing about

upsetting situations helps her process them and defuse the strong feelings that come with

the event before it actually happens.

Yolanda tells me about the different journals that she keeps:

I have two different journals, well, three different journals. One is like rough

drafts. So it's my poems. And then one is like permanent poems that I finished

and I wrote them down and I signed it and put the date on it. And, I mean, that's

like final. And then the other journal is just like a daily journal, where I write

what happened, because in my church they want us to like, do this and like just

write up what happened through your day and like gospel stuff. But most is just

how my day went if I'm mad then hmmmm, or if I'm like sad and write too, or if

I'm a mixture of it, then I can write, mmmkay.

Yolanda keeps an intricate system of writing according to her needs. One is for

stress and coping with anger and emotions, it is an ongoing log of her feelings as she is

experiencing them and working through them. The second one is indicative of a

resolution of particular feelings connected to a moment or event which sparked the moment of creativity. This journal holds those poems and creative results as indicators of resolved conflicts. The third journal, she says is to keep a log for reflection and religious practice. She explains that the church asks its members to write about their day and reflect on their thoughts. This type of writing is a ritual that keeps her connected to and is part of the membership practices of her religious community. The separate tiers tie in with the various types of writing that Yolanda does for different reasons. Each of these practices accomplish specific and deliberate purposes to accommodate different states of mind, desires, and end goals ranging from emotional soothing, creative release, and community membership.

Reading as a Social Event and Community Membership

Yolanda sees reading as a very social thing. She trades and shares books with her friend in the class, Amanda. They both like "teen dramas" and they like to talk about them together. During book fairs they won't buy the same books so they can have more books to trade with each other. She describes herself and her friends as "fiction people." She says that she and her friends like to read realistic fiction. When I ask her what her favorite part about reading fiction is, she explains:

> I like the conversations, when I get to ask my friends how, what are their views on the book. Or have like questions, like "Oh, what's the theme?" or "How would you describe this person?" like seeing how they see the character in a point of view I usually don't see. 'Cause usually when you see a character in something you have a strong opinion like, "Oh. No. I know this for sure." But then they have

a strong opinion about something else. And then you get to explore different

things.

Yolanda explained to me that she really enjoyed class discussions for the same reasons of

getting to see how one's own beliefs and perspectives change on a piece of fiction when

seen through the eyes of others during discussions. She also saw class discussions as a

time to share her thoughts about current events, and to talk about how the characters

experienced social issues. At the same time she talked about reading and discussion as

something she liked to do with her friends inside and outside of school. She saw

discussing literature as a very essential part of the literary process. Yolanda tells me that

reading keeps her tied to her church:

> But it was pretty nice to read cause reading is a thing where you get to connect. A
>
> lot of my friends read in the church and like Hunger Games, uh Divergent. A lot
>
> of the movie series that came out. I read, because those are kind of like action,
>
> and I'm like oooh action!

Reading and writing helped Yolanda forge and maintain ties with her church. She

likes to talk about the popular books she reads and also watch and discuss the subsequent

movies with her church peers. She also reads church publications as a part of reading

challenges that the church holds. She discusses these readings with other members on a

scheduled monthly basis. These events are especially important to her because she

explains that many of the members of her church, including her siblings end up going to

the same college. This college is located over a thousand miles in another state, away

from Central City. These reading discussions are all an investment into a community that

will continue and pay off later, when she is attending university a great distance away.

Once Yolanda is on her own and away from her family, she will still have her church community to look to for support.

Shirley - "Not everything at age fourteen is bubblegum and unicorns."

Shirley is an extremely precocious eighth grader who is seriously invested in reading and writing. She is outspoken and sometimes gets into trouble in class and has to be reminded not to move around so much or talk out of turn. She is occasionally sent out of the room for a time out. Shirley identifies as African American. She is tall and her hairstyles are ever changing. She likes to dress in pastel colors and wears colorful knee socks with many of her outfits. She always carries a book with her wherever she goes, along with a notebook in which to write her thoughts.

Shirley's classmates tease her sometimes, but she doesn't seem to let it bother her. She acts as if she didn't hear what was said or doesn't care. She said she feels like she is the wrong age, born in the wrong time. She loves reading and talking about books:

The smell of new paper! I'm just like, I'm such an old soul! I love old music, black and white movies! Just a lot!

When I ask her if she ever talks about her writing with her schoolmates she says:

Mostly with kids my age, they don't really like to hear about it…I'm just like, "when I get older and your child reads one of my books, you'll remember me!"

She talks more about her ideas concerning people her age and reading:

I wish we had a book club here, but I don't think a lotta kids like to read, like at eighth grade or seventh grade. They don't want to read, like actually read.

Shirley believes that actually reading means immersing oneself in a book and taking it apart. To her this means deconstructing the plot, characters, narrative, as well as

the author's writing techniques. She doesn't seem to think that other people her age engage with books the way that she does.

It is worth noting that Shirley's classmates think that she is really smart and will comment aloud when they are surprised by the intelligent observations she makes in class. Daria told me randomly during one interview that Shirley is passionate and a good writer and that while she likes writing, she doesn't think she is nearly as good as Shirley is.

Literacy, Creativity, and Identity

Shirley calls herself a writer. During our interviews it becomes evident that she is doing what she can to achieve her writing aspirations of getting published at a young age. She takes great pleasure from reading, but also treats it as a learning project. She carries around her writing notebook where she jots down ideas for her fictional narratives in which she imagines characters experiencing a number of different situations. She opens it up to show me a complex collection of sections for character development and story synopses. I see lines crossed out, sentences rewritten, and disembodied ideas for stories in progress. It is documented evidence of hours of thinking and reading. When I ask Shirley what it means to her to be a reader, she explains:

> You just have multiple interpretations and that you're…I feel that, if you're a true reader and you can truly understand what the book is about then…you are more open minded to it and you can see different views of different people of different characters. Like, you can see really how dynamic each character is without feeling a certain type of attitude or closed mindedness or bias toward it to not see fully what the real book is about.

I ask her to talk about a little more about her ideas about characters.

Shirley: Yeah, as you read, like just…see what it's really talking about, like breakdown the character for really what it is and then see how that plays a role in what the book is about.

BM: So would you say that you become kind of emotionally invested in the characters?

Shirley: S: A little bit yeah (laughs).

BM: Like, like how? Can you think of an example?

S: Like, if I'm really into a book and I can understand like, what's going on, not just what's going, but also like get into like the actual character's mind. And like if I read a sentence, if I don't understand a word, like I really try to go into depth about it and like think about like what is this character thinking about? And what could this, what he or she could do in the future to impact what's going to go on now in the book.

Shirley reads books not just for their stories but to see how they are constructed as well. She wants to learn from them. She likes to take them apart by character, plot, and story and see how each piece plays a role. She tries to see the narrative from the point of view of the characters, getting to know their personalities and guessing how they might act according to how they're written. For her, characters are three-dimensional. She likes to deconstruct the writing of other authors and learn from them: their styles, techniques, and methods.

Shirley likes the horror, mystery, and true crime genres. A lot of the writing that she has done contains macabre and adult themes. I ask her where she gets these ideas

which are unconventional and mature for her age. She tells me that she is inspired by James Patterson, Edgar Allan Poe, and R.L. Stine. She is aware that a lot of her ideas are shocking and worries sometimes that the things she writes about are too disturbing. She wonders how her work is seen by others now, and will be viewed in the future. It concerns her that others will think that her writing is indicative of her home life:

> 'Cause like at this age, it's like, you expect, you have an already expectation of what a young author should or would write about. And it's like when you go out of that box and you do entertain mature shock value, it's just like, why? And where does she get this from? And who impressed, has this impression on her? And it's not that it's, it's just how vivid an imagination that you do have and what do you read?

She tells me that her writing even shocks her parents but that they are supportive and tell her that it reminds them of R.L. Stine's writing. Shirley likes this. She smiles with pride when she tells me this.

Shirley showed up to one of our interviews with a book that I had observed her carrying around for a few days. I noticed it because it was thick and large and had colorful sticky notes curling and protruding from the long side of its pages. The book is called *Kill or Be Killed* and it's by James Patterson.

BM: Are those your notes?

Shirley: Uh huh. Just like bookmarks of different stories. There's like four different book shots.

BM: Did you put those tabs there?

Shirley: Yeah.

BM: So what are you doing with those?

Shirley: Um, it's basically where I am, where I wanna be. Hmmm, cause I know this is like where I was in this chapter here, and then where I was. Oh! This is like where I am and then a short-term goal, then like a long-term goal.

Shirley tells me that in fifth grade one of her difficulties with reading concerned starting books and not finishing them. She says that a former teacher helped her with focus by encouraging her to keep reading by making goals and sticking to them. She uses the notes to separate the stories in the Patterson book and remind her of her reading targets.

Shirley sees reading and edgy genres as a part of who she is. Carrying around books and notebooks that are visibly and colorfully annotated also serves to show others that she is actively reading and writing about, or working through them. By carrying them around she is declaring her identity as a writer and a reader. By carrying around books and showing their covers, she is declaring her tastes and preferences to others.

Current Events, and Activism

Shirley finds the current violence by police against Black men disturbing and upsetting. She says "I take a conscious effort to every morning not do the pledge of allegiance." When I ask her if she considers herself to be an activist she says, "I'm vocal, but I don't have the resources to be more vocal everywhere. But (pointing to her notebook) I do have the resources here." I ask her what she means and she gives examples of celebrating Black History month, writing poems for the school poetry slam, and joining the eighth grade committee in which she helps make decisions that affect her class. Shirley already realizes the power of writing when it comes to making a difference

by speaking out or writing about social issues. She feels frustrated by current events but she ameliorates that feeling of helplessness by trying to do what she can through her writing. She tells me: I just…I have all the ideas, these ideas and I'm gonna write 'em down.

Looking Ahead

The students interviewed for this study used literacy to construct their identities, and as a way forward, to propel them into their futures. Shirley read voraciously and studied the books she read to use the authors' techniques in her own writing. She often talked of publishing and what it would be like to be a young published author.

Yolanda used writing to soothe her emotions, and forge connections with her friends and church community. These relationships and connections will follow her to her new university community where she hoped to matriculate into their prestigious dance program. She also read fictional Young Adult books about ballerinas, which reflected her own image and aspirations as a dancer in training. She told me that those books inspired her.

Daria used reading and writing to navigate a difficult childhood, solve personal issues, and write songs which were performed in her choir group for people all over the country. She told me a story about when she and her choir traveled to the Southwest and sang a song about diversity and inclusivity for a group of children of mostly undocumented immigrants. The event made an impression on her:

> I was so emotional 'cause that's like so sad. And I like, I kinda like hearing that
>
> because I want to do more with them and then tell them about my future and

about my past, so they will feel more comfortable. About not hiding and come out

to the world or whatever.

Daria was moved and felt empathy for the children. She connected to their situation and

recognized that their parents could be deported just has her aunt had been in the last year.

At the same time, it also inspired her to look forward to her future and what she can do

with it to make things better for herself and for others, like the children for whom she

sang. She considered that her singing and songwriting could be a form of activism. Daria

told me that hearing about the news every day upset her and that sometimes she wrote

about it. She said:

> The writing is about my past and stuff like that, like, like my own little diary. And
>
> then my poems are mostly about things that's goin' on in the world, stuff like that.
>
> And how we can make it better.

The Roles of Others

The students had people in their lives who inspired them to read or write and

supported them to varying degrees. Klauda (2009) states that "Parents and other

socialization agents have remained important figures in the reading lives of many avid

readers during later childhood and adolescence" (p. 351). According to Klauda people

who provide social reading interaction for adolescents make an impression on them,

whether they are avid readers or not.

Daria began to write because her aunt suggested that she try keeping a journal to

work through her emotions. Shirley read and discussed books with her mother. Her

mother also served as a person to bounce her ideas of off for story writing and character

developing. During one interview, Shirley told me a synopsis of a story that she has in

her notebook that she wants to write. Afterward, she told me how her mother reacted when she ran the idea by her:

> My mom was like, "It's so complicated" (laughing)! I was like, "When I work it out it's gonna be more clear cut!". But you have to keep up with it, in order to know what's going on, but it's still gonna be good!

Yolanda's grandmother gave her the discipline to sit down and make time to read, while her aunt who was an educator gave her the tools to improve her skills. She tells me about how they helped her with her literacy skills when she was younger:

> My grandmother was really strict at the time because I was really wild, so she had to be really strict, and she was like, "No, you have to read." And also, my aunt, she loved to buy stuff for us um, to further our learning. And she knew I hated reading, she was like "Oh, if you hate it, I have to help you with it." So, she bought these blocks and they said words on it, like the, why, there, all the different theirs, and you just, you had a big box of them, or it had a-b-c-d, it had different words for different grade levels. And she went from kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. And because she's a principal at an elementary school, so, she had all the stuff that she needed. So my grandmother every time, I spent everyday, thirty minutes doing it and that helped me a lot.

Yolanda had support from both her grandmother and aunt to help her build a good foundation in reading and writing skills. She tells me that having their support provided strength for her during a time when she felt unmotivated and aimless. She credits them pushing her to get disciplined with her desire to do well in her academic and dance studies.

Perceptions of Self as Readers and Writers

While reading and writing practices were heavily linked to the girls' identities, they still struggled with their identities as readers and writers. Yolanda stated on more than one occasion that she felt her vocabulary was not adequate enough for her to express herself through writing and she wished to improve:

> I love to write poetry. I wanna get stronger in writing too 'cause I know my vocabulary is not strong at all. I mean like, it's strong for my age, but if you wanna make poems usually you go with stronger based vocabulary than you do. I still write poems even though I don't have the strong vocabulary.

Yolanda is referring to a projected definition of what poetry and writing poems is supposed to be according to formal schooling. Even though, writing poetry is a voluntary activity that she chooses to do for pleasure, she still feels the gaze of assessment. She tells me that she wants to take a creative writing class in high school because they don't offer creative writing in eighth grade.

Daria said she only considers herself to be a reader if she's reading something that catches her attention. She says, "I need something to get my attention…like some things, I just need um, to work on that like, not everything's gonna interest you so you just need to step up and just deal with it." She sees her lack of interest in some subjects as a deficit or something that takes away from allowing her to define herself as someone who reads. She sees this disinterest in certain subjects as problem that she must overcome.

Shirley struggled with maintaining focus during reading and confided that even though she loves reading, sometimes she gets bored and skips around. While these are normal aspects of reading that all readers experience, the students felt that these minor

quirks were detrimental to the expected view of themselves as readers and that their reading and writing skills were lacking because of it. They thought that because of this they were not qualified to call themselves readers and that they had to change or improve certain things about themselves to deserve the title.

In spite of their hesitance to call themselves readers, the girls talked about their reading experiences and the influence that books had on their lives. Shirley explained how she became immersed in book series. She was a fan of the *Dork Diaries* series by Rachel Renee Russell when she was younger. As she got older and grew out of those characters, she discovered other books that she related to more, like the ones by James Patterson. She explained:

> And I got more into like more realistic things and more characters that had...were more dynamic and then as I read and continued to buy the books in that series. I was just like, "I'm on book ten and I've been a fan since book one and I don't want to finish! It's so sad!"

Shirley explained that it is difficult for her to finish a series of books that she likes because it's like saying goodbye to "old friends" that she's come to know through the years. As Shirley got older she needed the experiences of the characters to be more relatable and true-to-life in order for her to stay immersed. She refers to the need for "dynamic" characters in order to achieve this.

Immersive reading experiences rely on the suspension of disbelief, which allows the reader to completely focus on the narrative to the point that it becomes a personal involvement. These experiences become meaningful to the reader as they are invested in the lives and events of the characters in the stories they read. In some cases readers apply

the fictional narratives to their own lives to solve problems or feel better about uncontrollable situations that they face. Wilhelm and Smith (2016) describe the "immersive pleasure of play" and define it as the "The pleasure you get from living through a story and getting totally lost in a book." This type of pleasure comes from relating to the characters, and becoming caught up in their lives, and the events of the book.

Daria also demonstrated the strong bonds that are created with the characters in books when she described how she faced challenges in her life by modeling solutions based on what the characters in her favorite book The Vampire Twins did. She also referred to the characters as her "friends." In addition, she found the experiences of the people from the Chicken Soup book series meaningful in ways that resonated with the difficulties she faced with her mother.

Discussion

Daria, Yolanda, and Shirley used literacy skills in a variety of creative and utilitarian ways to help them accomplish certain goals or meet different needs. Their voluntary literacy practices played very important roles in maintaining their social lives, emotional well-being, and continuity in sense of self.

Yolanda was a practicing dancer. She attended dance classes since she was a little girl. At the time of the study she had enrolled to begin a dance centered curriculum at an arts-centered high school. She read fiction about dancers which motivated her own aspirations as a dancer, and wrote poetry about some of the difficulties that she faced in her ambitions to dance and in her personal, and family life. She also invested a lot of time

in her spiritual life and was active in her church, planning on attending college 1,400 miles away at a religious institution.

In spite of Daria's disengaged nature in the classroom, and desire to not have academic attention, she was very immersed in and excited about her writing. She acknowledged the importance of writing and how it linked her to the community of her choir. She saw the choir as a way to make a difference in the larger community of the undocumented people that she met. She found a way of belonging through her work in choir and wanted to extend that sense of caring and safety to the people she met through her writing and singing. She also had no trouble standing on the stage in front of her middle school peers and singing a song that she wrote a cappella.

Shirley saw the need to keep finding inspiration and honing her skills through the authors she read. She carried her books with her as if they were manuals of how to write and build story worlds and characters. She identified as a writer at her young age and talked about how things would be when she got published as a young person. She used books to support her creativity and aspirations to become successful and famous as a young author. Identifying as a reader and writer also made her feel special, grown-up and more aware of things than her peers.

Although these literate sides of Daria, Yolanda, and Shirley were rarely explicitly seen as part of curriculum work in the classroom, they were important aspects of their identities and personalities. They made efforts to present them to others, and make them conspicuous. Some of the ways they did this was by carrying non-curriculum books around with them on their person, and leaving them on their desks during class time. In Shirley's case they were visibly annotated with colorful tabs. They also carried personal

notebooks with them in the hallways, in the lunchroom, and during recess, also writing in them during these off-times. These performances of literacy were conspicuous and meant to be seen as a way to show that these practices are important signifiers of who they are.

The girls put a lot of time and effort into their daily literacy habits. The reading and writing that they performed on a daily basis added up to a lot of daily practice hours and valuable skill building. The projects that they shared with their peers and teachers at the end-of-year talent show were only the tip of the iceberg of their skills and talents. Daria's song, Yolanda's dance, and Shirley's poem were not one-off novelties. These were skills honed and practiced daily that were very much tied to every day literacies that could be shared in the classroom as part of the curriculum.

There is clearly a division between the types of literacies that are acceptable in school and at home, even when they are the most conventional practices of reading and writing in their rudimentary forms. When we see the major roles that voluntary literacy practices play in the lives of these three middle school students we realize that they are an important and crucial aspect of their lives. And yet these are all aspects of the students that were lost among the schoolwork, test taking, and everyday assignments in the classroom.

Carico (2001) discusses the importance of providing a space in the classroom to discuss ideas that arise from reading and writing that are important to students and vital to their lives and social growth. Leggo (2007) believes an intellectually and emotionally supportive classroom environment could allow young writers to construct their identities and learn about their world "through words" (p. 10). Most of the students I interviewed named literature discussion as their favorite part of English class. They all wished that

there was more time dedicated to talking about the books and stories they read in class. I consider this might be because it's the only time that the students get to share personal aspects of themselves and their personalities with the class. It is well documented that adolescents see the fictional characters they read about as extensions of themselves. Talking about characters' issues creates a safe space for them to talk about their own experiences. More indicatively, they said that during literary discussions they like hearing their classmates' perspectives and opinions to see how they differ from their own. Rosenblatt (1995) believes that this is a key stage in the transactional process which allows for self growth and development through the "self-awareness and self criticism" that comes from listening to the experiences of others and re-examining one's own beliefs during literary discussions. When students read books in the classroom, but are not afforded sufficient time to discuss them with their peers, an important part of the process is left unfulfilled. This study shows that voluntary literary practices can be seen as ways that adolescents use to fill gaps in the curriculum through creative exercises which allow for self-reflection and reinvention of the self.

Implications for the Classroom and Further Research

If research is to serve education, the linguistic transaction should be studied above all as a dynamic phenomenon happening in a particular context, as part of the ongoing life of the individual in a particular educational, social, and cultural environment. We need to learn how the student's attitudes and self-understandings are formed and enter into the reading/writing event. (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 14)

This study on adolescents' personal literacy practices is just one of many that demonstrates the richness and productivity of voluntary reading and writing habits (Finders, 1996; Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Norton, 2003; Othouse, 2012; Potter, McCormick, & Busching, 2001; Richardson & Eccles, 2007; Schultz, 2002; Steinkuehler, 2010; Williams, 2013). The participants in this study all relied on reading and writing to develop different important aspects of their personal and social lives. Although these were out-of-school practices the students were not secretive about them in the classroom. They provided visual cues to their interests, carrying around their books and notebooks, placing them on their desks during instruction time, writing in them during breaks, and sharing them with their classmates when they got a chance.

Further research may entail looking closer at the subtle cues of students' ostensible social literacy performances that are indicative of their personal and voluntary literacy habits and/or desires. These include, not just what they do, but how they talk about it, present and show it on their person, on their desks, and through their extracurricular activities. Williams (2013) relays "The challenge for teachers is to learn about students' out-of-school writing and to find ways to advance that writing while simultaneously meeting the curricular goals" (p. 378). According to Olthouse and Sauder (2016), one way for students to improve and master new skills is to incorporate students' interests into their writing assignments. They argue that interest increases passion in learning, which leads to exponential growth as the subjects and forms of writing expand in the process.

Noticing, validating, and talking about literacy habits in the classroom will not only support the students who participate in them, but may also engage the interests of other students who don't consider themselves to be readers or writers because of a preconceived notion of what it means to do these things. This may be accomplished by incorporating a transparency in the classrooms about how reading and writing connects to the daily activities that students do. Doing so can help students see themselves as achievers of literacy in their everyday habits by making connections to the shows they watch, the music they listen to, the websites they frequent, the messages they send, and their social media usages. Drawing these links can help demystify literacy and show that it is much more than just explicit classroom work.

Alvermann, Greene, and Wisenbaker (1999) state that "listening to adolescents is a valuable way to begin to understand how they perceive and/or negotiate literacy experiences outside of school in a community setting where informal groupings offer a range of opportunities for interacting with peers and adults"(p. 257). Once they make connections between literacy and their everyday lives, giving them opportunities to talk about them can make them and us more aware of their practices. One of the main things I found from speaking with adolescents about their literacy habits, is that they enjoy talking about their interests, and the things they do. They love to share. We just have to ask them.

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