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What Fifth-Grade Students Reveal About Their Literacies by Writing and Telling Narratives

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———————— **Abstract** ————————

Written and oral literacy narratives produced by seven fifth-grade students are examined to identify the literacy identities students construct when narrating their past and present experiences with reading and writing. The narrative analyses reveal four major findings:

　1.　The students who contributed to this study have experienced literacy in multiple modes and contexts indicative of relatively broad conceptions of what counts as literacy.

　2.　They primarily describe literacy experiences in positive or neutral terms; when literacy events are evaluated negatively, it is usually in response to literacy demands that diminished students' feelings of autonomy.

　3.　Students in this study intuitively understand that literacy is a set of social practices that take place in interactions among multiple actors.

　4.　Students sometimes portray themselves as having power to control the direction of literacy events; other times, their agency is limited by authoritative actors who are portrayed as enforcers of reading rules rather than as collaborative supporters. These findings are relevant for instructional practice because they present personal narrative writing as a way of infusing student voices into the discourse of the classroom in hopes of creating a more culturally relevant instructional space.

　At Granny's table, spread thick with food, this is where your story begins. You are sitting with an open spiral notebook in front

of you, a pencil curled tightly in your fingers. Uncle Joe took you to the store that day in the back of his truck. Your brothers asked for candy bars and sodas; and so did you, at first. But then you saw the stack of notebooks, sitting on the shelf two aisles over beneath rows of Funyuns and hot fries and barbecue pork rinds. You held your breath. There was a reason for those notebooks. They were covered with a thin layer of dust, into which you instinctively inscribed your name with your index finger. Then you blew and watched your name soak into the air around you. And you knew that all the Zero bars and Gatorades in the world would not satisfy you the way that notebook would. So you marched up to the counter and watched Joe's expression as he paid seventy-five cents for the raggedy orange spiral notebook that would change your life forever.

So you are sitting with the spiral notebook in front of you. While everyone else around you eats, you stare at the dingy white pages, then at the point of your pencil which you found under Granny's bed and sharpened with a kitchen knife. If you don't eat now, don't complain later about being hungry, Ma tells you. You hear her, but you continue to be mesmerized by the blankness of the paper in front of you.

The preceding excerpt is from an autobiographical piece I wrote several years ago to share with my fifth-grade students. I included this here as a reminder of Soliday's (1994) assertion that life stories are "dialogical account[s] of one's experience rather than a chronological report of verifiable events" (p. 514). In narrativizing this event from my childhood, I went to great lengths to position myself as a certain kind of person (i.e., an eager writer). This narrative is not a verbatim reconstruction of the past. Yes, I enjoyed writing as a kid; and yes, my uncle once bought me a notebook; but the magnitude of the event is obviously overstated. My narrativized version of this event is a carefully plotted construction of how my adult self wants my child self to be portrayed.

In the analysis that follows, student literacy narratives will be treated as storied retellings in which students seek to construct a particular reading/writing identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These narratives speak volumes about the way students position

themselves in the context of school and out-of-school literacy events.

Purpose and Research Questions

A long tradition of sociolinguistic and sociocultural research has documented the differences between students' community uses of language and literacy and those that are typically sanctioned in school settings. For example, Heath (1983) compared the language practices of an African American community with those of a mainstream white community and found differences in parent-child interactions between the two. More recently, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) documented the complex and meaningful out-of-school literacy practices of two African American teenagers who appeared to be disengaged from school literacy practices. These studies are but a few of the many providing evidence for the existence of multiple, locally enacted literacies (Street, 1993).

Proponents of culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy have stressed the importance of validating and legitimating these diverse literacy traditions (Au, 2001; Au & Raphael, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, researchers have documented powerful teaching practices that allow students to merge home and school discourse practices (Ball, 1996; Lee, 2000). Nonetheless, for teachers to legitimize these multiple perspectives and create hybrid language/literacy spaces, they must first find a way to deepen their understanding of their students' literacy histories (Willis, 2002). For this to happen, two parallel processes are necessary. First, research must continue to focus on the situated literacy practices of diverse students as this research will add to our collective knowledge of the experiences students bring with them to their reading and writing classes. Second, teachers need to be armed with tools that allow them to make public their students' literacy histories so these histories can be examined as part of the curriculum.

This study seeks to address both of these processes. In my analysis, I use written and oral literacy narratives produced by fifth-grade students to examine what kinds of literacy identities these students construct when narrating their past and present experiences with reading and writing. In this study, narratives are used as interpretive tools (Wertsch, 1998) that shed light on a student's stance toward literacy even when he or she isn't aware of a particular stance. This study was guided by the belief that literacy narratives reveal how students position themselves in relationship to literacy events and other actors in those events. Two research questions guide this analysis:

1. What types of literacy events do the students choose to narrate?
2. How do the students position themselves and others within these narratives?

Method

This study was conducted as I worked with a first-year teacher and her fifth-grade students. The teacher, Ms. Price, is a white female teacher at Success Academy, a middle school campus serving a predominantly African American population (names of all individuals and schools are pseudonyms). The campus is located in an urban center in a mid-size city in the southeastern United States. The majority of students at Success Academy qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is commonly used as a socioeconomic indicator for schools. I worked with Ms. Price to help her develop instructional plans as she implemented reader's and writer's workshops with her students.

Data Sources

Data for the current research are drawn from two sources collected toward the end of the school year.

Written Literacy Narratives

Narrative writing played a large role in Ms. Price's class throughout the school year, in part because of the state requirement that all fifth-grade students take a standardized writing test that focuses on narrative writing, and in part because Ms. Price and I both value the potential of narrative as a site for self-examination (McVee, 2004). For one class assignment, Ms. Price asked her students to write stories about their early memories of reading and writing. The literacy narrative assignment was designed to allow students a chance to reflect on their literacy learning and to share examples of how reading and writing have influenced their lives. Students spent two instructional periods working on drafting two different literacy narratives.

Literacy narratives written by seven students were collected. These students were purposively sampled (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) to represent a range of ability levels. Based on Ms. Price's recommendations and my own observations of the students during class activities, two high-achieving, two average-achieving, and three lower-achieving students were selected. All the participating students self-identified as African American.

Oral Literacy Narratives

Each student participated in a 15-minute audiotaped interview during which they were asked to reread or retell their written literacy narratives, and then asked to explain why they chose those particular memories for the assignment. Students were also asked to narrate additional memories of reading and writing, and in particular, their memories of learning to read and write. The stories that emerged in these interviews were transcribed and combined with the written narratives to comprise the data set for each participant.

Data Analysis

Each student's data was separated into discrete narrative units. A discrete narrative was defined as a sequence of temporally arranged clauses that recount past events (Labov, 1972). Each discrete narrative was treated as a single literacy event, which Heath (1988) describes as an event in which comprehension of text plays a central role.

The narratives were analyzed using a framework that took into account three characteristics of narrative structure: setting, activity, and actors. These characteristics were derived from previous work on narrative structure (Bruner, 1991; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McVee, 2004). To translate this narrative framework into a coding scheme, open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to develop a set of inductive categories. Once these categories were developed and I was able to verify that no additional codes were needed to capture the richness of the data, this grounded coding scheme was applied to the full data set. Qualitative analysis software along with manual coding methods were used to complete the analysis. The coding categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Description of Coding Categories*

Code	Description
Setting	
School setting	Narratives that took place in school
Out-of-school setting	Narratives that took place outside of school
Activity	
Alphabet reading	Saying the alphabet, reading letters one at a time when presented by a teacher, matching letters with sounds, etc.

Book reading	Reading fiction books such as novels, picture books, etc.
Word reading	Sounding out words and practicing sight words
Environmental print reading	Reading nonbook print, such as road signs, candy bar wrappers, etc.
Nonfiction reading	Reading informational and expository texts such as newspapers, internet sites, magazines, science books, etc.
Mechanics of writing	Learning to use correct punctuation, spelling practice drills, etc.
Handwriting	Learning how to form letters in print and cursive
Nonfiction writing	Writing expository, informational, and other nonnarrative texts
Word writing	Single word writing
Message writing	Communicative writing such as writing notes to someone else
Name writing	Practicing writing one's name
Story writing	Writing narratives/stories
Note taking	Writing margin notes and highlighting or revising a written text
Text sharing	Discussing a text they were reading/writing or sharing written work with others
Storytelling	Listening to and telling oral stories
Book selection	Choosing and acquiring a text
Hands-on	Participating in hands-on activities related to books
Symbolic destruction	Purposely destroying a book (tearing out pages, etc.)

Evaluation

Positive	The student receives satisfaction from the literacy activity; he or she places value on the event
Neutral	The student does not evaluate the event in the narrative

Negative	The student is frustrated or dissatisfied by the activity
Actors	
Guardian	Parents and grandparents playing an active role in the narrative
Teacher	Teachers and principals
Sibling/cousin	Brothers, sisters, and cousins who are close in age to the student
Peer	Other students in the school environment
Self only	No other actors appear in the story
Actor roles	
Criticizing	The actor makes fun of the student or gives harsh feedback
Controlling	The actor controls the literacy event by deciding what will be learned or produced
Instructing	The actor gives information through direct instruction
Supporting	The actor supports or assists the student; for example, helping a student spell or read a word
Praising	The actor provides positive feedback to the student
Collaborating	The actor and student work jointly on a literacy activity; both actor and student have the same goal

Findings

The findings are organized under two subject headings based on the original narrative framework that steered the analyses. In the first section, I examine the activity of these events, describe the different literacy-related activities the students chose to narrate, and relate these activities to the students' implied evaluations of literacy as evidenced in their stories. These activity-evaluation relationships provide a glimpse of students' affective interpretations of different literacy events they have experienced. In the second section, I focus on the actors that the students include in their narratives and the roles assigned to these actors based on the students' reconstructions of the literacy activities. These actor-role relationships provide a

snapshot of how much agency students give themselves (or perceive to have been given) in their narrated literacy histories.

Literacy Activities

What Types of Literacy Activities did the Students Choose to Narrate?

The seven students chosen for this analysis told a wide variety of literacy narratives. Approximately half of the narrative events occurred in school, and the other half occurred in out-of-school contexts. Table 2 summarizes the activities that students included in their events. These activities were grouped in three broad categories (reading activities, writing activities, and other activities).

Table 2. *Overview of the types of literacy activities the students narrated and how they evaluated the activities*

	Total # Occurrences	Student's Evaluation of the Event		
Reading Activities		*Negative*	*Neutral*	*Positive*
Alphabet reading	3	1	1	1
Book reading	21	6	7	8
Word reading	4	1	3	0
Environmental print reading	4	0	2	2
Nonfiction reading	4	0	2	2
Writing Activities				
Mechanics of writing	5	1	4	0
Handwriting	5	0	5	0
Nonfiction writing	1	0	0	1
Writing words	2	1	1	0
Message writing	2	2	0	0
Name writing	2	0	2	0
Story writing	12	1	6	5
Note taking	1	0	0	1
Dialogic and Nonprint Activities				
Text sharing	2	0	0	2
Storytelling	1	0	0	1
Book selection	2	0	1	1
Hands-on activities	2	0	1	1
Symbolic destruction	5	5	0	0

The range of activities chosen by the students is revealing of their perceptions of what counts as a reading and writing activity. Most of the events they recalled were related to reading and writing letters, words, books, and other typographic sources. For example, Antwon describes a book reading event with his kindergarten teacher:

Antwon: The first book that I read was Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham*. I read it with Ms. Ling.

Researcher: This was in what grade?

Antwon: I think it was kindergarten.

Researcher: What'd you think about the book?

Antwon: It was good, and after we got through reading the book, we had green eggs and ham... That was when I was still in Ms. Ling's room. We sat on the carpet. We all read, and we had this little table where we get to sit down at, some of us. And soon as we got through with the book everyone was excited because they seen green eggs and ham. And we cooked it straight in our room because she had a stove thing... and she had a little pot thing and she plugged it into the wall. And everybody got a whole bunch of food.

In addition to these school literacy events, students also narrated events that took place outside of school. For example, Shanika describes an event with her grandmother that shows her family's keen ability to make connections between traditional school learning and activities in the home:

Shanika: When I was younger, I was taking a Spanish class and when I came home my grandma would always have these letters made from pretzels.... She had pretzel letters and she had one in the English alphabetical order and she would have one, the Spanish one. She would mix them all up and then point to which one and say, "Which letter is this?"

Researcher: How did she make the pretzels?

Shanika: I showed her my book about Addy, a slavegirl that ran away to another place. Her mom was teaching her letters in pretzels, so I showed my grandma that and she was learning how to make pretzels from my cookbook from school.

A similar example is taken from a story Dezmond wrote about a literacy interaction he had with his sister.

When I was little I was 2 my sister and I will ride our bikes or when we were riding in the car. Every word we will see we will ... take our seat belts off and go to a window and we get to a stop sign and she will be like "stope." I will

be like "chop." Every time we stop we would see a sign and we would look at each other and try to shout it out and go to another window.

In this narrative, Dezmond recounts a literacy event that involved reading environmental print while riding in the car. This out-of-school activity serves as an example of the diverse literacies practiced by the students in this study. The reading and writing events described here illustrate that the participating students view reading and writing as social practices that can take many forms and occur in many different contexts.

How do Students Evaluate their Experiences with Reading and Writing Activities?

In addition to showing the different reading activities included in the students' narratives, Table 2 also shows how the students evaluated their experiences in those activities. Evaluation is a narrative element that describes the way a narrator feels toward the events in a story (Labov & Waletsky, 1967, as cited in McVee, 2004). Positively evaluated events are those in which the student expresses enjoyment or satisfaction with the literacy activity being narrated; in these events, the student values the activity as something worthwhile, useful, and culturally congruent. In negative events, students express their frustration or dissatisfaction with the literacy activity in question. In a neutral event, the student doesn't make any particular claims—implicit or explicit—about their evaluations of the activity.

The majority of the literacy activities were positively or neutrally evaluated. For example, Dwayne expresses his positive evaluation of book reading in his written narrative of an experience he had in second grade:

"OK class! It's time for free time! I'm so excited. You can do anything you want!" my teacher, Ms. Griffith, exclaimed. It was time to have fun. I was reading, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I saw my teacher reading a book and I wanted to do it too. I ran to the bookshelf and tried to find a big book. I found one and snatched it off the shelf. I ran to Ms. Griffith and asked her to help me read.

"Why you little genius!" she screamed.

"Hey everybody, Dwayne is asking Ms. Griffith to read him a book. Dwayne is a teachers' pet!" a boy yelled out from across the room. My heart dropped in sorrow and I didn't know if I wanted to read anymore. I told Ms. Griffith that I didn't want to read the book anymore and I started to cry. I heard billows of laughter behind me and I began to cry harder. They sounded like yapping hyenas.

"Stop!! Everyone who just laughed go sit at your desk and you will not go to [P.E.] for the rest of this week and all of next week." Ms. Griffith hollered. Over half of the children in the room went back to their seats and poked out their lips. A boy named Jayden Barnes came over and asked if he could read with me. She said he could and she began to read. She taught us how to pronounce big words and made us sound out others. When we were able to read the words and understand them, Jayden and I read to each other. We read the rest of the book and told each other what we liked and disliked about the book. We ran to Ms. Griffith and howled "Give us some more books!!!"

Although Dwayne's narrative chronicles a situation in which his interest in reading was negatively evaluated by his classmates, his evaluation of the literacy activity (book reading) is positive.

An extreme example of a negatively evaluated literacy event is labeled in Table 2 as "symbolic destruction." In these events, students describe how they became frustrated and angry while being forced to read and consequently destroyed their books by tearing out pages and ripping apart the covers. For example, Kimora recounts the following episode in her written narrative:

... one day I saw this book I didn't like so I got frustrated and took the teachers broom and I acted like I had a pogo stick except for I had to run and jump just to move so I had launched myself into the air and came down on the book. "Crack" the book went, and everyone became silent I mean dead silence. The book tore into pieces. I tried to hide it but of course I couldn't because the teacher heard every move you made...

If viewed from a deficit perspective (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), these narratives might indicate violent or antisocial behavior. However, a close analysis of these events across participants reveals that these narratives are meant to be symbolic. The students likely constructed these events to show their negative evaluations of literacy events in which they felt disempowered by authoritative actors. When asked about these events, students acknowledged that they were not true and that they told these stories out of frustration.

Other literacy activities were negatively evaluated as well. For example, Denise's written narrative describes her dissatisfaction with a story writing activity in Ms. Price's class:

"Alright," Ms. Price said. "Start writing." I didn't know what to do. She had given us the stupid prompt that said, "Describe a time you were

incredibly happy." I was so confused, because I had no times when I was incredibly happy. I could write about the time I went to Six Flags but I had wrote that story about 15 times.

I quickly tried to think up something, and finally something came in mind. I wrote about the time when I was in summer camp and started to sing some kind of song that just popped in my head and it got me all excited and happy.

When I was finished with my story I called Ms. Price my teacher, over to come look at it. Turns out she wasn't really feeling it. "It's not that strong. Start over." I couldn't believe she said that my heart was just torn in little pieces and stomped on by a huge elephant foot. I was as mad [as] a pit bull getting ready to bite somebody because they touched her babies.

Ten minutes had passed. I still couldn't think of anything to write, and I was still furious with Ms. Price for making me start over.

Finally I just gave up. I didn't bear to try to think of any thing to write. Then it was time to share I didn't raise my hand because my story sucked. So for the rest of the day I was angry.

Taken together, the narratives created by the participants in this study show that most of the experiences they have had with literacy have been largely positive or neutral. All of the students constructed at least one positive and one negative narrative. In general, when the students in this study presented negative experiences with literacy, these events contained authoritative actors (teachers and parents) who inappropriately applied demands for performance without considering students' personal patterns of interest and engagement. The role of these and other actors in the students' literacy narratives will be addressed in the next section.

Actors

This portion of the analysis draws heavily on Davies and Harré's (1990) notion of positioning. As described by Alvermann (2001), "young people are often positioned as individuals without agency and autonomy, particularly in instances where adults perceive them as being irresponsible and lacking in good judgment" (p. 678). To investigate how students position themselves and others in their narrative reconstructions of their real-life literacy experiences, the actors that students included in their narratives were identified and the roles the students assigned to these actors were examined. Table 3 provides an overview of the frequency of occurrences of various actors and their roles.

Table 3. *Overview of Actors and Roles in Students' Literacy Narratives*

	Total	Actor Roles (–>decreasing student agency–>)					
		Collaborate	Praise	Support	Instruct	Control	Criticize
Peer	6	2	2	0	0	0	2
Sibling/cousin	10	2	0	3	0	2	3
Teacher	26	1	8	7	2	5	3
Guardian	19	1	0	10	0	8	0
Self only	8	–	–	–	–	–	–

What Actors do Students Include in their Narratives?

The student participants narrated reading and writing events that involved their peers, siblings and cousins, teachers, and guardians (parents and grandparents). As Table 3 shows, the majority of narratives included teachers and guardians. For example, Antwon describes an event with his teacher:

> And I remember my other teacher, Ms. Gray. She's the one that taught me how to write like in cursive and how to know all the letters. And we had a test on it to give all the letters and we had to write them all in cursive.

Dominic presents an oral narrative in which his mother plays a prominent role:

> Dominic: I had learned some writing from my mom because like she used to be a writer - sometimes she would make me books.
>
> Researcher: So she used to be a writer, tell me about that.
>
> Dominic: Like she used to write books. In my family she would write books for people like my cousins.
>
> Researcher: That's cool, what kinds of books did she write?
>
> Dominic: She would write entertaining and a lot of stories about Martin Luther King ... She would give them to people in my family that was going to start learning how to read or she would give it to other people just to read. And like a lot of times I think I get my talent from her because it just comes to me like the story it just comes to me.
>
> Researcher: You started to say that you learned about writing from your mom. What are some things you learned from her?
>
> Dominic: How to get good adjectives, how to get good words, how to get good nouns and adjectives and verbs; and like sometimes she still helps me write on my stories and my homework ... She tells me just let the story come to me, but then I keep on telling her that it doesn't happen, but then one good story came to me and I just started writing...

Although less common, there were several narratives in which peers and siblings played an important role. Dezmond's sister, for example, appeared in almost all of his narratives. She even makes an appearance in a classroom literacy event, as described in the following excerpt from his oral narrative.

Researcher: Okay, so tell me about this Dr. Seuss book you were reading.

Dezmond: It was the book with the ham.

Researcher: *Green Eggs and Ham*?

Dezmond: [nods yes]... I read it with my sister. At school.

Researcher: Were you and your sister in the same class or something?

Dezmond: We were next door to each other and every time I didn't know a word we could get up and go to one of our family members and ask them for a word.

How do Students Position Themselves in Relation to these Actors?

To address this question, the types of roles students constructed for the other actors in their stories were analyzed. The majority of the actors in the participants' narratives were supportive of student agency. For instance, Dwayne orally describes his mother's attempts to scaffold his early reading experiences when he was four years old:

I remember the first book that I read. It was *Go Dog Go*.... I got it at a thrift store, and my mama bought it, and I said I wanted the book, and she started ... teaching me how to read because I didn't understand it. It was a little book, and I kept reading the words over again and I got better. And then one day I forgot what my mama had taught me, but I remembered every word on every single page so when she was reading it to me she told me to read, and I just looked at the picture and I knew what was going on.

In other cases, the students positioned other actors as controlling or criticizing. In particular, guardians were routinely positioned as controlling. In Kimora's written narrative, she presents the following scene:

Another time I learned how to read was in a car. Well it all happened when we were going to North Carolina, My mom gave me a book. I hated it. I hated it more than I hate broccoli without cheese. I hated it so much that when my mom turned her head I would stop reading, and when she turned it back I would stick my head right back in the book. Ten minutes later I would say I am finished. But she didn't fall for it.

In this example, she portrays her mother as an enforcer of reading rules rather than as a collaborator or supporter in the reading event. This type of portrayal was also

applied to teachers, as in Denise's narrative about her third-grade experiences with writing.

> Every time I would come in she [my teacher] would have like a prompt on the board and it would say something like – you would have to write a story in your notebook – and it would probably say "Write an imaginary story about you saw somebody in the jungle" or something like that. And I would always write these funny stories and make everybody laugh. This was in 3rd grade.

Although Denise does not evaluate this experience as a negative one (in fact, she seems to enjoy writing these stories), she positions her teacher as the person who decides what gets written in class. At times, students also positioned other students as criticizers and controllers. For example, in several of his narratives, Dezmond portrays his sister's tendency to enact a teacher identity. He states:

> If I try to spell *talking* right, I spell it *t-a-l-i-n-g-e*, with an *e* at the end… She'd [sister] say, "You spelled talking wrong, you don't supposed to put the *e* right there." And I'll say, "I didn't know." And then if I spell *read* wrong, because I used to spell it *r-a-e-d-y*, read, she would say, "You spelled it incorrectly." And she would spell it like she's my teacher.

Overall, the analyses indicate that students see themselves occupying a variety of subject positions in literacy activities. In some events, they are more agentive and thus have power to control the direction of the activity. In other cases, their agency is limited by authoritative adults or critical peers and siblings.

Discussion and Implications

These analyses reveal four important points that are theoretically relevant because they add to our knowledge base of how upper elementary students think about and participate in literacy activities both in and out-of-school.

Experiencing Literacy in Multiple Modes and Contexts

First, the students who contributed to this study are not limited in their perceptions of literacy activities as they experience literacy in multiple modes and contexts. With the exception of one student, everyone recounted at least one out-of-school literacy event. This is notable because the students were not explicitly prompted to describe literacy practices in non-school settings.

The range of activities chosen by the students is revealing of their perceptions of what counts as a reading and writing activity. Most of the events they recalled were related to reading and writing letters, words, books, and other typographic

sources; but they also recounted dialogic and non-print events such as storytelling, sharing books with others, and hands-on activities. This suggests that the students recognize the multiple functions and forms of literacy practice in different settings.

However, they did not describe any events that might involve "new literacies" required for engaging with information/communication technologies (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) such as text messaging, reading and searching on the Internet, or communicating via email; nor did they describe other practices documented in studies of urban adolescent literacy like videogaming, blogging, or reading and writing music lyrics (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Thus, while their conceptions of literacy are relatively broad, there is still room for their conceptions of reading and writing practices to expand. It is possible that these students have not begun thinking of these newer and more community-based communication practices as aspects of their literacy identities. It is also possible that the nature of the assignment led them to assume that the teacher and researcher who provided the instructions were interested in hearing about traditional reading and writing activities that have historically had ties to school rather than newly emerging practices that have just began making their way inside classroom walls. This is an important limitation to keep in mind in future studies that examine students' reconstructions of literacy identities.

Experiencing Positive Interactions with Literacy

Second, more often than not, these students describe literacy in a positive or neutral light. This is an important point that should not be underemphasized – most of the narratives portray experiences with literacy that are voluntary, enjoyable, and rewarding for the student protagonists. Another important point worth noting is that while some negative events were described, no student in this sample negatively evaluated all the events she or he chose to recount. Instead, negative evaluations were limited to specific events. This suggests that students' evaluations of literacy activities are situated, contextualized judgments.

Furthermore, these analyses suggest a strong link between student autonomy and how a literacy event is evaluated. When negative evaluations of literacy events were implied in the narratives, they were usually in response to literacy demands that diminished a student's feelings of autonomy; for instance, when a teacher or other authority figure imposed a specific book or activity or provided feedback that the student perceived as overly critical. In short, when students negatively evaluated a literacy activity, they were expressing their feelings about a particular enactment of literacy that was not in line with what they expected or desired in that particular context.

Experiencing Literacy as a Social Practice

Third, these narratives suggest that the participating students tend to view literacy as a social—not individual—practice. Few individual literacy events were recounted even though students were given freedom to describe whatever literacy experiences came to mind. Clearly, the image of a solitary reader sitting with a book or pencil is not the typical representation of literacy for these students. In contrast, most of the narratives portray literacy as a set of practices shared among multiple actors. Memories of reading and writing are intertwined with memories of car trips, forming new friendships, afterschool snacks with grandparents, getting upset with teachers and parents, and learning to take on increased expertise in school and at home. This view is consistent with conceptions of literacy derived from sociocultural and social practice theories of literacy (Bloome & Katz, 1997). Ironically, while it took the field of literacy research several decades to begin a transition from individualistic, cognitive explanations of the reading process to social explanations, many of the social aspects of literacy have been readily intuited by young adolescents through just a few short years of lived experiences with reading and writing.

Experiencing Literacy with a Variety of Actors Who Help Determine Students' Feelings of Agency

Finally, not all social enactments of literacy are equivalent in the way students perceive their own agency in relation to the other actors in the events. Students think of literacy events as encompassing a variety of actors who play a range of roles. The most common actors in these narratives were teachers and guardians, although peers and siblings made appearances as well. In some events, students portray themselves as having power to control the direction of the activity. In other events, their agency is limited by authoritative others who are portrayed as enforcers of reading rules rather than as collaborative supporters.

The levels of student agency or autonomy made possible by the actors in these narratives can be aligned along a continuum, as shown in Table 3. The actor roles on the left side of the table are generally supportive of student agency, while those on the right-hand side are actor roles described in events in which students portrayed themselves with minimal agency. This continuum is a useful heuristic for teachers, parents, and other individuals who routinely engage in literacy events with children as they can use this continuum to examine their own interactions during literacy events and the way they position children through their relative emphasis on collaboration, praise, support, instruction, control, and criticism.

Conclusion: Literacy Narratives as a Pedagogical Tool

The findings of this study of fifth-grade students' narratives about their experiences with reading and writing are relevant for instructional practice because they present personal narrative writing as a way of infusing student voices into the discourse of the classroom (Delgado, 1990) in hopes of creating a more culturally relevant instructional space (Au, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study also provides a model methodology that classroom teachers can use to broaden their understanding of their students' past experiences with literacy. As suggested by others (Jiménez, Smith, & Teague, 2009), when teachers have an in-depth understanding of the local enactments of literacy experienced by their students, they are better positioned to legitimize the literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. If narrativized experiences can reveal so much about how students perceive literacy, then teachers can use these narratives to uncover and find ways to engage pedagogically with the literacies their students bring with them to the classroom.

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