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# "You Pulled the Chair from Right Under Me!"

## *How a Black Young Man Disappears from a High School Reading Class*

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Relational identities in the classroom shape teachers and their students as well as the researchers who study them for the long term. Researchers whose fieldwork is located at "home" simultaneously embody with research participants the past, present, and future interactions on a shared continuum of experience. The collaborative enterprise of fieldwork is relived, retold, remade, and it is always present.

In this chapter, the shared, embodied experience that infused the ethnographic space in situ transformed one's understanding of young people, their teacher, and the researcher. The study was focused on better understanding students' experiences with literacy in high school. Within the context of ethnography and education, it is important to examine carefully teacher and student interaction relationally in connection to the reproduction of social class tropes and gendered identities as well as discourse norms.

Of particular interest was the exploration of literacy learning within the contexts of multiple texts, such as assigned novels and newspapers, standardized tests, school district Reading Graduation

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Demonstration Exam (RGDE), and students' reading and writing interests. Questions that informed fieldwork included what does "a reading class" mean in high school? What practices constitute such a class, and how do students resist these practices? And, how do relational activities around texts and also between teacher and students create a sense of belonging in connection to reading as an academic home in the classroom?

Adolescents' literacy practices, interaction with teachers and with texts are in part influenced by both their self-perceived and imposed identities (Beach and O'Brien, 2007). Male students, in particular, sometimes become less engaged with literacy as time passes in high school reading classes. How can reading play a more central role in young men's lives such that it engages them rather than alienates them? The dynamics around literacy presented here, especially for young men, whether from the school or home literacy context, seem to defy the notion of a possible commonality.

Three central ideas inform the research in this chapter: how discourse affects students' abilities to be perceived as "literate," the challenge of separating academic accomplishments from personal experience, and the relational interactions that mediate the success of boys in such classrooms. Through the ethnographic study of Reading Ideas, a high school reading intervention class aimed at students who read at grade levels 4–5 was observed during several months. The researcher and the teacher noticed how the young people in the class constructed their identities and managed literal space, and, by analogy, the figurative space of "good student" in a reading class fraught with tension for teenagers who are lumped together because they are perceived to be struggling with reading.

Within a sociocultural perspective in literacy, *literacy identity* is interpreted as a process of socialization and acculturation of particular conventions that recreate and interact with texts from a particular discourse in community. That learners are "becoming literate means more than apprenticeship with texts—it means apprenticeship in particular ways of being" (Kern 2000, 35). When students bring to classrooms their literacy practices as acquired strategies and ways of being literate, alternate and competing discourses encountered in classrooms problematize the "literacy identity" previously practiced and valued.

## Shaping Literacy Identities

Hall (2012) identifies a form of identity that summarizes the multiple identities of youth but also characterizes their literacy as "reading identity." Reading identity, Hall (2012) explains, "refers to how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, values they place on reading, and their understandings of what it means to be a particular type of reader within a given context" (369). She argues that students' reading identities are created over time based on their experiences in school and understandings of different identities available.

Furthermore, Heath and McLaughlin (1993) claim that adolescents' identities are not limited to how they view themselves; they are influenced by how adults, media, and school systems have represented them. How adolescents view themselves or are viewed by adults both shape adolescent identities in general and reading identities in particular. Identities stemming from culturally constructed and socially imposed worlds (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, and Cain, 2001) thus become a main factor guiding adolescents' interactions with teachers and text in classrooms.

One benefit of ethnographic study lies in the rapport researchers develop with research participants, leading to better understanding them as unique individuals in relational, non-static contexts. For example, students help shape the classroom experience, and Dante, the focus student in this chapter, was a flirtatious, outgoing, rapping Black sophomore whose gregarious personality was always evident in the classroom. He read books to which he could relate, such as *Forged by Fire* by Sharon M. Draper (1997), and always wanted to read aloud, egging others to let him have another reading turn. Dante was removed from class before the semester ended because of his unmanageable behavior and altercations with Ms. Day, his reading teacher. He was earning a C in the class but did not pass the district RGDE.

Ms. Day, a teacher of European ancestry with eight years of experience teaching reading intervention classes and thirty-five years teaching both English and reading classes, worked hard at relating the curriculum to students' lives. Even when students found the RGDE newspaper pieces boring and confusing, Ms. Day helped link the articles to their lives through activities and discussion questions. Ms. Day also seemed open to trying new ideas, adjusting the curriculum when

possible to fit students' interests. Clipping out newspaper articles in which students appeared, encouraging students to research books and subjects of their interest, and giving pointers on personal writing done on their initiative were all ways of showing her support. As a result, students seemed to generally respect and like Ms. Day.

Over time, Ms. Day was not only a research participant but also a colleague, engaging in many informal conversations about the reading classes. She and the researcher consulted each other in class and had lively conversations about classroom events, the texts students produced, student interactions, and students who were in trouble academically. They also shared information about Ms. Day's knitting club, Ms. Day's partner's work with community youth, or the antics of family members. Ms. Day was generous with her time, allowing the researcher's university graduate students to observe her reading classes and to learn how to write field notes there, and she also sponsored the school's LGBTQ club after school hours. Outside class, they would sometimes see each other at the grocery store and exchange quick greetings and chats.

## The Classroom Context

Student and teacher interactions and engagement with literacies in their typical classroom situation were observed, capturing a detailed day-to-day picture of literacy practices and surrounding events, verbalized thoughts, and activities (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Ms. Day and her students interacted within the literacy curriculum, allowing the researcher to understand students' interactions with reading, other students, and the teacher, and to see how these interactions affected their perceptions of their world and literacy itself. Because Ms. Day often talked informally about classroom activities and interactions, this allowed the researcher to have an immediate insider perspective of the teacher's perceptions, and it was included in daily field notes.

### *Site and Participants*

The class chosen was an inner-city, reading intervention, Reading Ideas, with twenty-one students—seven Black, seven White, and seven Latinos. Of those, seven were male students. There were two English language learners in the class from Iraq and Sudan. All students participated in the free or reduced lunch program. In this high school, 40 percent of all students were on free and/or reduced lunch; 97 percent of those students were in reading classes (Sarroub, 2007). Indeed, this was a high percentage of low-SES students. An important aspect of this study was that the students had been identified as needing extra instruction in reading according to standardized and placement tests or teacher observations, resulting in placement in that classroom. If they passed Reading Ideas but not the standardized RGDE, they would be placed in the same or a similar reading class again the following semester. Although the class label may have been the same, there were different curricular materials each semester on a four-semester cycle. Over half of the students had been in a similar reading class at least once in previous semesters.

### *Data Collection*

The larger study included several years of ethnographic fieldwork. However, in this reading intervention classroom, field observations occurred during the fall semester and took place approximately three times a week. Video recordings were made one out of every three periods (total of fifteen), and collecting artifacts also occurred simultaneously during this period. Field observation was conducted 47 times with over 400 pages of field notes of the interactions among students, teachers, and curriculum. Artifacts included daily bulletins, worksheets, seating charts, or other classroom materials.

Informal interviews and friendly conversations with the teacher concerning classroom interactions took place throughout the semester. Some examples of student work for grades such as journals and completed worksheets were also collected, along with one student's creative work (poetry, not class related but composed during class). Standardized test results and samples of practice tests along with grade reports were gathered and shed light on how students' works

translated to passing class and high-stakes tests determining their academic success or failure.

Upon completion of observations and field notes, catalogs of the interactions observed on the videotapes were developed to identify key teaching and learning moments, and then occurrences were transcribed and micro-analyzed. Field notes were coded with open and focused coding, and a list was generated of almost 450 emerging codes occurring a total of 8,752 times. Those codes were subsequently collapsed into a more compact and manageable list. Not surprisingly, the codes Teacher Telling, Questioning, and Answering, and Student Answering and Questioning occurred most frequently, showing the typical classroom use of the Initiate/Response/Evaluation (Mehan, 1979).

## The Case of Dante

### *Competing to Read Aloud*

Students' desire to read books of their own choosing occurred when they had "reading debates," especially when they read as a class *Forged by Fire* by Sharon M. Draper (1997), a problem novel about a teenage boy who overcomes tragic circumstances of living in poverty and child abuse. Students would argue over who would get to read the book aloud and try to one-up one another by saying things like, "You can't read!" (Dante, field notes, September 30) One example of a reading debate is highlighted in field notes given below (September 16).

> "This side don't want to read," Lakeisha said when Ms. Day asked if there is a volunteer on the left side of the room.
>
> "I want to read," Anastasia said.
>
> "Everyone try to prove they can read when they know they *can't*," Dante said.
>
> Ms. Day decided that Samantha should read.
>
> "Maybe we should start at the top of the page," Ms. Day said, then she proceeded to remind students what had been happening in the story up to this point by asking review questions. "What did Gerald [the main character] think

> when his mom asked him to come live with her?" Ms. Day asks.
>
> "He choked on his food," Dante said.
>
> "Why?" Ms. Day asked.
>
> "He doesn't know her," Samantha said.
>
> "What page we on?" Dante asked, and someone answered him.
>
> "Who says Dante should read?" Dante questioned the class. Tyler, Tamika, and most of the people on the right side and those at the back table raised their hands. Ms. Day tried to calm them down.
>
> "Ms. Day, come on man," Dante pleaded.
>
> "You know what you should do, you should let everyone read," Anastasia said.
>
> "I just want to get through chapter six!" Ms. Day whimpered in a mock crying voice.

Samantha started to read quietly, but Dante continued to interrupt, so she stopped reading. After a few more moments of loud debate among students seated on the right side of the classroom, including Dante, Anastasia noted, "You know, I'm just gonna read," and she started reading at the top of her voice while the others continued arguing. The right side of the room grew quiet almost immediately, and Anastasia stopped reading. Samantha read the first paragraph again, and the room was silent. Maria and Gabriela also read paragraphs. It was Dante's turn to read. "You know I'm just gonna read the rest of the chapter," Dante said. "Yeah, you can split it between you and Anastasia," Ms. Day said firmly.

The central two people arguing for a turn to read were Anastasia, a ninth grade English language learner from Ukraine, and Dante, but several other students expressed interest in reading as well. Dante started to use oneupmanship to jockey for position as reader over Anastasia. Ms. Day selected Samantha rather than either Anastasia or Dante. After Ms. Day asked some comprehension questions, Dante initiated a voting process in order to override Ms. Day's decision.

Dante's next tactic was to plead while Anastasia tried to persuade Ms. Day to allow everyone to read. After Samantha attempted to take control by reading, Dante took the floor by talking over her. Strangely

enough, when Anastasia took back the floor, the arguments stopped, and Anastasia seemed surprised. After several students had the opportunity to read, Dante took the floor again, announcing that he would read the rest of the time.

Ms. Day's reaction to this argument suggests some frustration and eventual concession to Dante and Anastasia, the most vocal of the students requesting to read. Through those actions and the multiple ways in which the students attempted to one-up each other, it is apparent that the desire to read this particular book was quite high. It was frustrating to the teacher who struggled to rein in their excitement.

Ms. Day, in revisiting this excerpt of data with the researcher, commented frankly, "But to me this exchange seems like a personal power struggle and a way to take the focus off the task at hand, delaying the reading as well as drawing attention to oneself." Ms. Day was replying to the suggestion that students seemed engaged with reading aloud, which was surprising to see in a high school reading intervention class. It was clear that most students read above the grade level of the intervention meant for students who read at grades four to six. Ms. Day was comfortable disagreeing collegially and perceptively with the researcher. Both agreed that this event suggested that the students were comfortable in carrying out the argument and had a strong sense of belonging in this reading class.

Ms. Day also noted that some of the students were involved in Special Education services, and certain conditions, particularly behavior disorders, influenced their interactions with one another and texts. This was an important reminder that classroom interaction is always mediated by intersecting contexts, some of which are not immediately discernable to researchers. Power struggle or no, students were genuinely engaged with the book and demanded turns to read. Ms. Day and the researcher collaboratively engaged in conversations together to better understand what was meaningful to students in the reading class such that Ms. Day could promote further engagement.

## "Gettin' all racial"

Race was a factor in how students perceived power figures in the school. For example, Dante was upset to find that the protagonist is White rather than Black in the book *Mississippi Trial, 1955* by Chris Crowe (2003).

> At 9:30, Dante said, "So, Ms. Day, this is a White boy speakin' in the book."
> "What?" Ms. Day asked, genuinely surprised.
> "His grandpa had the cotton field. Why can't it be about a Black boy?"
> "Good question," Ms. Day said.
> "Thought the way you described it was 'bout a Black boy," Dante said almost accusingly.
> "I did too," Ms. Day noted. "I think the important thing is for people to get it. Maybe that is why the author had the narrator be a White boy."
> "Now you gettin' all racial," Dante said.
> "No, that just might be why the author wrote it that way. I have others if you want a different one," Ms. Day offered.
> "Nah," Dante said.

For Dante, the book had less appeal because the protagonist's race was not what he believed it to be, and his taking offense that it was not about a Black boy shows that he probably chose it because he thought he identified racially with the protagonist. Ms. Day admitted that she had thought the book's protagonist was Black, and her response suggests that it is important to figure out who is speaking. Ultimately, Ms. Day let Dante decide if he would rather read a book with a Black boy protagonist.

Interestingly, students perceived a race gap between themselves and Ms. Day as exemplified in Dante's talk. Dante grew excited and began to talk quickly in Black vernacular speech and also used slang in this next field note excerpt:

> "What do you think selling shoes would be like?" Ms. Day asked.
>
> "Boring," Marissa said.
>
> "Fun, cuz you know you're getting people kicks they like. . . " Dante talked quickly until Mia interrupted him.
>
> "I don't think she understands you, Dante—she's White," Mia said dryly.

Ms. Day was aware that the students were interested in protagonists and resources related to their social, cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. For example, on October 17, Ms. Day shared a newspaper written in Spanish for which Marissa's mother wrote, and on October 21, she shared many new books, seven out of ten of which, she observed, "have minorities as protagonists." Ms. Day attempted to bridge the gap between students and school discourse, actively trying to create a home space wherein race relations was also the topic of conversation in this classroom because of students' strong identification with it.

Although the ratio of boys to girls was originally only one to two at the beginning of the semester, that ratio dwindled to one to six by the end of the semester. Boys often absent from the classroom left largely because of behavior problems or due to excessive voluntary skipping of class. By the end of the semester, only two boys actually took the semester final, Juan and Gerald. There were five boys who gradually left the class.

Leaving school occurred despite the fact that at least two of the boys showed genuine interest in reading material of their own choosing. Ms. Day remarked that "skipping seems addictive." Many students began to skip after the first semester. "As the work piles up from days missed and grades go down, students give up and stop coming all together," she said. She and the researcher shared looks of disappointment each time they discovered that students skipped class. Dante argued many times about reading aloud a book he liked, and Tyler independently researched the background of the books he read. In contrast, only two girls left the class, one because her family moved away and the other for unknown reasons.

## How Dante Stopped Reading in Class

One day in class in late October, Ms. Day jokingly stood behind Dante's chair as he was about to sit and pulled it from under him. He fell backward to the floor, hitting the floor hard on his bottom. There was a moment of utter silence as Ms. Day looked aghast, her eyes wide as she remembered the video recording and said that she never expected him to fall down. She said she thought he had seen her pull the chair back and that it was a joke.

Then, as she looked at Dante, he jumped up and accused her of purposefully making fun of him by pulling his chair from under him because he was Black. *You pulled the chair from right under me!* he yelled. His pride was hurt, and his trust in Ms. Day plummeted at a critical moment for him as a "struggling reader" in her class. The researcher remembers not being able to look their way because she was paralyzed by the embarrassment Dante felt at being bested by his teacher, thus becoming the butt of her joke. She could not make eye contact with Ms. Day because she could also feel Ms. Day's consternation in having made such public mistake with all students watching.

Dante returned to class one more time after this incident and then disappeared altogether. Ms. Day often commented afterward at school that she regretted her innocent joke because she had developed a real connection with Dante even though he was difficult in class. The researcher was never sure how to respond other than to agree with a supportive nod. In the grocery store or in the community, this moment was etched in the minds of both the researcher and the teacher and was relived every time they saw each other. Ms. Day did not talk about it outside school, yet this interaction continued to be pivotal in understanding how young people, especially young men, lose their sense of belonging in classes such as these and how well-meaning teachers inadvertently foster alienation.

## Dante as the Protagonist in the Research Study

A key finding in this study that linked the teacher and researcher across years in their home spaces in the field was that of the protagonist and identification with the protagonist (the agent in the story,

the agent in one's own story) as being key to engaging students and changing their "reading identities." Students mostly identified with protagonists like themselves as they engaged with reading. Dante, when the chair was pulled from under him, became the protagonist of his own classroom story of the Black boy who is inadvertently treated in an unjust way by his teacher's humorous intent.

Students' identification with protagonists of their ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, age, and gender affected their ability to accept the literacy curriculum, which they resisted when there was a discrepancy. The deeply embarrassing moment that Dante experienced as a Black youth and as reader in the intervention class led him to believe that his teacher was the antagonist in his story, someone who violated what Noddings (1984) has characterized as a caring ethic "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (2). The students' resistance to the curriculum and the teacher often had a negative impact on the students' success in the class and on their ability to remain in the classroom.

A recurring question remains regarding why boys are unable to adapt as well as girls in school to reading classes. Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, and Lankshear (2002) explore the fact that while gender affects success in schools, other aspects such as low socioeconomic status and previous success combine together to create "a network of disadvantage" for boys (24). For example, the boys did not see themselves as being positioned by the teacher or the texts in the curriculum as legitimate students. Furthermore, social class and its constitutive discourses emphasize differences in schools and are perpetuated by continuously linking "struggling reader" with low socioeconomic background, boys with low literacy achievement, and lack of connection with well-intended teachers.

While reminiscing some years after Dante's chair was pulled from under him, Ms. Day noted one day in the school hallway, "Higher level students have a classroom persona that they turn on and you don't get to know those students as well. The students [low socioeconomic status students] wear their emotions more at the surface and can't turn that off. For kids in poverty, it's all about relationships." This shared insight demonstrates how "home" is reinvented between the researcher and the research participants with every new "ah ha," thus

informing the relational understandings founded in educational ethnography that lead to a sense of belonging in the field.

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