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Finding Yourself in a Book: Marginalized Adolescent Identity Development and Literary Engagements

By

Anthony Johnston

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor P. David Pearson, Co-chair
Professor Sarah W. Freedman, Co-chair
Professor Donald M. McQuade

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the identities of “marginalized” adolescents as they engage in literacy-based activities. Using ethnographic and qualitative research methods (including surveys/questionnaires, audio recorded interviews, video recorded observations, classroom artifacts, and observational notes), a multi-case study occurred over six months. The study took place at South Bay High, a small public charter school, located in a poor and working class neighborhood of major city in Northern California, serving non-dominant youth. Twenty two juniors, and of these, six focal participants, elected to participate in the study, which took place in their English 11 class. The study utilizes socio-cultural theories of learning and identity, transactional theories of pedagogy, and applies figured worlds and positional identity theory in its analysis. This work is in conversation with a growing genre of scholarship referred to as literacy and identity studies (Moje, 2009).

The relative fragility and durability of a student’s academic identity is considered. In addition to examining individual identities, this work also takes up the collective classroom identity as a site for examination. By taking into account local histories of cultural and social contextual matters, and by examining classroom culture (i.e., norms, discourses, routines), the classroom studied offers the first case studied. Specifically, I consider the effect of ideologically divergent approaches to literacy instruction on the academic identities of the collective.

Adolescence is a time when young people are in search of narratives and discourses to offer understandings of the past, security in the present, and imagined trajectories towards the future. How one comes to see oneself (and one’s future) is often determined by the narratives made available – from peers, media, families, schools, and other institutions. Non-dominant youth have less access to identity resources imbued with social and academic capital from which to construct
identities or imagined futures. The second findings chapter follows the focal participants as they take up literacy-based resources as they engage in processes of authoring the self.

The figured world of the high school classroom has a limited amount of roles for students to occupy. Often students are labeled and treated in ways that position them on a relative scale of academic potential and social behavior. Once students become positioned in particular ways (i.e., as the class clown, teacher’s pet, slacker) they often accept these positionings and come to define themselves in relatively fixed terms. However, in an ELA class, literacy can serve as a medium for students to “try on” identities not always available to them in other spaces. The third findings chapter looks at how focal participants were positioned and at the positioning events that serves to either solidify or disrupt seemingly fixed identities.

Implications of the study include: Instructional practices that treat ELA classrooms as spaces for interpretations not only of texts but also in ways that provide insights into students own lives. An examination of the multiple competing forces present in classrooms, from federal and state-mandated testing to the teacher’s pedagogical stance, illustrates the complexity of classroom spaces, particularly in classrooms for students who have traditionally been underserved by schooling as an institution. The need to examine the spectrum of diversity among non-dominant youth so that young people are not further reduced or essentialized by progressive instructional methods is also considered.
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Chapter 1
Literacy and Academic Identity Matters

This dissertation explores identity displays by non-dominant students as they participated in an English Language Arts class in a small, urban high school in Northern California. Over six months, I employed ethnographic methods and a multiple case study approach as I followed a class of 22 juniors and within that class, five focal participants. As a researcher, I am interested in the generative potential for narratives from literary fictions to intersect with and build upon the discourses and narratives that marginalized youth bring to the classroom. The class participated in two approaches to literacy instruction and a wide range of academic and social activities, thus operating under various contexts and constraints in which students might display identity. By analyzing the relationship between the uptake of literacy resources for identity work, the role of positionality for marginalized youth (Franzak, 2006), and the identity work for the class collectively, I contribute to a growing literature that considers the relationship between adolescent identity, literacy, and learning. I discovered that these marginalized adolescents, often characterized as disengaged, indifferent, and incapable of being active participants in their own academic success, both reflect these descriptors in ways that are alarming and resist in ways that inspire.

As an educator, this dissertation builds on my teaching background that strived to address the disproportionate representation of African-American and Latin@ youth graduating from high school or attending college. I have an explicit agenda in conducting this study: I want to know which academic and social contexts, activities, practices, and literacy engagements are conducive to “nudging” students towards (or away from) an academic identity trajectory. A related project this study undertakes involves creating a rich portrait of each of the five focal participants to learn how they experience English Language Arts instruction.

Background of the Problem

A young person who “drops out” of high school is 63 times more likely to end up in prison than a person who graduated from a four-year college (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, Palma, 2009). In San Francisco county, where this study occurred, only one in four African-American students left high school with a diploma during the year this study took place (CALPADS, 2013). In the same year, 65% of African-American students and 44% of Latin@ youth grades 10 through 12 “dropped out” of high school (CALPADS, 2013).

These alarming numbers result from multiple factors including, among others, poverty, and the lack of engaging school experiences for these youth. These factors contribute to a “school-to-prison pipeline” (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007; Polakow, 2000) wherein the disciplining procedures including suspensions, expulsions, mis-education, “diploma denial” play a role in ushering young African-American and Latin@ youth into a pipeline that leads to the prison system (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). Recently, Winn and Behizadeh (2011) argued that “disrupting and
dismantling” the pipeline can occur if youth can engage in fostering critical literacies; if students have forums where their voices, ideas and lived experiences can be heard; if students feel they are co-constructors of their learning and have spaces to present their ideas in multiple ways.

In an effort to find stories of promise to learn from, Shaun Harper (2009) examined the reasons African-American men succeed in college. One recurring strategy for success was accessing counter narratives of self. Harper demonstrated that having multiple discourses from which to author the self, as successful black college students, was an effective strategy for coping with the challenges and stress that came with being an African-American male in a college setting. Taken together, Winn and Behizadeh’s call for critical literacies and student voice, along with Harper’s finding about the saliency of multiple and counter narratives to fashion the self, collectively point to possible instructional efforts that might inform curriculum and instruction in ELA classrooms primarily serving students of color. This study examines how an attempt to teach ELA with these ideal goals was experienced by the class as a whole, and the five African-American and Latin@ students in particular. Ultimately, I seek the activities and experiences that support a more durable academic identity. I define identity as a narrative of self, made up of multiple discourses, and as we construct our identities over time and in practices we continue a process of authoring the self.

**Statement of the Problem**

In lieu of an explicit problem statement, I briefly sketch the scene of the classroom as inhabited by my focal participants. Those of us who have worked in, or attended, urban public schools can likely imagine each of these students vividly. Some of us might see ourselves. The sketch also illustrates a problem that this research hopes to address. Despite their aptness, these descriptions, by their very nature, are inchoate, unreliable, and serve to marginalize; in short, they oversimplify everything about these students and their contexts. The participants in the study are not only members of the classroom studied, they also reside in the figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of the urban high school classroom broadly.

First we meet a few of the boys: Tre (all names are pseudonyms), an African-American male, wearing his hooded jacket pulled over and tightly drawn over his head, rests it on the table. Tre resist schoolwork and disrupts others in class, more interested in engaging the girls in the class than being engaged academically. Jeffrey, sitting at the front table, also African-American, a low-skilled but earnest student, finds himself over his head but unwilling to show weakness. Carlos, sitting with his two childhood friends in the back of the room, is a Latino male who enjoys his status as the class clown and often arrives late. Next, we meet three Latinas: Alejandra, who keeps checking her cell phone, skillfully navigates the “game” of school and seems eager for the period to end. Sitting behind her, the quiet Cat with her dyed red hair seems always lost in a daydream. Finally, Andrea, loudly argues with the teacher, Rose, while also joking with her peers.
The problematic and familiar labeling and classifying of these youth illustrates the parameters of the problem. Too often, students get positioned (and position themselves) in ways that fall along a spectrum associated with a trajectory towards academic failure or success. Once students reach the eleventh grade these identities become “sedimented” (Holland et al., 1998) as people repeatedly perform identities in particular contexts. Additionally, while educators and researchers searching for “solutions” for the problems of engaging and educating adolescents deemed “marginalized” often hope to mediate the effects of these prophetic labels, they often leverage and apply these same problematic labels uncritically. Building on Wortham’s work (2006) that notes the inextricable links between identity development and academic learning, this work intends to examine the identity work (Calabrese Barton, Kang, Tan, O’Neill, Bautista-Guerra, & Brecklin, 2013) that students engage in while participating (or not participating) in an ELA class and notes positioning events that provides tremors (or even ruptures) to positioned identities inhibiting academic success and an expansive social self.

A secondary and related problem this research explores relates to Bakhtin’s notion of “ideological becoming” (1981). One’s ways of viewing the self, understanding the world and one’s place in it, and mediating experiences is the result of one’s “ideological becoming.” This dialogic and discursive process involves authoritative discourses (religion, law, school rules, a canonical text read in school) and an unending struggle with various internally persuasive discourses (gossip, media, stories, opinions) through which an individual can fashion one’s meanings of the self and the world. These discourses are embedded with the language we use to mediate our understandings of our experiences and it is this struggle of ideological becoming that facilitates how we go about “authoring the self” (Holland, et al., 1998). Many of the students in this study struggle with being marginalized in the definition sense of the word, marginalized as being “insignificant or peripheral” (OED, 2014). Marginalization provides less freedom to experience alternative discourses or experiment with alternate identities. As Nasir and Hand state, “the identities and practices that an individual is exposed to and negotiates along a trajectory of activity support an array of imagined trajectories of becoming. A more constrained trajectory results in less variety in imagined identities” (p. 468, 2006).

My hypothesis is that through reading literature and engaging in literacy activities, English class can serve as a dialogic space wherein students’ discourses interact with the discourses found and produced in a space that offers multiple imagined trajectories of becoming. While ELA classrooms are not the only space in which students can engage in “authoring the self,” the locus of the ELA class has two salient features for this task: both conceptually and functionally, it deals in and provides a language for an identity imagined anew, and it serves as a social space wherein others (peers and teacher) collectively engage in specific activities meant to facilitate this process. The extent to which this classroom and the literacy activities therein supports an authoring of the self that both promote the building of their social selves and improving their academic outcomes drives this research.
Theoretical Foundation

But the “I” is by no means a freewheeling agent. Rather, the “I” is more like Levi-Strauss’s (1966) bricoleur, who builds with preexisting material. In authoring the world, in putting words to the world that addresses her, the “I” draws upon the languages, dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed. One is more or less condemned, in the work of expression, to choices because ‘heteroglossia,’ the simultaneity of different languages and their associated values and presuppositions is the rule in social life. (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, Cain, 1998, p. 10)

The above quote from *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* reflects the theoretical basis of this dissertation. The curious usage of the word “condemned” rings relevant given the context in which this study takes place. Students “authored” the meaning of their worlds, their contexts, their lives, within an underfunded school setting that seemed annually on the verge of closure, with a stressed out third year teacher already seen as the veteran on staff, in a classroom culture meeting low expectations and embracing socializing and being off task, and as part of a group of juniors reading, on average, at a sixth-grade level. Within this particular context, and in the other worlds they inhabit, what “worlds address[ed]” these adolescents of color? Additionally, what “words of others” are they “exposed” to?

Might the school-based literary fictions that these students read and the literacy activities they engage provide them with additional narratives and discourses to serve as “preexisting material” from which to author the self? Assuming the first question holds promise, what instructional practices allow for the narratives to join the *bricoleur* that constructs the “I”? Such questions lie at the heart of this research. This dissertation examines the identity work of adolescents as they participate in literacy activities. The scholarship and theory that drive this research exists at the intersection of two distinct yet interrelated disciplines of study: literacy and identity. The move to consider the relationship between literacy and identity has led to a genre of scholarship that Moje and Luke (2009) refer to as *literacy-and-identity studies*. The preponderance of theory and to a lesser degree, empirical studies, that explores the particularities of this intersection considers the affordances offered through an examination on the ways that identity and literacy shape and inform one another.

To explore this relationship, I first review socio-cultural theories on identity construction including positional identity theory. Next I examine transactional theories of learning that supports the prospect of using literacy as a tool to author the self. It is from these two theoretical genres that I designed, researched, and analyzed the study and the data collected in my six-month qualitative research project.

Identity Construction

Identity construction occurs as individuals make meaning of themselves, the social world, and their place in it. In order to make meaning of the world, and our
lives and place in that world, individuals employ discourses for accessing a language with which to construct understandings – a process that Bakhtin refers to as “ideological becoming”. Ivanič suggests that, “discourse is the mediating mechanism in the social construction of identity” (1998, p. 17). However, while selected discourses mediate our understandings of the world and allow one to fashion the self, access to discourses is hardly equitable. In addition, individuals are saddled with discourses that can that limit the possibilities and breadth of options for ideological becoming. As I discuss in later chapters, the participants in this study carry limiting and narrowly imagined discourses of self about what constitutes being a young black male, or being a student identified as having a learning disability, or being a young Latina who sees school as largely oppressive. The discourses that the youth in this study have access to and have to endure in their processes of ideological becoming is limiting in that it inhibits freedom, learning, and opportunity.

In particular, I am interested in the ways that students are positioned into particular historically characterized roles in a classroom (i.e. the good student) and how such positioning contrasts, compliments, aligns with or is at odds with students own perceived academic identities. The participants in this study have what I refer to as fragile academic identities – in the sense that they possess little confidence as scholars as well as lack a history of recognizing or being recognized for sustained academic success. Crucial to this fragile academic identity is the transformative potential of even minimal academic achievements. In other words, getting a good grade on an essay may be an uneventful norm with students possessing a more durable academic identity, but when this occurred for one of my focal participants, Alejandra, it served as a significant event because it functioned to provide a glimpse of herself as capable of being a “good student” – an identity she had rarely known. This exemplar of a positioning event – wherein a student is positioned in a meaningful way that either disrupts or reaffirms an identity that feels “fixed” to the individual, a phenomenon further explored in chapter six. Finally, this fragility drove students to actively position one another in ways that stabilized their own hold on a tenuous scholarly sense of self.

**Literacy: A Resource for Identity Work.** How might students like those in my study gain access to a more varied and diverse range of discourses from which to “author the self” in ways that both promote the building of their social identities and improve their academic outcomes (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008)? How can educators counter an inequitable distribution and access to discourses and narratives of self that offer a trajectory of potential identities one can imagine traversing in the future (Gee, 2000; Nasir & Hand, 2006)? By examining scholarship from transactional theories of learning, promise resides in their argument that literacy activities serve as mediating resources for accessing and internalizing new discourses with which to author the self.

The socio-cultural ideas of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) in particular, and the intersections of their ideas as articulated by Emerson (1983), Wertsch (1991), and Holland & Lachicotte (2007) provide theoretical foundations for this dissertation. In addition, informing this research are theories of figured
Learning Precedes Development. While Vygotsky’s primary concerns involved human mental functioning, a number of scholarships have drawn correlations between the implications of his theories of learning and development and recent discussions regarding identity construction. Informed by Vygotsky’s work, Lave and Wegner's (1991) theories of how learning occurs reflect a perspective wherein learning and a sense of identity are inseparable, in fact, “they are the same phenomenon” (p. 115). Penuel and Wertsch (1995) apply Vygotskian theories to studying identity through observing local activity settings where individuals actively engage in forming their own identities, taking mediated action as a unit of analysis, and examine the cultural and historical resources for identity formation as empowering and constraining tools for identity formation. Dyson has argued that children’s inner sense or awareness of themselves are shaped by their imagining of pleasurable worlds, that articulated with classroom communities, reverberate as an ideological force instrumental in identity construction. Wells (2000) discussion of Vygotskian concepts notes that learning explicitly links learning, development and identity. Wells stresses that “identities are formed through participation in various activity systems” (p. 55), discusses the identity forming effect, as a result of “being wholly involved, in assisting others in the ZPD” (p. 57). As Wells states, “learning is not simply the acquisition of isolated skills or items of information, but involves the whole person and contributed to the formation of individual identity” (p. 61).

Most notably for this research, Holland and Lachicotte (2007) stress the fundamental importance of mediation for the study of identity and extend this to a discussion of agency. In addition, these authors examine identity formation in trajectories of participation across activities. Noting that Vygotskian theories support a Meadian identity theory (viewed as a social and cultural product that people transact in practice and later direct to the self), Holland and Lachicotte argue that identity itself can be viewed as higher psychological function, and thus subject to the laws of complex concept formation. Identity then, “personalizes a set of collectively developed discourses about a type and cultivates, in interactions with others a set of embodied practices that signify the person” (p. 134). An amalgamation of collective meanings of self is employed to organize and narrate the self (semiotic mediation) in practice and achieve a modest form of agency. Vygotsky himself argues that the self is only understood through applying one’s understanding of others to oneself, “we are conscious of ourselves because we cognize...others, and in the same way which we use to cognize others – since we are the same in relation as others to us. We are aware of our self only to the extent that we are the other for our self, i.e. only in so far as we can perceive our own
Vygotsky provides a generalized framework for the process of acquiring a new concept, including higher order, or complex concepts. In his framework, individuals proceed through a series of steps (pseudo concepts, complex formations, scientific concepts) during which the phenomenon continually emerges as individuals interact with others in the socio-cultural contexts of the acquired concept. Social interaction, mediated by symbolic forms, provides both resources and constraints for acquiring the concept. In *Thought and Language* (1986), Vygotsky illustrates the process by which one learns including the process of errors made, previous understandings relied upon, and socially offered resources accessed, all with the intention of finding a foothold of understanding towards gaining “higher order mental functions” (p. 126). Vygotsky emphasizes that the mind and the personality, both sociogenetic constructs, develop in relationship with one another.

I theorize a similar process for identity construction, one of struggling to find some semblance or harmony of order. In a Vygotskian sense, the capacity to organize oneself under the auspices of some identity concept develops as one transacts cultural artifacts with others and then proceeds to apply the cultural resource to oneself (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). In other words, Vygotskian developmental concepts explain how people come to be able to organize themselves in the name of an identity. Identities, as a higher order psychological function, consist of relatively organized complexes of thoughts, memories, feelings and experiences that an individual come to rely on as a stage for action and response.

Vygotsky’s notion of semiotic mediation is useful in my work because it articulates the process of internalization and organization. Individuals rely on cultural artifacts to modulate their own behavior and actions. Semiotic mediation occurs as symbols are enacted first on an interpersonal plane and secondly, when the person begins to apply them to him or herself, on an intrapersonal plane (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). My work extrapolates on this theory by applying them to the cultural artifacts present in an ELA classroom. Treating the discourses found in literary fictions or produced in literacy activities as cultural artifacts or discourses that can be an object of shared social interpretation provides a space for an interpersonal plane of mediation, what Ball and Freedman (2004) refer to as the Grand Dialogic Zone. Ideally, students would also apply the symbols at an intrapersonal plane of mediation once the discourses are internalized and treated as a resource to “author the self.”

**The Epochal Nature of Adolescence.** While much of Vygotsky’s work was with younger people, I was struck by Vygotsky’s (1986) discussion of the salient time period of development that adolescence occupies. Adolescence enjoys special status as a stage in which one’s elementary concept formations come to a close and a new stage of complex concepts – such as abstract thought – engage (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 135). However, this is no seamless transition, and while complex concepts become more common, individuals must rely on elementary concept formations frequently. “Adolescence therefore is less a period of completion than one of crisis and transition” (p. 141). For Vygotsky, due to the time in life that adolescence
occupies, these newly emerging complex concepts serve as foundational concepts upon which future concept formations will develop – and thus need special attention. In other words, because these complex concepts are early forays into abstract thought and objectivity – a foundation for future higher order thinking is actively forming. Supporting Vygotsky’s claims about the salience of adolescence, recent brain research has suggested that brain development during adolescence is secondary only to the brain development that occurs in the first years of life (Strauch, 2003). Given the consequences of this transitional period, Vygotsky argues that society must be cognizant of the emergence of conceptual thinking, “If the milieu presents no such tasks to the adolescent, makes no new demands on him, and does not stimulate his intellect by providing a sequence of new goals, his thinking fails to reach the highest stage, or reaches them with great delay” (p. 108, 1986). While learning and development lasts throughout one’s life, adolescence is salient because newly acquired foundational understandings inform subsequent learning and growth.

**Refracting Voices to Author the Self.** For Bakhtin, the process of ideological becoming involves the dialogic tensions of developing internally persuasive discourses as one assimilates the words of others. Bakhtin’s discussion of the author crafting a novel provides a metaphor applicable to this discussion of identity construction. In writing a novel, the author speaks through language – he or she ventriliquates the socio-ideological position of the heteroglossia of his or her epoch (1981). Similar to the quotation that begins this chapter – “the ’I’ draws upon the languages, dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed” (Holland et al., 1998). However, this act of ventriliquation is no echo, rather, it “refracts” a double-voiced discourse. One’s utterances emerge *through* the refracted lens of heteroglossia. The metaphor calls to mind looking through a prism from which one must construct meaning of the image, employing both mediation and agency. The refraction process calls to mind Vygotsky’s semiotic mediation discussed earlier – wherein one has the means to organize, control and resignify their own behavior. “In this sense, one’s identities are social products drawn from social history, actively internalized, and redrawn as one’s expressions enter into new activities and new circumstances” (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007).

Vygotsky’s notion that social interactions precede development can be understood with Bakhtin’s discussion of refracted voicing (Emerson, 1983; Wertsch, 1991). While not articulated to the extent that Bakhtin considers, Vygotsky’s discussion of the word as both a symbol and a tool allows utterances to play a crucial role in development, “the acquisition of language can provide a paradigm for the entire problem of the relationship between learning and development. Language arises initially as a means of communication between a child and the people in his environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to internal speech, does it come to organize child’s thought, that is, become an internal mental function” (p. 89, 1978). As Emerson (1983) states, “For Vygotsky, the Word is a powerful amalgam: part sign, part tool, it is the significant humanizing event. One makes a self through the words one has learned, fashions one’s voice and inner speech by a selective appropriation of the voices of others” (p. 255). Bakhtin articulates the self-
fashioning process in his discussion on assimilating the words of others. One may "recite by heart" or, "retell it in one’s own words.” When an individual assimilates words in the latter process, Bakhtin suggests that one arrives at an “internally persuasive” discourse – thus making the words one’s own – what Emerson calls our “intellectual and moral growth” (p. 255). Wertsch (1991) synthesizes the ideas of Bakhtin and Vygotsky, suggesting that Bakhtin's notion of “utterance” relates to Vygotsky's (1978) term “mediation” in that both concepts involve dialogic negotiations inherent in their functionality. For Wertsch, Bakhtin’s argument for ideological becoming stemming from authoritative and internally persuasive discourses addresses the “how” of Vygotsky’s ideas about development.

Ball and Freedman (2004) discuss ideological becoming as more than ideas being developed; including an understanding of how one develops views of the world, imagines one’s place in that world, and a system of ideas – an ideological self. Informing this work, the authors stress that ideological becoming is mediated by the ideological environment – the space, practices, activities and discourses that form the social and contextual space through which an individual can consider, draw on, reject, struggle with and through such engagement – author the self. When considering the ideological environment of the ELA classroom then, two important distinguishing qualities make the space generative with regards to identity construction. One, the practices, texts, and discourses provide a language for ideological becoming, and two, individuals in an ELA classroom collectively participate in various activities in which ideological becoming is a potential (if unstated) goal. The relationship between the ideological environment and ideological becoming influences my first findings chapter where I treat the whole class as a case study. In addition, the concept of an ideological environment suggests similarities to the concept and functionality of figured worlds.

**Figured Worlds**

Articulated by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain in their 1998 book, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, figured worlds are described as “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). Part their larger discussion of identity, the authors note that figured worlds are populated by a set of agents (teacher and students) involved in a series of meaningful activities (reading, taking notes, arguing) and moved by a specific set of forces (mandatory attendance, interest in learning, school rules). In figured worlds, people come to produce or reproduce subjectivities (or roles) that they recognize, and are recognized by others, as constituting their identity.

The concept of figured worlds supports this research given the site used in the study. Like many figured worlds attached to institutional constructs, the high school classroom is populated with predetermined roles that students adopt or are expected to occupy – the "good" student, the class clown, the chronically late student, and so forth. This classroom is no exception in this regard. At the same time, the highly social nature of the class included “off task” behavior, humorous discussions, and moments of tension that all seemed like daily norms and events
and contributed to a strong sense of community. The teacher in the class occupies an additional social construct, one that this teacher actively embraces and often resists given the context. Next, being part of a school and nested in a Humanities department invariably includes historicized and locally produced constructs. Finally, the “figured world” of the generic 11th-grade English class frames the space for participants in varying ways: for some, this meant resistance to or excitement about academic work; for others, it meant feeling anxious or eager about debating ideas or issues in a book; and for still others, it was seen as nap time. Given these varied responses to the class, participants were “distributed” by navigating different points in the “landscapes of action.” One lens through which I observe this distribution includes noting the dynamic relationships between social and academic positionalities as they occurred. I pay special attention to the mechanisms that supported a more durable academic identity.

The relationship between figured worlds and agency warrants discussion. Holland et al.’s (1998) socio-cultural practice theory of self focuses attention on “figured worlds as sites of potential agency” (p. 40). However, figured worlds offer a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power. Populated with socially imagined roles, the identity and agency of individuals form dialogically and dialectically within figured worlds. Similar to Bakhtin’s metaphor of a refracted lens, people develop a sense of self in these imagined roles, and in doing so, objectify and develop a consciousness of self that “allows at least a modicum of agency or control over their own behavior” (p. 40). Holland’s concept of figured worlds, then, is generative when considering identity and agency in education.

**Identity as Positioning.** Positions, in ways that perhaps reflect my earlier discussion on discourses, are made available through generic conceptions and are called upon by specific story lines within the figured worlds they inhabit – such as teacher and student. In the course of social interactions, individuals assume roles specific to a given figured world (Holland, et al., 1998) that they draw on through previous experience and in relation to the discourses that are available to them. These roles position individuals in socially recognizable and conventional ways. Positionality is a function of the figured world construct wherein individuals perform their roles in ways that come to be recognized as their identities. Positionality has been defined as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 91). Holland et al. (1998) provide a more nuanced definition, “Positional identity is a person’s apprehension of her social position in a lived world: that is, depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all” (Holland, et al., 1998, pp. 127-28).

The participants in this study reflect a population of adolescents often portrayed as disengaged from school and in what the future holds for them. Student such as these are too often portrayed as lacking agency or autonomy (Alvermann, 2001). At the same time, adolescence invariably occupies a period in life when individuals actively frame or imagine identity, trying to reconcile who one has been
with whom one wants to be. A process ridden with anxiety, often only alleviated by selecting or accepting self-narratives and descriptors of identity not always conducive with academic success (i.e. “I am not a math person but am good at sports”). Particularly for (but not limited to) marginalized youth, these rigid identity constructs offer imagined self-narratives and self-descriptors that provide adolescents with a modicum of stability during an unstable period (Athanases, 1998; Broughton, 2002; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Despite the deficit discourse targeted toward marginalized youth regarding disengagement and apathy (Osei-Kofi, 2005; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009), I agree with Moore and Cunningham (2006) who argue that agency on the part of teens occurs with or without permission or guidance. This research responds to Moore and Cunningham’s (2000) call for educators to have the beliefs, practices, and programs in place that allow students to craft agentive identities where youth interrogate existing conditions and construct literacies that will best serve them. Because the focus of positioning is discursive, how social actors become constructed in particular ways is a resource through which speakers and listeners can negotiate new positions. As chapters three and five illustrate, both the agentive promise and restrictive or marginalizing potential that positioning presents inform this work.

Moje and Luke (2009) argued that the identity as positioning metaphor usefully encapsulates previous metaphors explaining identity. They write, “A person calls out, another responds, meanings are made, identities are assigned and acted upon in the next round of meaning making.” Identity as positioning allows for subjects to “author the self” in relationship to others; through story telling and the adopting of new stories; positioning occurs both over time and abruptly; and it allows for the doing of identity – “to be as powerful a means of self-construction and representation as the narrativizing of identity” (Moje & Luke, 2009). Additionally, identity as positioning allows for a rich, nuanced representation of participants.

Social and historical theories of identity suggest that, while changeable, identities “thicken” (Wortham, 2004), become “sedimented” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), or “laminate” (Holland & Leander, 2004), as people repeatedly perform identities in particular contexts. In my fifth chapter, I consider the role that positioning events play in attenuating, rupturing, or providing shock waves of resistance to seemingly fixed identities that have resulted from multiple subject positionings over time. Like the benefits from drawing upon additional narratives from literacy for “authoring the self”, positioning events might support a student’s academic success and enrich his or her social self because their fixed sense of identity has been called into question, a newly imagined self emerging.

**Literature as Tool for Authoring the Self**

Identities mediate and are mediated by the texts that they encounter (Moje & Lewis, 2009). The notion that the texts one reads and literacy practices one engages mediates identity construction can be understood by aesthetic educational approaches, and in particular the pedagogical practice of reader-response theory.

In *Experience and Education* (1938), John Dewey develops ideas for what would later be referred to as a transactional theory of learning. Dewey’s theory argues that experience arises from the relationship between two principles --
continuity and interaction. Continuity suggests that each experience a person has influences his/her future, for better or for worse. Interaction refers to the situational influence on one's experience. In other words, one's present experience functions as the interaction between one's past experiences and the present situation. Dewey's concept recalls Bakhtin's discussion of the utterance and the role that addressivity (always directed towards someone) and answerability (anticipates a response) plays in each utterance expressed. An utterance is embedded in a history of expressions by others and is a "link in the chain of communication" (Bakhtin, 1986). In treating the experience of learning as one that both builds on prior learning and anticipates further learning opportunities, one views the learner as an active, as opposed to passive, constructor of knowledge. This recognition has been influential for various approaches to instruction, including cognitivist, constructivist, student-centered, and inquiry-based approaches.

**Reader-response.** Influenced by Dewey's ideas, Louise Rosenblatt's (1983, 4th ed.) *Literature as Exploration*, as well as her other writings, became the foundation for a "reader-response" approach to engaging literature. For Rosenblatt, literature provides a living through, not only knowledge about; an experience and not solely information. Rosenblatt (1994) describes transactional reading as "an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader" (p. 1363). This occurrence treats the reading experience as a dynamic one, involving dialogue between the reader and the text. Transactional theories of reading position the reading activity as an ongoing process of negotiating meaning with a text. As such, reading is a situated event, shaped by context, and framed through the reader's stance along an efferent-aesthetic continuum of purposes for reading (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1372). The efferent end refers to a process of attempting an objective gathering and assessing of information and then identifying a prescribed meaning; aesthetic refers to a paradigm wherein the reader brings the self to the text, and through a transactional process, creates new meaning (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Similarly, Iser offers the metaphor of prospecting to explain the process of reading a novel (1989). In his view, reading evolves from the relational work between the text and the reader. The relationship arises through the phenomenological process where as one reads and constructs meaning, one reacts to the meaning made, enabling the reader to have experienced the book as an actual event. In his construct, the reader becomes a "self-regulating structure" (p. 39) in which "the blank in the fictional text induces and guides the reader's constitutive activity" (p. 39). The work's aesthetic merit realized only through this excavation process (Iser, 1989). Going further than his predecessors, Sumara explores reading as an embodied experience in that a deep engagement with the narrative in a literary fiction becomes part of one's lived experiences (1996, 2002). Sumara (1996) states that literary meanings are a material part of the self as it is inextricably bound in a material world. "Our engagements with literary fictions become part of our physiological encounter with the world and eventually influence and shape us biologically" (p. 108). The value of reading fiction does not lie in the ability to extract meaning from the text, but rather, to generate an interpretation of
the text and in the process, re-interpret oneself (1996). Sumara cites Derrida’s notion “that the work of literary fiction is not a location for meaning but, rather, is a form that empties out meaning while at the same time, remaining potentially meaningful” (Derrida, 1992). Sumara suggests that the process of making meaning from a text requires a hermeneutic imagination, creating possible worlds that become part of the reader’s experience of living. Sumara goes on to suggest that the goal of reading lies not solely in interpretation, easily achieved by recognizing the patterns, connotations, allusions and others resources authors use to tell a story, but to uncover insights. Insights can be transformative in that they offer readers additional discourses with which to author the self.

**Engaged Reading & Reader-Response Theory.** The above claims about the merits of reading presuppose that students approach the reading task with a sense of earnestness and a willingness to engage. As teachers in ELA classes can attest, this is not always the case when students are asked to read in school. When students read in school, they will often read for the purpose of finishing their homework, or getting the information they need to complete an assignment, or to read well enough to pass the course. Engaged readers (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012), on the other hand, are defined as “motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive”(p.2). Ivey and Johnston (2013) argue that most of the research on engaged reading has been occupied with the first part of this definition and that the socially interactive component is unexplored. In their 2013 study examining the outcomes and processes of engaged reading for adolescents, they found that while students were constructing meaning of texts, they were also using the text to make meanings of their lives – a finding consistent with my research as well. The authors found that the socially interactive element of engaged reading “occurred inside the books in the form of dialogical relationships with characters and outside of books in dialogical relationships with other and with selves” (p.271). They go on to describe the relationships amongst peers as more than passing interactions, using Rosenblatt’s term, the relationships involve transactions because students reported dynamic readings of the texts and of the transformations they saw in themselves, their peers and the classroom space. A few important distinctions in Ivey and Johnston’s promising findings beg noting. The students were younger (8th and 9th graders), were from more privileged and dominant groups, did not have anxieties about testing and graduating to contend with, and the teachers worked collectively to foster and nurture spaces for engaged reading (adding no tests or other assessments). While I would argue that all students should enjoy such beneficial conditions for literacy engagements, similarly propitious contexts are rare – and by no means could they be found in the context used for my research. During my study, students in the class were introduced to aspects of this approach to reading and collectively distinguished it from how they have read in school for other purposes. Parallels were drawn between how students immersed themselves into music, video games, and other activities, and the teacher modeled and supported bringing a similar mindfulness to reading literature.
Participants were then encouraged and supported to read the primary text using engaged reading strategies.

Moje (2002) posits, “all learning – and literacy learning, in particular – can be conceived of as moments in identity construction and representation” (p. 233). This research intends to explore this claim from Moje, with special attention paid to what instructional practices, student dispositions, and classroom cultures leveraged the use of literacy learning as a “moment in identity construction”. By distinguishing literacy learning for either the intention of gaining information or experiencing transformation, chapter four explores the reasons why some participants took up literacy engagements as resources for identity construction while others did not.

**Literature Review**

My dissertation is part of a larger conversation of scholarship from which I selected works that employed ethnographic and/or case study methods, studied similar settings and populations, while also informed by socio-cultural, and critical theories of learning and identity. I’ve divided the works into three areas to indicate what findings and concepts I build upon and what gaps my research fills. The initial section of works are those I view as being particularly relevant as positioning pieces – they examine adolescent identities, how adolescents develop over time and in-situ, and note the mechanisms that position students in various ways. The next area of scholarship also deals with adolescent identities, but more explicitly considers the presence of literacies and the role literacy plays in identity construction. To situate my research question about the collective identity of a classroom developing over time, my final area includes works that make the classroom context (i.e. participants, activities, curriculum) all salient to any discussion of learning and identity development. After traversing these relevant bodies of scholarship, I articulate the ways in which my work looks to build upon, and in some cases fills gaps, in the current literature.

**Identity Positioning in the ELA Context**

Lesley Rex (2001) provides a rare, early example of a study at the intersection between how a student’s fragile academic identity may, over time, become durable. Addressing the challenge of successfully integrating lower tracked students into higher tracked ELA courses, Rex uses ethnographically obtained classroom discourse data to learn how one student shifts from being a “general” reader to a “gifted and talented” reader. For such a transformation to occur, Rex argues that students need to remake themselves within classroom conditions so that they become seen and see themselves as being a reader, writer and speaker about literature. Rex argues that reader identities emerge through the available sociolinguistic discourse practices that inhabit a particular speech community. Additionally, the transformation of one’s reader identity is an accumulative effect of occasions when an individual’s reading performance meets the evolving expectations of the collective.

Blackburn’s (2003) study of an African-American lesbian adolescent, Justine, discusses the potential for interrogating discourses and trying on alternative
discourses to serve as an agentic act. Justine acquired literacy practices at a youth center that she then accessed to engage in social change and identity work at school. Drawing on Judith Butler’s (1988) work on performance of identity and New Literacy Studies (Collins, 1995; Gee, Hull, Lankshear, 1996; Street, 1984) Blackburn employs the idea of “literacy performances,” as a specific literacy event that may confirm and disrupt the identity work accomplished through the many other performances that make up individuals’ school experiences. Justine’s literacy performances had a dual purpose: creating a space for her full self to be present in school and to effect structural changes to support other gay and lesbian youth. Through writing and sharing poetry, Justine enjoyed a space to “figure her world, perceive her position in it, and author herself in multiple and variable ways” (p. 322). Important for Blackburn is the notion that while literacy events have value, through the repeated literacy performances (in various contexts) a trajectory emerges and lends itself to feelings of agency towards authoring the self.

Luttrell and Parker (2001) argue that students use their literacy practices to form their identities within, and at times in opposition to, the roles they inhabit in the school, classroom and in the home. Following “Alice” in these different spaces, the authors found that Alice participated in multiple literacy activities but saw them as distinct from her school literacy activities. Alice had a difficult home life, was placed in remedial track at school, and suffered with her outcast status amongst her peers. By reading poetry and writing in a journal, Alice’s literacy practices outside of school helped her understand, articulate, challenge and construct meaning out of her difficult life. In addition, Alice shows an interest in engaging in school based literacy practices that more closely resemble the literacy activities she enjoys outside of school. However, such a merging challenges the figured world she has of the purpose and accepted practices in the ELA classroom. The author’s note that if she had been placed in the honors classes offered at the school, then the activities she would enjoy might challenge her notion of what is allowed to occur in a classroom setting and more closely resemble her out-of-school literacy practices. The author’s conclude by arguing for a closing in the gap between students’ everyday literacy activities and their school-based literacy if schools “seek to provide students with the means to redefine themselves and to author worlds” (p. 246).

According to Fairbanks and Ariail (2006), the acquisition and negotiation of positional identities can determine academic success more so that one’s academic skill level or talents. Their longitudinal study of three young women of color throughout middle school considered what discourses students brought to their encounters with literacy and schooling. Specifically, the ways in which they were positioned and positioned themselves in school contexts, and the consequences such positioning had for academic engagement and literacy learning. The authors found that when positional identities are aligned with school norms for behavior, response to instruction, and engagement in class – academic success followed. Additionally, in their implications, Fairbanks and Ariail (2006) argue that school administrators and teachers need to recognize students’ abilities, as well as their weaknesses, as “part of a whole fabric of negotiations and identities forged within a complex set of social contexts” (p. 351). While all three girls studied expressed
interests in reading, writing, and being successful students – the disconnect between what the school counted as academic engagement and what the students cared about and the ways that young people made meaning served to alienate two of the three participants.

Lesley’s 2008 work explores creating a pedagogical bridge between out of school, non-dominant literacies and school sanctioned, dominant literacies to challenge and engage academically “at-risk” students. The context for the study was an after-school program designed to support students who had multiple risk factors and who were viewed as potential dropouts from the local high school. At the site, students paired with two adult mentors who supported them in improving academic literacies, feelings of self-efficacy, encourage reading experiences reflecting transactional theories, and participate in a “non-school” type of experience. Participants were six 11th-grade students, male and female, of either African-American or Latina/o backgrounds, and were projected as unlikely to graduate. Using texts that included themes related to issues of social justice, Lesley and her colleagues encouraged students to apply a critical lens to the literature, and encouraged non-school forms of discourse during the discussion about the texts. The research found that creating contexts where “at-risk” students could engage an exploration of the ways individuals are positioned as marginalized created a bridge between dominant and non-dominant forms of discourse. For these “at risk” students the literacy discourse used in schools, paired with the canonical texts, serve as dual barriers to engagement with reading. However, choosing texts that students see as relevant and allowing non-school sanctioned discourses about said texts can be a bridge that helps to bolster an identity as literate.

These pieces all emphasize the potential (or lack thereof) for students to reimagine the self, often with the support of either a literacy activity (Blackburn, 2003) or an instructional context that situate students own literacies and out of school discourses as legitimate (Rex, 2001; Lesley, 2008) or conversely, invalid (Lutrell & Parker, 2001; Fairbanks and Ariail, 2006). Taken together, these authors recognize a value in providing instructional contexts where bridges can be made between out-of-school literacies and in-school literacies and where discourses that students bring to the classroom are validated. In addition, all of these works highlight the power of being “positioned” as literate, or “at risk’, or remedial, and how such identities can be resisted, or leveraged, in ways that lead to academic success. For example, Rex’s 2001 piece suggests that one’s identity as a reader is informed by the social expectations of the context for what being a reader means. Rex’s story of one successful effort to remake oneself as a reader suggests that some students may have latent successful reader identities that school instruction, literature offered, or classroom contexts either suppress or support. Finally, the students imagined figured world of the ELA classroom mattered. For students such Alice, (Lutrell & Parker, 2001) and the “at-risk” students in Lesley’s (2008) work, the expectations for what an ELA classroom space might offer was not one of liberation or re-imaginings of the self, but a space that had historically alienated and oppressed. In contrast, Rex found that by placing a perceived remedial reader in an advanced reading course it altered both what the student thought ELA could involve and what she could accomplish. Similarly, Blackburn argues that Justine’s repeated
literacy performances writing and sharing poetry in an out-of-school context equipped her with the agency and skills she needed to help redefine literacy practices in her school setting.

**Literacy and Identity Construction**

An article that sparked the early imaginings that eventually became this dissertation is Athanases’ 1998 ethnographic study exploring a mixed-race, 10th grade ELA classroom engaging multicultural literature. Athanases builds on an earlier work (Spears-Bunton, 1992) that found that previously struggling African-American students improved reading performances when they were deeply engaged in text and were asked to link the readings to life experiences. Athanases stressed that teachers need to be explicit with struggling and resistant readers about how to engage literature and talk about literature in meaningful ways. Additionally, students often resist reading due to confronting cultural norms and forms of expression – both regarding the content of the text and the related classroom activities – leading to “aesthetic shutdown” (Soter, 1997). A finding mirroring my own work was that students reported identification with literary fictions because they shared similar experiences or dilemmas as the characters or authors regardless of race or gender. Additionally, in follow-up interviews two years later, Athanases found that students’ emotional responses to particular works of literature remained as strong and vivid as after their initial reading, suggesting that the works of literature became internalized discourses (Bakhtin, 1986).

Although the set in an afterschool book club, Broughton’s 2002 case study of four sixth-grade Latinas reading novels about Mexican youth provides some useful theoretical constructs, as well as generative findings that inform this work. Given the association between a core sense of self and the term identity, Broughton prefers to use the idea of subjectivities in analyzing students’ construction of the self. The experience of being hailed repeatedly to an ideological call (Althusser, 1984) leads an individual to repeat subjectivities in recognizably consistent ways, thereby lending support to the notion of a core identity. Instead, Broughton’s use of language urges a call for action, resistance and agency, ”by describing girls in terms of their subjectivity schemes, it is possible to envision a subject who claims membership among specific groups and repeats certain subject positions, yet remains open to ongoing constructions of the self” (p. 4). For adolescents hungry for equilibrium between how they imagine they are perceived and who they hope to become, positioning provides a modicum of security during an unstable time. Broughton found that the readers in her study allowed literature to become part of their own experience by mentally taking part in the story, and that discussions of the novel allowed readers to debate difficult topics in ways that decentered the self and legitimized thoughts and feelings – providing a mediating distance that supports trying on alternative discourses or identities. Finally, Broughton suggests that because many literary narratives offer a framework for how one develops and changes overtime, students can explore their own constructions of self.

Using an approach similar to Broughton, Sutherland’s 2005 qualitative case studied the interconnectedness between literature, literacy practices, identity and social positioning. Six African-American 16-year teenage girls read *The Bluest Eye*
(Morrison, 1970) in their high school English class. Sutherland draws primarily on group and individual interview data, and notes that students spent little time analyzing the literature and more time using the literature as a springboard for generative discussions around race, gender, and the social positioning they experienced as young Black women. As they read and discussed the text, participants both displayed and challenged identities that they were saddled with. The text provided the distance, or medium, through which to validate, modify, or contest the ability of others to ascribe identities upon them. Broughton (2002) talks about ascribed identities as boundaries and that literacy practices allow for negotiation of such boundaries. In Sutherland’s context, these boundaries consisted of Eurocentric standards of beauty and challenging assumptions about how they, as young Black women, are “supposed” to act. Sutherland was struck that the literature’s complex portrayal of the protagonist gave participants a discourse to consider their own self-narratives in ways that went beyond binaries and simplistic descriptions of self. These nuanced and more complex understandings of identity extended to how the participants viewed one another, and people in their communities, as well.

In a work that serves as an excellent literature review as well as an empirical study, Moje, et al., (2008), report on the challenges, concerns, efforts, and complexities that inhabit the adolescent literacy scholarship. They thoughtfully consider what constitutes adolescence, literacy, and the literacy activities adolescents participate in. Additionally, the authors note ways that these activities impede or support academic success. This review is followed up with an examination of reading practices that youth from one urban and primarily Latino/a community engaged. Authors looked to learn what youth read, why they did so, and how often they read. Using mixed methods, the authors found that reading and writing happened frequently and were motivated by a range of factors, that reading and writing occurred in a range of literacy contexts, but that only reading novels on a regular basis outside of school was shown to have a positive effect on academic achievement as measured by school grades. The participants in this study read what they saw as relevant to their lives (not only with regards to race, gender and class), were drawn to characters resisting oppression in some form, included characters navigating relationships and working on constructing identities for themselves. In others words, these adolescents enjoyed texts that carry many of the same markers of adolescence. Adolescents who engaged in literacy activities were primarily motivated by an interest in building social capital with others. Challenging the rhetoric of a “crisis” myth that suggests reading and writing are not part of young people’s lives – the authors stress that youth are actively reading and writing outside of school.

Referenced earlier in the theoretical foundation, Ivey and Johnston’s work (2013), Engagement with Young Adult Literatures: Outcomes and Processes merges engagement and motivation research with literacy and identity theory. The authors conducted 71 end-of-year interviews, teacher interviews and biweekly classroom observations to learn student’s perceptions of the processes and outcomes of engaged reading experiences (Guthrie, Wigfield, You, 2012). Providing me with a heuristic to apply to my own analysis, Ivey and Johnston found that students
reported that the process of engaged reading has multiple indicators. The students reported engaged reading as prolonged periods of time spent reading, a strong sense of agency with respect to their reading ability and interest, stretching themselves to their limits by selecting difficult texts and relying on peers for support when struggling with comprehension. With regards to outcomes, students repeatedly noted changes to their own sense of identity, their sense of agency, an expanded moral and intellectual awareness and transformative interactions in their social environments and with peers.

One potential impediment for adolescents of color, particularly those without a history of reading literature, to engaging in school texts as an aesthetic experience is due to alienating effects of the content of the texts and the related school activities (Noguera, 2008). Kirkland’s (2011) work examines the relationship between ideology and literacy, between interest and motivation, in order to consider how educators might better support African-American adolescents to participate in academic literacies. Kirkland reiterates Mahiri’s (2004) point that youth do not fail to engage in texts; rather, the texts in schools fail to engage youth. At the same time, Kirkland offers a reluctance to simplify the challenge by arguing for texts that perhaps further essentializes both the students and the texts themselves. Instead, Kirkland focuses on the ideologies that accompany school-based literacies and argue that such ways of thinking about reading serves to alienate young black men. Ideologies that construct how school’s teach reading include privileging dominant discourses, provide canonical texts that act as toolsets for reifying the status quo (Hurley, 2005) and do not allow certain forms of production or consumption of linguistic, symbolic and cultural forms that may serve to engage non-dominant youth. Kirkland’s study follows a young black male named Derrick who resisted reading Beowulf and viewed the assignment as dehumanizing and intentionally selected to facilitate his failure. Later, the class read The Iliad, also a very challenging canonical text, but for this text the teacher made efforts to “decanonize” The Iliad, including allowing students to retell the story in a series of comic books. The comic book series, called “The Ill” series, used vernacular and images that reflected popular culture. As a result, Derrick both read and comprehended The Iliad, and integrated the text into his life using a vocabulary and medium (comics) meaningful to him and his peers.

Scholarship in this section make a strong case for the role that literature can play in supporting students processes of constructing the self. Athanases (1998) points out that students will cross boundaries of race, gender and class when texts explore universalizing themes relevant to reader’s lives. In addition, these works of literature, and the discussions they engender, hold lasting relevance for students years later. Broughton (2002) highlights the usefulness of narrative to serve as a road map for students to reflect on their own lives, and that using the literature as a medium provided a safe space for students to take a critical and reflective stance in considering their own circumstances and experiences. Even when literature discussions extend beyond the “four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4), Sutherland (2005) recognizes value in students using literature discussion as a space to take up the critical and complex lens in a novel, that may not be present in another context, and apply it to the positioning they face and the identities they
elect to adopt. Moje, et al. (2008) found two dominant reasons that students elect to participate in literacy activities, building social capital with peers and seeking out texts that help them understand their lives. Ivey and Johnston (2013) make strong claims about the power for engaged readings of literature to inspire immediate shifts in how one views the self, improved moral and intellectual capacity and extends these literacy practices to support more complex and generous evaluations of their peers. Finally, Kirkland (2011) suggests that non-dominant youth might also be open to the aesthetic readings of texts that Ivey & Johnston’s (2013) participants enjoyed when the reading ideology employed does not alienate or silence.

**Collective Classroom Identity**

Leander (2002) argues that “while the importance of considering embodied practices or the bodily habitus is often admitted in studies of classroom interaction, actual analyses of the embodiment is relatively rare” (p. 24). As institutional settings, imbued with social and cultural histories, classrooms have both stable and emerging characteristics constitutive of multiple activity systems that interact to promote learning (Gutiérrez, 1993). Scholarship that examines the identity work (Calabrese Barton, et al. 2013) of a class as a collective is scarce, but a number of researchers highlight the classroom culture and context as a salient feature of the learning and teaching that occurs. Wortham’s 2006 book, *Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Learning* observed a ninth grade, urban social studies class participating in Paideia seminars. Wortham’s work views the classroom as a special context, including layout, artifacts, activities and relations. Methodologically, Wortham closely analyzed verbal interactions from his fifty visits to the class in order to note how some students were positioned in ways that identified them as promising girls, unpromising boys, beasts and outcasts. Wortham applied Lemke’s timescales (2000) to his analysis. Lemke suggests that understanding the emergence of historically specific social categories and identities of persons in a particular time and space requires one to consider how actors in these spaces are combining, creating, and modifying a variety of possible categories and identities over disparate timescales. Arguing against a decontextualized model of learning and identity development, Wrotham argues that researchers must “investigate empirically how a model of identity can take on a distinctive form in local contexts and how that locally infected model is applied to individuals in a specific way” (p. 8). Despite the presence of race in the classroom (students were primarily African-American and teachers were white) Wortham primarily discusses the role of gender as an important indicator for how participants are positioned.

Kevin Leander (2002) applies a micro-analytic lens to detail and map the ways that a young African American woman was positioned as “ghetto” in mixed-race classroom. Leander argues that positioning involves a network of activities including talk, materials, bodies, constructions of community, and institutional practices. Identity artifacts are a joint social accomplishment, locally produced, involving a process that includes positioning others as identities are stabilized and defined. Applying cultural historical activity theory, or CHAT, (Leont’ev, 1978; Engström, 1987) Leander notes two important relationships shared between
identity artifacts and the role they play in construing the role of social relationships for producing the space. First, the meanings projected by identity artifacts contribute to the constitution of social space. Second, identity artifacts are projected against particular social spaces and interpreted in relation to them. To illustrate this concept, Leander describes the linguistic and social practices that position an African-American student named Latanya as “ghetto.” In his description, Leander notes that the construction of, and relationship between, multiple identity artifacts—including a banner displayed in the classroom, projected understandings of the Black community, discourse on home geographies and interactive talk and embodied spaces not only produced but stabilized Latanya’s positional identity through a process of uptake and reification.

Beach, Thein and Parks book, *High School Students competing Social Worlds: Negotiating identities and Allegiances in response to Multi-Cultural literature* (2007) follows adolescents in different spaces and activities including the classroom, workplace, at family events, and with sports teams. Their study examines how working class, primarily white, students construct identity through mediating multiple discourses. Led by a strong teacher in a rigorous ELA course, the students’ multiple discourses encounter the narratives in multi-cultural literature, and provide a space for students to challenge allegiances to “status quo” discourses and cultural models. Through the use of ethnography, case studies and interviews, six students were followed over a school year and in that time, some students displayed shifting views away from the dominant discourses associated with their rural town and some resisted alternative narratives provided by the literature. The authors found that students benefit from reading narratives of different experiences than their own in ways that extended beyond humanist values or the potential for empathy. Additionally, these literacy engagements offer a space to experience dialogic tensions essential for authentic or internalized learning. As students read and discussed works, students also realized how they might be limited by or benefit from racism, classism and sexism in their own lives. Finally, the authors argue that reader-response too often supports individualistic responses or critiques to developing an awareness of structuralism, and how larger, social inequalities are played out locally.

In the realm of mathematics ideologies, Boaler & Greeno (2000) apply the framework of “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998) to compare students participating in two ideologically different AP calculus classrooms: didactic and discussion based. In the didactic classroom, students identified with mathematics as a subject that did not require any meaning making other than finding the answers to questions that the authors (or teacher) already possessed (Boaler & Greeno, 2000). In discussion-based classrooms, students identified with mathematics as a subject with concepts and principals open to discussion and exploration. Whereas, in the didactic-based setting, students viewed engaging in mathematics as individual engagements with a series of procedural activities containing right and wrong answers. These different perspectives made a significant impact on student’s identity production as math learners and their “trajectory in the participation in the practices of mathematical discourses and thinking” (p. 172).
The task of a researcher conducting qualitative and ethnographic analysis of a complex space, like a classroom, is one of judicious selectivity of data points (Goetz, J.P., LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993; Yin, R. 2003). What does one foreground when analyzing teaching and learning in a classroom context? What becomes background, or solely contextual, as the researcher provides a narrative of phenomenon as it played out? Relevant to my research, Wortham (2006) found that teachers, and later students, used the content from the Paideia seminars as a resource to identify themselves and other students in the class. Wortham argues that cognitive models become entangled with the social interactions and identities of those making meaning from the content. While my analysis is not at the micro level of Leander’s article (2002), I am drawn to his analysis of the genesis from the locally produced, social and historically informed, positioning to a more stabilized identity; suggesting that positioning events both are reproduced and can be relatively innocuous (the word “ghetto” written on a banner) or of great consequence (the racially charged argument that follows Latanya resisting the “ghetto” label). Beach et al. (2007) pay closer attention to the ecology not only of the classroom, but also the communities that students traverse. With regards to the community of the classroom, race mattered - Beach and his colleagues (2007) found that the ethnic make up of the classroom, primarily white with two students of color, challenged the potential for multicultural literature to serve as transformative reading engagements. Instead, the demographics led to a climate where discussing multicultural texts involved guarded, defensive or dismissive discourses at times – requiring the teacher’s involvement to develop a larger critical understanding of structural inequalities.

The Present Study

As I discussed in my introduction, ultimately I am driven to better understand the academic success and struggles of marginalized youth of color. Anecdotally, as a teacher I witnessed many students enter high school with plans to graduate in four years, attend college, and pursue various aspirations. Why did some students achieve this goal while others failed? Recognizing the locus of my control as a teacher, I wondered what is happening in schools that either bolster or threaten the fragile academic identities of marginalized students of color? Kirkland (2008) provocatively argues, “Black men like Derrick do not loathe reading; they loath the incredible sacrifice required when reading for school. They loath the texts working as a uniform outfit not necessarily stitched to fit them, but forged in fabrics of socialization that reshape them into something strangely irregular” (p. 206). The inverse of this powerful statement presents numerous suppositions that my research explores. If students like Derek engage in reading ideologies that are stitched to suit them, what will the consequences be? Will students like Derek enjoy the grand claims that Ivey & Johnston (2013) make about aesthetic transactions through engaged readings of literature? In a diverse classroom setting, who will be served or not served by such an approach?

In my work, I find it productive to consider the identity work (Calabrese et al. 2013) of the focus students as well as the class as a group. The authors define identity work as:
The actions that individuals take and the relationships they form (and the resources they leverage to do so at any given moment and as constrained by the historically, culturally, and socially legitimized norms, rules, and expectations that operate within the spaces in which such work takes place. Individuals author possible identity work over time both with and against the norms of the worlds they inhabit. (Calabrese et al., 2013, p. 38).

For the focus students, I explore the connection between identity work, positioning events, and responses to literature. In addition, by treating the classroom collectively as an entity that experiences identity trajectories over time, my research fills a gap Leander (2002) points to regarding to the lack of studies examining the embodied practices of classrooms. In my own study of the classroom as a collective identity, I pay particular attention to the presence of and production of discourses and how these discourses inform, contrast, and build upon one another. Further, I am interested in moments when academically situated discourses come into contact with out-of-school discourses. In other words, I hope to map what Wortham (2006) refers to as the “inextricability of social identification and academic learning” (p. 23). Given that the classroom I studied participated in two approaches to ELA instruction informed by contrasting pedagogical foundations, I also consider aspects of Boaler and Greeno’s (2000) admittedly different study, to explore the relationship between identity work and ELA instructional ideologies.

The context of my study is aptly situated to test some of the claims discussed in the above literature, to complicate assumptions in a number of works, and to extend scholarship into new areas. Essentially, both the scholarship on positioning in ELA contexts and scholarship on the role literature plays in identity construction argue for a number of pedagogical conditions and approaches for literacy instruction. Summarized, the works recommend thoughtfully integrated in-school and out-of-school discourses and literacy practices, a reader-response/critical lens approach to reading, and culturally responsive instructional strategies. Such pedagogical actions and dispositions serve to build community and give students ownership over the academic space; allowing for the risk taking necessary for reimagining the self, engaging literature in authentic or internalized ways, and repeating literacy performances that support academic identities. The teacher and I worked closely to design a curriculum that attempts to realize these conditions for students in her class. In doing so, the findings illustrate the affordances and constraints of these methods, unpack the challenges of implementation, and examine its effects on the ecology of the classroom.

Research Questions

**RQ1: What is the academic identity of this class as a group?**

How does the collective identity of the class affect how students position themselves and one another? What instructional contexts or whole class activities support or impede the academic identity of the group? What role does the teacher and the curriculum play in the shaping of the academic identity of the classroom?
What networks in the classroom space between students influence the classroom’s academic identity?

**RQ2: How do students leverage literacy based resources for identity work?**

What are the discourses and narratives found/produced in the literacy activities (student writing, class discussion, instructional methods, etc) and literary texts in this ELA class? To what extent do “marginalized” students come to depend on literacy-based discourses for experimenting with alternative identities? What is the role of how instruction is delivered in either inhibiting or facilitating a “transformative” reading experience? Under what conditions do some students read a novel to solely be informed, and under what conditions do some students engage a literary fiction to be transformed?

**RQ3: How are students positioned in an ELA class and how does positioning support or disrupt their academic identity?**

What indicators of identity facilitate a thoughtful, holistic, and complex assessment of student identities? How do my focal student’s academic identities shift over a semester? What factors contribute to shifts in a student's academic identity? How are students positioned in out of school contexts and how does ELA class reinforce or disrupt positional identities?

**Dissertation Overview**

In Chapter 2, I present the methods for this research as well describe the specifics for the process of gathering and analyzing the data used in this study. Chapters three, four and five are the findings chapters. Chapter 3 discusses the case study of the class as a whole and focuses primarily on the first research question. The classroom participants, culture, norms, and activities are articulated with a particular attention to the shared identity artifacts (Leander, 2002) produced and specific to this context. Because the classroom engaged two variant approaches to ELA instruction, this chapter also explores the relationship between curriculum and student engagement and learning.

Chapter 4 focuses on the focal participants and the ways they took up, or did not take up, literacy-based resources for the purpose of defining the self, for identity work, and for making meaning of the worlds they inhabit. This chapter considers the complicated relationship between learning and development by examining why some students turned the learning upon themselves (thus supporting development), or elected to treat the units of learning in a detached manner. The chapter is organized into two sections. The first, entitled the engaged readers, focuses on Jeffrey and Carlos as students who read the novel by Sherman Alexie (2007), The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, and were transformed by the text. Part two is entitled The Touchstone Trio and discusses Alejandra, Cat, and Andrea who did not have a strong response to the novel but did use the final project as a resource for identity work.

Chapter 5 examines the ways that students were positioned in the ELA class and how the positioning served to keep their fragile academic identities in a fixed state. In addition, the chapter illustrates the salience of positioning events that
served to either further entrench one’s identity or provoked a rupture to a seemingly fixed sense of self. By looking at the potential sources of positioning events, the chapter illustrates that positioning events can occur as a result of multiple and complex influences – the curriculum, life beyond school, peers, the teacher, academic work, and institutional forces.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the findings and offers a discussion and suggestions for future research. My purpose for this study is to examine the positional identities of marginalized youth in an ELA classroom and to explore the potential for literacy narratives to participate in the ideological becoming process in ways that promote academic success and the building of the social self.
Chapter 2
Methods and Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods to examine the positional identities of Black and Latin@ adolescents in an ELA classroom and explores the potential for literacy-based resources to participate in student’s identity work in ways that promote academic success and building the social self.

My first research question considers the academic identity of a class as a group. Used frequently throughout this dissertation, the term academic identity refers to a process that occurs through the participation in the academic activities and practices of school, wherein involvement constitutes an integral part of one’s sense of self (Nasir, 2012). In considering the collective then, this definition extends to consider how participating in academic activities and practices plays an integral role in shaping the culture and community of the group. I also consider the influence of two approaches to literacy instruction in the classroom to consider how students respond to ideologically contrasting curricula. Through a discussion on the relative durability of academic identities, I explore academic identities that emerge when one feels one is doing academically well, or poorly, and seeing that performance as instrumental to defining the self. In order to develop a case study of the class, and track the various individual and collective displays of identity, students completed a survey/questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study, I observed and made video/audio recordings of classroom activity, and I interviewed the teacher and focus students.

For my second research question I examine the ways that students take up literacy-based discourses found and produced in the ELA classroom and use these discourses as resources for identity work. At the same time, I examine why some students elect not to apply the literacy-based resources in their own processes of “authoring the self”. These distinctions then serve as useful discussion points for teasing apart the interrelated and yet distinct processes of learning and of constructing identity. Given the learning experiences and needs in this context, I consider the potential for narratives and themes found in literature to offer both structures or road maps and concepts that students could then apply to their own lives and situations. To answer this question, I paid close attention to classroom talk about text and then interviewed focus participants about their responses to the literature and their in-class literacy practices. In addition, I examined student work (written and discussion based) to see how the discourses in the curriculum were making their way into student’s own scholarly work – or not.

My final research question considers how students were positioned in the classroom and how the positioning supported or inhibited academic identities. In examining positionality, I apply a positional identity theoretical lens (Moje, Luke, Davies, Street, 2009) to identify what forces seem to played a primary role in positioning focal participants – the self, peers, the teacher, the curriculum and instruction, or out-of-school factors such as home life. I examined the effect of repeated positioning over time, what Holland et al. (1998) refer to as sedimented identities or as identities that thicken (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2006) as a result of the multiple subject positions a person experiences in the practice of daily
life. In classrooms, where students are often identified or “labeled” at an early stage in the school year based on their actions, behavior, academic achievement, and reputations (real and perceived), they then become recognized (and recognize themselves) when engaging in behaviors or practices that reify these labels which in turns thickens identities along a spectrum of competent or incompetent with regards to school related activities (Wortham, 2004). At the same time, it is useful to identify what I refer to as *positioning events*, wherein an incident occurred that either strongly reinforced sedimented identities or perhaps provided a tremor or rupture to positional identities that had apparently *thickened* to a solid state. To answer this question, my primary data source was close observations of focal participants; also useful were interviews with focal participants for discussing positioning events and hear their perspectives as well as check the validity of my own understandings. I also examined the student work, and finally, the surveys/questionnaires completed by focus participants.

**Setting**

To answer my research questions, I needed to select a school that had as its population primarily marginalized students of color who lacked models of college going or college graduated adults in their lives and/or who did not have strong literate or academic identities. In addition, because as part of the research methods students would participate in a particular curricular approach (described below), I needed a school that would allow me the freedom to implement the curriculum and a teacher who was both willing and capable to collaborate in its development, modify it for the students, and ultimately, enact it.

**The Site.** Taking up the top floor of a school building it shares with a middle school, SBH’s crowded main artery teems with its 247 students all jostling about in a hallway initially designed with smaller bodies in mind. South Bay High (SBH) is a small, public charter school in the South East region of a major city in California. The school sits in the shadow of a larger public school and is seen by many as an alternative school for students needing additional and more personalized academic support to graduate. The area surrounding the school had been home to Italian and Irish immigrants fifty years ago. Over time it became a largely Black community, but this population has declined as well in the past ten to twenty years. At the time of the study, immigrant and second-generation families from Asian and Latin American countries predominated. In spite of the changing demographics, the neighborhood has remained working class and in the eyes of many of the city’s residents a forgotten part of town. Small residential family homes surround SBH, no major sites of interest neighbor the school, and the entire community often gets confused with being part of an adjacent town to this major city. Presently, the majority of students at SBH hail from Latino families (60%), while the remaining students fall thus: Black (21%), Filipino or Pacific Islander (8%), Asian (3%), White (2%), mixed race (4%) and Native American (1%) students.

A bit like the small blue train from the children’s classic, *The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1990), SBH has been in danger of closing since it first opened its doors. In the school’s 15 years of existence, beyond the demographic changes, it
suffered through numerous changes at the administrative level, struggled with yearly teacher turnover, made severe cutbacks due to decreasing enrollments, and changed building locations four times. At the time of the study, the school had a second year principal, a teaching staff made up primarily of first or second year teachers, and finds space to function on the top floor of a middle school. However, throughout all of this, SBH continues to produce high rates of graduates that go on to attend college (93% in the year prior to this study), maintained a strong commitment to professional development of staff, valued project based and college preparatory instruction, worked towards equitable outcomes for all students and used multiple assessments (traditional and alternative) in evaluating the students and their own work as a school.

Historically, the school design was based on progressive reform elements – such as alternative assessments, project based learning, personalization, small class sizes, interdisciplinary courses, and other aspects that reflected their relationship with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). As a mentor school for CES, staff and school leaders both received professional development and provided training and support to other schools within the CES network. CES has ten common principles to support learning in schools developed by Debbie Meier (2002), and Ted Sizer (1984, 1997) and South Bay High took pride in consistently working towards embodying these principles in there first decade of existence.

However, the previous five to seven years rendered South Bay High to becoming less of an “alternative” space to the larger comprehensive school next door. The causes for these changes are hotly debated among current and former members of the school’s community. Most cite a combination of factors; including the changing demographics of students in the school (less skilled academically, more ELL students), the teacher turnover and administration changes, as well as the importance placed on state mandated testing. Mirroring national trends, as the school becomes more focused on skill building for the multiple standardized tests required, student engagement in school declines. Despite these recent changes, the school’s principal and most of the teachers still valued many of the ideas and practices that the school was known for. As a result, when I approached the principal and vice principal about the research agenda and the curriculum involved in the methodology, they were open to the idea. In part, this was because I had been a teacher at the school from 2002 until 2009, having taught all levels of English and serving as the department chair. The administration knew that I was familiar with the school, the curriculum, the various cultural norms practiced, and some of the challenges and affordances in place. All of these contextual points provided useful background knowledge as I developed the curriculum over the summer and also supported my analysis of the data collected. In addition, while I had not know the teacher I worked with prior to this study, my relationship with others on the staff and in the administration, made my presence at the school unobtrusive and facilitated access to resources that aided me in my role as a researcher.

**English 11, 4th Period.** Four times a week, twenty-two juniors find their way into room 307 for fourth period English. The classroom space includes posters on the walls that have strong social justice messages or celebrate works of
literature. Also covering the walls are samples of student work and school rules and
expectations. The teacher, Rose, who has to supply her own materials, has set up a
cozy tea and cocoa corner that students often access before class begins. A stickler
for cleanliness, she often cleans off tabletops between classes and has strict rules
about what foods are permitted and when they can be eaten. Despite teaching for
only two years prior, Rose has a veteran teacher’s awareness that a little bit of
organization and structure goes a long way. The students wander in at various
rates, many still engaged in hallway conversations, some hugging each other or the
teacher, most with their cell phones out and earphones on. Five minutes into class,
most of the students are seated and reviewing the agenda on the board. They sit on
the outside of tables in a large U shape - facing the whiteboard at the front of the
room. In the middle of the U shape are two more tables, also with seats facing the
front. Rose sits center stage, on a high stool with her back to the board and facing
the students. In this way, students can see the teacher and see the board, work
independently or in small groups, and easily engage with others throughout the
room.

Rose’s fourth period English 11 class was selected for my research because of
the lively, active, social, and not particularly academic or rigorous climate. Day in
and day out, the students who choose to engage, or not, or who find ways to do both
- often the same students with a few exceptions. Right away, one can see Rose’s ease
with the students and the pleasure she takes in her work. She uses humor, gentle
teasing, personal stories, warnings, guilt trips, and any other resources available,
given the obvious care and community in the room, to cajole as much production as
she can muster each day. On good days, her effort lends itself to roughly 75% of
class time being spent doing the work - but on bad days only 25% is spent engaged
in the academic work. In many respects, Rose’s class reminds one of a typical public,
urban, working class eleventh grade classroom.

Similar to 11th grade ELA classes nationwide, the English 11 course at SBH
has historically been an American Literature course (Burroughs & Smagorinsky,
2011). Given the racial demographics of the school, the course emphasizes teaching
books by American authors of color. The year of this study was Rose’s second year
teaching the course. In her view, as well as those of the current department chair
and principal, the population of students in the school had shifted in the last few
years to being less skilled academically. After years of being taught as a college prep
course that supported students interested in taking AP English in the following year,
the curriculum had recently shifted to balancing previous goals with a new
emphasis on skill building and test taking so students could pass the California High
School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) and the California Standards Test (CST).

**Curriculum.** To answer each of my research questions I needed a classroom
context where the learning activities supported various types of identity displays.
In the summer before conducting the research, I developed a curriculum, that Rose
and I tailored for this classroom to ideally create a classroom space that offered
multiple contexts and activities with which to examine identity. More importantly, I
wanted this curriculum to be as beneficial to the student’s learning as much as it
served my research questions, if not more so. To achieve this, I developed the
curriculum by first reviewing the research that identifies instructional practices that best engage Black and Latino students in learning activities\(^1\). Next, I combined these concepts with an approach to literacy instruction that Sumara (1998) argues best supports engaging literacy for discovering insights of the self that are necessary for identity construction.

The curriculum, called the Interpretive Inquiry Project, came to be referred to as simply, the Alexie curriculum, a moniker I adopt throughout this document. While the first findings chapter provides additional details, I offer here an overview of the curriculum to illustrate why it supported exploring my research questions. The entire curriculum lasted for eight weeks and was primarily taught by Rose, but at times I stepped in as a co-teacher to explain certain assignments or provide brief lectures on concepts. Guiding the Alexie curriculum was a set of goals that informed assignment design, classroom activities, and assessment. The goals included practicing engaged reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), introducing socio-cultural understandings of identity, and supporting students to self-select topics of study that were developed from their own authentic questions to guide their learning. Students engaged in a range of literacy activities, independently and in groups, which offered multiple opportunities and contexts to display identity and experience meaningful engagements with literacy. Each student received a new copy of the young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). These were copies to keep, and the students were encouraged to freely write in the books and feel a sense of ownership towards their learning. In addition, students brought in *partner texts* to share with class and add to the literacy resources in the classroom. Partner texts included literacy resources that students saw as being in conversation with the Alexie novel. In order to model partner texts, the teacher showed parts of the film *Smoke Signals* (1989), also written by Sherman Alexie. Another example of a partner text was a guest speaker who came to meet with the class early in the curriculum. Mark Anquea, a local Native American activist and radio DJ, visited to speak with students about the book, answer questions about Native Americans, and provide some contextual knowledge to support comprehension of the book. The partner texts that students shared included various genres and formats, such as poems, music, essays about Native Americans from social studies class, and other books with similar themes.

Early in the curriculum, students did a literacy biography in which they were encouraged to envision literacy activities as broadly defined – such as texting, using social media, dancing and drawing. As they read the novel, students participated in Socratic Seminars\(^2\) as well as other informal small group discussions, wrote journal

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1. Research reviewed to inform curricular design include: Carol Lee's cultural modeling framework (2006); Tatum’s argument for curriculum orientations that empower students of color (2006); Moll’s attention to students funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 1992), Moje’s (2000) call to bring nonmainstream literacies into academic settings; strategies for reducing perceived stereotype threat (Spencer, Steele, Quinn, 1999); and Nasir’s (2008) three instructional strategies to support engagement for Black students.

2. Socratic Seminars are a common structure for formal discussions of literature used at SBH. In these settings, which often lasts twenty to thirty minutes, students sit in small groups (8-12) and both participate in and facilitate the discussion of texts. Students are expected to come prepared with
responses to the reading, and drew cartoons to represent scenes in the book (Alexie includes cartoons in the novel as well). In addition, students worked in small groups called Literacy Detective Teams where they focused on the book’s use of either character development, themes and motifs, metaphors and symbolism, and plot structure. These teams tracked their assigned literacy device while reading and did presentations to the rest of the class once the novel was finished – at about week four of the curriculum. This assignment provided a jigsaw approach to building shared understanding of the novel and the literacy devices presented.

Through a series of guided writings, small group discussions, and the sharing of reading artifacts (a text viewed as formative for their identities), students developed what we referred to as a seed. Taking the form of a statement or a question, the seed sparked an authentic line of inquiry; the growth they exhibited in deepening their critical thinking about the seed would then be shared in the final assessment. Personal and meaningful in nature, seeds reflected students burning questions (i.e., “what makes a healthy family?”, “what makes a true friend?”, or “using humor to cope with pain”) and addressed social or universal issues (i.e., “understanding racism”, or “how will the world we know come to an end?”).

Operating from an assumption that engaging in authentic inquiries would support identity work, I also provided a brief, developmentally appropriate, lecture on sociocultural theories of identity. After this brief lecture, students completed an assignment entitled, James Gee Identity Charts (Gee, 2000). During this activity, students collectively completed the identity chart for Arnold, the protagonist in the Alexie novel. The charts contained quadrants for one’s natural, institutional, discursive and affinity identities – four ways that Gee argues explains identity as a construct that allows one to be “recognized as a certain type of person” (2000, p. 99). Next, students completed identity charts for themselves, struggling with where to place contested terms such as “Latino” in the process.

Most of the assignments supported furthering student’s thinking about a particular seed. Initial perspectives on selected topics were enhanced and challenged through interviews with adults and peers, doing research online, writing alternative viewpoints, finding relevant literature and other works of art, considering ways the Alexie book explored the topic, and participating in a hot seat activity where students were grilled by a teacher and their peers to push their thinking. For the final project, called the Touchstone Text, students shared their intellectual journey, beginning with how they initially viewed the topic, sharing their research, and articulating their current, more informed understandings and insights about the topic. Students self selected the format for their final project from a number of options (an essay, a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation, a play, a short story, a series of poems, a comic book, a series of posters, or a spoken word performance). The logic behind students self selecting a format was a desire for the students to feel they were working from their own “comfort zone” with regards to the medium chosen, and that a greater emphasis could be placed on content – illustrating their growth of thought about a meaningful topic.

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ideas and questions to share, to build on the ideas of peers, ask critical thinking questions, and use evidence from the text to support their viewpoints.
Also part of the study was a curriculum that occurred prior to the Alexie unit. During the first six weeks of classes students read the novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972) and did a series of related assignments. Taught solely by Rose, this curriculum included test prep activities as warm-ups, daily comprehension questions about the assigned reading, two Socratic seminars, and a highly scaffolded five-paragraph essay in which students all wrote about the same topic. These two ideologically divergent approaches to literacy instruction served as an unexpected and ultimately useful context with which to consider my research questions, in particular the first question regarding the collective identity of the classroom.

**Participants**

**The Teacher.** Rose (a pseudonym) often endures curious and uncomfortable looks in her direction. A heavy set white woman with crew cut hair, wearing tight t-shirts and jeans, her body, including her hands and neck, is covered in tattoos. Rose’s imposing presence quickly softens when she unleashes her big smile and her frequently loud laughter. The grace and comfort she clearly enjoys in the skin she is in puts those around her at ease, especially her students. Students often come to her for hugs, and she makes an extra effort to show her affection for students who, because of their appearance, may also endure curious looks as well.

Needing an effective teacher open to collaborating and whose classroom space offered a climate where students felt they could be themselves, the school’s principal recommended Rose as being the ideal teacher to work with. Only in her third year, she was seen as a veteran teacher on staff who was especially adept at not having “classroom management problems” (Principal, interview, August 23, 2013). Rose’s strength as an ELA teacher lay in teaching writing, modeling a love for literacy, building meaningful relationships with students and leveraging those relationships for academic success. From observing the class sessions and based on comments in interviews with focal participants, the students appreciated Rose’s crass sense of humor, her genuine care for them, and her efforts to make many sessions both fun and inviting. While teaching this course, she worked towards completing her Masters program, taught three other courses, and often (and unwillingly at times) found herself involved in school politics between the teaching staff and the administration.

**The Class.** To answer my research questions, I needed to work with students that met certain criteria. These included students who felt marginalized as a result of being saddled with identities that limited their academic and social potentials. In addition, I hoped to work with students who did not have examples of college going or college graduated adults in their lives. And finally, I wanted to work with a group of students that did not have a strong history of academic success or meaningful relationships with literacy activities. At the same time, I wanted a diversity of students with regards to academic skill level, as well as racialized and gendered identities. These criteria, met by the class I observed, were salient for considering the validity of my findings. I chose this particular class of students because they reflect the concerns discussed in the earlier section regarding the background of the problem. On the one hand, many of these students may want to go to college, and
others may have professional careers imagined that require at least some formal post high school education. Eighteen of 22 students surveyed reported that they expected to attend college. On the other hand, the students lacked the models or narratives in their lives of how to adopt the identity practices of a college-going student. Of the twenty two participants in the study, only one had a parent graduate from college and only four students reported a parent as attending, but not graduating, from college. With regards to literacy practices, about 6 reported a positive relationship with reading either in school or out of school and 16 expressed a neutral or negative relationship with reading. Only one student, Cat, said she “loved to read” (Cat, initial survey, September 28, 2012). Responses to writing activities, including in school and out of school practices, suggest that 9 students viewed the activity in a positive manner. In an early interview, the teacher assessed this junior class as being at about a 6th or 7th grade reading level. When asked further about his claim, Rose stated that a “few” were closer to 9th or 10th and that a “few” were reading at a 4th or 5th grade level, and she was adamant that no students were reading and writing at an 11th grade level (Rose, interview, August 31, 2012). I did not obtain access to students ELA state or federal tests scores for verification, and my own informal assessment of the average reading level of the class would echo Rose’s perception.

Evenly split between males and females, the class had 22 students. All of the female students are Latina, and primarily first or second generation Mexican. Of the eleven males, five are Latino, four are Black, one is Samoan and one is of mixed race. Generally close and at ease with one another, the class is also made up of clear groupings that tend to dictate daily interactions. While the students often spoke of school in a negative light as either a necessary evil or a waste of time, most did enjoy the atmosphere in Rose’s class and enjoyed being around one another. Many of the students were friends as far back as elementary school, a detail that supported a sense of easy community in the class but also served a distraction from academic engagement.

**Focal Participants.** Although the entire class participated in the study, I invited students to volunteer as part of a smaller group that would provide additional data if they wished. The eight who volunteered to do so became the initial focal participants. Of the 8, I dropped two (Johnny and Joseph) who did not attend regularly scheduled interviews and expressed a desire to opt out. A third later was dropped (Tre) because he left the school prior to the end of the class and the study. Although a volunteer sample, the 5 remaining focal students, between the ages of 16 and 17 years of age, reflected the diversity of the class with regards to race and gender, as well as academic skill level and scholarly ambitions. In the following table (Table 1), I provide demographic data on the focal students. With input from the teacher, I also include my perception of each individual’s relative social and academic hierarchal standing in the class. I assessed academic standing by using teacher input, class and home work completion rate and my examination of their academic work. I assessed social standing based on the frequency of social and academic talk in class, each participant’s own self-assessment in interviews, teacher
input, and my observations. The names included, as with all the names in this study, are pseudonyms that individuals often selected for themselves.

Table 1.
**Focus Participant Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic Standing</th>
<th>Social Standing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Latina (Self-identifies as White at times)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Mid to low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to develop a narrated description of each focal participant I asked the following question on an initial survey and followed up on their responses in student interviews: “If asked what your identity is, you would say what?” Their responses were both interesting and varied.

**Cat: The tortured soul.** “I’m fun, loving, caring, very empathetic. I’m sad a lot - but not depressed. I think a lot, I’m open minded and a cool person to talk to. My identity is my name and how I act, not what my race is” (Cat, initial survey, September 28, 2012).

Cat is a soft-spoken young Latina with dyed red hair and a shy smile. She struggles with feelings of depression and loneliness, and had to leave the class at times because she felt emotionally overwrought. Cat has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for various learning challenges that spells out modifications for her academic work. Cat sees herself as separate from the rest of the class, in particular from the Latina students whom she views as being “too ghetto” (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012). Cat voiced early on to me that the other students see her as “White,” a label she at times rejects and at other times adopts. Claiming to be an active reader outside of school, Cat takes pride in having read a few tough books and “fallen in love” (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012) with the books and the authors. She is more at ease discussing books, movies, or art, than she is at discussing the class or her life. She views herself as a poet and an artist. In class she rarely spoke, and while she has the literacy skills to do the academic work, her emotional instability and insecurity about herself as a student impeded her academic success.

**Jeffrey: The eager dreamer.** “I’m crazy fun. A creative, well-mannered person. I’m a person who never gives up. I fear no one or nobody. I hate struggling all the time. I want you and me to know that I want to grow up and be the best” (Jeffrey, initial survey, September 28, 2012).
Jeffrey comes across as naively joyful. He comes to class possessing a certain grace, as if all the drama around him easily rolls off his back. His optimism refreshes; and makes him popular amongst teachers and students both. While his school struggles are related to his particular learning needs, he quickly mentioned that having an IEP does not bother him since he is convinced that despite his low academic skills, his willingness to work hard will win over. Jeffrey plays on the school’s basketball team and expects to have a baby after his junior year with his girlfriend who attends a different school. He initially attended SBH as a freshman and happily has returned for his final two years after an attempt to transfer to a school closer to home led to problems. Jeffrey’s childlike qualities starkly contrast his tall stature; he wears a Transformer backpack, quotes songs from children’s cartoons during class, and talks about toys as if he were nine, not sixteen. In class, he manages to maintain a high social status with his friends, but unlike most of them, he usually makes sure he completes his work. Jeffrey fully expects to attend college and to perhaps play college basketball.

**Alejandra: The independent.** I’m Mexican (full) and I would say I am a very open to sharing my information, ideas and thoughts. Oh, I have a 4.33 GPA!!! (Alejandra, initial survey, September 28, 2012).

Alejandra enjoys her identity as a good student, and she comes across as mature beyond her years. At times she puts real thought and care into her work, but if she does not want to, she knows how to play the game of school well enough to get by with minimal effort. At the time of the study, Alejandra explained that she found herself in a “good place now” and that she had experienced a difficult past that “sobered” her up in terms of behavior and priorities (Alejandra, interview, October 11, 2012). Her challenges began when she ran away from home in the ninth grade. She ran from what she saw as a close-minded and traditional family and spent a couple of months living in the streets. She credits a former boyfriend and her decision to return to church as turning her life around. Now, she is eager for life after high school and she stated a refusal to get caught up in the school drama. In the class she is friendly with Tre and does her best to support him, but her relationship with the other girls in the class is clearly strained – which has origins in the choices she made in her earlier years.

**Carlos: The passive gamer.** “I am a very chill person. I like to have fun and I like to make people laugh- it makes me feel good” (Carlos, initial survey, September 28, 2012).

An easy-going young man who enjoys his status in the class as having a good sense of humor – Carlos laughs as much at himself as he does others. Frequently late, Carlos quickly disengages from the academic work and enjoys being nonchalant about his resistance to schoolwork. Not helping any are his two close friends in the class whom he has known since childhood. Carlos describes himself as laid back, a gamer, and someone who has to travel a long distance to school each day. He cites this last reason for often being absent or late to class in the beginning months of the semester. While the other focal students frankly and candidly talked about their lives outside of school, Carlos took longer to warm up to me. When he did, he shared that he often felt depressed since his parents divorce when he was starting middle school. While he’d managed to move on, at the beginning of his sophomore
year, his mother remarried and he gained two additional step-sisters, that he missed his biological father – and all of these events had caused his depression to resurface. For these reasons, he shared with me that his main escape involved locking himself in his room to play video games for hours. Carlos, like Jeffrey, comes across as somewhat childish during class, making jokes and having off topic discussions. Unlike Jeffrey, Carlos gives up easily when schoolwork is challenging.

**Andrea: The stubborn rebel.** “I’m Andrea. Everyone that knows me knows what that means. I act like a lady, I think like a boss. Outgoing, honest, all over the place, original, one of a kind personality” (Andrea, initial survey, September 28, 2012).

Andrea displays a strong willed young woman who takes pride in being both unpredictable and also being “true to herself” (Andrea, interview, October 16, 2012). Andrea loves to challenge authority, and while she and the teacher are close, she enjoys trying to get under Rose’s skin during class. She regularly offers strong views about being an independent woman who is “not ruled by a man,” (Andrea, interview, October 16, 2012) yet she is frequently affectionate with her boyfriend Amari during class time. Very close to her brothers, Andrea was visibly upset when she shared in our first interview that the brother she is closest to was locked up for murder. Andrea has a difficult relationship with her mother who had kids at an early age and seems more interested in being her buddy than in being a parent. During the study, she was kicked out of her house for a time. Andrea enjoys being the hub of social activity in the class where other girls admire and fear her a bit, and she is playful and close to many of the boys. Academically, she shows promise, but she often elects not to do work because in her view, she “doesn’t care enough about it to get it” (Andrea, interview, November 19, 2012). She enjoys acting as if she is lost and confused when in fact she is often avoiding doing the work.

**Researcher Role.** As a researcher, I adopted the stance of “observing participant” (Florio-Ruane, S., 2002). This move away from the familiar “participant observer” is notable on two levels. First, it recognizes that my own autobiography, including being a former teacher at the site and of that particular course, inevitably mediates the work of understanding and describing other’s lives. Second, I took on a number of active roles both in service in and at times that distracted from my researcher responsibilities. The roles ranged from curriculum-collaborator, teacher aid, co-teacher, and lead teacher at times. The consequence was that my observer role was at times dwarfed by my changing role as a participant. I was mindful of and strategic about balancing these various roles by being intentional about when I took on various roles and then finding ways to make allowances for that choice. For example, I strategically placed audio and video recording equipment when I taught and also followed up these sessions with reflective memos. Conversely, on days that I knew would be generative with regards to identity displays, I prioritized my observer role and made sure that Rose felt fully prepared to teach, including prepping all instructional materials and discussing the lesson with her in advance.

In addition, given that I wanted students to feel at ease sharing their personal and academic lives with me, it was important to build a rapport with the class –
especially my focal participants. To do this, I adopted an ethnographer’s approach during the first weeks I visited the site. Introduced as a former teacher at the school and now a researcher hoping to learn from the students about how ELA could be improved, I did my best to be viewed as a member of the classroom community. I did not take observational notes or make recordings of class; rather, I tried to participate in the class as a teacher’s aid, or a tutor at times, and worked to build positive and relaxed relationships with the students and then later made notes on the day’s visit. Often I would stand by the front door when students came in, welcoming them to class so that Rose could prepare and students could get to know me. Introduced as someone who used to teach at the school, students gradually grew comfortable asking me for help and at times the teacher would ask my advice in answering their questions. Once I began formally collecting data, I made an effort to balance that with continuing a more informal presence, chatting with students, handing back work, discussing my time as a teacher at the site, and generally acclimating myself to the community. These efforts were rewarded when I interviewed my focal participants who were candid and open about their lives and learning experiences.

Data

Data for this study fall into five main categories: interviews, observations, artifacts, surveys, and other information. After offering descriptions of each data source, I articulate the procedures used for collecting data and close with a review of the data analyzing procedures.

Table 2 indicates the total number of types of data collected, which data sources best supported my findings for each research question. While data sources informed all my research questions, to the right of the descriptions I indicate which research questions benefitted from the sources. The related bolded research questions indicate the greatest degree of reliance on data listed.

Table 2.
Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Related RQ³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Interviews n=22 | • 16 interviews with focal students (3 interviews with five out of six, plus 1 interview with Tre (a focal who later dropped); approximately 8 hours of audio data)  
• 4 interviews with the teacher of record (approximately 3.5 hours of audio data)  
• 2 interviews with focal students’ previous | RQ 3  
RQ 2 |

³ RQ1: What is the academic identity of this class as a group?  
RQ2: How are students positioned in an ELA class and how does the positioning support of disrupt their academic identity?  
RQ3: How do the literacy-based discourses present in the ELA classroom interact with the discourses that marginalized adolescents carry?
### Artifacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n = 69</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23 pieces of focal student work from the class, including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 final projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 guided writings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 identity charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 literacy biographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3 additional class work items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 pieces of curriculum material, including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3 calendars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 16 assignment directions/rubrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 10 informational or activity handouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 lesson plans or other instructional supports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n = 39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 37 field notes from literacy classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approximately 40 hours of audio and video data from literacy classes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Surveys/Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n = 39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 21 beginning-of-year student surveys on ELA experiences, views on school, out of school information, parent education levels, descriptions of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 18 end-of-year student surveys that assessed various aspects of the course, self reported learning and growth, and suggestions for improving ELA instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other Information

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Focal student demographic data – as reported by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Informal interviews with the teacher, other teachers in the school, principal and vice principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflective field notes from attending one full day and two half day professional development meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflective field notes from casual daily observations in school settings beyond the classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Survey/Questionnaires.** The first data source was a pre-study survey/questionnaire that I provided to all students early in the project. This six-page document asked for short written responses about their background, home life, and experiences with ELA. In addition, the questionnaire asked students to complete seven likert scale responses related to their relationship with school and literacy activities. Students of a similar age and from a similar context reviewed early drafts of the questionnaire to improve the content and clarity of the data collection tool.
At the end of the semester, students completed a second, post-study survey/questionnaire. This second questionnaire included multiple-choice, likert scale, and short answer questions. Its purpose was capturing students’ views on their developing relationship with literacy and responses to the different approaches to ELA instruction. Questions asked for student feedback on the curricula, to reflect on learning and growth over the semester, consider the classroom community and assess classroom culture, and offer general suggestions for improving ELA. While the two questionnaires do not reflect a “before and after” data collection construct, the questionnaires were primary resources for considering the class as a case. Both questionnaires described can be found in the Appendix A.

**Interviews. Focal Students.** Cat, Andrea, Jeffrey, Carlos and Alejandra each participated in three semi-structured interviews over the course of the semester. These audio-recorded interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and occurred during lunch or just after school in a room on the site where privacy and confidentiality was assured.

The first interview focused on two areas of inquiry: learning about students historical and current relationship with literacy activities, school and ELA courses; and learning about participant’s lives, families and friends outside of school. Expanding on answers given in the initial survey/questionnaire and based on observations I had made during class, I developed generative questions for the semi-structured interviews particular to each focal participant. The first question for each participant called for an expanded response to the answer given to the questionnaire’s prompt, “If asked what your identity is, you would say...” (see Appendix A for initial survey). During the interviews themselves, participant responses provided entry points for additional questions as well.

The second semi-structured interview was conducted after seven weeks into the semester, and at an early stage in the Alexie curriculum. The goal in this second interview was to learn about student’s responses to the *Bless Me, Ultima* novel, to learn about early impressions of the curriculum, to follow up on some of the responses given in the initial interview, and to check the validity and gain an interpretation of some of the observational notes I’d taken during class sessions. To better understand displays of identity, I inquired about what seemed to be contradictory displays of behavior from participants. For example, in the initial interview, Cat stated that she loved to read and enjoyed discussing books; however, I observed that she rarely spoke up during class discussions, formal and informal, about the books being read. When I asked why she spoke so infrequently, she articulated her resistance to aspects of the curriculum, her feelings of discomfort with peers in the class, and her preference to discuss literature in different contexts.

The final semi-structured interview occurred soon after students returned from winter break, and about three weeks after the Alexie curriculum was completed. As this was the final interview, I asked for their perspectives on their own identity and learning trajectories over the previous five months. I asked questions about their experiences of the curriculum and their final project presentations. I looked to gain participant feedback on my observational notes from
class sessions. In addition, I asked if they believed that participating in a study affected their academic performance and classroom behavior over the Fall. All of the focal participants stated that participating in the study had no impact on their classroom behavior and actions; believing their actions, comments, interactions and behavior would have been similar had I not been present or had they not been focal participants. Two students, Carlos and Jeffrey, reported that being in the study initially made them want to do well academically, but that their strong interest in and enjoyment of the Alexie novel served a stronger factor and that they often forgot they were part of the study at all. The other focal participants voiced their belief that the study had no bearing on their academic performance.

**Teacher Interviews.** Rose and I had a total of four formal audio-recorded meetings/interviews. Two weeks before the school year we met for an hour to discuss the curriculum, the students in the class, and established some norms and boundaries for our relationship during the study. Our second formal session occurred in the early weeks of the semester, during which Rose shared her views about own biography, her identity, her teaching, her thoughts about the class and the students, and about South Bay High in general. About half way through the semester, I interviewed Rose a third time, with the primary topic being implementation of the curriculum and her assessment of student engagement and learning. In this interview, she provided participant feedback on my observations of the class and useful contextual information that informed my analysis of focal participants. Finally, on the last day of the semester, we had our fourth and final formal interview during which she reflected on the curriculum, her own learning as a teacher, our working relationship, the final projects that students shared, and what she saw as affordances and constraints to the instructional approach we carried out.

In addition to these formal, audio-recorded meetings, Rose and I held informal meetings, check-ins, and email exchanges over the course of the study. Once I began observing at the site, we had informal check ins almost daily, consisting of building a relationship with one another, talking about the students in the class, and the *Bless Me, Ultima* curriculum she was teaching. At the stage when we started the Alexie curriculum, in addition to our daily informal check-ins, we held additional meetings on most Friday afternoons with the focus being planning for the coming week. At times, these meetings addressed Rose’s views of the academic identity of the class, the focal participants, and her own role in these matters as the instructor. In addition, the school was going through some serious challenges between the administration and the staff, and so Rose used these meetings as a chance to talk through some of her feelings about the events with me.

**Other Interviews.** In addition to meeting with Rose, I had informal meetings with the principal and vice-principal about the school, the course, selected students, and Rose as a teacher. Given the challenges that were present between teaching staff and the administration, and my personal relationships with individuals from both groups, I gained insights about the culture and climate of the school that supported my analysis of Rose’s work as a teacher and the academic identity of both the classroom I observed and the school more generally. Additionally, I carried out formal, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with two prior English teachers
for the class of students to help fill in the case study profiles of each focal participant. In these interviews I asked for general impressions of the students and comments about the student’s academic skill levels and relationships with reading. These two teachers had been associated with SBH since the earliest years of its existence, and provided feedback on the changing realities of the school climate, teaching staff, and student population, providing additional contextual information for my analysis of the academic identity of the classroom.

**Observations.** Classes at South Bay High meet four times per week, twice for forty minutes and twice for ninety-minute sessions. In the first six weeks of the semester I visited the class two times a week, during the 90-minute classes, for a total of 11 visits. Once the Alexie curriculum began, I attended each session of the class until the end of the semester, for a total of 27 visits. I also made a final visit in the Spring to conduct final interviews with focus participants and host a pizza party to thank the class. In all, I visited the Rose’s 4th period class 39 times.

During my observations of the class I wrote field notes 37 times. Field notes were taken either as “jotted notes” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 20) handwritten in my notebook or typed into my laptop, or they were more extensive observational notes in which I noted teacher moves and talk, focus students moves and talk, classroom agendas and activities and whole group moves and classroom talk (Table 3). The level of extensive note taking was determined by the context of the day’s lesson and the role I needed to take. All sessions were audio recorded, and all sessions during the Alexie unit were also video recorded. On days when I took fewer notes, I relied on reflection notes taken after class sessions and the audio and video recordings I reviewed during the data analysis stage to help “fill out” my notes from those sessions.

**Table 3.**

*Observation Sheet (Sample)*

**Agenda:**
- WarmUp: 20 minutes of silent reading, review the last chapter or finish book if necessary
- *Bless Me, Ultima* essay returned
- Work in groups for Literature Device Detective Teams project
- Complete team packet, delegate roles and adding tasks
- HW- If necessary, finish Alexie novel. Also, do tasks assigned to you by detective teams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Teacher Moves/Talk</strong></th>
<th><strong>Student Moves/Talk</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reflection</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose reads with Alejandra, then turns to look at non-readers to signal to them to read. Jeff shushes people.</td>
<td>Jeffrey, unsolicited, tells me that he uses basketball to help calm stress, wants to know of Junior does the same thing. I confirm he does</td>
<td>Everyone here today – the heat makes it difficult to focus. A student from another class has entered the room twice in the first twenty minutes to talk with Amari, Rose does not address this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose wants kids to have review her feedback</td>
<td>Andrea wears a shirt that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When taking observational notes during class, I usually situated myself in one of the two back corners of the room, a spot that facilitated following focal participants closely while being as unobtrusive to the students as possible. However, during individual work time, group work time, and the beginnings and ends of classes, I took breaks from taking notes and moved about the room to interact with students, look more closely at the work they were engaged in, and support the teacher as needed (i.e., posting an agenda, handing back graded work).

**Artifacts.** I collected instructional materials, calendars, lesson plans and other items that supported teaching and learning. At the analysis stage, instructional materials were divided into two sections, one consisting of the materials used during the *Bless Me, Ultima* curriculum, and the other consisting of The Alexie curriculum materials. This division supported my analysis of the different ways that the ideological approach to ELA instruction played a role in the academic identity of the class.

Additional artifacts include student work – primarily the focal participant’s academic work. However, for a number of whole class or small group activities and for the final project in the semester, artifacts produced by additional students were also obtained. In selecting assignments to collect, I emphasized works that offered an academic activity space to display identity, such as their literacy autobiographies and their James Gee identity charts.

**Data Collection Procedures**

I joined the classroom at the start of the second week of classes of the new school year. My early arrival helped establish my presence in the classroom, build relationships with the students, and provided me with a chance to assess the classroom culture, norms, dynamics and personality. In this early stage, I invited the entire class to participate in the study and was pleased that all of the students consented. As I observed the classroom sessions, my notes included identity displays of my focal participants, whole class actions or events, noting the efficacy of instructional actions, teacher talk and moves, and relevant daily occurrences. I also photocopied student work and later scanned the artifacts into my computer for later analysis and returned to students. During the data collection process I refrained from transcribing or explicitly analyzing data so that I could maintain a data
collection stance while on site. While I referenced my observation notes for writing weekly reflections, I made a concerted effort to immerse myself in the data collection stage due in part for my own learning and also because when I was not on site, I was often prepping lessons and photocopying and organizing documents for Rose on a weekly basis.

After initial classroom observations, I administered the pre-study survey/questionnaire. The students completed the questionnaires without the teacher present, and took about 20 minutes on average to complete it. All student participants completed the profile. This data set helped me to create a profile of the class as a case. When the questionnaire was provided, I explained to students that I was hoping to find a group of focal participants. In both written and oral delivery, it was made explicit that the focal participants would be interviewed three times about their experiences with ELA, they would be the primary focus of audio and video recordings during class time, and that I would collect samples of their work throughout the semester.

During the first five weeks of classes, I observed the students participating in the Bless Me, Ultima (Anaya, 1972) curriculum. Data collection during this time included taking observational notes, video and audio recordings of significant events (like Socratic Seminars), and audio recorded weekly meetings with the teacher. Towards the end of this curriculum I conducted the first series of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with each of my six focal participants. These took place in one of two spaces, either the conference area adjacent to the principal’s office or in a small, unused office space located near an administration office two floors below. To encourage interest and establish ease in the initial interview, I provided snacks and gained permission from students to audio-record our discussion.

Once the Alexie curriculum began, I attended each class session until the end of the semester. Rose and I met on a more regular basis at this time. While we initially intended to conduct our weekly meetings in an audio-recorded setting with at least 20 minutes of formal discussion, the unpredictable and unstable realities of a public urban school at times disrupted this effort. As a result, only a total of three Friday afternoon meetings with the ideal conditions took place. Because time was scant and students were often present, we held other shorter Friday afternoon meetings that we did not audio-record. The irregularity and informal nature of the Friday meetings proved problematic because the enacted curriculum did not often mirror the written curriculum we’d agreed on. Such conditions and dilemmas are par for the course in schools like SBH, yet my concern about the discrepancy led both to tension for myself as a researcher, and at times, discomfort between me and Rose. However, when possible we worked to address the discomfort and our respect for one another and the relationship we’d developed won over.

During this phase my observation strategies shifted. On days when my roles also included co-teaching, I both video recorded and audio recorded the sessions so that I could record my observations after the class session. A useful strategy during such times for collecting data involved the ways in which we grouped students in both seating arrangements and in small group selection. As much as possible, the students selected to be focal participant either worked together or sat near one
another. My placement of recording devices allowed me to capture their daily classroom actions, interactions, behavior and experiences. Additional data collection during this time involved a second round of semi-structured interviews with the focal participants, other than Tre who had left the school, and I carried these out in the same way as discussed for the primary interviews. Finally, I continued to collect copies of focal participant’s academic work.

During finals week, the entire class of students completed the second, post-study survey/questionnaire. Given that the content of the survey called for less personal information than the earlier survey, they did this with the teacher present and as a whole class. I administered the survey at the beginning of class on the second to last day of the semester. This final data source from the entire class served as a useful bookend to the earlier questionnaire in creating a profile of the class as a collective, and also allowed me to compare the experiences of the focal students to the class as a whole. In addition, I recorded all of the final project presentations for later analysis. After the Winter break, I returned in the Spring to thank the class with a pizza party and shared a short movie I’d made of them using clips from the video recorded class sessions. At this visit, I also held the final round of interviews with the focal participants.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

I uploaded all transcribed data (interviews, observational notes, reflection notes, and student work) into the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. While I had not transcribed interviews at the detail of discourse analysis, I did my best to capture voices and expressions accurately. Next, I uploaded video and audio recordings to ATLAS.ti and by running them concurrent with my observation notes, used the recordings to verify, expand upon, and supplement the observational data gathered. I reviewed and consolidated the responses to both the pre and post survey/questionnaires that I then printed out (see Appendix A) for further review. Finally, I organized the collected classroom artifacts (student work, instructional materials, and documents about the school) into either manual folders or, in the case of student work, into ATLAS.ti for further analysis. In the process of organizing and transcribing data, I found the ATLAS.ti software to be a useful resource, but also benefited from having much of the data printed out and organized in paper form. Reviewing the data in these varied formats generated different readings and insights of the material.

Once my data were organized, I read through all of my data sources in chunks, beginning with all the observational and reflective notes, then student and teacher interviews and meetings, and finally classroom artifacts. While reviewing these chunks of data I used the quotation tool in ATLAS.ti to highlight all potentially useful sections for later analysis and also made note of potential inductive coding and organizational themes in ATLAS.ti. Inductive codes then were paired with codes derived from my research questions, creating a list of initial codes for a first round of assigning codes to quoted data.

I organized the initial list of codes into three generative themes that emerged from my research questions: identity displays, student engagement, and context and site. Identity displays primarily got assigned to the focus students and included
explicit, implicit or inferred displays of identity. Explicit displays refer to verbal "I" statements (i.e., "I don't like this book"), implicit displays refer to verbal statements that do not use "I" but still reveal potentially relevant information about the speaker (i.e., "that's not right they had to kill the dog!"). and inferred displays include non-verbal displays of self that suggest aspects of identity (i.e., manner of dress, putting head down on desk, arriving early to class). In tracking identity displays in this manner, I looked to capture a rich portrait of the focus students in order to enrich the case study profiles. Student engagement was a secondary generative theme, and addressed whole class or small group instances of notable actions or behavior. This theme provided insights into exploring my first research question about the collective identity of the class. The theme’s primarily concerns included recognizing levels of academic interest and engagement, the influence of social and off task behavior on academic learning, and identifying circumstances that impacted levels of motivation. The third theme situated context and site related issues, and focused on the teacher’s talk and moves, instructional efforts, out of class issues that seemed to enter the space, and school site issues.

After my first round of coding, it became evident that I needed to add a fourth generative theme that addressed positional identity. Positioning codes indicate when students experience positioning--by themselves, peers, the teacher, the curriculum, schooling as an institution, factors present outside of school, or some combination of these. For example, when Alejandra shared that she felt unsafe to share her ideas in the class because of how she thought other students might respond, I indicated it as a moment of being positioned by peers.

These themes provided me with ways to examine the phenomena occurring in the classroom and for the students in relation to the research questions. I organized and indicated codes by first providing an initial to the generative theme and then following this with an acronym to help me identify the code. For example, when a student expressed interest in the text being read, such as saying aloud, "I like reading about Rowdy, he is just like me" (Benny, observation note, October, 18, 2012) I marked it as S.RI (indicating student engagement, reading interest). During a second round of coding, it became evident that some codes warranted further specificity and also applied to other generative themes. Continuing with the example above about being interested in reading about the Rowdy character, I added possible reasons for reading interest, leading to codes such as “text to self” which served to suggest an implied identity display (I.TTS – or, identity display, text to self). In addition, making such a statement publicly served to also position the student as a reader (P. SP), or “student positions self”. As this example suggests, many co-occurring codes emerged from the data set. The codes generated during the analysis of the observations data set proved inclusive enough to apply across multiple data sets.

In a third round of coding, I further delineated codes into more specified categories and also included an additional metric for understanding positioning events. To explore the relevance of being positioned as a particular identity (i.e., Carlos being applauded for arriving on time to class for change) I reviewed all moments that had been coded as positioning events and attempted to rate each event for levels of salience. Using a scale of one through four, one being low impact
and four being very high impact, I was able to explore the salience of each positioning event. These ratings, based on my own assessment of how the event served to position students, indicated whether or not the student reported feelings about being positioned as such, and the extent to which I could note change in the student as a result. For example, Carlos being sarcastically applauded when he arrived on time led to a rating of three. Carlos laughed at the applause when he entered the room and again when I asked him about it during an interview. In addition, the novelty of the applause strategy encouraging him to arrive on time was different from the usual reprimand from the teacher. After being celebrated for arriving on time, his punctuality improved significantly— even though he was not celebrated during subsequent class sessions. Arriving on time, for a change, and being celebrated publically for it, repositioned Carlos from being a chronically late student to being a punctual one.

Triangulation and converging of multiple evidentiary sources of data for each of the case study participants considers the motivations and other sources behind identity displays. This analytical approach assists a research agenda interested in considering how students are positioned, how they respond to positioning and what activities and spaces support identity work towards a more durable academic identity.

**Limitations**

While I’ve already addressed the limitations and efforts to address them with regards to my role as a researcher, other limitations merit mention here. With respect to my third research question regarding the intersection between out of school discourses and academic discourses, the relative small number (n=22) of participants in this study limits the claims I can make. However, one limitation of case studies as a method is that they are generalizable to theoretical propositions, not to populations (Yin, 2003). Therefore, the goal of any case study is to provide analytic generalization as opposed to enumerate frequencies or claim causality. Important for my context, additional general limitations of case study research persist. The use of self reported data in interviews and on questionnaires is inherently biased. However, given the depth and length of one-on-one interviews with focus participants, the information provided to me by the teacher, as well as the strong rapport developed through in-class interactions, I’m confident that much of the information provided through self-reported means could be confirmed or was reiterated in other contexts. In addition, in rare moments when students represented themselves in interviews or on the questionnaires in a felicitous manner, the few incidents that I noted served as generative identity displays in and of themselves.

Of greater concern remains the isolated and context specific locale where the majority of the data was obtained, Rose’s fourth period English 11 class. Had I observed the students in other classrooms, or out of school contexts such as places of work or engaged with sports teams, or visited them at their homes, I would have benefitted from additional spaces to note and analyze the various identity displays employed. While a familiar limitation to classroom studies, the limitation only increases given my interest in positional identity theory where repeated positioning
of a particular identity in *multiple contexts* lends itself to a "laminating" or "sediment" effect on one's sense of self.

These limitations offer clear directions for future research, and do not undermine my research aim of increased understanding of the interplay between in school texts, student's developing sense of selves, and the durability of academic identity.
Chapter 3: Ideology, Curriculum and Classroom Identity

Isabella quickly looks at the paper in front of her that tells her what she is expected to do for the next twenty minutes of class. She sighs and turns the paper over. She checks her phone to see if her friends texted her. No one has. She finds some music on her phone to listen to through the ear bud she has discreetly woven through her large gray sweater. Next, she takes out her compact case and begins to check her makeup, even though it is flawless. After a while, she puts the compact away and leans over to her friend Mia and teases her about something she said earlier in the day. The two girls laugh and the teacher reminds them that they should be working. They grow quiet but neither otherwise acknowledge the reminder. Isabella puts her head down on the table as if she is tired but actually she is checking her phone again. She glances up and scans the room. She notices other students engaged in one of three activities. Not working, working, or finding ways to do both. She reaches for the assignment sheet and turns it over and reads through the directions a second time. She draws little pictures on the paper itself and then checks her phone again. Finally, eight minutes into work time, she opens her notebook and begins the assignment. (Classroom Observation, October 4, 2012)

What was going on for Isabella in the above scenario? Was she resistant because she believed she was incapable of doing the work? Was it above her skill level? Or, was it beneath her skill level and she felt bored by the prospect of doing what may have seemed like a mundane assignment? To what extent did she view the work as dehumanizing or an alienating endeavor? Did issues outside of the classroom distract her? Did something happen in an earlier class that colored her thoughts towards this class? Did she have breakfast? Enough sleep? Answers to any of these questions may apply. However, what is also true is that this ritual of procrastination is a well-rehearsed habit. Not only does Isabella enact the behavior almost daily, others in the class do as well. The ritual is an indicator of what I refer to as possessing a fragile academic identity.

This chapter treats the classroom as a case study, beginning first with a look at the students in the room – considering the historical, local, and interactional nature (Wortham, 2006) of their individual identities, as clusters of social networks, and the local collective identity of the whole class. The collective portraiture emerges through examining the participants’ history with schooling and disposition towards academic learning, considers their lives beyond school walls, the experiences of their parents as students, and their imagined future trajectories. Paired with these considerations, I note the patterns of ways that students engaged their academic work, the teacher, and one another. What unfolds makes up the first section of this chapter and suggests that the participants, both collectively and for the most part individually, possessed a “fragile academic identity.”

In the second section of this chapter I examine participants’ responses to two contrasting approaches to ELA curriculum and consider how each context both
supported and jeopardized their academic identities. Given my interest in the relationship between engaging literacy, positioning of participants, and conditions for supporting academic identities, having two ideologically divergent curricula offered varying contexts to consider the inextricable link between social identification and academic learning (Wortham, 2006). The students began the year reading Bless Me, Ultima (Anaya, 1970) and participated in an instructional approach (referred to as BMU curriculum) that supported skill building, test preparation and formal reading comprehension. In the second half of the same semester, the students read Sherman Alexie’s 2000 young adult novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (referred to as the Alexie novel) and participated in an instructional approach that supported socially mediated comprehension, facilitated authentic and self-directed lines of inquiry, and included explicit instruction on the relationship between literacy practices and identity construction.

This chapter considers my first research question, “what is the academic identity of this class?” As discussed in the final analysis, I found that different curricular approaches informed students’ views of what it means to be literate and what constituted legitimate academic instruction. Each curriculum was met with varying levels of buy-in and engagement. Academic identities developed in different ways within each instructional context. While the Alexie curriculum supported greater interest, engagement, and authentic learning opportunities, the BMU curriculum was deemed as legitimate academic instruction for some, and for a few students, supported academic identities because of its predictable and institutionally sanctioned activities and structures.

The Fragile Nature of Academic Identity

The snapshot of Isabella above captures a too common display of academic (dis)engagement in classrooms across the country. In Rose’s classroom, the fragile academic identity of the classroom contributed to Isabella’s resistance and procrastination. The term “academic identity” refers to seeing oneself as a scholar, having a history of recognizing oneself, and being seen by others, as academically oriented, and engaging in academics with an eye toward a future where school work is viewed as relevant for one’s imagined trajectory. Academic identity is discussed here as a continuum, wherein a student who is extremely motivated, has a history of academic success, and who is socialized to see academics as integral to his or her sense of self, possesses a durable academic identity. Such durability softens the blow of an academic setback, encourages a choice to take an upper division course, and steels the nerves when faced with a daunting assignment. Students with durable academic identities often enjoy an existence that assumes college, and perhaps graduate school, are given parts of the future. Additionally, because academics is integral for how they define themselves, students with a durable academic identity tend to produce their best quality work, even on small assignments, and would not be satisfied with earning low- or mid-level scores.

While the students in Rose's class resided on different points on this continuum, the majority situated themselves toward the fragile end. Most participants did not view themselves, nor did others view them, as being especially
strong students. In addition, they do not have a history of seeing themselves, individually or collectively, as academically oriented or skilled at completing academic work. Motivation in the classroom to do academic work was driven by wanting to earn a passing grade, not by viewing the learning as integral to their identities or future interests. Finally, while most stated an interest in attending college, only two students had a parent who graduated from college and students spoke of college primarily as a means to a career. These indicators of a fragile academic identity are supported with data in the sections that follow.

4th Period – History with and Dispositions toward Formal Schooling

Rose’s 4th period English class met four times a week. Students sat in assigned seats, but often changed their seating arrangements during class. The 22 students were all eleventh grade students of color. Most were 16 years of age, but a few were 17. The year began with 21 students, but Sosa joined the class about five weeks into the study, around the same time that the BMU curriculum was ending. Two students left the class prior to the end of the study: Minerva in October to care for her grandmother in Nicaragua, and Tre in mid-November because after losing his IEP status, his mother arranged for him to leave school so that he could enroll in a course that would help him earn a high school equivalency degree (GED).

According to the survey the participants completed, fourteen of the students were born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. Four students were born outside of the US, and two of these had recently arrived. One was born and raised outside of the Bay Area. The majority of students in the class reported that their parents either graduated from high school or left school at a young age. Many responses in their survey stated that one of two parents “did well” in school, and that one parent either had lots of problems with school or “dropped out.” For parents who left school before high school early, the reasons given included getting into some sort of trouble, for employment reasons, because they moved to the United States, or because they had children. Three students reported one parent attending “some college” and two students reported having a parent who graduated from college. Three students reported that they were unaware of how far their parents went in school. Despite the lack of college-going parents in their lives, of the twenty-two students, eighteen expressed a desire to attend and graduate from college. The only reason given for this objective was pursuing professional careers. Those who included information about potential career trajectories mentioned an interest in becoming an architect, nurse or doctor, running a salon, being a firefighter, a crime scene investigator, a social worker, and one wanted to be a police detective. These data suggest that despite having few models of college-going parents, students had a positive disposition toward and interest in attending college.

On the survey students were asked about their most and least favorite memories from school. Among the favorite memories listed, one striking piece of data was that none were academic in nature (other than graduating from middle school). Most memories cited involved friendships, sporting and social events held in schools, and memories of fun moments. When asked about least favorite memories, eight students named specific academic experiences (poor grades, a class being too difficult, repeating a grade), five cited “mean” teachers, two named...
problems with peers, two mentioned getting in trouble for misbehavior, and three referenced poor choices on their part. With regards to dispositions toward academic disciplines, more students named English class (9) as a favorite course than any other. Math was deemed the least favorite (15) of the classes. However, one mitigating factor in this response was that when this survey was distributed a new math teacher, reputed to be ineffective and incapable of controlling the classroom, taught most of these participants. At the same time, most participants named Rose as one of their favorite teachers in the school. In interviews with focus students, efforts to understand why students preferred some classes over others often involved references to teachers who earned respect and those who did not, or social dynamics within a classroom, with the actual content matter seeming secondary at best.

The students were asked to report on the activities they engaged outside of school. Most students named hanging out with friends, watching television, working at a job, or taking care of siblings as primary out of school activities. Only three students mentioned that time outside of class was spent doing homework. Asked about personal interests and hobbies, two of the twenty-two students referenced reading, while most indicated sports, arts, video games, or simply spending time with friends. In my interviews with focal participants, only Carlos complained about the amount of schoolwork assigned to him. The other focal participants either said that schoolwork wasn’t difficult or that they did not feel it was a major source of stress. Sources cited as causes of stress included social pressures, dealing with “drama” among peers, and outside-of-school issues such as family matters and violence or crime in their communities. Alejandra took pride in being a strong student, sharing in her survey that she had an impressive GPA, but she also said that schoolwork came easily to her.

In sum, other than a few standouts, this group of students did not display signs of being academically motivated beyond wanting to do well enough to graduate from high school. While students had aspirations to attend college and pursue professional careers, they also displayed disconnects between their current actions and the potential for them to realize these academic and career interests. In part, this may have been due to having few examples of other people in their lives who had come from similar circumstances and gone on to graduate from college and enter into a professional career. Adding to the lack of counter-narratives in their lives, as a collective the students prioritized other aspects of their high school experience above academic interests or achievements. For example, hanging out with friends both in school and out, socializing at various events and playing sports, seeing friends when they arrived at school -- these benefits of attending school were viewed by the participants as having greater value to them than what they happened to be learning about in their classes. Any discussion of academics tended to involve the results (grades, passing, failing), not the process or learning opportunities academic engagement offered. In addition, classes were often judged not so much on the academic discipline, but rather the effectiveness of the teacher, the behavior of the other students, and the relative ease or difficulty of the assigned work. Necessary to add here is that reports about being grade-centric or privileging the social contexts of school is also present with students possessing durable
academic identities. The distinction, however, is that students with durable academic identities carry additional narratives about school, such as models of academic success in their families, peer pressure to achieve academically, parents and teachers that hold them to high expectations, and a history of academic success.

4th Period – A Culture of Familiarity, Fun, and Resistance

English mixed with Spanish, academic discourse with urban dialects and cursing, bodies hugged, flirted, danced, wrestled with and jostled other bodies, voices shouted and laughed and whispered secrets; the students in Rose’s 4th period class felt at home in the space. Evident in each class session I observed was a relaxed familiarity between students, meaningful and caring relationships among peer groups and with the teacher, and varying levels of resistance toward academic work made up the classroom climate. The strength of this class was clearly the care evident among the students themselves, and between the students and Rose. However, while genuine, under the caring surface a number of important rifts among individuals within the class served to splinter the room into various clusters that I describe below. At the same time, Rose was very good at organizing the classroom (seating charts, selecting people to work in groups) and would position herself as the object of attention (both positive and negative) in ways that minimized the rifts she acutely sensed. While the rifts only came to the surface a couple of times during the course of the study, the easy demarcations of clusters allowed students to interact with those whom they felt most at ease – even if this also meant that less academic work occurred.

Often sparked by one or two students and then taken up in chorus, the class resisted even minute forms of academic work. Evident from the start, participants saw classroom time as their time to be social and catch up with friends, with the academic responsibilities taking a distant second. In reviewing transcripts from class sessions, assessing the expected time it might take the class to achieve each day’s posted academic agenda, and in reviewing my own weekly reflection notes, I would surmise that on average a bit less than half of each class time included engaging in productive academic work. A number of sessions witnessed academic engagement during a greater percentage of the time, as high as 90% (noted by my own reflections of class session: wow! they were really motivated today, they worked from the beginning of the class to the end with the only distraction occurring when the principal stopped by to talk with Rose). However, a larger number of classes saw students academically engaged less than a quarter of the time spent in the classroom. The biggest reason for this time spent “off task” seemed to be habitual. The norms of taking five to ten minutes to settle in, the tendency for Rose to repeat directions multiple times and her tendency to get sidetracked by the students, the unofficial time allotted for social talk and off-task behavior, the quickness and lack of care put in to completing daily work, and Rose’s expectations for what the students could actually accomplish in the allotted time, all contributed to days when little work occurred. These habits of work (or lack thereof), teacher expectations, and classroom norms were present on day one, stayed relatively constant, and carried over from her experience of teaching many of them the previous year.
Like other classrooms, what defined academic achievement depended on the relative expectations of the context. Based on students’ own assessments and Rose’s reporting, students fell readily into achievement bands-- high-, mid-, and low-level academic achievers. In what follows, I indicate who appeared to be academically successful and who struggled during the BMU curriculum. High performers -- Amari, Alejandra, Arturo, and Mia -- were students not especially challenged by the class, but who did enough of the work well enough to earn the higher grades. For these four students, schoolwork was something that came easier to them than the others, and so they could perform better on assignments while investing the same amount of time and energy as the mid and low achieving students. It is unclear how much more this group of higher achieving students might accomplish in a context with raised expectations. The students in danger of failing the class included Tre, Carlos, Andrea, Johnny, and Sandra. The low grades these students earned resulted from low academic skill levels (for Tre, Johnny, and Sandra especially) and minimal effort -- two likely related causes. While capable of doing better when they chose to, Andrea and Carlos were resistant students during most of the study. For all the participants, other than Tre, Johnny, and Sandra, doing most of the work at a minimal level insured that one could earn a decent grade in the class. The mid-level group of the 13 other students in the class waivered in the C or B range and appeared content with being in that range.

4th Period – A Network of Social Clusters

Four clearly marked clusters, or “cliques,” of social peer groups inhabited the classroom. Two individuals (Benny and Jessica) enjoyed the luxury of traversing multiple clusters. Beyond the clusters, a number of students showed no affiliation to any groupings, but at times paired off among themselves. These clusters were relatively consistent throughout the course of the study and informed my understanding of the collective academic identity of the class.

As the table below illustrates, the clusters possessed various levels of social and academic status in the classroom. As my analytical lens operates at the level of positional identities, determined by social constructions, social and academic status here is measured based on perceived (by the participants and myself) levels – perceptions not always correctly surmised. For example, Jeffrey’s actual academic status would be construed as low in most classroom contexts, but because his peers viewed him as assiduous about doing well in school, he possesses a higher level of academic status than he might in another context. In contrast, Andrea, while in possession of strong academic skills, consistently undermined them with her public displays of resistance to schoolwork and this relegated her, in the eyes of her peers, to having little academic status – but instead enjoyed a high level of social status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Social Status</th>
<th>Academic Status</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Disruptors</td>
<td>Andrea, Amari, Johnny, Jessica, Sandra, Jeffrey</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fellas</td>
<td>Carlos, Benny, Joseph</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Shockers | Minerva, Alice, Sally, Benny, Jessica | HIGH | MEDIUM
---|---|---|---
The Quiet Kids | Mia, Jasmin, Isabella, Maria, Roberto | MEDIUM | HIGH
Outsiders | Cat, Tre, Alejandra, Jet, Sosa, Arturo | MIXED | MIXED

Andrea, Amari, Johnny, Jessica, Sandra and Jeffrey made up the cluster reviewed to here as The Disruptors. Of all the groups, The Disruptors tended to dictate how each class went with regards to time spend engaged academically, time spent socializing, and times during which Rose’s teaching efforts were taken off track or undermined. Of the group’s members, three managed to both disrupt others and get their work done (Jeffery, Amari and Jessica), but the others both played a role in instigating disruptions and then struggled to regain their academic focus. Generally, Andrea served as the ringleader. Other than the teacher’s actions and behavior, Andrea’s unpredictable emotions and her disposition toward school and the class itself played the largest role in determining the likelihood that the class would engage (or not) in the day’s lessons. When she seemed upset, or as she puts it “irritated,” by something either in class or otherwise, her misery loved company. She argued with Rose and said things to upset or excite others, usually Johnny and Sandra. Andrea brooded in distracting ways, such as drumming on the table throughout class. Ironically, when feeling very positive she came to class with lots of energy and also remained a distraction. She laughed very loudly, sang or rapped or danced in her seat, and she was quite good at getting others, such as Jeffrey and Jessica, to join in the fun. More often than not, she came to class in a mood that was someplace between these two extremes, and in those classes the students had greater success completing the day’s agenda.

Carlos, Benny, and Joseph made up another group referred to here as The Fellas, and this cluster also played a disruptive role. These long-time friends often sat together and as they joked and talked among themselves, they drew in others. Carlos and Benny are cousins, and Joseph has been a friend with them both since elementary school. They were often seen together at lunch and socialized in the hallways between classes as well. Of the three, Joseph was academically the strongest, and could usually get his work done while joking around with the other two. Benny instigated off-task behavior by joking with the other two or inviting other students, often Minerva and Alicia, to join him in behaviors that distracted from the lesson. Carlos also found ways to make those around him laugh, but usually did so by teasing the teacher or making fun of himself. On rare occasions, this group would talk in Spanish to each other so that the teacher, and other non-Spanish speakers, could not understand. In addition, Minerva (a recent immigrant who struggled with English at times) and Benny often talked in Spanish during class about topics unrelated to the day’s lesson. Owing to her own pedagogical stance of wanting the students to feel that their classroom was “their space” and because of
her progressive views on welcoming students discourses into the classroom space, Rose never elected to interrupt or dissuade students from speaking in Spanish.

Minerva, Alicia, Jessica, and Benny, made up the group referred to here as The Shockers. Led by Minerva, this cluster served a similar role as The Disruptors, and the two groups often socialized. A strategy The Shockers employed involved making off-color statements (often sexual in nature) that invited comments and laughter from other students as well as Rose, who made allowances for the action because it was rooted in humor and not defiance in the ways The Disruptors were. For example, in just my second week of observations, Minerva was joking about sex, mixing English and Spanish as she entertained the others in her cluster. Sitting a couple of tables away, I could hear her joking and she noticed me listening to them and taking notes. Minerva then said loudly, to the delight of her tablemates, “I see you, Tony. You wanna come and get some of this too?” (Minerva, in-class comment, October 15, 2012). I laughed along but then redirected my attention elsewhere. Her actions reflected the extent of the relaxed and humorous culture in the classroom, one where everyone was fair game.

Unlike the previous two groupings, this cluster was inconsistent with regard to the extent that they disrupted the day’s lesson or elected to engage academically. When they preferred to find ways out of doing class work, the combination of the Shockers, the Fellas and the Disruptors proved too much for Rose to contend with. While the Shockers could usually be defused by imposing thoughtful seating arrangements, Rose seldom applied the strategy in her efforts to redirect students toward the days’ academic objectives. On most days, Alicia and Jessica were motivated to complete work, and when this was the case, Minerva often followed suit and Benny engaged his other social cluster, The Fellas.

The three groups above, the Distracters, the Shockers and the Fellas, all engaged one another and possessed high levels of social status in the class. They were popular individually, carried histories with one another, and received a lot of attention from both the teacher and other students in the class. Of the three, the Shockers academically performed the best, primarily because Jessica and Alicia wanted to do well, and Amari, Manny and Jeffrey were viewed as “good students” relative to the others in their clusters.

The Quiet Kids, made up of Mia, Jasmin, Isabella, Maria, and Roberto were the fourth and final cluster of students. Adept at engaging in clandestine non-academic behaviors (putting on makeup, passing notes, using their cell phones, copying homework for other classes) the Quiet Kids also found ways to complete most of the day’s assigned work, albeit often to a minimal standard. The four Latinas of the group had for years known one another and were close friends. They adopted Roberto, by virtue of his seating placement and his quiet demeanor during the semester. This group was often ignored because they generally completed the work, rarely distracted other students, and socialized only within their cluster. As a group they possessed a low- or medium-level of social status and a high level of academic status. Rose often spoke of the group as students she “did not have to worry about” (Rose, post-class comment, August 31, 2012). However, as is often the case, while the members of the Quiet Kids rarely distracted from the class, their lack of vocal presence did not necessarily mean they did not need academic support. One
indicator of a durable academic identity is displaying the grit and determination necessary to solve academic problems when they become difficult. The quickness with which students asked Rose for help, often before reading directions or making any effort, reflected their fragile academic identities. Rather than rely on the teacher for help, the Quiet Kids tended to assist one another – either by explaining or assisting, or simply copying one another’s work. Jasmin, who was shy, and Roberto, who had immigrated to America within the last five years, both struggled academically. Yet, because of their membership in this group and their quiet demeanors, they did not get the support they needed.

Not belonging to a specific cluster, the six outsiders in the classroom included Alejandra, Tre, Cat, Sosa, Arturo, and Jet. Of the six, Alejandra and Tre often paired up, as did Arturo and Jet. While not associated with any of the other groupings, to varying levels they would interact with people from the clusters as a result of simply sitting near them or because the academic or social activities supported or required interaction. Popular and handsome, Sosa was a Samoan student who often interacted with both the Shockers and the Quiet Kids, but as a newer student to the class, he did not specifically aligned with anyone. Jet and Arturo, both quiet and somewhat introverted students, were friends who often paired off and rarely engaged others in the class. Alejandra and Tre made an odd pair, the strongest student and the most resistant. Their pairing seemed to stem from a few sources. They enjoyed flirting with one another, she liked playing the role of caretaker for him and he enjoyed the attention. The difficult pasts they both possessed helped them feel a sense of solidarity. In our first interview, Alejandra said that she enjoyed helping Tre in class because unlike others, he did not judge her. Cat rarely engaged with anyone, but she did talk to Jet and Johnny at times.

One notable detail is that all of the females in the class, other than the teacher, were Latina. Like the stark clusters just discussed, the Latina students in the class were a diverse and eclectic group. Cat verbally positioned herself as an outsider among the girls in the class. She stated in her interview that she did not want to be like the other Latinas in the classroom who “acted ghetto” and said things to one another such as “Hi Bitch,” or, “Hi Hoe!” (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012). The students Cat described cracked jokes, spoke louder than others in the class, and where the girls who Cat positioned herself in opposition to. These Latinas included those from the Disrupters and the Shockers, namely, Andrea, Sandra, Minerva and at times, Jessica and Alicia. The four girls belonging to the Quiet Kids were another grouping, and they generally enjoyed the humor of the other students and appreciated the attention drawn away from them. Alejandra and Cat stood alone as the two outsiders among the Latinas. Alejandra, who in another setting may have been part of the “quiet kids,” was viewed as being “stuck up” by some of the Latinas and shared in our second interview that she also felt physically threatened by Jessica and Sandra. Cat’s position as an outsider is the result of her own presentation of self. She was very quiet, did not laugh at the other student’s jokes, and believed that others saw her as acting “too white” (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012).
4th Period – Academic Identity

The teacher had low expectations of the class as a group. Rose stated in our first interview her assessment that, on average, the students were capable of reading at a sixth grade level. Given the limited amount of work she assigned and the sparse daily agendas she posted, she also felt they could only complete the work at a slow pace. Rose held higher expectations for students at an individual level, but her assessment was the result of the social context of the classroom, an awareness that when this collection of students came together – their individual interest in and capabilities with academic work diminished significantly.

More than skill level however, the source of resistance and minimal effort was rooted in views of schoolwork as irrelevant and inconsequential, a necessary coming-of-age ritual. These views stemmed from positive (mostly social) and negative (mostly academic) experiences of school and reflected disinterest and alienation from the content they’ve learned in school. This lack of seeing school learning as relevant is an especially crucial aspect of contributing to one’s fragile academic identity. Adding to the fragility is the fact that the students were also juniors, a pivotal year regardless of context, and participants were anxious about graduating and the prospects of attending college.

While many of the students assumed college would be in their future, few, if any, had the grades or test scores to attend colleges within the statewide University of California or California State University systems. Ironically, if not tragically, they did not seem aware of the discrepancy between their performance and their aspirations. Many who voiced an interest in attending college were also failing multiple classes. While community college was a possibility for some, the hurdles required for students seeking to complete two years of community college before transferring to a University of California school or California State University require, among other things, a durable academic identity.

Possessing a fragile academic identity has multiple and complicated consequences. Rose was a maternal and loving teacher, and these qualities both enabled and accommodated the fragile academic identity that inhabited both the students and the classroom culture. A positive consequence was that in this low-pressure environment, students felt safe and comfortable “being themselves” in ways they might not in other classrooms or in spaces outside of school. As Jeffrey would state in class, “In here, I get to be Jeffrey, but when I leave here, I’m just another black kid when people see me” (Jeffrey, in-class comment, November 19, 2012). Rose valued a classroom that offered a haven from some of the struggles students faced elsewhere. The constant supply of teas and hot cocoas students could access when they pleased and her relatively lax rules about eating in class or using cell phones symbolized her commitment to providing students with a sense of ownership of the learning environment.

Students like Andrea, who had been thrown out of her home and who found herself in physical fights with others, loved the class – despite her constant complaints. Andrea knew Rose cared for her, in this room she enjoyed popularity and being somewhat intimidating, and no matter how poorly she behaved, she knew she’d never be sent to see the principal. Students spoke freely in the class, using curse words, speaking in various languages, they discussed a range of topics.
perhaps not always suitable to the setting. Tre, a student who had been in and out of some sort of correctional institution eleven times in his life, felt very close to Rose and appreciated that the classroom culture did not make him feel the “gaze” he experienced elsewhere, be it in other classrooms or outside of school. He shared in an interview that he appreciated that a strong student like Alejandra could become his friend and help him with his academic work without jeopardizing her own academic standing in the class.

Even students without troubling lives beyond the school walls took refuge in Rose’s classroom. Some of the other teachers in the school struggled with both inexperience and found themselves unprepared for the students at SBH, and the students appreciated that Rose could “handle the class” and students could learn in a classroom not too loud or chaotic. Because of the minimal academic expectations, many students appreciated earning decent grades without much effort. In other schools and with students who are seen as being at or above grade level, higher expectations can create a competitive environment in ways that pit students against one another. In contrast, Rose’s students often celebrated one another’s academic achievements. Feelings of safety, strong peer relations, having a caring adult as the teacher, and earning decent grades were all important and positive benefits to the culture that Rose created in her attempts to support students who had low academic self esteem, had difficulties outside of school, and who had come to view school as a negative and oppressive force in their lives.

The fragility of the academic identity of this class – and of the individuals in it – also allowed for a fertile ground for development. In other words, there was a lot of room for academic growth for the class as a whole and for participants individually. This contrasts with spaces where participants are familiar with academic success, and who might take achievements for granted. As I discuss later, Andrea’s celebration after earning a B on an assignment suggested a great sense of both surprise and pride. Jeffrey’s excitement about both the book and the curriculum revealed an evident hunger he had for texts such as this one and the learning opportunities that he saw as relevant to his life. As discussed in the next findings chapter, Carlos’s transformation from reluctant reader to book expert could only be possible because he’d previously felt anxious and lacked confidence as a reader. The fragility of the collective elicited nurturing from the teacher and among the students as well. When Cat took a risk in sharing her poetry with the class and Roberto read aloud his essay on poverty in English, a language he struggles with, the class cheered and celebrated two students whose quiet demeanors often left them forgotten. These moments of celebrating academic success and engagement benefitted from a non-competitive environment and reflected solidarity among fragile identities that helped to alleviate anxiety about schooling.

At the same time, the disposition that these fragile academic identities fostered toward schoolwork proved a glaring negative. In not seeing themselves as especially academically oriented, and in not seeing academic learning as especially relevant to their lives, their preference for using class time to interact socially with peers included daily resistance to academic engagement. Schoolwork, even in a class they generally liked and with a teacher they respected, was viewed as an imposition, at best. Rose made allowances for these resistances by not asking much
of students from one class to the next. For example, in one 90-minute class I observed, students did the warm up (half a page of writing in a journal) and discussed the previously assigned reading. Rose lectured briefly on a new concept and then students peer edited a paper. All of these activities could have been done in about half the time, but by scheduling only these activities for the allotted 90 minutes of instruction, Rose reinforced that the student’s slow completion rate was all that could be expected of them.

Students adeptly found ways to resist engaging in academic work. One approach involved what I came to refer to in my reflective notes as false displays of ignorance. Rose would hand out an assignment sheet and the students were expected to read along as she or a volunteer read it aloud. Invariably, about half way through reviewing the directions a student who had not been reading along (usually one of the Distracters) would yell out, “Wait! What is this? What are we supposed to do?” (Andrea, in-class comment, October 15, 2012). At times, the confusion stemmed from students not bothering to listen or read along, but more often it was simply a ruse to avoid actually doing the work. This outburst was followed by sighs from students who had paid attention. Rose would then go back to the beginning of the assignment sheet and review it again. Only now, the ones who paid attention earlier did not need to, and they would begin to chat and this caused another deterrent to eventually getting to the work. This series of distractions created a cycle of behaviors and a culture in the classroom where students worked slowly, engaged in off-task behaviors frequently, and Rose crafted agendas, with minimal items and extensive time allotments, that anticipated these conditioned behaviors.

While not unusual or specific to this group of students, another consequence of possessing a fragile academic identity was placing a greater emphasis on grades than on the rewards of rich engagements with learning about ideas and developing new skills. Students were not developing an academic identity that valued learning as much as it seemed to value passing a class. Imagining these same students in a college, it can be assumed that having a mindset about school learning that is solely motivated by grades or passing a class (versus having some intrinsic motivations for authentic learning) might not suffice. Another consequence was that the low expectations in place, meant to “protect” the fragility of the students academic identities, also reinforced the students views of themselves as being low skilled and incapable of grade-level work. Because Rose surmised that students could meet only minimal expectations, students remained at the low bar that was set. As a result, while it was clear that students like Jeffrey could not compete academically with a student like Alejandra, she was rarely asked to do more than what would be expected of Jeffrey.

In the figured world of this particular classroom, what “counted” as social capital among students was being funny or entertaining, having a strong personality, and to a lesser degree, showing intellectual and academic prowess. While students celebrated the academic achievements of their peers, doing so carried less value than someone telling a funny story about something that had occurred at a party over the weekend. Finally, as I discuss in the third findings chapter, while the classroom did not feel academically competitive, students within
this class were positioned in specific ways along a spectrum from being a “good” student to being a “poor” student and students often used subtle tactics to maintain their positional identities along this continuum. In sum, many challenges exist for imagining Rose’s class, like many others in similar contexts and with similar students, as being supportive of providing durable experiences or empowering narratives participants might call upon when faced with academic challenges in the future. However, as the second section of this findings chapter illustrates, the curricular approach was seminal in either bolstering or further fracturing the academic identities of the class and of individuals.

Bless Me, Ultima Curriculum

The school year began with students participating in the BMU curriculum. The classroom structures and norms carried over from the previous year when many of the students had Rose as a teacher. Because the class met four times a week, twice for about 90 minutes and twice for about sixty minutes, longer classes involved more in-depth and time-consuming activities and the shorter classes often included the same starting routines but used the latter parts of class as time to complete work from a previous session. These daily structures typically involved starting class with some type of warm-up activity in their journals. The warm-ups consisted of standardized test practice questions, generally involving correcting sentences with multiple grammatical errors. Students did the quick warm-ups within about thirty seconds to a minute and then used the rest of the allotted five minutes to socialize and settle in while Rose took attendance. Rose would then invite a student to come to the board to show the class how to correct the sentence. Vocabulary-building exercises were an additional activity that occurred early in class meetings. This included receiving a list of vocabulary words early in the week, doing homework that included finding definitions, writing sentences using the vocabulary, and then ending each week with a quiz on the vocabulary words, as well as words from previous weeks. These daily staples took up the first fifteen to twenty-five minutes of each class session.

Specific to the Bless Me, Ultima novel’s content, students learned about symbolism and magical realism during the curriculum. Using lectures, real world examples, and quotes from the text, Rose discussed the ways that the novel utilized symbolism and magical realism as literary devices. Students later wrote an essay on symbolism as the final project. In addition, over three class sessions, students watched the Japanese Anime film, Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001) because it featured many elements of magical realism and symbolism. Students were expected to complete a worksheet as they watched the film to make note of how these literary elements were utilized in the film. Many students enjoyed the film but also struggled to see the relevance to the novel being read and few completed the worksheets while watching the film.

Most class sessions allotted time for reading, either as a class with the teacher and volunteer students reading aloud, or done quietly. When students were asked to read in class, about one third read, others read off and on, a third pretended to read, and a few did not bother to feign reading at all. However, the majority of the reading assigned made up the homework, and along with the
reading, students answered comprehension questions for each chapter. Often, the discussion of these comprehension questions made up the second part of class time, allowing students who did not do the reading a chance to stay caught up in the book. As an additional aid to reading comprehension, Rose scheduled a weekly plot overview when she would talk through the major events of the book up to that point. Rose believed the book to be a challenge for some of her lower-skilled readers and argued that the overviews and discussion of comprehension questions helped to maintain student interest and understanding, served to keep students caught up who had not read, and were a useful review for students who had read. Carlos shared in his interview with me that he would skim the assigned reading but relied heavily on the reviews of the reading in class to help him understand what was happening in the book. Some students who shared that they did not read at all. Andrea and Johnny, for example, relied solely on the classroom discussions and plot overviews to learn about the book.

Finally, students participated in two Socratic seminars and as a final assessment, wrote a five-paragraph essay. The Socratic seminars primarily supported shared comprehension of the novel, but in the second seminar, students explored the main character’s crisis of faith and then held a rich discussion about their own religious doubts and beliefs. The discussion about religion, its role in the students lives, its relevance to their social and historical context, was the first time during the study I noted meaningful and authentic interest in the academic material. Many students in the class were raised Catholic, like the protagonist in the novel. The students shared some of their own doubts about faith in general and Catholic beliefs in particular. While none stated that it was the book itself that fueled these questions, they appreciated seeing the questions they held represented in an academic text as well as the opportunity to express their views in the Socratic Seminar.

As a final exam, students wrote an essay with the help of multiple scaffolding resources. The prompt for the essay asked, “What does the Golden Carp symbolize in the novel?” Rose provided worksheets to help them organize their essay, find quotations to support ideas, and develop topic sentences. Students wrote an outline and two drafts. In addition, a rubric with explicit guidelines for meeting specific objectives was provided that articulated what was required to earn a particular grade. Rose’s policy of allowing students to redo the essay until it earned the grade the student wanted meant some students continued to work on the essay into the Alexie unit. The students went to the computer lab in final sessions of the BMU unit to work on their essays during class time, with progress being saved on a Google Document file they could access from home. All the essays written used generally the same quotations as evidence, included similar topic sentences, and most of the thesis statements and supporting analysis were relatively identical.

Alexie Novel Curriculum

On the first day of the Alexie curriculum, students learned that the familiar routines they knew where about to change. Many were happy to hear that test prep warm-ups and vocabulary quizzes would be put on hold until the following semester. To introduce the Alexie novel and drum up interest in the content, day
one involved students participating in the Human Barometer Game. Two signs hung in the room at opposite ends, one saying “agree” and the other saying “disagree.” Asked to stand up in the front of the room, the entire class positioned themselves in relation to the signs to show the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. While the statements began with innocuous statements (i.e. “Pizza is better than Burritos”) the energy and interest among the students enhanced as statements grew more provocative and relevant to the novel they’d be reading (i.e. “everyone is a bit racist”). Students then wrote a reflection in their journals about which prompts interested them the most. Next, the class reviewed the unit overview for the Alexie novel, received their own copies of the book (and encouraged to write in it), and then read the first chapter together.

The next day, a guest speaker named Mark Anquea, a local Native American activist and radio DJ, came to discuss the novel, his own experiences, and to answer questions about Native American history and current issues relevant to the Native American communities. The class was one of the few sessions that the entire class time engaged the academic agenda – with the only item being talking with the guest speaker. Rose and I sat in the back of the room, I took notes while Rose did her best to let the guest speaker and the students guide the class. The students had enjoyed the first chapter of the novel and benefited from the engaging speaking and many stories and historical information Mark shared about both the history and current realities for Native Americans, information the class was oblivious of. Andrea, in particular, expressed an interest in discussing issues with Mark, ranging from his choice to wear his hair long to his opinion of Disney’s Pocahontas movie. Students who generally did not engage in discussion, Tre and Cat in particular, asked Mark question as well. About midway through class, Andrea looked over at Rose and asked, “What are we doing in class today? Where is the agenda?” (Andrea, in-class comment, October 25, 2012). Rose told her she was doing it already, that this was the class. Andrea looked both pleased and confused.

The descriptions of these first two days of the curriculum exemplify the variation and unpredictable nature of the classes during the Alexie curriculum. However, the key elements that relating to academic identity are reviewed here. The students learned, through a lecture and PowerPoint presentation, basic understandings on recent thinking about identity and how identities develop and change. They also learned about James Gee’s (2000) four types of identity (biological, institutional, discourse, and affinity) and completed an identity chart with these categories for both the Arnold character in the novel and for themselves. Another key element was the self-guided learning expectations articulated in the unit overview (see Appendix B) and throughout the curriculum. With a series of supportive activities (such as the Human Barometer game above) students eventually selected a topic of interest to them that could be explored by reading the Alexie novel and also by engaging in other literacy-based activities such as research, interviewing, artwork, reading additional texts, writing, and planning and preparing presentations on the topic. Finally, a third element involved an explicit call for engaging literacy in meaningful ways – this meant practicing engaged reading strategies, bringing to class reading artifacts, and finding partner texts that were seen as “in conversation” with the Alexie novel. The intention was to support a
community of text interpreters, to legitimize student’s own discourses and literacies, and the creation of a culture that was less alienating and routine than their usual experiences with an English class.

To following table conveys the differences between each approach to ELA instruction and how each viewed and treated learning activities and resources:

**SHARED CHARACTERISTICS**

| Read a book about America by an author of color | Participate in two Socratic Seminars | Students used a range of registers in their classroom talk: “Spanglish”, AAVE, curse words, academic discourse | Reading novels usually occurred as homework, some reading done during class time | Informal discussions of the book happened in most class sessions |

**CONTRASTING CHARACTERISTICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bless Me, Ultima</th>
<th>Alexie Novel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictable classroom routine</td>
<td>Unpredictable classroom routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm-ups involved test prep activities – usually correcting the grammar and punctuation of a sentence</td>
<td>Warm ups were usually journal writes or pair shares about the book, or an icebreaker activity to help introduce the day’s lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centered curriculum</td>
<td>Student-centered curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student work was done independently</td>
<td>Students worked independently, but also in small groups (2-3), and in larger groups (4-5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills taught: Test prep activities Writing 5 paragraph essay The writing process</td>
<td>Skills taught: Engaged reading, Research skills Presentation skills, Self-directed Inquiry, Group work, Reflection, Draft and revision, writing across genres, meta-literacy awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Taught: Symbolism, Issues of religious faith, Latino History, Magical Realism</td>
<td>Content Taught: Socio-cultural Identity Theory, Native American history and current context, Cultural markers, Plot structure, Metaphor and Symbolism, Themes and motifs, Characterization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final product: A five paragraph essay on the symbolism of the Golden Carp in the novel, Bless Me, Ultima</td>
<td>Final Product: Touchstone Text Project – students choose both the content and the format of their final where they shared how their thinking about a particular topic of authentic interest to them developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All text provided by teacher</td>
<td>Texts used were provided by the teacher, developed by students in the class (e.g. chalk talk activities) or brought to the class by the students (partner texts and reading artifacts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students watched a Japanese Manga film to learn about symbolism which lasted three class sessions</td>
<td>Students watched scenes from “Smoke Signals” to get some contextual awareness to aid comprehension of the Alexie novel for half of...</td>
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</tbody>
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one class session

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<tr>
<th>Journals used for test prep purposes</th>
<th>Journal used for writing to think and reflective purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students read used, old copies of Bless Me, Ultima that had to be returned</td>
<td>Student received new copies of the Alexie novel to keep for themselves and were encouraged to write in them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing students reading: Students completed comprehension questions about the chapter they read discussion/reviews occurred in class (for those who did not read). The teacher provided weekly plot overviews to keep students current.</td>
<td>Assessing students reading: Students discussed the book in class and wrote about the book during warm-ups. Key sections of the book were often re-read as a class. Students who did not read the book received time to read in class at times. Students shared partner texts</td>
</tr>
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**Ideology and Curriculum**

The relationship between the ideological approach to teaching a subject matter and the effects on both learning and identity raises questions about the purpose of schooling and in an ELA class, and what comes to count as literacy (Apple, 2004, Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009). While ideology splinters into multiple meanings based on its contextual usage, much of its recent treatment infers a political purpose wherein “ideologies are systems of ideas that function to create views of reality that appear as the most rational view; a view that is based on “common sense” notions of how the social world ought to be” (Galindo, 1997, p. 105). However, the term carries a more benign definition in socio-cultural theory, and refers to the acquiring and practicing of a meaning-making system. As an identity apparatus, the ideological self is constructed in relation to an individual’s present interests and past experiences – the totality of the surrounding ideological spaces that comprise an individual’s pool of interests (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1978). Viewed in this manner, ideologies involve ways of looking and influence the engagement and participation in socially constructed and culturally defined spaces, such as ELA classrooms.

Sutherland applies both meanings of ideology in discussing the reading ideologies that persist in ELA classrooms. Reading ideologies, for Sutherland, involve the “the arrangement of thought and desire that influence one’s reading practices. These particular ideologies are directly related to reading engagement” (Kirkland, 2011). Boaler & Greeno (2000) applied the framework of "figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998) to compare students who participated in two ideologically different AP calculus classrooms: didactic and discussion based. In the didactic setting students participated in a “narrow and ritualistic” view of mathematical learning, and in the discussion based setting, teachers framed mathematical learning with a more “broadened” perspective where learning math was treated as participating in social practices of negotiation and interpretation. In the current study, I am interested in learning both how the ideological approach implicit in each curriculum shapes students’ academic identities and also serves to
communicate understandings of what counts as literacy and what it means to be literate.

**Ideological stance of the BMU curriculum.** As students engaged in reading *Bless Me, Ultima* in this junior English course, they participated in a series of familiar learning activities. The ideology that emerged was the garbled result of competing agendas in the classroom. On the one hand, instructional activities were driven by a neoliberal agenda of testing and accountability. In this paradigm, education was focused not on shaping critical and original thinkers, but on generating workers who have acquired the standardized skills and the sanctioned types of information necessary to compete in the global economy (Friedman, 2009). Yet, tempering this crass assessment included competing ideologies of a deep sense of care, respect, and commitment to social justice rooted in both the school and the teacher’s ideological stance toward students and her responsibilities as an educator.

Emerging from this seemingly paradoxical context was a classroom space where what counted as literacy included the completion of worksheet-based tasks such as noting examples of symbolism in a film, the completion of a highly formulaic piece of writing (a five-paragraph essay) and recalling essential elements of a text – when reading the text was optional. Being a student in this context involved rewards for minimal levels of effort, scaffolds for thinking remained firmly attached so that academic challenges would not encourage opting out or disengagement, and learning only occurred once assessed a score or a grade. The grammatical exercises and vocabulary building assignments occurred without any contextual relevance, save a collective impression that it benefitted preparing for standardized tests and would aid students who read and worked at or below grade level. The unspoken norm of assuming that only half of class time would include doing academic work was meant to support Rose’s lowest-skilled and least-motivated students, but instead had the effect of reducing expectations for all and rewarding her least-engaged students’ behaviors. While the primary novel read was relevant to students given its themes involving doubt, faith, and family, and served to represent Latino families and culture, the publication date of 40 years earlier rendered it antiquated to many students.

Moments of authentic inquiry and intrinsic motivation, such as when the class had a rich discussion about religious doubt during a Socratic Seminar, went from fervently embraced and celebrated to quickly forgotten once the next scripted task was underway. By treating this moment of deep engagement as a passing superfluity separate from the “real” learning processes, literacy is reinforced as something done in English class for a grade, not a resource for constructing the self and making meaning of the world both in school and beyond. In general, the expectations for what the students could accomplish did not reside in a view of them as close to finishing high school, but allowed for students to continue working at levels below their capacities. Most students appreciated that they could pass the class with minimal effort and others, like Alejandra, Cat and Arturo, were aware that literacy instruction should both provide and ask more of them.

Rose works extremely hard, and given the context she teaches in, is an effective teacher. She loves her students and wants the best for them. A poet and
avid reader, she has a rich sense of what literacy can offer and recognizes that the BMU curriculum falls short of meeting what literacy can provide. The logic informing her instructional approach she shared in our early meetings, predominantly a sense that students needed to spend more time “building literacy skills” and this required sacrificing engagements in more meaningful, thoughtful, authentic and demanding assignments. When we reviewed the curriculum for the Alexie novel, Rose would often make statements suggesting that the curriculum asked too much of the students, and some elements were altered and others altogether cut. At the same time, I understood her view of what students can do based in large part on what they elected to show her what they were willing to do. She worked in a school where the top-down message, one that started with the principal (as voiced to me in initial meetings), made it clear that the population of students in the school was changing, becoming increasingly less skilled and less motivated to learn. As a school that prides itself on not allowing students to “fall through the cracks,” a culture of teaching to the lowest-skilled and least-motivated student persisted across disciplines and grade levels.

I would argue that much of the socializing that took place in class stemmed in large part to this disconnect wherein students needed time to honor their current, somewhat advanced stage of adolescent development while the curriculum continued to treat them as younger than they actually were. Rose looked to address this lacuna by encouraging a climate where students felt ownership of the classroom space and invited the students’ strong personalities and discourses to help shape the classroom culture. As a result, while the environment was supportive and welcoming for most students, the space tended to privilege the Distracters, the Fellas, and the Shockers, it also served to silence and alienate the Quiet Kids and the students counted amongst the outsiders.

**Ideological stance of the Alexie curriculum.** As stated on the unit overview, the guiding question during the Alexie curriculum asked, “What skills and knowledge are needed to reach a deeper and more critical understanding of a meaningful concept or idea?” As students read the novel, they also brought in supplemental materials, researched topics of interest to them the book touched on, and eventually produced, and in some cases, presented, a touchstone project representing their evolving ideas about a topic of interest. Treating literacy as a resource to engage in meaningful inquiry on a topic of interest to students own lives provided a sense of purpose beyond just earning a particular grade or passing a test.

Teaching of the primary text, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, involved what Anderson and Rubano (1991) refer to as *unarticulated responses*, because instruction avoided summative and reductive analysis common in many ELA classrooms. Rather, activities (such as cartooning, journaling, bringing in partner texts, chalk talks) looked to emphasize reader’s own transactions with texts to unearth themes, topics, and other elements that spoke directly to the readers’ interests. For example, Jeffrey became intrigued by a very minor element in the novel, that of an interracial crush/friendship between the protagonist and a white girl at the new school Arnold attended. Because this minor aspect of the story caught his interest, Jeffrey was encouraged to pursue his thinking on the topic and
would later reference it in his final project on racism. Similarly, a number of other students resonated with the dynamics between the protagonist and his best friend on the reservation who feels betrayed by Arnold’s decision to attend the all-white school twenty miles away. In this way, when the intrinsic motivation to read stemmed from a genuine curiosity, students reward for discovering their hook included an encouragement to pursue the topic and an integration of the topic as part of the curriculum.

Finally, this approach to ELA instruction reflected an ideology that seeks to empower students to design their own learning experiences. No administering of quizzes or tests assessed if students read the novel, although most read the book and the few who did not were honest in saying so. Students wrote literacy biographies, presented in small groups about various literary elements of the primary text, and treated their seed (the central idea they pursued and later presented on) to a rigorous and extensive analysis. With limited success, a culture of encouraging students to always submit what they saw as their best work was promoted. In each of these activities, students knew that reading the book aided those tasks and supported efforts to make the most of their learning opportunities.

**Student Response to Divergent Curriculum**

Despite what may seem like two very different approaches to ELA instruction, at least as I have described their goals and intended practices, more similarities than differences persisted at the stage of enactment. Where an outsider to walk into the classroom during the BMU curriculum and then again during the Alexie curriculum, the differences of ideology might not be noticeable. The students’ general response could be summed up by Isabella, the student introduced to begin this chapter, in her response to a question on the exit survey about each instructional approach, “It was different, I think we had more freedom but it still felt like English class.” The habits of work, the view of school as being something done “to them”, the desire to have time in class to be social and have fun was consistent during both curricula. While time spent engaged in academic work was improved (to about 2/3 of class time on average) during the Alexie unit, resistance to doing the work remained the same. In fact, because of the unpredictable and unusual nature of the assignments, at times resistance increased during the Alexie curriculum. Sandra stated a recurring sentiment when she exclaimed, “Why can’t we just take a test?!” (Sandra, in-class comment, November 6, 2012) when the class reviewed the expectations for the final Touchstone Text project.

While I expected that academic work rooted in the student’s own interests would lead to higher levels of motivation and engagement, for about 3 to 5 students this was true, but for most, it still fell under the guise of schoolwork and as such, an imposition. The one exception to this response occurred the day the class participated in the guided writing activity done to help them select the seed for their Touchstone Text project. As the co-teacher, I read a series of prompts (i.e. what makes you angry?, how are you different from your family?, what does it mean to be a man or a woman?) meant to unearth student’s private and personal thoughts and questions. After reading each prompt, students wrote in their journals a half a page or so in response. I had prepared six questions, expecting to get through perhaps
four before the class came unhinged. However, after giving a few directions about behavioral expectations during the activity, the room grew silent and for the first time that year, the class showed unanimous engagement to an assignment. Students intently wrote their responses, eager get their thoughts down. At one point, Andrea yelled at me to give her more time to write before moving on to other prompts. Because of the intense level of investment, I ended up coming up with a two extra questions to make it a total of eight prompts. In the final survey, students ranked activities from the unit based on an interest/enjoyment scale and an opportunity to learn scale (see Appendix A), and this activity ranked the highest in each. Despite this generative activity, similar assignments meant to increase student engagement at times fell flat. When this occurred, it was due to either poor planning of an assignment, execution in teaching it from myself or Rose, or simply because students had other priorities that day.

To give a sense of how students viewed the two approaches to ELA, I’ve offered a number of quotations taken from final exit survey. Students were asked the following:

How does this unit compare to the Bless Me, Ultima unit or other English classes you have been in? Was it the same? Did it seem different? Explain your thoughts please.

Of the twenty respondents, eight stated that the two units had similarities but preferred the Alexie curriculum. As Alicia wrote, “It was the same by reading books and different by doing finals differently. We got to choose on what we wanted to do for the final”. Similarly, Maria said, “In a way it felt the same but the book was more interesting and I had more fun doing this.” For the students who noted similarities, the tasks of reading, writing, and other familiar ELA activities, served to support the figured world of the English classroom.

Ten students saw the two curricula as being rather different and of these, eight clearly preferred the Alexie curriculum. For example, Jasmin wrote on her survey, “I thought it was very good because with the Alexie novel went a lot more deep into it because almost everything we did related to the book.” Joseph shared that he resonated with the Alexie book, “I like this unit more than the BMU unit. I was more interested in the book because I related more to it.” Contrasting these last two statements and yet still indicating a stance of noting differences, Alejandra stated, “It was different because we did less work on the actual book. It really focused more on our own lives.” Similarly, Andrea stated simply, “It was different because I liked it.” One student saw them as different and did not like either and Roberto saw them as different and preferred the BMU curriculum because he had an aversion to the activities that were done during the Alexie curriculum, writing, “It was different from other English classes because we had a lot of projects and activities. I don’t like doing a lot of activities in groups of people I don’t like that much, because everything turns different than what I expected.” Finally, Johnny’s response was ambiguous, stating, “I forgot what Bless Me, Ultima was about.”

For some students, survey responses and behaviors and actions in class revealed stances toward ELA and schooling that served to mute the differences in each approach. For example, students expressed a desire to do assignments that reflected their own interests, questions, and experiences, such as writing the
literacy biography. Yet once the actual engagement in writing, editing, and turning in the literacy biography occurred, students complained about the work in much the same way they did with assignments not seen as relevant to their lives. In considering how the ideology informing curriculum communicates what it means to learn and be literate, Jeffrey’s response to the above prompt suggests his history with ELA shaped his view of what qualifies as English instruction: Jeffrey wrote, “This was different because in most English class we only learn about English, and this time we did presentations and talked about topics.”

During the Bless Me, Ultima curriculum, participants experienced something predictable, routine, and for some, comfortable. The Quiet Kids, and a few other students, appreciated the curriculum because they knew what to expect and known success with this approach to literacy instruction. They did well on the test prep activities, read enough of the book to write the essay, and earned a good grade on their five-paragraph essay. In this regard, the strength of the final essay lay in its support of the student’s academic identities who did well on it; an attainable task, explicitly defined, and served to bolster students sense of academic self-worth in large part because of its role as symbolic capital in the ELA context. For example, Andrea, who often behaved indifferent with regards to her grades, rewrote the essay enough times to earn a B on the assignment. Ecstatic about her grade, she danced around the room and celebrated for much of that day’s class. As someone who has an extremely fragile academic identity, earning a B on a final essay, one that she had revised multiple times to get the grade she was hoping to receive, proved a momentous event.

Students with a history of struggling academically and disengaging from school continued to do so during the BMU curriculum. The three clusters of students who tended to distract from the day’s lessons, the Distracters, the Fellas and the Shockers, expressed resistance, often daily, to the academic work asked of them. While a few still completed most of the work, some either did not do any of the work or did very little. Jeffrey complained about the vocabulary quizzes and being confused by the BMU book. Carlos joked about not reading the book and relied on the many reviews of the chapters to follow along. During the Socratic Seminar for the BMU curriculum, Carlos enjoyed being the center of attention by showing exaggerated enthusiasm and agreement with everyone’s comments – while adding nothing himself. Tre disrupted learning for others throughout the BMU unit, deterred from such behavior only when he spent class time sleeping or when Alejandra held his attention. Usually, passive forms of resistance dominated – students forgetting their books or homework, doing only parts of an assignment, and using most of class time to be social. Overall, with the exception of Andrea’s experience revising the final paper (further discussed in Chapter 5), the fragile academic identity of the class remained constant as academic success was tied solely to grades, doing the minimal amount required and continuing to see academic work as irrelevant to the student’s lives.

Responses to the Alexie curriculum varied, and the levels to which students engaged and showed motivation was often related to the extent that they enjoyed the novel and the opportunity to experience an alternative approach to ELA curriculum. In particular, male students enjoyed the book. The boys noted
similarities that they saw between the protagonist’s coming of age experiences and the ones they had known or were going through. *Bless Me, Ultima* also had a male protagonist, but the character was written from the perspective of a grown man reflecting on his childhood and his experiences and struggles seemed foreign to the students in Rose’s class. The Alexie curriculum offered some new ways (for these students) to engage literacy and a few students appreciated these alternatives. For example, a number of students (Cat, Arturo, Jessica and Carlos) explored the idea of thinking about what constituted an identity from a socio-cultural perspective. Some students voiced excitement about the final Touchstone Text project – eager to explore topics of interest to them and to design the format for their presentations. Most of the people in the Shockers group, Andrea and Sandra from the Distracters, and some of the outsiders (Sosa, Cat and Jet) took full advantage of the final project and did an impressive job. And yet, while some students who had not historically responded well to engaging in ELA and then became motivated by these alternative learning opportunities, others remained disengaged throughout, including Tre, Johnny, Benny and Minerva.

One challenge for the Alexie curriculum stemmed from its allowance for, and encouragement of, self-directed learning. This aspect allowed some students to take the “easy way out” at times. While some students, like Jeffrey, Carlos, and Alicia pushed themselves to make the most of their learning experiences, some of the higher achieving students, such as Alejandra, Amari and Mia, took advantage of the self-directed learning culture and expectations by producing minimal work and redirected energies elsewhere, either to other classes or other priorities. In other words, most students who had been in the habit of doing what was minimally acceptable during the earlier curriculum continued in the same manner when given more ownership. On his exit survey, Amari shared that he liked the Touchstone Text final because he, “knew it was easy and could focus on other finals.” For these three high-achievers, since they were confident that they could earn a high grade with minimal effort, and because grades played an integral role in their identities, their savvy with the “game” of school played a part in their choice to not fully invest themselves in the learning opportunities. Whereas some of the other students, who were less concerned about grades, and who found the curriculum meaningful and relevant to their lives, benefitted from a greater investment in the learning activities.

The clusters of students described above remained constant, but the ways that these clusters responded to the two curricula shifted. During the first curriculum, students who had been in the Disruptors, the Shockers and the Fellas had little academic status, showed little interest in learning, and had a high social status. However, for many of the students in these clusters, they exhibited more academic engagement and interest in the Alexie curriculum, especially Jeffrey, Carlos, Jessica and at times, Andrea. As a result, while their social status remained high, they experienced gains with regard to their academic status in the classroom. On the other hand, some students in the Quiet Kids group and the outsiders expressed some resistance to the lack of structure and the sense that it did not conform to their figured world of the ELA classroom in which they had enjoyed some semblance of success. During the Alexie curriculum, the academic identity of
individual students either remained relatively unchanged, seemed to move slightly
towards a more durable place on the continuum for a few (Sosa, Jessica, and Alicia)
and became significantly more durable for two students, Jeffrey and Carlos. At the
same time, while I would not say students saw their academic identities threatened,
a few students did reject the Alexie curriculum as either inconsequential, or at
worst, a distraction from what ELA class was “supposed” to involve. These students
included Cat, Roberto, and to a lesser degree, Alejandra and Amari.

Discussion

This chapter illustrates that student’s academic identities become influenced
by the ideology shaping what it means to be a student, to learn, and to be literate.
How students came to be socialized into ELA influenced levels of engagement and
resistance to an alternative curricular approach. In my introduction, I hypothesized
that many of the strategies that have been recommended for teaching marginalized
youth of color, if implemented, would support a more durable academic identity.
With the familiar caveat that what constitutes the “written” curriculum often does
not play out as the “enacted” curriculum, the objectives and learning goals of the
Alexie curriculum intended to enact the recommendations for teaching students
identified as marginalized youth of color. The results of this effort was mixed.
While most students appreciated the “alternative” approach used during the Alexie
curriculum, less than a quarter of the participants displayed a more durable
academic identity as a result, and a few used its “loose” structures and assessments
to redirect their energies elsewhere and give their literary academic identities a
vacation of sorts. Even though most of the participants displayed higher levels of
engagement during class and at times surprised themselves and the teacher with
what they produced, it would be difficult to determine the extent to which such
accomplishments were taken up by individual students to re-imagine their scholarly
selves. This difficulty stems from the simple fact that the assignments lacked the
institutional stamp of what constituted legitimate academic work, at least within the
ELA curricular traditions in which these students had been reared.

Students who have traditionally struggled made gains, a promising
development. These gains suggest that inviting authentic questions, out of school
literacies and discourses, allowing students to self-direct their own learning, and
creating spaces for students own meaning making of texts should not be the
exclusive domain of “upper division” or above-grade level students. Students who
struggle with reading and sustained engagement in academic work, or who endure
out-of-school challenges, or for whom English is a second language, are not only
capable of engaging curriculum like the one used during the Alexie book, but many
welcomed it and excelled. In fact, the data suggests that in the absence of authentic
and meaningful learning opportunities, students will turn to other outlets in a
classroom, such as engaging in social activities not often related to academic
learning, to seek encounters where their ideas and lives as valued, meaningful and
worth engaging.

Hopefully, this chapter conveys the danger of categorizing any students, and
especially marginalized students of color, in essentializing and reductive ways.
While the students shared similar backgrounds and lives outside of school, diversity
with regards to their attitudes towards being students and views about the purpose of schooling persisted. In the minds of some students, the BMU curriculum served to both prepare them for college and offered opportunities for them to feel successful and bolster their academic identities. While other students embraced the Alexie curriculum and displayed both learning gains and increased engagement as scholars. The largest number of participants expressed a marginal preference for the Alexie curriculum, but saw both instructional approaches as simply English class. Under both curricula, the students’ views of their academic identities and the class itself remained for the most part, consistent.
Chapter 4

Literacy as Identity Resource

In the teacher’s lounge, during our second interview, Jeffrey sat on the edge of his seat and grinned when I asked about his views on the Alexie novel. The Alexie book? I feel like it showed, who I AM. Like, I want to be a person that gets seen by people and seen by colleges and seen for doing stuff - just by being me and keeping that positive attitude. Like, uh, Arnold did. Cause he keep a positive attitude even though he struggled a lot. He went through a lot of struggles. With his family, he did a lot of struggling with um, with everything, basketball, not having his friends there - I understand how that feel cause I lost a lot of friends. And I think the book is a type of motivation to me too because um, it motivating me because even though I am having a kid, I could still do what I gotta do so I could make it in life. Yeah. (Jeffrey, interview, November 12, 2012)

An inquiry into my second research question, this chapter examines the ways that focus participants engaged literacy activities as a resource for identity work. Identity work involves the actions individuals take, the relationships they form and resources they leverage at any given moment and as constrained by the “historically, culturally, and socially legitimized norms, rules, and expectations that operate within the spaces in which such work takes place” (Calabrese et al. 2013, p. 38). Calabrese contends that individuals “author possible identity work over time both with and against the norms of the worlds they inhabit” (p 38). I am interested in the use of literacy based narratives, both found and produced in the situated activities of the ELA classroom, for providing resources for identity work that challenge marginalizing discourses of self, consider counter narratives of self, and bolster enduring academic identities.

Identity work supports what Lave and Wegner (1998) refer to in their discussion of learning as a trajectory of movement, of being a peripheral participant to progressing towards an integral, or full, participant in a particular situated practice. In academic settings such as the ELA classroom studied, what it means to be a full participant is generally assessed by engagement, motivation, behavior in class, and academic achievement. However, participants rarely traverse this inward trajectory at the same pace. One explanation for this variation is the taking up (or not) of the resources available to students in the space as resources for identity construction. Côté and Levine (2002) argue that individuals utilize resources as they construct identities in social settings. Any discussion of leveraging or utilizing resources benefits from further clarification about the intertwined processes of learning and identity. According to Nasir and Cooks (2009) learning involves “shifts in use of artifacts (both cultural and cognitive) for problem solving, sense making, and performance” (p. 44). Similarly, learning has been characterized as, “changes in the relations between persons and their situation in a way that allows for the accomplishment of new activities” (McDermott, 1997, p. 127). But identity work occurs when the use of artifacts to participate in a practice is deemed an integral part of who one is (Nasir & Hand, 2006, 2008). In other words, “learning” may
occur through the taking up and shifting usage of artifacts, but if the participant does not view the practice as in any way relevant to the self, such learning does not necessarily support identity work. It is this distinction that this chapter intends to explore. Recognizing that identity development is a complex and multilayered phenomenon involving multiple time scales, for the purpose of this analysis, I looked for moments when participants expressed reflective or reflexive responses to learning activities and I treated such moments as potential uptakes of learning activities for the purpose of identity construction–followed by events that verified these treatments when possible. In doing so, I asked, what types of engagements with literacy activities facilitate not only learning but also an intentional application of the literacy resource for “authoring the self” (Holland et al. 1998)?

In Jeffrey’s quotation he explained that he leveraged the book to support his own identity construction. The novel, and the protagonist, served as resources found in the literacy-based activity of reading and realized through various forms of motivation to do well in school and for reflecting on his own life and circumstances. Jeffrey’s reflection reveals a strong interest in and identification with Arnold that stemmed from a number of similar and divergent experiences and characteristics. Like Arnold, Jeffrey played basketball, expressed affection for his family, found and lost friendships, eagerly hoped to have a better life, and maintained a positive attitude despite encounters with racism and poverty. Jeffrey found their differences intriguing as well, such as Arnold’s Native American background, his crush on a white girl in school, and life on the reservation.

Other students in the class read the book but did not articulate such a strong sense of connection. While they may have liked the book and may have learned about Native Americans or gained insights from a theme in the book, the transaction did not necessarily result in identity work – at least not in public ways I might note. In considering the resources found in literacy engagements that students accessed for identity work, this chapter draws on data from classroom observations as well as interview data gathered from each participant, student work, and completed surveys - allowing for a consideration of identity work from multiple perspectives.

Organized based on the ways that participants used literacy practices and engagements as resources, the first section explores the identity trajectories of the Engaged Readers, Carlos and Jeffrey, focal participants who appropriated Sherman Alexie’s (2007) novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian as a resource for identity work. Observations, student work, and interviews, all indicate that Carlos and Jeffrey not only read with intrinsic motivation and enjoyed the novel, but that they participated in critical thinking and reflection about important identity shaping influences (issues of race and family) as they engaged in reading and participated in related literacy activities. Next, I share the stories of three young women, Cat, Andrea and Alejandra, and refer to them as the Touchtone Trio. Each of these participants, in different ways, struggled to engage in the novel to the extent that Carlos and Jeffrey exhibited. Cat and Alejandra treated the novel as a learning resource, but stopped short of using the novel as a resource for identity work. Andrea read parts of the book, but her own resistance to both reading and school-based learning activities meant that the novel was not a literacy based resource for identity, and served only minimally as a resource for learning. And yet, these three
focus students at times used the literacy activities that made up the curriculum as identity resources. In particular, all three treated the final project, called the Touchstone Text, as an opportunity to engage in a literacy activity as a resource.

There was an evident gender split regarding how the focal participants responded to the Alexie novel. Alexie’s coming of age tale has, as its protagonist, a teenaged male facing issues relevant to the domain of adolescence. In addition, the author engages his male readers in particular because he handles these coming of age tropes with, at times, juvenile humor, cartoons, and a subtle sentimentality the male students appreciated. Coupled other shared characteristics, families with financial troubles and enduring racism, the connections that Rose’s male students made to the book seemed relatively seamless. At the same time, a few female students, non-focal participants, also enjoyed the book and vocalized feelings of connections with the story, and a number of the male students did not display feelings of connection to the protagonist or to the book. As a class, most students read and enjoyed the novel, and a number noted the absence of well-rounded female characters that were integral to the story. The book that students read prior to the Alexie novel was Bless Me, Ultima, also featuring a boy of color that was living in poverty and experiencing coming of age events – and yet no students, male or female, expressed any sense of connections or feelings of affinity with his character.

To contextualize my analysis, these two sections begin with brief personal and literacy biographies of the profiled participants written to illustrate their “history in persons” (Holland et al. 1998) at the time of the study. The biographies consider the participant’s history and family, experiences in school, and their disposition towards and history with reading and writing. I then illustrate the participant’s journey over the course of the study and explore how they accessed literacy as a resource for identity work, and the consequences of these engagements.

Carlos and Jeffrey: Engaged Readers

Carlos and Jeffrey both read and enjoyed the Sherman Alexie novel. This fact alone is vital to name from the outset because Carlos rarely read assigned books in school and while Jeffrey usually read them, he did not like the books assigned in school and usually found them too difficult to understand. In addition, they both displayed, as well as voiced, feelings of transformation as a result of reading the novel and participating in related literacy activities. While these feelings of transformation materialized differently in both content and in their consequences, they occurred in direct relation to the reading experiences the two boys had and in the literacy activities they participated in. These apparent transformations were noticeable by themselves and others, occurred gradually over time, led to greater academic gains, and suggested a potentially profound effect on their emerging academic identities.

Both young men came from difficult family circumstances, were dealing with out of school challenges, and carried fragile academic identities. Neither were strong readers. However, both found refuge in Rose’s classroom, shared feelings of connections to the themes and characters in the novel, and articulated discourses they read from the book in talking about their own lives.
Carlos Biography – The Goofy Gamer

Carlos wore a black ski jacket buttoned to the top and covering the ceaseless grin that at times crept above his lapels. This grin, along with the sleepy haze in his eyes, might suggest that he was often high on marijuana, but unlike his two best friends in the class, he stressed that he’s never smoked before – a claim the teacher verified in an interview about the focus participants at the end of the study. Both of his parents are of Mexican origin, with his father being born in Mexico and his mother here in the US, Carlos himself took pride in being born and raised in the Bay Area. Carlos lived in a crowded house with a new stepfather, two new stepsisters, his two biological sisters and his mother. In addition, Carlos lived far from school and it took him over an hour to get to school each day. Since he stayed up late playing video games, he often overslept and came to school late. His struggles with punctuality and attendance, an issue in his previous years at the school, positioned Carlos as lazy and disengaged in school, a positioning served to shape how he saw himself and how others saw him. Early in the semester he was rarely on time, and when he was, the class would sometimes applaud – an action he clearly liked as he enjoyed being the center of attention. Usually, however, he would saunter in about ten minutes late with a big smile and say hello to his friends and to Rose as if it was of no consequence that he was late. While his attendance seemed poor to both teacher and I, Carlos’ own assessment of his attendance was, “in the middle, not too bad, not too good” (Carlos, interview, October 5, 2012). His assessment informed by his previous year, when his grades and attendance were even worse. At the start of this study, Carlos was concerned because he knew that he was in danger of not graduating on time.

One reason he gave for his poor performance was the troubles he faced at home, troubles that got especially worse in the past year. His mother remarrying (a man that he described as being very different from his biological father) and the inclusion of two new sisters in his house made Carlos feel both alienated in his own house and angry with his mother. Carlos shared his unhappiness about the new additions in his second interview, “I really didn't like it at all, I didn’t like going downstairs and I would just go straight to my room and stay there and play video games. But now, its getting better - I’m getting used to it now” (Carlos, interview, November 15, 2014). The initial survey asked students to rate their the extent that they were free to “be themselves” in school and also in their homes. While Carlos felt at ease in school, he rated his ability to “be himself” at home as poor. His new stepfather and sisters were still strangers to him and he preferred to hide in his room and play Call of Duty instead of trying to develop a relationship with them. Carlos had one of his worst years academically in his sophomore year, his last difficult year occurred when he was entering sixth grade and his parents had just divorced, suggesting that Carlos relied on stability and home happiness to help him perform better in school.

While his struggles with attendance and tendency to fool around in class suggested otherwise, Carlos claimed a sense of urgency about his academic performance, stating that he was determined to pass his classes and get caught up, “I realized I can’t keep doing this. I was like, ‘what am I going to do?’ So, yeah, I was thinking about, I want a good job. Stable job and I was thinking about being an EMT.
I might want to do that and to do that I need to graduate high school” (Carlos, interview, October 5, 2012). Carlos’ interest in being an EMT prompted the following exchange:

TJ: You mentioned wanting to be an EMT - so where does that interest come from?
C: I don’t know. Cause I remember I did get surgery for my appendix. I don’t know. I was looking at them and it looked like a chill job. It’s not hard.
TJ: Well, except you know, people almost die! And sometimes they are in great pain or freaking out.
C: Oh. um, yeah.
TJ: It doesn’t seem stressful to you?
C: I don’t know, I don’t have to do nothing. I just pick them up and drive them as quickly as possible.
TJ: Ok - what do you think an EMT does?
C: Drives people around that are injured and stuff - takes people to the hospital. Isn’t there like two? An EMT driver and the doctor type?
TJ: I believe you have to be trained to be both.
C: I want to be the driver.

This exchange (Carlos, interview, October 5, 2012) reflected both Carlos’ interest in leading a stress free life and his disconnect about the sorts of jobs that would facilitate this desire. The discussion also reflects a lack of consideration and awareness of what life after high school will entail as well as the higher education needed to pursue such aspirations. Carlos was similar to many of the students in the class in this regard, for whom future goals were either unclear or what these goals required of students appeared abstract at best.

Carlos viewed himself as a non-reader and a non-writer. When pushed on the question of what he reads outside of school, he mentioned that he reads only video game manuals and magazines that advertise and review new video games. With regards to reading in school, Carlos said he struggles to comprehend while he reads, but this comprehension difficulty stems more from an inability to be drawn into a text than from a lack of fluency or linguistic and semantic processing. Carlos said, “When I read, sometime I don’t even get it. Reading to me - like I’m reading but I’m thinking about something else. When they explain it to me and go over it then, I can get it or whatever” (Carlos, interview, October 5, 2012).

This comment from our initial interview reflects a common strategy Carlos applied during the Bless Me, Ultima curriculum – he would skim the assigned pages for homework and then use the discussion on the book the next day to more fully comprehend what he partially read. Given the built-in supports by the teacher for students not reading, this strategy tended to work well for Carlos. Early in the semester, when the class read Bless Me, Ultima, Carlos claimed he read “most” of the book, yet he rarely spoke up in classroom discussion involving the book and he needed an extension to write the final essay.

When pushed about his previous reading experiences, other than video game manuals, Carlos recalled one school assigned book he read in the 10th grade, called
Buried Onions (Soto, 2006) and one book he read outside of school two years prior to this study, Gym Candy (Deuker, 2008). These books both deal with young men facing various challenges with growing up. Buried Onions deals with poverty and inner city violence, and Gym Candy is about a high school athlete taking steroids. Written for a younger age group when he read them, they may have reflected his reading level at the time. Despite these two reading experiences, Carlos maintained a status as a non-reader early in the study. He presented this identity through his explicit identity displays, stating both in his initial survey and vocally during class time, “I don’t read outside of school” and through his implied displays, including continually forgetting to bring his book to class or choosing not to read during the allotted time given in class.

Jeffrey Biography – The Assiduous Dreamer

Jeffrey is a tall young man who often wore a maroon jacket and a Transformers backpack. At times, Jeffrey carried a basketball around with him. Full of energy, Jeffrey presented a cheerful countenance and was friendly with students from various backgrounds and social circles, as well as with the teachers.

Unlike Carlos, Jeffrey showed an earnestness to work hard and do well in class often punctuated with outbursts directed to no one in particular, “I’m about to smash through this work!” (Jeffrey, in-class comment, October 9, 2012). He sat so he was close to the teacher, leaned in to better hear, and exhibited engaged interest on most days. Jeffrey willingly offered pertinent home life information in both his initial survey and during our first interview. He lived with his little sister and his mother, whom he called his best friend. Despite growing up in dangerous parts of the city, having financial challenges, and having to move around frequently, he recalled a happy childhood. Jeffrey maintained that he shared a close family bond, always enjoyed playing outside with friends, and said he was happy until he started going to school. Jeffrey’s early resistance to school occurred because, in his view, he was shy and wanted to be home with his mother. At the age of five, Jeffrey’s father walked out on his family. His anger showed when he talked about him, describing the current relationship as both non-existent and “ugly.” He repeatedly (interviews, student work, class discussion) used his father’s choices as a motivation to work hard and not to follow the same road. Jeffrey stated that in the 7th and 8th grade his behavior and attitude was very disruptive and disrespectful. Then, in the 9th grade he got into what he described as “serious trouble” and his mother’s response helped to change his behavior moving forward:

“I had did something stupid. And I was in trouble, and I was crying, and she looked at me dead in my eyes and, I could remember, she looked at me dead in my eyes, pointed her finger at me and said – ‘DO NOT be like your daddy. You acting just like your dad right now!’ And then, it just, caught on. I was like, ‘I am like him, I’m doing stupid stuff right now’. Then I just changed my act, then I showed her my report card and she like, ‘ok, you gotta keep working up, keep working up, I’m a get you this, keep working up and I’m a get you that’. Like she was motivating me by giving me things. But by tenth grade I told her to stop doing that cause that’s not getting me nowhere. That’s keeping me in that mindset like she going keep giving me things when
I’m older. I told her to stop and then I start doing it on my own. 11th grade I’m just trying to keep focused. I’m TRYING to get honor roll, I am trying my hardest to get honor roll this year. So, I can tell my mom that I am ready to be a man now” (Jeffrey, interview, October 12, 2012).

Jeffrey’s response to my question about what helped him change from being disruptive and disengaged in school to being respectful in class and driven to succeed is revealing in a number of ways. First, Jeffrey was open and willing to share about his life from the start. Second, Jeffrey’s relationship with his mother, and his desire to prove himself to her as being different from his father, was a theme he returned to in each of our three interviews. Third, Jeffrey is very driven to succeed and feels strongly that hard work can overcome any challenges – not unlike the character of Arnold in the Alexie novel. Finally, when Jeffrey spoke, his passionate tone and enthusiasm functioned as much to fire him self up as to convince others to believe in him.

Despite his exuberance, Jeffrey faced obstacles that made his commitment to “hard work” admirable, but insufficient. Jeffrey’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) was necessary because he struggled with comprehension, especially with following directions. He had modifications that allowed him extended deadlines for his work when necessary. In working with him during class, I noticed his tendency to easily stray off topic, taking him away from central points and making it difficult for him to write essays or do other longer assignments. Another obstacle that he faced is that like his father before him, Jeffrey was expecting a baby in the summer between his junior and senior year. Jeffrey was initially discouraged about the situation and that he felt anxiety about following his father’s footsteps, but also stated that he loved his girlfriend (who attends another school) and looked forward to having a child so that he could “be a father who is there for the kids – not like my dad” (Jeffrey, interview, October 12, 2012). Like Carlos, Jeffrey has aspirations for life beyond school (play basketball, go to college, perhaps study engineering, and to be a good father) but has only a limited and abstract understanding of what meeting these objectives involve.

While Jeffrey does not often read and describes the activity as “boring,” he is more willing than Carlos to give a book a chance. One reading experience that Jeffrey shared as meaningful to him was reading the Bluford series. These twenty, short, urban fiction novels, each with a one word title reflecting the main theme of that book, have African-American teenage protagonists dealing with contemporary problems such as bullying, gang violence, and getting caught for cheating in school. The one that Jeffrey liked most was titled Schooled (Langan, 2009), which profiled a young man hoping his basketball skills would help him get out of the inner city and the struggles of poverty. Despite his fondness for this series, Jeffrey stated that the books that school assigned tended not to interest him and he struggled to understand them.

Jeffrey shared two other relevant details regarding his use of and experiences with literacy. One out-of-school literacy activity involved a coping strategy that his mother taught him. Whenever he felt depressed, she encouraged him to write a list of his positive and negative feelings, events, and issues in his life. He was told to
then read over the list, thinking about each one and its importance. Finally, he should cross off all the negative ones and put those in the past. He learned this strategy as a child and continued the practice at the time of the study, saying it helps him avoid getting stressed about the negative parts of his life. Finally, one school-related literacy activity that he enjoyed occurred in the fourth grade when he participated in an accelerated reading computer program and did well:

TJ: Why did you like the fourth grade?
J: I used to be knocking down, what’s it called? The accelerated reader type stuff? You get to go to the computer and answer the questions and stuff. They buy you pizza if you answer all the questions and stuff - it used to be fun.
TJ: So you liked the way that you could right away feel a sense of accomplishment from it? You can answer a question and know you got it right.
J: Mm-hmm, and for some reason when I did that I could always remember what I was reading. When I was doing that contest, I could always remember the book. (Jeffrey, interview, October 12, 2012)

Neither Carlos nor Jeffrey viewed reading or English class as especially relevant to their lives. For Jeffrey, while he enjoyed a few out of school reading experiences, his perception of the readings that school assigned meant an anticipated feeling of being disconnected from the material. As Jeffrey stated in our first interview, “Reading? It’s boring. If its something, like serious, like I can reflect off it - then I could read it all day. When its something like they give in school, talking about why is your leg connected to your arm - then no (laughs)” (October 12, 2012). Carlos also had little interest in reading, and employed a number of coping strategies in school (copying from peers, “skimming” books as necessary) that allowed him to maintain a low level of success while avoiding actually reading the assigned texts.

As with other adolescents, Jeffrey and Carlos were more complex than their social face suggested. One relevant contextual matter concerned their home lives and the relationships they had with their parents. Jeffrey and his mother were close and his motivation stemmed in part from a hope to “prove to her” how different he was from his father. Carlos was angry with his mother for remarrying and spoke of his biological father, whom he saw every other weekend, in idealized terms. Motivated to succeed, Jeffrey came to class energized and with a positive determination to work hard, despite struggling with the material. Jeffrey was naïve about his impending fatherhood and seemed unclear about what the future held, other than a certainty of going to college. Carlos was more skilled at completing the academic work than Jeffrey, but he rarely exhibited determination or engagement during class time, and seemed to view both school and his life at home as a purgatory that would end after senior year. Yet, from the beginning of the semester, Carlos showed signs of turning things around. Worried about not graduating on time, he asked for help on the work from Rose during the lunch or after school when other students were not present. His recent decisions to become a stronger student and graduate he kept hidden from his peers, and suggests that he was recognizing
the futility of his choices up to that point. All of these aspects or circumstances, at times contradictory in nature, factored into how both of the young men thought of their current lives, their futures, and their experiences of school during the study. As such, the choices they made during the study, to take up literacy resources for identity work, was likely influenced by these personal contexts where both participants were searching for stability in an unstable time.

Jeffrey uses literacy to wrestle with racism. Jeffrey loved the Alexie book and spoke of the protagonist, Arnold, as if he were a close friend. He was visibly angry when reading about some of the racist treatment that Native Americans endured on the reservation. The book, and the supporting curriculum, provided a space for Jeffrey to explore racism, an issue familiar to him that he hoped to better understand. Because the pedagogical aims of the curriculum welcomed students' own experiences, asking them to share their stories in conversation with the novel, Jeffrey journeyed along a thoughtful analysis of racism over the eight weeks of the curriculum.

Early in the semester, Jeffrey presented views reflecting a narrative of racism as a somewhat self-perpetuated form of oppression that affects African-Americans more intensely than other groups. Jeffrey shared that racism made him feel he “could not be someone in this world, that other people were better than him, and that it made him lack confidence” (Jeffrey, Touchstone Text, 2012). Reading Alexie's novel, Jeffrey was both moved and enlightened by the experiences of Native Americans and came to genuinely empathize with and better understand the challenges faced by Arnold. Jeffrey shared to the class after the first week of reading the novel, “I can't believe there is a people that got it as bad as Black people – maybe worse!” (Jeffrey, in-class comment, October 29, 2012). As he progressed through reading and discussing the book, his ideas revealed the contradicting narratives about race that Jeffrey grappled with. Gradually, Jeffrey moved away from an understanding of racism as self-inflicted and limited to African-Americans to an understanding of racism as associated with white supremacy and socioeconomic oppression. Jeffrey voiced a conviction that through eliminating poverty, racism would dissipate. Jeffrey said in a small group discussion, “if everyone had money then we’d all be white” (Jeffrey, Socratic Seminar, November 16, 2012). Jeffrey also grew fascinated by the relationship between Arnold and a white girl named Penelope at the all-white school he attends. A minor part of the novel, Jeffrey brought up their relationship and Arnold’s romantic feelings for Penelope during informal discussions about the book, once in a Socratic seminar, and once again during an interview. Part of his interest seemed rooted in what he thought was the unusual nature of this mixed friendship. As he said in our second interview (Jeffrey, November 11, 2012):

It was interesting to me cause its hard for like, two different races to be together. Like, you would never see no white person and a black person together. You might see it randomly, but that’s just random. That felt good that an Indian and a white person can unite and make something good. That made me feel good, I was like, oh, she going to already have stuff that she did when she was younger but he, the dad, if they had a kid, Arnold would have
more struggles to to tell his kid about, going through school and all the that, and she can’t really - (laughs) well, she got no problems so she can’t really tell him about it. But I know that - I don’t know - I just thought that part was interesting to me.

As the above quote illustrates, Jeffrey’s views on race (white people have no problems, whites and blacks are rarely couples, races “uniting” could be advantageous for offspring) were informed by past experiences, of genuine interest to him, and were still developing. For Jeffrey’s final project in the class he presented his thoughts about racism and his solutions for how to bring about its end. These included education (he urged for more school assigned books like Alexie’s novel), creating spaces for diversity so people can get to know one another (South Bay High was cited as an example), and a criticism of media that reifies stereotypes or makes light of racism. Jeffrey also researched, and shared with the class, how racism benefits whites and about the phenomenon of white privilege. Therefore, at the end of the semester, his understanding of racism shifted again to the conviction that, as he said during his final project, “it wasn’t race that was the problem but racism and White people” (Jeffrey, Touchstone Text, 2012).

In our final interview I asked Jeffrey why he selected this topic for his Touchstone Text, he stated, “Honestly, I think racism is really real-like, people just expect me to fail because I’m black, like they expect me to be in the street. If people think you supposed to fail then nobody really cares if you do” (Jeffrey, interview, February 14, 2013). The motivation for Jeffrey’s journey in thinking about issues of race and racism was born from his own struggles of experiencing racism as well as from the narrative of the Alexie novel. These two narratives intersected to help further his thinking on the concepts of race, class, and privilege. Jeffrey selected the topic of racism for the Touchstone Text, the semester’s final project. In preparing the final, and in compliance with the requirements, he carried out research (interviewing adults, online searches, reading additional materials) that offered additional perspectives on the concept of racism beyond the novel and his own background and views. In our final interview, Jeffrey applied his developing ideas about issues of race to consider a challenge his mother was facing as an employee of the local bus company.

J: There’s only like three black people at her job and then it the um, they boss is white. So, they give all type of power to the white people cause um, you know (he names an affluent neighborhood in the city)? Thats like the most cleanest place ever and only white people can go in there and my mom can’t never go there, and I always wonder why she can’t go in there.

TJ: For her job?

J: Yeah, for her job, she can’t even do that cause -

TJ: What does she do?

J: She work for (name of the bus company).

TJ: Ok, so?

J: You see it and its like, and she told me, they being racist towards me. And my mom, now she FIGHTING for it and so now they having
and spent as much time at Arnold’s house as possible.

Carlos noted that Arnold’s friend, Rowdy, lived in a house with many of the same problems common to others who live on the reservation. However, because of his abusive father, Rowdy was rarely home and spent as much time at Arnold’s house as possible. Carlos noted that Arnold’s

Jeffrey applied his learning about racism and white privilege to his mother’s situation at her work where she and other Black employees were not getting placed in white, affluent neighborhoods. Jeffrey’s comments recognized the role of institutional racism as a mechanism to maintain oppressive labor practices and reinforce racist ideologies. Finally, Jeffrey’s emphasis that his mother and her co-workers are “FIGHTING” against this practice by the local bus company suggests a growing sense of agency and awareness of social activism – a stark contrast to the language of learned internalized racism and helplessness that Jeffrey displayed early in the semester.

Carlos uses literacy to gain insights into healthy families. Carlos both read and enjoyed Alexie’s novel, and commented on its appealing blend of cartoons, vivid and witty dialogue, and taboo elements that excite teenage readers. While he did not feel the same kinship with the protagonist that Jeffrey had, Carlos found the themes of friendships and family appealing. Carlos had important male friendships that he valued and also had a troubled home life, and Alexie’s treatment of these topics was a motivator for Carlos to read.

Drawn to the novel’s format and content, the “non-reader” Carlos finished the book in three days. The significance of this accomplishment is explored in the next findings chapter, but one affordance was the acquisition of new tools and resources to cope with the tensions and contradictions he faced daily. For example, for his Touchstone Text project, Carlos chose to analyze the differences between healthy and unhealthy families. Modeled on the cartoons found in the Alexie novel, Carlos decided to explore his topic by creating a comic book as his final project.

Carlos began his exploration by asking: what makes a healthy family? In the Alexie novel, Arnold was part of a family struggling with problems that many families on the reservation face – depression, joblessness, racism, alcoholism, domestic violence and hopelessness. Carlos endured some of the same struggles in his own home, and drug abuse and domestic violence factored into his parents initially separation. Carlos held idealized notions (perhaps from representations in the media) about “healthy families” a term he used to describe families that were different from his own.

Carlos revised his own narrative about his family after reading the book and further researching this topic. In the Alexie novel, Rowdy, who is Arnold’s best friend, lived in a house with many of the same problems common to others who live on the reservation. However, because of his abusive father, Rowdy was rarely home and spent as much time at Arnold’s house as possible. Carlos noted that Arnold’s
family had many problems as well, but unlike Rowdy’s family, their ability to communicate with each other and their use of humor helped them remain, in Carlos’s opinion, a healthy family. In the end, Carlos reconsidered his own family and decided that his family was more like Arnold’s than Rowdy’s. Carlos came to a poignant conclusion that he shared in his final interview, “really, all families have problems, what matters is how they deal with it” and shared that he worked to apply this lesson to his own situation, that, in his own home, “things be pretty good now, not like before when I stayed locked in my room – now I am being more social with my family” (Carlos, interview, February 14, 2013).

Carlos looked beyond the struggles in his family and chose to focus on the positive ways they handled the struggles. Inspired Arnold’s efforts to forgive his own parents, Carlos worked at letting go of the resentment he had towards his mother and made moves to repair their relationship during the time of the study. The topic of “healthy versus unhealthy families” is not a dominant theme in the Alexie novel, but it was an issue Carlos was engaged in at the time, and the curriculum supported his use of literacy as a resource to consider an authentic issue. His choice to explore the topic, and to see his work legitimized in an academic setting, facilitated Carlos’ choice to be a far more engaged student than earlier in the year. In addition, he turned the learning about healthy families towards his own home situation where he took the initiative (not a word normally associated with him) to heal his relationships in that setting.

**Touchstone Trio: Cat, Alejandra & Andrea**

Cat, Alejandra, and Andrea, are three Latina students whose stories are quite different, and yet all three used the Touchstone Text final project - designed to support self-guided learning of authentic inquiries - as a literacy-based resource for identity work. For these three participants, the reading exchange with the Alexie novel lacked the apparent transformative effects that Carlos and Jeffrey enjoyed. Alejandra and Cat both read the Alexie novel and completed most the assigned work over the course of the semester. Andrea did less assigned work and read only parts of the book – the extent of which was unclear – but shared that she enjoyed the book and some of the related curriculum. Their uniquely situational stories collectively suggest that accessing literary-based resources for identity work requires levels of willingness, risk-taking and vulnerability that not all students enjoy or classroom settings support.

**Cat’s Biography – The Poet Wallflower**

Cat’s shy smile and soft voice concealed a passionate and artistic spirit. Cat excitedly shared in our first interview that her name, changed here for the purposes of confidentiality, is a very unusual Parisian name and was the name of a woman, not her mother, who her dad knew while stationed overseas. The woman was, in Cat’s words, “the love of his life” and he concealed this from her mother while encouraging her to give her daughter this unusual name (Cat, interview, October 23, 2102). Cat’s enthusiasm in sharing this story, and later her decision to reference this story on an assignment, was indicative of the romantic sentiment and
disposition towards the fantastical she also displayed in interviews and at times in class.

Cat lived in a crowded two-bedroom apartment with three other family members. Her little brother to whom she was close, her grandfather who moved in because he could not afford his own rent, and her mother, with whom she shared a room. Her mother recently returned to college and Cat often helped her with the schoolwork because her mother’s English wasn't always strong enough to read the materials. Cat harbored significant resentment towards her mother, and like Carlos, tended to idealize her absentee father. She complained about having to do her own homework and then her mother’s, and stressed that her mother goes out of her way to diminish Cat’s dreams. She wanted to attend college in New York to study some sort of art – acting, dance, fashion – but was often reminded by her mother that it was not likely to happen and that they could never afford it regardless.

Cat’s love of reading was a quality that made her unique in the class. Cat shared that two books in particular were meaningful to her, and that she wrote reviews of them in her English class as an extra credit assignment in the previous year.

TJ: Which books did you write reviews for?
Cat: *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.
TJ: OK - you wrote it for something, or for a class?
C: No, I just wrote it for me. But I showed it to my teachers - the one for *Catcher in the Rye*.
TJ: Tell me about *Catcher in the Rye*.
C: I don’t know. I really liked it. I didn’t really see why people didn’t like it. Like, a lot of older people liked it more than younger people, but when I try to explain it to like, a younger person, they just like, disagree and they just say that he’s a jerk. But I don’t. I don’t. I love him.
TJ: Why don’t you think he’s a jerk?
C: Um, I mean, I think maybe he just wants to help people. He just doesn’t want to be come off as a jerk. Maybe he just, I don’t know. A lot of people talk shit about other people. So I don’t get why he can’t call people a jerk but other people can call another person a jerk. You know? It never came off to me like he was a jerk, so-
TJ: Some might say the book is too out of date. Was that something that was a problem for you or...?
C: I mean, yeah, there was probably like three words I could not understand -but um. It didn't stop me from understanding.
TJ: How about *Perks of Being a Wallflower*?
C: Have you read that book?
TJ: No, but I have heard a lot about it.
C: Ok, yeah - its a really good book, its like my favorite.
TJ: Why is it your favorite?
C: Um, because me and Charlie - the main character -we're just so much alike. Like, I thought like him, but I could never put my feelings into words like how he could. Every time he would say, he felt INFINITE. I
was like, wow, that word just like - its like my favorite words. It’s like my feeling for like, how like you can listen to your favorite song and like see the buildings and the light and like your just walking and you feel in place, infinite.

**TJ:** You’re a poet, aren’t you?

**C:** A little bit yeah, I write. (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012)

As an additional literacy practice, Cat wrote each day in her journal about a “stupid boy” in the class who she was in love with but who did not return her affection. While she initially intimated that she was willing to share the journal with me, she later changed her mind.

**Alejandra’s Biography – The Independent**

Alejandra experienced the fluid nature of identity and recognized that different contexts require different identity displays and ways of being (Gee, 2000). Raised as a “daddy’s girl” in her Mexican family, Alejandra rebelled at 13 against the pedestal she’d been placed upon throughout her life. She ran away from home and adopted new friends on the streets. While on the streets, she struggled with a number of difficult experiences, including drug abuse and thoughts of suicide. Her reason for leaving home was what she saw as her family’s racist, sexist, homophobic and “machismo” (Alejandra, interview, October 11, 2012) values and attitudes. Her home world did not allow for Alejandra’s bisexuality and her many friends of different races, genders and sexualities. She found home life oppressive. However, after things worsened while she was on the streets, and at the urging of some of her friends, she re-established ties with her family and moved back home.

Back at home for a year at the time of this study, Alejandra was working hard to develop a better relationship with her parents, stayed busy by doing well in school, attended a church where she sang in the choir, and worked at a Taqueria located on a college campus. Sounding older than her 16 years, Alejandra described herself as wiser because of her past struggles. She referred to herself as a “nerd”, and hoped to find a career in medicine. She reiterated that unlike her past self, she now only concerned herself with getting good grades, avoiding drama with other girls in the school (who view her based on her past actions), and playing the “princess” role at home to please her parents.

Alejandra said she enjoys reading, but felt she should read more often. She viewed most of the in-school reading as “fine” but she preferred not having to meet deadlines for reading. An example of taking up a literacy resource for identity work was her experience of reading a book three years earlier:

**TJ:** Do you recall any books you’ve read that stood out to you?

**Al:** Um, this book I read a long time ago - Esperanza Rising, or Raising Esperanza? Something like that. It had to do about this like, Mexican family that needs to like, be very, well in, talking about like economical wise. But then they lost everything cause their house burnt to the ground - so they came to the United states and they were working as farm workers.

**TJ:** And why did this book stick with you?
was ten and was arrested for stealing about twenty dollars worth of cheap jewelry. (Alejandra, interview, October 11, 2012)

The novel that Alejandra referenced is called *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) and is the story of Esperanza, a young girl in Mexico who lived an idyllic life until her father’s untimely death and the destruction of their family home. She and her mother subsequently fled to America where she eventually relocated and lived in a labor camp. Alejandra viewed the novel as a text that helped her to understand her experiences, not only her status as an undocumented child in the US, but also as someone who fell from grace. Different from Esperanza, however, Alejandra very clearly attributes the cause of her downfall to her own actions, as opposed to the external circumstances that led to Esperanza’s struggles.

**Andrea’s Biography – The Stubborn Rebel**

Andrea was a fighter. Raised in poverty, estranged from her father, Andrea has a large, extended family that she is close to. In our first interview, she stated in a matter of fact manner about her brothers’ struggles with the law:

An: I have like 12 other brothers and sisters from my dad.

TJ: Do you have a relationship with them?

An: Yeah, I do. With most of them. But mostly with my three older brothers. Um, my brother I am closest to, he was born like a month before me, and we look exactly alike, like twins. And he’s um, in jail. He got locked up like two years ago for murder. And then, um, but he didn’t do it though. Well, that’s what he said, but, he didn’t do it. I see all my brothers had been locked up and I see what they went through, cause I was there when they got arrested and stuff, so, it was kind of hard seeing all that, you know?

TJ: How old where you when that happened?

An: I was - when my first brother got locked up I was nine years old and he was 12. And then my other brother, who is 18 right now, got locked up like a week after that. And my twin brother, got locked up on and off for little things, but then they give him life, as of right now about a year ago. They let him out after eight months and then he had a kid and then he went back. And then my older brother, who is 18 right now, has two kids and then he went back and then he got out and now he is going to college and my 19 year old is going to college - so the only one that is really off track is my 16 year old brother. But - I mean - I don’t know. (Andrea, interview, October 16, 2012)

According to Andrea, her mother’s parenting involved either trying to find ways to get Andrea out of the house, or trying to act too much like a friend. An early memory that clearly shaped her perspective on their relationship was when Andrea was ten and was arrested for stealing about twenty dollars worth of cheap jewelry.
Rather than coming to pick her up, her mother requested that Andrea stay the night in juvenile hall – the police said she could not do that because Andrea was too young. Andrea describes the incident as the first of many times when her mother was not there for her. At the time of the study the relationship was still rocky. For a couple weeks in the semester Andrea was forced to live on the streets, staying with friends, because her mother would not let her come home.

Andrea presented a tough exterior but was also pretty quick to let it down when she felt safe around others. Andrea also loved to have a good time. She shared in interviews that she is often out partying at night with friends (though she was trying to do this less during the time of the study), she came to class at times extremely energized – dancing, singing songs loudly, and usually joking and teasing her friends or the teacher. Most of all, Andrea was unpredictable, a trait that made a challenge to “represent” her in the form of a case study. Her behavior in class was erratic and dependent on her “mood” that day. She was outspoken about being a “strong woman” who refused to let men control her, and yet she seemed to hang off of her boyfriend during class to the point of blocking out the rest of the room. She was a skilled writer, articulate and with an impressive vocabulary, she read material fluently, and yet liked to “act dumb” as a stalling tactic to avoid doing any work. In fact, given her family’s history with criminal activity, Andrea’s hope to become a parole officer seemed apt given her paradoxical nature.

Andrea said English was her favorite class, but given that she “hated” school and yearned for its completion, this was faint praise. Despite her strong literacy skills, she rarely did any schoolwork because she said she refuses to do work that does not interest her. When she did work, usually it was half done, and well beneath what she was capable of. She did not read the first book of semester, Bless Me, Ultima, and read only parts of the Alexie novel. In typical Andrea fashion, she shouted out one day in class, “I like this book I just didn’t read it!” (Andrea, in-class comment, November 5, 2012).

**Cat uses literacy to find community.** Given her professed love of reading, her reported daily use of a journal to record her thoughts and feelings, and her own self described identity as an artist, Cat appeared at the outset someone who would flourish in a curriculum designed to nurture some of these tendencies and characteristics. In some regards, this supposition was correct once we reached the final project. However, up to that point, she resisted the curriculum in ways that illuminated possible constraints of school contexts that impede the potential for literacy resources to support identity work. In other words, the classroom culture, Cat’s positional identity, and her resistance to what she viewed as appropriate for ELA instruction all served as barriers to accessing literacy as a resource for identity work.

As an artist and a poet, Cat had experience with treating literacy as a resource for identity work, and this came across in her academic work. In three different assignments asking for reflection and analysis of beliefs, inquiries and experiences (literacy biography, the reading artifact, and Touchstone Text final) Cat both referenced a book, The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky, 1999) and included quotes from the book itself. She describes the book as one that “expanded
my mind like no other book has before” (Cat, literacy biography). She shared her favorite quote both by rewriting it into her literacy biography and reading it to the class when sharing her reading artifact:

But right now these moments are not stories, this is happening, I am here. I can see it, that one moment when you know you are not a sad story, you are alive, and you stand up and see the lights on the buildings and everything that makes you wonder and you’re listening to that song, and that drive with people you love most in this world and at this moment I swear – we are infinite. (Cat, literacy biography, quoted from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky, 1999)

Cat then wrote her connection to and opinion of the quote and its speaker:

“IT’s taken the words right out of my mouth. I’ve always felt the same way as the main character Charlie. He’s gotta be the best main character ever. I always thought I was the only person who felt like I felt, but then came Charlie, I have a huge crush on him” (Cat, literacy biography).

Given these statements, I found her gradual disinterest in the study and the curriculum used during the Alexie novel surprising. In some respects, Jeffrey’s relationship with Arnold from the Alexie novel paralleled Cat’s sentiments about Charlie from the Chbosky novel. It became evident that when students like Jeffrey, a low-skilled, struggling reader, exhibited responses to literature in the ways that Cat had known, it contributed to her increasing resistance to the curriculum.

During interviews and informal check-ins during class, Cat happily discussed the Alexie novel, which she often compared to the *Perks of Being a Wallflower* - a much better book in her view. However, during formal and informal discussions of the Alexie novel in class, Cat rarely contributed. When pushed to share her thoughts by the teacher during a graded discussion, she talked about the difficulties Arnold faced as an Indian in a new school full of white students where the only other “Indian” was the school mascot. Cat first said, “It’s kinda sad, how he’s kinda alone in the ethnic department. I feel like he’s alone period. He can’t really open up to anyone – his family kind of isn’t there for him and he’s being made fun of at school. He and his best friend are kind of apart. Its sad that he’s standing alone.” (Cat, Socratic Seminar, November 7, 2012). After sharing these thoughts, she then asked a question of the group, “Do you ever feel alone in a crowded room?” (Cat, Socratic Seminar, November 7, 2012). Her question met silence and some uncomfortable shifting in seats by her peers.

Cat struggled in class to feel a sense of connection to her peers. Friendly with some of the boys in the class, she rarely engaged any of the girls. She tended to keep to herself, gazed at the boy in the class she said she was in love with, and often got emotional to the point of needing to leave the class to visit the school counselor. Her connection to literacy was as a place of refuge. Cat’s emotional connection to works of music, books, movies, and poetry, are of a deeply personal nature and she viewed Rose’s English class as both incapable and ill-suited a context to share or engage in these connections to literacy.
As the date for our second interview approached, Cat grew more resistant to doing work for the class, expressed irritation towards me and the teacher when we tried to check in with her, and postponed our interview twice. When we managed to meet she was tired and disinterested as I asked her questions about the book and the projects we did as part of the curriculum. Sensing her resistance, I moved on to asking questions about her relationship with peers in the class.

TJ: Do you feel like you have folks in the class that you connect with and work with – learn from each other? (Cat shook her head to indicate a “no”)

TJ: Why do you think that is?
C: Cause a lot of people don’t really understand.

TJ: What don’t they understand?
C: They don’t think like me, they are not on my level of thinking. I guess you can say it like that. They don’t think, um, I don’t think how – I don’t really know how people think cause I’m not them. But, I know that most of the time they can’t connect with me so I won’t connect with them. I mean, I could say something, but, they won’t understand. They are not empathetic. (Cat, interview, December 10, 2012)

Cat’s resistance to the curriculum included resistance to being part of the study. She avoided me during informal encounters, stopped turning in academic work for me to copy, and put off our formal interviews twice. This was in stark contrast to the Cat at the beginning of the study, who was eager to share her views on literature, art, and her life during our first interview. Wanting to both work to repair our relationship and re-engage her interest, I pushed Cat to think about what her ideal English class might involve. This line of questioning initially led to greater irritation on her part but did reveal a number of her views on the class itself the disconnect she felt from her peers.

TJ: And, your classmates? In the perfect English class – who would be there? Remember, you can imagine whatever you like – who would be in your perfect English class?
C: (lightening up a little) Probably, I would have JD Salinger in there. Stephen Chbosky, I guess. But, I would meet them when they were my age.

TJ: So, younger versions of them?
C: Yeah.

TJ: Ok – so people who appreciate reading?
C: Yeah, and people who can like connect to things on a different level. People who can like, see things from more than one perspective.

TJ: How could we have done this Alexie unit better? What do you wish we had done?
C: I don’t know. Probably read along with us. A lot of people in here probably didn’t even read the book.

TJ: OK – and what about some of what we did – what worked? What could be improved? Like, would you keep Socratics?
C: Well. People don’t prepare for it so I guess not. A lot of people don’t read so they don’t have anything to say. (Cat, interview, December 10, 2012)

Cat’s last statements conveyed her resentment. Most of the students in the class read the book, and the Socratic discussions and the informal talk about the book reflected as much. Cat perhaps felt threatened that others not only did the reading, but also expressed similar connections with the readings, suggesting that they too could experience an affinity to books. This realization threatened a central pillar in the shaky foundation of her academic identity. The day after this somewhat uncomfortable interview, I checked in with Rose to see if she knew about personal struggles Cat might be facing and mentioned that the interview did not go very well. Rose mentioned that Cat was coming to school high on drugs recently, she also suggested that her erratic behavior was “just part of her M.O.” and should not be taken too seriously. Cat continued to avoid both talking with me or Rose about either academic issues or simply in a social manner. In the last three weeks of the curriculum, she began leaving class earlier to go and stay in the counselor’s office. While more was going on for her than I knew, it was clear the classroom was not a place she wanted to be. Then, as if her resistance and her apparent apathy never occurred, she arrived on the day for the Touchstone Text final with a sheepish grin on her face and a bounce in her step.

While preparing the room for final project presentations, Cat thrust a pile of papers in my hand and asked me to help her select one to read. The five poems were each about one page long, double-spaced, and with about 18-20 lines each. Entitled, “glass dome,” “untitled,” “clock out, check in,” “clear eyes,” and, “pierced love,” the poems were about love, being young and misunderstood, feeling confused and alone, contemplating time, and generally reflected much of what Cat wrote in the few journal entries she shared with me. Happy to see her in a good mood and communicating with me, after a quick scan through them, I thanked her for sharing them and mentioned that the “Clock out, check in” poem seemed a good one to read aloud. Cat quietly mentioned that she thought the poems would be “over the students’ heads”. She read two poems to the class, the one I recommended and the one called “untitled,” a piece clearly written about the boy who she was in love with. She received respectful applause when she finished her readings and seemed, for the first time in a month, happy about being in class.

In our final interview, seven weeks after that day, Cat was much more positive and forthcoming than in our previous interview. She reported improvements to her academics, better attendance, and that she matured since our last interview. In addition, Cat cited sharing her poems for her Touchstone Text project as being instrumental in her improved performance. While writing the poems themselves was not too challenging, she admitted to feelings of terror when she read them aloud. “This one (pointing at the untitled piece) was hard because he was like, in the room. That was like the first time, I um, I can still remember the feeling, and like, um, my chest jumps” (Cat, interview, February 14, 2013). She added that sharing the poem publicly helped her to realize that she “had to move on,
that it would be hard but it would be a step towards moving on from my love for him” (Cat, interview, February 14, 2013).

For Cat, it appeared that the romantic idea of literacy served as an instrumental identity resource. She relied on her relationship with literacy to distinguish herself from her peers, to provide her with some sense of power when her daily life was a series of repeated reminders of her powerlessness. She spoke about books, characters in books, and authors, as friends, as kindred spirits, and people she loved. She spoke about her peers in school as strangers, as regarding her as invisible, and as less intelligent and cultured. The irony of this is that while she spoke of having a love affair with books, she did not really read very often. During the course of the study, I never saw her reading between classes or at lunch, and when I asked about other books she’d read she gave vague responses, such as, “oh, lots and lots, I don’t remember the names” (Cat, interview, October 23, 2012). While she clearly read in the past, and she saw movies about books she claimed to have read, outside of the Salinger book and the Chbosky novel she never referenced any other works. The resentment towards other students and resistance to the curriculum resulted from seeing her peers, like Jeffrey and others who did not usually express any interest in literature, experience books in ways she thought was special to her. It is also possible that she feared being found out for not being the reader she claimed to be.

At the end of the study, when she made the courageous choice to write and read poems about her feelings for the boy in the class and sense of alienation she knew so well, she was engaging in specific literacy practices, not just the idea of them. While she was comfortable with using literacy as a resource for identity work outside of the classroom, this move suggests that she was open to engaging with literacy for the same purpose in the ELA classroom. Cat’s Touchstone Text project reflects a boundary crossing of sorts, where she brought her private use of literacy activities into the classroom, a domain she had not thought was suitable, nor safe enough, for such engagements. Her comment suggesting the poems would be too advanced for her classmates showed she was still harboring similar feelings as exhibited in the previous interview, yet part of her also realized that sharing her poems in this manner would benefit her own development. This expectation proved correct given her sense of pride and feelings of healing and growth she reported in our final interview. Cat’s healing and growth led to improved academic engagement and performance in class (based on both Cat and Rose’s assessment), and a continued interest in reading poetry in public, including participating in a spoken word event at a café in the summer following this study.

**Alejandra uses literacy to test the waters.** Unlike her peers in the classroom, Alejandra carried herself as having already “grown up” despite only being 16. She carried a quiet confidence and evident assurance about her ability to be successful. These traits marked her as arrogant in the eyes of some of her peers but struck me as signs of maturity. She viewed her past behaviors as belonging to her “coming of age” period, and expressed pride in putting those times behind her. Given this stance, she was not actively searching for meaning or crafting identity in
the ways that her peers were. As a result she did not engage in school-based or out-of-school literacies with an intention of searching for identity resources to author the self. She completed most of the assignments in the class, she read the majority of the book, and she participated when asked in formal discussions. All of these tasks were carried out in her familiar manner, closely following the directions and rubric with an eye towards getting an A.

In an unusual move for her, she appeared disengaged towards two assignments, one of which she decided to not complete at all. Both assignments, the reading artifact and the guided writing activity, asked students to consider the different narratives or texts informing their identities. For example, when sharing her reading artifact, Cat read a passage from the Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky, 1999) and Jeffrey shared a photo and the story of an uncle who he lost to gunfire when he was younger. When Alejandra’s turn came she said she “forgot” her piece, surprising the teacher and me. Later, in our second interview, she revealed that she did have a reading artifact but did not feel comfortable bringing it in to the class.

Al: I was going to bring this um, I think you say, plaque? Is that right?
TJ: Yeah.
Al: A plaque I got from singing at choir in church. Um, that’s helped me a lot. Cause I told you a lot about how the church had helped me and I came back to it and, yeah.
TJ: So, what does the plaque signify?
Al: It just says I was in it, and it has a picture of us and stuff
TJ: So it’s like a recognition for your accomplishment?
Al: Yeah
TJ: Why do you think you forgot to bring it?
Al: Um, I just wasn’t comfortable, I didn’t know how certain people would act. (Alejandra, November 20, 2012)

Alejandra reported in our interview that the plaque had a special meaning to her because it served to remind her that she had pulled her life together. She also noted the presence of a couple of the girls in the class as contributing to her “forgetting” to bring it in. Alejandra she had a history of “drama” with some of the girls in the class, tensions going all the way back to middle school and the times she lived on the streets. I had noted that she rarely interacted with other girls in the class and was slowly learning why. By “forgetting” to bring in this artifact, she preferred to get a zero on an assignment (not an easy choice for her) rather than risk sharing something that might raise an objection or lead to drama with other students.

The guided writing assignment was the other class-based activity Alejandra did not fully participate in. Described in more detail in the previous chapter, the guided writing activity involved students responding to a series of prompts designed to help them select an authentic question to later use for their Touchstone Text. Other than Alejandra, every student in class was very engaged with this activity. The students stayed on task the entire time, did not participate in social or off-topic talk, and the majority would later cite the activity as their favorite
experience of the class that semester. Alejandra, on the other hand, gave incomplete answers to the prompts, but also was working on her Spanish homework and tried to joke with Tre who was sitting next to her. The scene was bizarre, Alejandra behaved the way the rest of the class often did, and they were trying to block her out so they could focus, enacting what was normally her dilemma.

In our final interview, when Alejandra discussed her reflection on the semester, she cited reading the book as her favorite activity and that assignments encouraging her think about her life were those she disliked: “I just don’t like to write about myself, it feels fake, like I’m writing a resume or something” (Alejandra, interview, February 14, 2013). Her resistance to thinking about the “self” as she engaged in learning activities seemed motivate by three factors: not feeling safe in the classroom to take social or emotional risks, feeling competent as someone who could earn good grades without investing personally in the work, and holding a belief about herself as “already grown up”.

The one exception to Alejandra’s resistance to using literacy as an identity resource was the Touchstone Text final. Initially she was anxious about doing the assignment, asking, “wait, does this HAVE to be about my life?” (Alejandra, interview, November 20, 2012). After learning that she could explore a topic meaningful to her without exposing personal aspects of her life, she managed to find a way to present on a topic that protected her, while also offering a space to be reflective about her life. She created a very artistic and polished scrapbook as her final project that provided a historical treatment of the laws around interracial marriage, that considered the moral and ethical debates about interracial love, showed statistical information about the numbers of interracial couples by state, and that included interviews with family members who were strongly opposed to the idea. Alejandra had been in interracial relationships herself, making this issue personal for her as well as for others in the classroom (such as Andrea and Amari who paid close attention). Beyond this obvious connection, Alejandra was also occupied with thoughts about other debates around romantic couples. At the time of this study, the state of California was hotly debating gay marriage, potentially providing Alejandra with an opportunity to interview her family about interracial marriage as a sort of litmus test for talking with them about her bisexuality. The scrapbook she crafted, which went above and beyond meeting the expectations for an A and showed her personality and care for her work, was a project that she shared with the whole class. In this regard, the scrapbook seemed to be an engagement with literacy activities that provided identity resources for the self. In our final interview, she stated that she selected the topic because she had only been in interracial relationships, that her parents had never approved, and she wanted to try and better understand their perspective. She included that she felt anxious about other final exams, particularly her AP Spanish class, so she decided making a scrapbook would be a reprieve from her stress, and that it was easy and fun for her.

Alejandra excelled at being the person she believed others wanted her to be. She played the role of the high achieving student in school, managed to avoid drama with girls in the school who clearly do not like her, and she approached each learning task as an item to mark off her to-do list. Even in interviews with me, she seemed eager to say what she imagined I hoped to hear, as opposed to being
completely candid to the extent that her peers were. At home, she played the princess role, went to church, and sang in the choir. She viewed her family as being prejudice and narrow minded about race, gender and sexuality. However, her bisexuality and strongly identification with many of her friends from diverse backgrounds also define her. She spent almost a year on the streets, couch surfing, doing drugs, almost committing suicide – all to avoid an oppressive home life. I would argue that asking her parents about interracial couples and then sharing those views with the class was an example of boundary crossing for her various identities. The topic, and iterations of the issue, held meaning for Alejandra but rather than simply turn in the scrapbook (which was her prerogative) she stood in front of the class, flipped through the pages, and discussed each entry. Given her tenuous social standing in the class – the sharing of this piece took more courage than she may have wanted to admit.

**Andrea remixes literacy to suit her needs.** Andrea was happy to inform anyone willing to listen that she did not like school and did not read. She refused to engage in any academic work she felt was not useful to her, but also wanted to graduate, so she did her best to do as little as possible to get by. At the same time, Andrea clearly enjoyed school. She enjoyed seeing her friends in school, Rose and one or two other teachers, and she liked all the attention that she received. Her attendance was nearly perfect, and she would often remain at school once the day was done. Some assignments, such as Socratic Seminars, the guided writing activity, and the classroom visit by local Native American activist Mark Anquea, revealed an Andrea who was highly engaged and academically strong when she choose to. One tactic that Andrea often used in class to avoid doing work was “playing” at being ignorant about the work that was assigned. Given Rose’s belief about the lower skilled students inability to handle grade level work, she was susceptible to Andrea’s ruse. Unlike both Cat and Alejandra, whose resistance to using literacy as a resource for identity work was partly due to the classroom context, Andrea’s resistance stemmed from her social standing in the class, a stubborn refusal to engage academically, and from a history of seeing school as an oppressive force in her life.

Asking Andrea about what she enjoys about reading or writing tends to lead to exchanges such as the one we had in our final interview after the study was complete:

    TJ: This semester you are reading a new book, *The Things They Carried* (O’Brien, 1990), how is that going?
    An: The what?
    TJ: *The Things They Carried*? About the Vietnam war.
    An: That’s what it’s called?
    TJ: Yes, I believe so.
    An: I don’t read so I don’t know.
    TJ: Really, you have not read it all?
    An: Maybe some parts of it.
    TJ: How would you compare it to the Alexie novel?
    An: I wouldn’t compare it.
TJ: Well, is there one you prefer, or aspects one you prefer more than the other?

In our first interview, Andrea mentioned one literacy experience in school she enjoyed and that she still practiced. In the 9th grade she was motivated by what she described as an excellent teacher and a poetry unit that hooked her. She also added that since the class, poetry has continued to be a resource for her.

TJ: Do you still write poetry?
An: Yes.

TJ: Do you write for classes at all or more for yourself?
An: No, when I am bothered or something I write about it and smoke or whatever.

TJ: Did you write poetry before your English class or is that when you started?
An: No, I got into it then.

TJ: Do you share your poetry with anyone?
An: Yes, like I share it with my brother, he calls me from lock up, I read it to him and he shares stuff with me -cause he writes poetry in there and we write for each other.

TJ: How do you feel about your brother being in lock up and sharing the poetry and connecting with you that way? What do you feel after?
An: I get hella mad. Cause he’s in (name of city Andrea lives in) and it’s not like he’s hella far. He’s right there and I can’t see him, hug, touch him, or nothing, you know? (Andrea, interview, October 16, 2012)

Another literacy activity Andrea excelled in was discussing the ideas both found and generated in ELA classrooms. She tended to dominate Socratic seminars, despite having not done the reading, and enjoyed loudly challenging the comments or opinions of others in the class during informal discussions. One such Socratic included a very rich discussion about the double standards that Latino boy and Latina girls have in the home. The girls in the discussion complained that in their culture, boys are free to stay out late, they can date girls, are not asked to do chores; whereas girls must learn to tend to the house, take care of younger siblings, and cannot go out with friends or date anyone. Andrea spearheaded this debate that pitted some of the Latino boys in the class against the Latinas, and the boys never had a chance. For Andrea, debating issues such as these (i.e. issues around race, sexuality, youth culture, education) were one of the few academic activities that Andrea seemed to enjoy and when she was engaged in these discussions her intelligence and thoughtfulness stood out. In spite of her obvious skills in this regard, she rarely applied these events to the figured world of her academic experience. When asked about her favorite memories from the semester she insisted the only positive memory experience was, “Arguing with you and (Rose)” (Andrea, interview, February 14, 2013). It was as if Andrea, who could excel in school, had too much of her identity invested in harboring resentment towards academics.
Despite these examples of resistance to schooling, and influenced by her wish to graduate, Andrea completed the Touchstone Text final. Initially, she firmly stated that she not going to participate. While we worked on the project in class leading up to the final, she toyed with the idea of doing a presentation on what it meant to be “true to yourself,” but with minimal effort. I did not expect her to have anything ready on the day of the final, so I was both excited and impressed when she shared a manifesto of sorts on being in love, and more specifically, about the people who disapproved of her relationship with her boyfriend. Andrea read parts of the four-page letter with the class. In typical Andrea fashion, what she submitted was not reflective of the specific assignment, but a “remix” wherein she made the work her own and by extension, met the spirit, if not the letter, of the Touchstone Text. Clearly a very personal piece, her personality was evident throughout, and it was obviously written as an emotional response to her life at the time. In our final interview she reflected on her Touchstone Text:

An: It’s an essay about love. I don’t know. Love is like a real important thing in everybody’s life, that’s why I wrote about it. Um, I just, have a lot to say about it. Like, everybody says, when you’re a kid, “oh, like, you’re too young to fall in love or whatever”. I don’t believe in that, cause, like you have love in you – its there. So um, its there. And it’s a horrible, a beautiful and a horrible thing at the same time. Because it could help you but it could like really hurt you.

TJ: How was it writing this?
An: It was frustrating.
TJ: Why?
An: Because I didn’t know what to write. I didn’t know how to say what I felt into words because I never really had to.
TJ: Well, you did it, and you wrote it and you have a lot of ideas in there. It’s sort of a stream of consciousness about love.
An: Yeah.
TJ: And, what did you learn in the process of writing this?
An: I learned that I love strong. Like, I love hard. I wouldn’t just to say it just to say it. If I say it I mean it. But, it could go away like that. Like if I say I love you I mean it but if you take it for granted then you don’t got it no more.
TJ: Why did you choose this as a topic? Towards the end it seemed like you were considering some other topics...
An: Um, because, at the time I had a whole lot of people telling me I didn’t know what love was.
TJ: So, people outside of the class?
An: Yeah, and I was like, that’s bullshit. I do know, you know what I mean? You can’t tell me what I know and what I don’t know. So then I just decided to write about it.
TJ: So, you were motivated by things that were going on in your life at the time?
An: Yup.
In taking that motivation, taking that frustration of people trying to
tell you about what you know and don’t know, do you see this piece as
a good way of responding to the critics?

Yeah. I mean the people that was criticizing, that was saying stuff, they
didn’t read this letter. They didn’t really need to see this.

Do you want to share it with them?

No.

Why not?

They could just sit there and hate. I mean, maybe I could share it with
them later on. (Andrea, February 14, 2013)

Andrea’s completion of the Touchstone Text final, albeit in her own way,
suggests a willingness to experiment with literacy for this purpose. In fact, her
choice to pick a different topic close to the deadline and to repurpose the directions
so that the assignment served as a way to deal with a very real challenge she was
faced with at the time – speaks directly to the goals inherent in the Touchstone Text
final and to the problems this research hopes to address. Students like Andrea, who
feel disconnected from instruction in schools, often struggle to leverage the
instruction school offers to develop academic identities or counter narratives of self
they might access to strengthen their resolve in future academic contexts such as
college. Andrea’s agentic stance of carving out a way to participate in the final
project on her own terms is an illustration of using literacy as a resource for identity
work. Andrea’s writing served as a narrative, one she produced, despite it being a
frustrating process because she “didn’t know how to say what I felt into words
because I never really had to”. Her process of producing this narrative, using the
writing process, gave rise to feelings of dissonance that led to her learning more
about herself. She gained insights into her own capacity to love (she “loves hard”).
Like the poems that she wrote to her brother who was in prison, she benefitted from
writing and sharing the letter/manifesto on love as a tool for healing. As someone
who struggles to manage her anger, she also learned that she could process her
emotions through writing, and avoid conflict with others.

In a sense, Andrea can be characterized as the anti-Alejandra. Andrea only
did work when she viewed the content as relevant to her life, which meant
infrequently. Alejandra did almost all of her work, but resisted work that asked her
to share or reflect directly about her own life. Alejandra closely followed directions
and studied the rubrics in order to earn high grades, Andrea elected to revise the
final project to her own liking and turned in something personal and meaningful.
Andrea was popular and enjoyed being the social focus in class, while also being
both very close to and combative with Rose. Alejandra did not feel safe to be herself
or be social in class, and kept her relationship with Rose as a traditional teacher-
student dynamic. An important shared characteristic both Andrea and Alejandra
enjoyed, relevant to this research, was the obvious self confidence and comfort with
themselves that contributed to their unwillingness to use literacy-based resources
to “author the self” to the extent that the other participants did.
Discussion

This chapter has explored how participants accessed literacy as a resource for identity work. In particular, it considers what types of engagements are necessary for the literacy resources to be not only sources of learning, but also can serve purposeful identity work. Given the problems this research hopes to address, I was interested in noting the ways that identity work involved developing agency, a critical lens towards marginalizing discourses, and the emergence of enduring counter-narratives of self. While all of the students, to varying degrees, participated in the assignments and learned from the material, only Carlos and Jeffrey seemed to engage the materials in ways that suggested an intentional, or at least an outwardly enthusiastic, process of identity construction.

Unlike Carlos and Jeffrey, the touchstone trio did not have a strong connection to the primary literacy activity of the curriculum – reading the Alexie novel. Cat viewed the book as “beneath her” and grew resentful of her peers’ responses to it, Alejandra liked reading the book but read with an eye towards doing the accompanying work well, not to examine the narrative in light of her own emerging identity. Andrea began the book, but quickly grew bored, reading only sections of the book that she thought might be of use for completing other assignments. As discussed earlier, and additional reason the boys felt a connection the book the girls did not was because the protagonist of the book is an adolescent male going through a lot of the growing pains associated with being a teenage boy. Finally, and explored in greater depth in the following chapter, the positional identities in the local context of Rose’s class for each of these focus participants either supported (for Carlos and Jeffrey), or discouraged (for Cat, Andrea and Alejandra), engagements with the text as a literacy resource for identity work.
“I feel like I’m gonna be that person that SHINES!”
(Jeffrey, interview, November 12, 2102).

Chapter 5:
Positioning Events and Academic Identities

As discussed in the literature review in chapter one, English language arts classes in high schools are examples of figured worlds (Holland, et al. 1998). Figured worlds are socially constructed realities within institutions and are simultaneously enacted upon and restricted by historically formed notions of their constitution. Participants’ understanding of what it means to participate in an English Language Arts classroom reflected one layer of this figured world and what it means to participate as a student in Rose’s classroom offered an additional, localized layer. These shared understandings draw upon institutional elements that include, but are not limited to, an awareness that teachers are there to teach and students are there to learn, students occupy different roles within the class, academic activities involving literacy are expected, time will be bounded by the bell schedule as well as an additional time scale involving weekends and holidays and so forth, attendance is mandatory, and local, state and government forces shape the curriculum employed. The additional layer of Rose’s classroom includes details discussed in chapter three on the classroom’s academic identity (i.e. non-competitive, social, relaxed discipline norms), while also carrying social and cultural markers of being part of a poorly funded public school in a high poverty region of a major city (i.e. limited resources, high teacher turnover, limited family involvement). All of these various factors both shaped the figured world of Rose’s classroom and contributed in offering roles for students to “take up” in the classroom. In figured worlds, people come to produce or reproduce roles that they recognize and are recognized by others as constituting their identity (Holland et. al, 1998). With this theoretical backdrop, this chapter considers how participants were positioned in Rose’s ELA class in ways that filled particular roles. Additionally, it considers how the positioning supported, or disrupted, an already fragile academic identity.

Holland et al.’s (1998) socio-cultural practice theory of self focuses attention on “figured worlds as sites of potential agency” (p. 40). Jeffrey’s quote which begins this chapter, that he intends to be a “person that SHINES”, was inspired by the Arnold, the protagonist of the Alexie novel. Jeffrey spoke of the adversities that Arnold overcame, and as he read about these accomplishments, he grew determined to overcome some of his own challenges. That Arnold was a fictional character and his successes were relative to the realities of the reservation context and the Native American experience was irrelevant to Jeffrey. While his agentive statement is laudable, certain institutional and personal realities are not simply eclipsed by hard work. As imagined social realities, figured worlds are situated within institutions mediated by relations of power. Because figured worlds are populated with socially imagined roles, the identity and agency of individuals form dialogically and dialectically within them-through struggle, tension, and internally driven give and take. Therefore, both the agentive promise and the
restrictive, or marginalizing, realities that positioning presents matter when considering how academic identities are constructed. It is this paradoxical point of possibility that is explored through the findings presented in this chapter.

Presented in this chapter are vignettes that reflect how five participants, Tre, Cat, Alejandra, Andrea, and Carlos, experienced positioning in Rose’s classroom. The vignettes consist of an amalgamation of multiple observations or of one emblematic episode illustrating how the participant usually behaved, spoke, was treated, engaged with others, their physical appearance; in short, the ways in which one is positioned and ways in which one positions the self. Each vignette is followed by narrative descriptions or a detailed account of what I refer to as a positioning event. Positioning events serve either to further sediment or evoke tremors to the positional identities of participants that are illustrated in the vignettes. At times the positioning events occurred in shorter time frames but they also could extend over longer time frames. Following the descriptions of the positioning events are analysis and discussion sections for each case. Three cases make up the first section, Solidifying Fixed Identities, and involve Tre, Alejandra, and Cat, wherein each case discussed illustrated how familiar positional identities were further sedimented by a positioning event. The fourth and fifth cases, involving Andrea and then Carlos, make up the second section, titled Disrupting Fixed Identities. These two offer examples of positioning events that served to interrupt narratives of self that suggested a fixed view of identity. It is important to name upfront that the first three cases, wherein identities are sedimented by repeated positionings or by a particular event, is a more common phenomenon than cases where students become positioned in way that seem to provide new identities or disrupt positionalities as described in the cases of Andrea and Carlos. Building upon the previous chapters discussion of the fragile academic identity of the classroom, and the potential for literacy narratives and practices to be taken up as identity resources, this chapter considers how students were positioned in the classroom. In particular, what positioning events might accelerate the sedimentation process of a positioned self, or alternatively, cause tremors or even quakes, to student’s positional identities?

Positioning events might also be thought of as the experience of being positioned in manner that carries personal significance, such that an individual might single out the event as being salient for one’s own identity formation. To explore the impact of memorable positioning events, when possible, reflections on the event from the participant’s point of view are included. The events reflect an array of forces that serve to position: Tre is positioned by a peer, Alejandra by an institution, Cat by her choices on an academic assignment, Andrea by an academic achievement, and Carlos by first the teacher and later, by his peers. Finally, I close with an analysis of what can be learned from these five very different ways in which the students were positioned during these events.

Solidifying Fixed Identities

The Trouble With Tre

An early focal participant, I later dropped Tre when he left the school a few weeks before the end of the semester. Tre was a popular student with a quick wit
and charming demeanor, and he was also new to the school and had a troubled history related to issues of poverty, family, drug abuse and crime. Students in the class seemed both intrigued and a bit wary of him. As discussed in earlier chapters, Tre rarely did academic work and while he participated in class work at times, he did so infrequently and with little investment. In our first interview Tre shared that he had a new daughter and was hoping to turn his life around, but saw school as an obstacle and was mandated by the court to have perfect attendance or risk violating his parole. The scenario described below, written to capture both the vignette and positioning event, occurred at an early point in the semester, when Tre was still capable of passing the class.

**Tre’s Vignette.** It was one of the longer 90-minute class blocks, and Tre was having a difficult day from the start. Early in class, Tre lay down across two seats and loudly stated, “Man, this is too much, I ain’t doing this shit,” as Rose handed out a two page document explaining the final essay assignment responding to *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972). Tre pushed aside the directions and the outline template and did not look at them again. Later, he reluctantly joined a circle of chairs for a Socratic Seminar along with nine other students. To prepare for the discussion, students were given a handout with quotations from the book. For each quotation, students were asked to write both a comprehension and an analytical response. Tre tossed his handout with the quotations, his journal, and the book on the floor in front of him with a loud smack. The only part of the handout he had completed was putting his name on it. He then buried his head in his hands with his face directed towards the floor. The hood on his black North Face jacket was tightly closed with the string drawn. He stayed very still like this; it was unclear if he was listening at all.

**Tre’s Positioning Event.** Six minutes into the Socratic Seminar, the student discussion leader sharply said, “Tre!” hoping to get his view on the quotation under discussion. Tre jerked his head up as if he had been awoken, leading to some stifled laughter by the other students. Normally quiet during Socratic seminars so that students could lead and construct the ideas in the discussion, Rose stepped in for the first time in this particular seminar. After the laughter died down, she calmly asked Tre for his thoughts on a quotation in the novel that discussed the tension between believing in a Catholic God while also believing in an indigenous god, the Golden Carp. Tre asked a few questions that helped him grasp the content of the quote – questions that were essential because he had not read the book. Tre hesitantly began to provide an analysis of the Golden Carp and the Catholic God as being “like the two fishies, the black and the white one, that like, need to be floating around each other?” Cat, who was sitting next to him, said, “Yeah, like the Yin-Yang thing.” Tre seemed emboldened by Cat’s affirming recognition. “Yes – that whole Yin Yang fish thing – its like that – “. Before he could finish his thought, Amari interrupted, saying, “That’s just a joke, Tre is just joking.” In that moment, Tre’s face seems to quickly change twice – from disappointment to resignation. With all eyes on him, Tre quickly elected to acquiesce, giving his “who me?” smile. Tre then laughed, and the class laughed with him. Rose moved on to get perspectives from
other students (Socratic Seminar, October 16, 2012).

But it was not a joke. It was Tre’s one thoughtful, analytic connection he would attempt to make in the twenty-five minute Socratic, and one of the few he would make that semester. The Yin-yang concept could have been a promising line of inquiry as a way to analyze the novel because the main character finds balance in his life by learning to embrace both belief systems. Since students viewed Tre’s comment as a joke, this idea was not pursued. Tre put his head back in his hands and, for the rest of the seminar, was silent.

Positioning events are those in which an individual is positioned in a way that either ruptures, or, in cases like Tre’s, serves to further sediment positional identities. Tre’s identity as a “jokester” and as someone who does little to no academic work played a significant role in the series of events described above. His effort to participate in class and to “try on” an academic identity was thwarted not by the teacher or the school but by peers who genuinely liked and cared for him. Tre did little to help his cause by simply repositioning himself as the “jokester” and acquiescing to being reminded of his role. However, given how disengaged Tre was on a daily basis in the class, it also seemed that a valuable opportunity was lost. Like many other students who do not engage in reading and writing assignments, the Socratic Seminar was one of a few spaces left where Tre might engage in academic activities and use his strong verbal skills to share his thinking with others.

Amari and Tre were not good friends, but as two handsome, popular, black young men in the school they seemed to respect one another even though they belonged to different social peer groups. Amari enjoyed his positioning in the class as being the most academically talented and skilled black student. Amari was Andrea’s boyfriend and the two often sat together and cuddled or held hands, and often joked around. Amari, at times, gave his work to Andrea to copy. Unlike Andrea, Amari carried less resentment towards school and displayed confidence about his academic abilities. Rose described him as a student for whom school came easily and that he tended to “do his work in a quick and sloppy manner and settle for Cs and Bs when just a bit more patience and thoughtfulness would earn him A’s on most of his work” (Rose, interview, October 5, 2012). According to the initial survey done at the beginning of the study, Amari was one of two students who had a parent who had graduated from college.

**Discussion.** As chapter three shows, Rose’s class did not have an academically competitive culture that permeated daily interactions. Students generally cheered one another on or at least gave lukewarm support when academic accomplishments occurred. Competition amongst the students, in the relatively few moments that it was felt in the class, seemed to involve jealousy over friendships, topping one another with humorous comments, and bragging about out of school sporting or social events. In light of this, Amari’s move to reposition Tre as the class clown merits examination as well. It is difficult to know what motivated Amari’s choice to silence Tre and reposition him during the Socratic seminar. Did he perhaps feel threatened that his own positioning was in jeopardy? Given his freedom to maintain his positioning despite putting in minimal effort, was he aware on some level that his positioning was tenuous and less the result of his own doing
and more a byproduct of this particular classroom’s collection of low-achievers? Perhaps he was irked that Tre, who had not read the book at all, was allowed to respond and was providing a pretty solid analysis while he, who had read, had not yet contributed much to the discussion. Regardless of his motive, his move re-established order in the figured world of this classroom where Tre was the resistant student and class clown and Amari was the promising young black male who was the most likely go on to college. In a class where the high achievers were a small contingent, perhaps Amari felt that only one black male could occupy such a positioning.

It would be naïve, and inaccurate, to suggest that had Tre’s thoughtful comment been taken up that he would have somehow been “transformed” by the experience. At the same time, it may have been an event that could have paved the way for future positioning events that could have transformative effects – as Carlos’s case later in this chapter illustrates. However, the entire episode served as a positioning event for Tre in two ways. First, for Tre to even entertain the decision to take an academic activity seriously, especially in a moment where all eyes were upon him (normally the conditions for an attempt at humor) Tre must have wanted to use this space – where his verbal skills would be rewarded – to challenge the resistant student positioning he’d been associated with in all of his years of schooling. Recall that after this Socratic, Tre never once made another effort to contribute in an academic manner to a discussion. I was left asking, had his line of analysis been taken up, would this have helped Tre be more engaged in the book and the class on the whole? How might it have affected Tre’s perception of himself as a student? How might it have affected the Rose’s view of Tre? Perhaps the answers to these questions are “not much”, but in not taking up his contribution, the moment repositioned Tre such that he, and his peers and teacher, were unable to imagine Tre as much more beyond a jokester and a resistant student. Second, the moment served as a positioning event because the force that repositioned Tre was his peer, Amari. Amari and Tre had previously been positioned in ways that were, academically, occupying very different roles in the figured world of Rose’s classroom. Tre was reminded of this “natural order” by Amari’s interruption. Also reminded were the teacher and other students as exhibited by their quick acceptance of Tre being cut off because that served to match their understanding of the “figured world” of Rose’s classroom.

**Cat Constructs The Self**

**Cat’s Vignette.** Even when centrally located in the room, Cat managed to sit off to the side, bundled up in an oversized sweater, easily overlooked. Postured thus as a result of her self-described “wallflower” status, of other students choice to ignore her, and also because she was very self-conscious being in the same room as the “stupid boy” she was in love with. If Cat talked at all in class, it was very quietly and with Rose or with one of three less threatening boys - Jeffrey, Johnny, and Jet. In this loud classroom, she was easily forgotten, which she seemed to prefer. She did her work on most days, but also spent much of class time daydreaming, looking out the window or doodling in her notebook while her fingers curled her red-streaked hair. At times, she was unexplainably upset; and when Rose and sometimes Jet tried
to console her, she usually refused their help. Rose was patient with Cat, letting Cat leave class when she needed to go see the counselor, a need that grew frequent as the semester wore on.

Cat’s Positioning Event. Cat struggled with an imagined disconnect between being herself (defined in her words as a wallflower, a poet, an artist) and being Latina. One of the objectives of the Alexie curriculum was to introduce students to notions of identity as being multiple, in flux, contextualized, and developed in practice. The hope was that students like Cat would learn to resist narratives of self that saw identities as fixed and limited potential trajectories of becoming.

In an activity tied to reading Sherman Alexie’s young adult novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, students constructed an identity chart to analyze the protagonist, Arnold, and his different identities. Students were introduced to James Gee’s (2000) construct of four different parts of identity and his claim that most of what we think of as making up an identity fall into one of these four areas. The areas include a notion of identity as the result of genetics (nature), the result of belonging to a prescribed grouping (institutional), the result of behaviors and personality (discursive), or the result of having particular interests or memberships to particular communities of practice (affinity). During a brainstorming activity, students determined that Arnold’s nature identity included his birth defects, his hair and skin color being particular shades of brown, being a younger brother, and being skinny and tall with big feet. They viewed his institutional identity as carrying the label “Indian”, as living in poverty, being a student, being seen as a mascot or savage at his White School and as an “apple” on the reservation. In addition, Arnold’s personality—being seen as smart, awkward, funny, and very earnest, all reflected his discursive identity. Finally, the students noted that Arnold’s participation on the basketball team, his passion for books and comics, and his friendship with Rowdy and sense of belonging to the reservation all revealed parts of his affinity identity.

Next, the participants created similar charts for themselves, and included on the charts identities and characteristics they hoped to have in ten to twenty years.
Cat’s identity chart (note that her name was manually changed by me to Cat).

Cat’s choices for how she identified herself within Gee’s framework was illustrative of how she was positioned, and positioned herself, in multiple ways. Cat is Latina, her mother and father are both of Mexican descent, and yet these aspects
of her identity are not on the chart. Instead, Cat elects to refer to herself as “white” because she is both referred to as white by her peers and she makes efforts (in her appearance, interests, manner of speaking) to distance herself from Latina cultural markers. Her name is also meaningful to her. While Cat serves as her pseudonym for this study, her actual name is French in origin, is very unusual, and is something she sees as appropriate given the self-described “weird, wallflower, artist” status she claimed.

Her choice to use the term wallflower offers an example of how literature has the potential to provide students with additional narratives to author the self. Cat’s favorite book was Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky, 1999), a story about a young man who, like Cat, is an outsider, is not socially savvy, and is shy and introspective. Also like Cat, he is a junior in High school who exhibits feelings of disconnect from the teens that surround him. Recall that in the previous chapter, Cat wrote about the book in her literacy biography, saying that it “expanded my mind like no other book has before” (Cat, literacy biography). Cat’s notes about her imagined future reflect a sense of agency associated with being a teacher, an artist, or an actress, professions that Cat believed would require her to be serious rather than silly, and professional rather than weird. Even her drawings all over the paper can be seen as an identity display through her abstract, playful images that enhance her worksheet through her art.

Discussion. While positioning is generally thought of as the subjective product that emerges in and through social interactions with others, examining student work offers an additional context in which to examine how positioning can occur in classrooms. Recall that in the previous chapter students engaged literacy activities that allowed them to explore and exhibit aspects of their identities still forming or previously not displayed in an academic context. Cat read her poetry to the class and the result was therapeutic. Jeffrey revealed to the class his struggles with racism and how he was developing a more critical perspective. Andrea remixed an academic assignment to meet an authentic desire to voice her views on young love. Alejandra explored non-traditional romantic relationships and in doing so, traversed her own complex identities. Finally, Carlos showed uncharacteristic vulnerability in revealing his own family problems to the class with his assignment on what constituted healthy families. In each of these examples, participants used their academic work to disrupt positioned selves (as disengaged for Andrea, as “too shy” for Cat, as naïve for Jeffrey, as the “good girl” for Alejandra, and as machismo for Carlos) and as a space to reimagine and publicly display a more complex identity.

Cat’s completion of her identity chart provided her with an academic activity to articulate her own process of authoring the self, crafted through an array of available narratives, including terms derisively applied to her by others (white), adopted literary narratives (wallflower), and from an imagined future (art teacher, actress). Nested within her selected monikers for self were authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, and reveals the complex process of ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981) which adolescents, given their stage of development, experience to a heightened degree. Given the space for dissonance that this
assignment supports, one can imagine students treating it as a positioning event in ways that can not only solidify an identity, but also serve to re-imagine the self in ways that disrupt identities. With regards to ethnicity, Cat repositioned her subjective position by listing white as part of her institutional identity and through her omission of her Latina and Mexican heritage. Had Cat included her Latina heritage, while still maintaining her artistic and wallflower status, it might reveal a tremor to her self-concept, appropriated from social constructions of identity made available to her, that viewed “white” as somehow synonymous with her affinity and discursive identities.

Alejandra the Achiever

Alejandra’s Vignette. While Cat seemed to slouch in her seat or had her head on the table, Alejandra could be seen sitting at attention with all of her materials (book, notebook, pencil) laid out neatly in front of her. Alejandra was also generally quiet in class, but would contribute to academic talk because she took pride in being a strong student. She shared her views on the readings, responded to teacher directed prompts, and was an active participant. However, because she had a history of “drama” with some of the girls in the class, tensions that went all the way back to middle school, she was not very social with others in the class. Alejandra was social with one person however: Tre. The class clown who rarely did any work and the most studious and motivated student made an odd pair. Yet they clearly enjoyed one another, the two spent class time flirting and joking around, and Alejandra enjoyed encouraging Tre and helping him with his work. Rose came to rely on Alejandra to help Tre be less disruptive and to have his need for attention satisfied by her company.

Alejandra’s Positioning Event. The event that served to position Alejandra did not occur during the study, but was actually revealed in a story she shared in our first interview. She described herself as a strong student and as capable of doing well in school. Given that most students in the study did not speak of themselves in positive terms when it came to academics, I wondered what Alejandra identified as being integral in supporting this view she held about her scholarly self. Alejandra described a generative event that fueled her motivation and confidence as a student that occurred during her early middle school years. Apparently, because of her strong performance in school, her parents received a letter from an authoritative source lauding her academic prowess.

Al: I never saw this letter but my parents said I received a letter from congress or the mayor or something saying they were going to like, that I had a real high, I don’t know what you call it - that I had like high test scores. That they were going to keep an eye on me. That they were real proud.

TJ: Your parents were proud?

Al: No, the government! I think it was the mayor - I don’t know, I’m going to ask them.

TJ: But you never saw this letter.
As many of the participants, my first chance to get to know Alejandra was with the initial survey she completed. Alejandra wrote, when asked about her identity, that she had a grade point average of 4.3. Throughout the survey she was one of a few students that spoke in positive terms about school, reading, and writing. The surveyed showed her as proud of her academic potential, inspiring her desire to become a pediatrician someday.

**Discussion.** As discussed in the earlier findings chapters, Alejandra was good at the “game of school” and appreciated knowing the rules and knowing she was capable of earning high grades. She seemed unflappable with regards to her focus on doing well in school, which for her meant she would enjoy her future, and this focus helped her to avoid the social drama and conflicts most of the other participants seemed to attend to daily. As Alejandra participated in the Alexie curriculum, she was less interested in thinking about her own identity, in pursuing authentic questions, or in using the novel as a literacy based resource for identity development as her peers were. Having found success and earned recognition from the aforementioned letter, Alejandra was less motivated to pursue learning opportunities that seemed outside of the boundaries of the authoritative discourses of the academic domain.
Finally, given that all discourses are implicated in and imbued with power relations, positioning events inherently require some powerful agent for the event to have any salience. Alejandra never witnessed the letter sent to her from “the government” that expressed pride in her academic progress. But her awareness of the letter sufficed to position Alejandra as someone who did well in school. This omnipresent authoritative voice had, for Alejandra, wielded legitimacy and implications of future promise that she had not known from her parents or everyday experiences with school.

**Disrupting Fixed Identities**

**Andrea’s Academic Achievement**

**Andrea’s Vignette.** Wearing pajama bottom pants and a T-shirt pronouncing, “Blind to the Haters”, a new pair of powder blue Air Jordans, and with her dark hair pulled back, Andrea stood in the doorway peeling an orange while the class did the assigned warm-up. After three requests from Rose, Andrea returned to her seat and began flirting with her boyfriend Amari, drawing something on his hand and cuddling closely with him. Rose was reviewing the directions on a handout placed on the tables during the warm-up. As she reviewed the directions she stopped often to explain, offered examples, answered questions, and made notes on the board to aid comprehension. Once she was finished and told them to get started, Andrea, who had not once looked at the handout, suddenly pulled away from Amari and yelled “Wait – what do we gotta do!” (Andrea, in-class comment, December 11, 2012).

Andrea was capable of doing as well in school as she would like. She has a quick mind, is very articulate, and when motivated, is extremely thoughtful. However, because she sees herself as not caring about school or having any interest in what school offers, she often feigns both ignorance and indifference towards her academics. One consequence of this choice was that she developed a habit of giving up before making much of an effort. When Andrea struggled with an assignment she either looked for a way out of it (usually by causing a distraction), looked for an easy solution (often copying Amari’s work), completed only a small portion of the work, or simply gave up. At the same time, as the following excerpt from our second interview shows, Andrea acts as if these choices were perfectly reasonable given her firm stance of doing only what she wants.

**TJ:** Sometimes when it comes to the academics you come down hard on yourself. You seem to give up easily. Is that correct?

**An:** Cause if I don’t get it then I don’t get it. You know what I mean? Like, if I don’t get it then I’ma be like, “I don’t get this!” You know what I mean? But if I get it, its gonna be done like thab. (snaps fingers). But if I don’t get it than I’ma just sit there like, questioning myself, like, “OK, I need to figure it out”. And I just sit there and be like, whatever.

**TJ:** When you don’t get it, when it’s hard, why don’t you really work at it until you get it?

**An:** Because some things aren’t important to me. I don’t find them interesting and then I don’t want to do it.

(Andrea, interview, November 19, 2012)
Andrea, and others in the Distracters group, often avoided work by asking questions of Rose that they already knew the answers to. By engaging Rose in talk about the assignment, they’ve learned that she will go out of her way to make sure students all understand the work. In doing so, they’ve also learned that one benefit is that class time will pass before they need to get work done. Often, the repetition of directions became so frequent that time spent explaining the work would last longer than time spent actually doing the work. The following exchange, and my reflective notes, captures this tendency.

While reviewing direction for the final project, Rose reminds Andrea that if she doesn’t pay attention she won’t know what to do. Andrea responds with, “Yeah, I will, cause you gonna help me with it later.” At one point the directions states that five sources of evidence are needed to support the student’s ideas. As Rose lists examples of evidence on the board, suddenly Andrea looks up and loudly and quickly says, “What five what five what five?” in a manner that stops Rose from her examples and forces her to return to the assignment sheet to re-read that section of the directions.

After the assignment was explained and students began to do the work, Andrea kept yelling – “I don’t get it”. Rose took the time to explain it for what seemed like the tenth time. Earlier, Andrea had lost the assignment sheet and Rose gave her the teacher copy. So, Andrea had the directions but did not bother to read them. Eventually, Rose goes over to help Andrea and they come up with a plan, they then celebrate this plan with a high five. (Observation notes, October 18, 2012)

**Andrea’s Positioning Event.** For major assignments, Rose has a policy of allowing students to redo the work until they get a grade they are pleased with. Rose and Andrea are very close, and during lunches and often afterschool, Andrea could be found often hanging out in Rose’s class with her friends, but also chatting socially with Rose and on a few occasions, getting academic help. The final project for the BMU curriculum involved a five-paragraph essay analyzing the symbolism of the Golden Carp. Andrea’s first effort on the essay did not earn a passing grade and so Rose worked with her on the essay, outside of class time, to improve it and raise the grade. She pointed out what was needed to improve the essay by referencing the rubric and then allowed Andrea time to revise it. Andrea turned the paper in on the last day allowed for a makeup assignment, and she ended up earning a B on the final paper.

When Andrea earned a high grade on the final version, and therefore avoided the likelihood that she would fail at the end of the first semester, Andrea shouted with delight and gave Rose a big hug. In Andrea fashion, her celebration dominated the classroom and served to distract others. When she was dancing on the tops of the tables, Rose finally had enough and told her to settle down. Later in the class, Andrea’s positive academic self seemed to continue as she organized and finished work from another class and said aloud, “I’m about to get me a B in this Chemistry class!” (Andrea, in-class comment, November 9, 2012).
During our debrief after class, Rose excitedly shared how impressed she'd been by Andrea’s final version of the BMU essay, saying that “it was the finest work she had done” (Rose, post-class comment, November 9, 2012). For Rose, seeing Andrea feeling positive about an academic achievement was the beginning of breaking through Andrea’s resistant facade. Never lacking in confidence or self-assuredness, these strengths were derived from being tough, being popular, and being outspoken. In addition, the rest of the class saw her celebrating an academic achievement – and because she was a lightning rod for the class – I would contend that it helped to enhance the classroom’s academic identity as group. Previously, she cared about passing classes so she could get school over with, but in this case, she cared about her academic performance because of what it meant for her as a learner – and this distinction was crucial for strengthening her academic identity.

**Discussion.** While this positioning event, moving from identity displays that position Andrea as someone who does not care about academics to displays of celebrating an academic achievement was noteworthy, it did not last. As quickly as the next class session, Andrea reverted back to feigning ignorance to avoid work, expressing irritation at being asked to do something other than socialize, and expressing a lack of interest in the material. In addition, when I interviewed her soon after, Andrea’s own view of her achievement seemed to be changing. In the context of explaining to me why she worked on some assignments and not others, she shared the following, “Like my essay with Bless Me Ultima or whatever. I got a frigging B on it. It was simple. I didn’t even read the book. (laughs) But I still gotta B on it. You know, like, if I get it then I’ma get it” (Andrea, November 19, 2012).

What is interesting about this statement is that she seems to be diminishing her accomplishment just after experiencing such jubilation the week before. She said the work was easy for her, accomplished without reading the book, and that she just “got it”. However, this essay took multiple drafts, meetings with Rose for help, and more time and effort on Andrea’s part than she’d previously shown. Andrea struggled to redefine herself as a student because the academic identity she knew was an instantiation of the negative self-concepts that had been adopted from social constructions repeatedly and over time.

Returning to her initial response of joy towards her accomplishment offers an additional aspect of the fragile academic identity concept to consider. As discussed in the introduction, fragile not only implies unstable or delicate, but also fertile. Andrea responded with jubilation towards getting a B on a major assignment, and the novelty of this event was integral in her reaction. One might imagine that if it had been Alejandra who earned a B she might have been content, but certainly not joyous. What made this moment a positioning event was that it carried more meaning because she was publicly positioned in an unusual (for her) and academically positive way. This suggests that despite being 11th graders, with a very long history of being defined and categorized by school and other social and cultural forces as low skilled, as apathetic towards their own academics, and disengaged from schools, the participants in this study are still responsive to being positioned as capable and competent – in fact, this example suggests that they are hungry for it.
Carlos (Re)Considered as Reader

Carlos’ Vignette. Carlos sat towards the back of the class and was social with two friends from childhood, Benny and Joseph, who usually sat near him. The three were introduced in the first findings chapter as The Fellas, whose social interactions in class were often a source of amusement for the entire class and a distraction from academic work. Even on hot days, Carlos always wore his black Northface jacket, usually zipped up high and covering the lower part of his face. Carlos was often a target of gentle teasing from Rose, attention he clearly enjoyed. Usually her teasing was meant to encourage him to be more academically successful - commenting on his attendance challenges or efforts to feign doing class work. He’d often laugh about it and then get back on task, only to find himself off task again a few minutes later. The pattern would then repeat itself, and Carlos generally spent about half of class time being on task and half off. Carlos preferred to display himself as disinterested in the work rather than ask for help during class, electing instead to stop by after school or at lunch to get help from Rose.

At the start of the semester, during the Bless Me, Ultima curriculum, Carlos positioned himself as the happily resistant reader, in that he would find humorous ways to display his resistance to reading (such as making jokes during discussions of the book). This posture was rewarded with attention from his peers, but it also meant he was failing the class. On a survey about his literacy experiences, Carlos expressed that he rarely read books assigned in school and never read outside of school for pleasure other than gaming manuals and magazines. His peers enjoyed his sense of humor and it was apparent that his mere presence provided them with a modicum of confidence about their own fragile academic identities.

Carlos’ Positioning Event. Ironically, Carlos experienced a positioning event, or series of events, while absent from school. While home sick for a week, Carlos missed out on the early days of the Alexie curriculum. When Carlos returned to the class he discreetly mentioned to Rose and I that he had read the entire book in three days. Initially, I did not believe Carlos, given his history as someone who liked to joke around and who did little academic work. However, after answering a few questions about later sections in the novel, it was clear that Carlos had in fact read the entire book. Also evident was that given how well he could recall details and how quickly he had read, Carlos had read the book in an engaged manner (Ivey & Johnston, 2013) – an approach that was the topic for the day’s lesson.

In my role as co-teacher, I was giving a lecture that day on the importance of reading a novel in ways that allow for a deep engagement with the text and support the phenomenological transaction between a reader and a work of literary fiction. During the lecture, I provided an example of this sort of engaged reading by recognizing and celebrating Carlos as someone who had read the entire book in only a few days. The class reaction included incredulity and also applause. Carlos, however, jumped up and quickly denied having read the book, stating, “No! I didn’t read that book! I was just playing about that!” (Carlos, in-class comment, October 29, 2012). But his blushing and grin gave him away and he was clearly pleased that he had been singled out for this academic achievement. His friends in the class jokingly teased him about trying to deny it.
Over the next few weeks, Carlos would become seen as someone who other students could rely on to explain different parts of the book. When a student did not read, or could not remember a detail, Carlos was often approached for help before students asked the teacher. When the class broke up into teams to present on various literary elements in the book, Carlos was invaluable to his team because his fellow group members had either not read or only read sections of the book. Because the group was charged with providing a visual representation of the various elements in the plot structure, Carlos served as the resident expert on these elements in the novel.

In an interview three weeks after his positioning event of reading the entire book in three days, and after he’d enjoyed the recognition in class as an engaged reader, Carlos explained his initial resistance to being singled out for his achievement, saying, “because that’s not me” (Carlos, November 15, 2012). My follow up question was, “if that’s not you – who was that person in your house that read the book in just a few days?” Carlos responded with a smile and said he felt proud of that - adding that it was his first time he had read an entire book in such a short time and that while he read, he experienced a new sensation of being “lost in the book” (Carlos, November 15, 2012).

Carlos experienced a positioning event when he was recognized for being an engaged reader, a recognition that was both new to him and contrasted with his thickened positional identity as a non-reader. In and of itself, the positioning event was not enough for Carlos to reimagine himself as a reader (just as Andrea earning one B on one assignment did not suffice in significantly reshaping her academic identity). However, it was the first in a series of tremors that would eventually leave cracks in his familiar positioning as a non-reader. First, he was publicly recognized and celebrated in his classroom for being an engaged reader; second, he became the expert on the book – especially in small group settings; third, he stopped making jokes about being a non-reader and instead became a regular participant in both formal and informal literature discussions. Even after these moments of being positioned anew, Carlos needed a reminder of his accomplishment as described in the above interview exchange.

Carlos’ journey recalls Bakhtin’s notion of ideological becoming (1981) where multiple competing discourses created a sense of dissonance for him that contributed to an authoring of the self that included a more durable academic identity. Carlos rejected his comfortable and socially affirming status as the happy non-reader; and when given the chance to be reflexive about this move, saw his academic identity in a new light. As one might expect, Carlos continued to enjoy the role of being a class clown and a resistant reader at times, but this was complicated by his new identity as an engaged reader that was often present as well. Carlos earned a B in the class, and for the first time since entering high school, passed all of his classes that semester. In the following semester when the class was reading The Things They Carried (O’Brien, 1990), Carlos and I had our final interview where he shared that he wasn’t too excited about the book but that he, “knew he could read it because (he) read the Alexie book in three days” (Carlos, interview, February 14, 2013).


Discussion. Davies and Harré (1990), in their article that introduced the notion of positioning, spoke of “extensions of the significance of an attitude,” suggesting that the consequences of positioning is a relative phenomenon and that these consequences can be attributed to two sources- indexical extensions and typification extensions. Indexical extensions involve what Holland et al. (1998) refer to as history in persons, or how a person comes to internalize a positional identity over repeatedly being subjected to it. An example of an indexical extension would be Carlos’ familiarity and internalization of his non-reader identity. Typification extensions, on the other hand, involves the phenomenon of being positioned with an imposed attribute identity characteristic (Davies and Harré) that has consequences, such as being singled out for being an engaged reader as Carlos was.

Subject positions, or the discourse used in defining oneself in a specific context, interact with the process of being recognized by others through shared discourses that may or may not be consistent with how one views the self. In the above positioning events, participants faced either a reification of a familiar identity that served to add further laminations (Holland & Leander, 2004) or provoked a rupture to a thickened identity narrative (Wortham, 2004) in ways that supported a more durable academic identity. At the same time, as Carlos’ case demonstrates, this is a complex and layered process wherein a subject positioning is never fixed, as much as it is a negotiation through interactions with the storylines available in the local, socially contextualized, experiences of everyday lives.

Summary

This chapter explored the ways that participants became positioned into the various and limiting roles offered in the figured world of the classroom. Social and culturally enacted norms seemed instrumental with regards to how students were placed into particular roles. Tre’s case suggests that having been saddled with the role of “class clown” or “resistant student”, the burden is oppressive and resistant to change. One reason for this is that in classrooms with fragile academic identities, students such as Tre provide an endpoint for what disengaged and disruptive constitutes. In fact, students took solace (and found opportunity) in knowing that regardless of their behaviors and actions they would still likely fall short of that ignominious end point. In addition, in schools such as SBH, the imagined landscape of the classroom includes a limited number of “roles to fill” that involve high academic achievement. Tre’s attempt to “try on” the role of the engaged and analytically minded student met resistance by Amari, who already occupied one of these few coveted spots.

Early in the semester, it was relatively easy to spot which students filled which particular role. In addition, the roles themselves rarely seemed to change over the course of the semester. One reason students easily fell into roles and maintained the associated characteristics was that they were juniors, and had known one another in classrooms for years. The preconceived notions of options for roles that exist in classrooms and the ease and uncritical ways in which students become positioned into said roles reinforced this detail. In addition, while the students at times regretted the roles they found themselves occupying – such as
Cat’s role as outsider – they found some semblance of power within the limiting confines of the social positioning. Cat’s outsider status allowed her the distance to view her peers in a detached manner, helping her to cope with being left out. She also made statements that revealed a sense of superiority over her classmates helped her to alleviate feeling out of place. Alejandra was positioned as “stuck up”, but also as someone who was a “good student”. Alejandra expressed regrets in our final interview that she did not have many female friends in school, but also stated that this meant fewer distractions so she could focus on being a “good student” and believed strongly that her friendships with other women would improve after high school. Andrea, the most popular girl in the class, enjoyed her status, and in coming to rely on her success socially seemed to need to minimize the value of academic success. Each of these participants, and the others in the class, were repeatedly positioned by the institution of schooling, by local practices and procedures, by the curriculum, by the teacher, their peers, and by themselves in ways that seemed to sediment over time and come to constitute what they viewed as their identities.

Yet, this was the Bay Area, so tremors to sedimented foundations are not uncommon. Carlos and Andrea (to a lesser degree) experienced positioning events that gave them a glimpse of who they also could become. In the case of Carlos, he was reminded of this new possible identity by the teacher and by his peers over time, and yet he still, in his reflection of the event that spurred this new positionality, stated, “that ain’t me”. I had to point out to him the various stops he made on his journey from being a resistant reader to being an engaged reader for him to eventually come to see himself in this manner. Yet, once he began to accept that he could, in fact, be a reader, he elected to adopt this aspect of his identity when faced with another challenging book the next semester. In order to convince adolescents that they are still “in-process”, that identities are not fixed, and that their future trajectories can be multiple and varied, we need to be mindful of how students are positioned in classrooms. When students see their academic identities as fixed in unpromising ways, they need to be repositioned as academically capable, in multiple and varied ways, and they need spaces to be reflexive and reflective about their emerging academic selves.
The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation, but human freedom, which finds its light, identity, and dignity in those few brief moments when one’s burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things. (David Smith, 1991)

Chapter 6
Conclusion

Jeffrey leans back in his seat, tipping his chair perilously on two legs as he shouts out with incredulity, “Oh wow! Grandma was a BALLER?!?” He is referring to a cartoon in the Alexie novel of the protagonist’s grandmother indicating that she was a basketball player on the reservation. And just like that, Jeffrey is hooked in this book. I sit in Rose’s class and cannot take my eyes off of him long enough to record what I’m witnessing. In this day’s class and those that followed, he argued with his peers about what happened in the book with the same fervor he showed when debating who was the best NBA player. He adamantly defended the protagonist’s choice of leaving the “rez” to attend an all-white school, would be moved by the racism experienced by Native Americans and would become fascinated with the interracial friendship between the protagonist and a white girl at the new school.

Poised in the corner of Rose’s class, hunched over my computer, I enjoy the infectious spirit and conviction that Jeffrey shared with his classmates. For a moment, Jeffrey’s joy of learning and reading make so many of disturbing debates in education about the quality of schools, what counts as literacy, wrestling with state and federal assessments, all feel distant and irrelevant. Here is a young man, at the age of 16, fervently discussing a work of literature that he has grown to love, and he is doing so for the first time in his life. This should be all that matters. Yet, the crux of being an educator, is the looming reminder that according to many research studies, statistics, articles in the popular press, and as the result of policy decisions made by various administrations – I am forced to wonder if he will enjoy moments like this again in some other academic context? Will this be the apex of his academic and literate life?

My research explored the potential for marginalized youth to access literacy-based resources to develop more durable academic identities. Rooted at the theoretical crossroads of socio-cultural theories of learning and identity and transactional theories of learning, I examined the social context and local practices in an English class serving marginalized students of color, and considered the relationship between literacy engagements, the positioning of students, and the relative changes to the participant’s academic identities and the academic and social cultures of the class.

In this final chapter, I summarize the study, first revisiting the problem it looked to address, and the theory and methods applied in tackling the issue. I then discuss the findings for each research question and provide further analytical implications. Next, I consider each focal participant and apply an interconnected analysis of the findings to his or her experiences over the semester and note how each one took up literacy resources, was positioned in the classroom, and I identify
the mutability of their academic identities. Finally, I discuss implications for teaching and research, followed by some closing thoughts.

**Finding Yourself In a Book: An Overview**

**The Problem.** The impetus for this research was a concern about the almost half of African-American and Latin@ youths from the San Francisco Bay Area who do not have a diploma from high school (CALPADS, 2013), the many who leave high school early, and those who find themselves in the school to prison pipeline (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007; Duncan, 2000; Fisher, 2008; Lipman, 2008; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). South Bay High was clearly impacted by structural inequities that underlie these statistics. The structure of the school, and its history of being forced to change locations multiple times in recent years, reflect the poverty of the city that surrounded it. Related, the school leadership had been in flux almost yearly – causing instability and constant turnover of teaching staff. Current federal and state policies, most importantly the No Child Left Behind Act and state mandated testing, increasingly reframed teaching and learning such that only echoes of its formerly progressive, reform-oriented practices remained, particularly in English and social science. Numerous research projects have studied the larger social, structural and institutional means by which this dilemma might be addressed (Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 2004; Noguera, 2009), while others looked locally at schools, focusing on equitable disciplinary procedures (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Winn, 2014; Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2005) and instructional practices and pedagogical approaches (Morrell, 2008; Plaut, 2009; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011) similarly committed to dismantling this pipeline. My research builds on these earlier works by considering the locus of the ELA classroom and the affordances and resources offered therein to provide students with multiple and contrasting narratives of self, durable academic identities, and the critical agency required to withstand and resist the larger institutional and social forces navigating them towards this pipeline.

As juniors in high school, these largely poor, non-dominant participants entered this study with a long history of unequal educational opportunities and inequitable disciplining procedures. Accompanying and informing this history is a relatively fixed view of what school is, how it functions to socialize and organize, and who they are as students. How students see themselves and are seen by others, and how they imagine their future selves, are instrumental factors in shaping their levels of motivation, engagement, and levels of resistance to schooling (Dweck, 2000). According to Harper (2009), black males who went to college benefitted from counter-narratives of self to offset status quo narratives that limited imagined trajectories and pathways to college. Winn and Behizadeh (2011) argued that when marginalized youth engage in critical literacies, participate in forums where their voices, ideas and lived experiences can be heard, and co-construct their learning experiences, then “disrupting and dismantling” the school to prison pipeline can occur.

**The Study.** Rose’s classroom was one where some promising practices were present – student voices, ideas, and lived experiences were welcomed, valued and known well by the teacher. Yet, the curriculum Rose used did not offer counter-
narratives of self or critical literacies, nor were students invited to co-construct their learning experiences. The Alexie curriculum, which I developed in conjunction with Rose, was designed to offer these practices to students, as a way of providing an empowering and transformative learning experience. The curriculum aimed to embody claims by transactional learning theorists (Dewey, 1938; Rosenblatt, 1986; Iser, 1989; Sumara, 2002) about the potential for literacy-based activities to serve as a resource for identity work. Students were encouraged to “try on,” grapple with, challenge, remix, and perhaps adopt, alternative narratives. Given their own self-assessment of their identities – the participants in this study initially seemed wed to limiting and fixed identities informed by a narrow, status quo discourse of self. The learning activities provided students with an opportunity to explore “boundary crossing that creates possibilities for the revision of these personal narratives” (Sumara, 2002).

The students in this study participate in few practices or spaces in their lives where they might experience the freedom to enjoy a reprieve of being seen first as young black and brown teenagers. Repeatedly, in interviews and class discussions, students articulated an acute awareness of being viewed in marginalizing and restrictive ways. Some, like Alejandra, felt oppressed and limited in their homes and by their families. Others, like Jeffrey, endured the daily frustration of being viewed a threat in social contexts. The English class seems well suited to supporting the fundamentally human activities of exploring different facets of the self, trying on new identities, resisting labels and roles ascribed by societal and institutional forces, and simply playing with what “being” can mean. ELA is suited for these activities because it deals in narratives, languages, and literacies that students can explore and that are not always available in other spaces; and it does in a set of collective cultural practices and with the guidance of peers and a teacher. The literacy activities illustrated to students what Sherman Alexie himself asked teachers to point out, that “there is enormous power and beauty in the power to be able to drive between worlds and we need to stop teaching our children otherwise” (Collopy, 2012, p. 11). This study explored the experiences of the entire class, and the focal participants in particular, as they traversed these approaches to ELA instruction. I hoped to find out how marginalized youth responded to a concerted effort to provide them with the tools and resources to resist marginalizing forces and to instead imagine and construct their academic lives and social selves.

The students profiled in this study are, of course, individuals whose unique lives and experiences do not represent all students who might be marginalized in similar ways. Any research agenda or instructional reform that hopes to reject those mechanisms of schooling that treat adolescent identities as fixed, stable and singular, must be mindful of not simply replacing one set of marginalizing and reductive frameworks with another. These concerns informed my commitment to capturing the differences and variations amongst these participants – which were many. However, multiple case study analysis serves to test theories by examining lived accounts of participating in a shared experience of a particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The cases in this report, both of the class as a whole and for the individual focal participants, provide insights into important questions and can support educators looking to interrupt, within the limited locus of their control, the
inequities that lead to negative academic identities and diminished life chances. Namely, how do marginalized youth experience ELA instruction in schools like South Bay High? How are they positioned in such spaces? Under what conditions do the positions their shift or settle? What role do learning and literacy activities play as adolescents define themselves during this crucial time in their lives?

**Review of Key Findings**

**Rose’s Classroom: Culture, Identity and Curriculum.** This study employed a situated perspective on learning. As such, it was carried out under the assumption that the nature of learning is profoundly shaped by the activity systems within which students learn. Situated and sociocultural theories of learning assert that students learn more than facts, concepts and skills in school, that schooling is a constitutive process through which students come to understand the world and define their places within it. From this perspective, learner identity develops through participation in particular practices (Lave & Wegner, 1991).

Numerous works have considered the relationships among learning, identity, curriculum, and local contexts – many applying the concept of “figured worlds” (Holland, et al., 1998) because of the affordances the theoretical framing provides. Notable works explore the roles available in figured worlds and how the filling of such roles both shaped are shaped by the local context (Leander, 2002; Rubin, 2007; Faircloth, 2009). Other researchers were occupied with examining the learning activities in the local contexts, ideologies informing curriculum, and the effects on learner identities (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Sutherland, 2005; Kirkland, 2011; Wortham, 2004, 2006). This research builds on both scholarship areas, in particular the emphasis on the interrelated relationship among curricular ideology, identities available for participants, and the learning activities that occurred. What makes my work unique is that while some offer contrasting classroom contexts, most notably Boaler & Greeno’s 2000 study of two math classes, my study examines one group of students, with the same teacher, participating in two ideologically disparate approaches to ELA instruction.

**Contrasting Curricula.** In the first five weeks of the course, the class participated in what could be described as a contested, yet traditional, curricular approach. While students were preparing for standardized tests through daily vocabulary building exercises and grammar based warm-ups they were also reading a book, *Bless, Me, Ultima*, (Anaya, 1972), engaged in relatively interesting discussions about being Latino, the role religion played in their lives, and issues related to immigration. At the same time, students participated in a highly scaffolded series of worksheets that would guide them towards writing a formulaic five-paragraph essay in which they all answered the same prompt (What does the Golden Carp symbolize?) and had similar theses and quotations for evidence. I suspect that this sort of contested, hybrid curriculum may not be unusual as schools struggle to meet the perceived needs of students, reflect the school and the teacher’s priorities and objectives, and address policy directives from the state and federal level.

In the second half of the semester, lasting six weeks, students participated in a student-centered and alternative approach to ELA while reading *The Absolutely
**True Diary of a Part-Time Indian** (Alexie, 2007). The curriculum aimed to create a climate of co-constructors of meaning, asking students to select themes in the book that were meaningful to them, find outside texts that also addressed the theme to share with the class, and design, research, and present a final project based on an authentic inquiry they carried out. The curriculum reflected Lee’s (2006) culturally modeling framework, Moll et al.’s (1992) attention to students funds of knowledge, and Moje’s (2000) call to bring nonmainstream literacies into academic settings. Literacy theorists also informed the curricular design; notably Guthrie et al.’s (2012) call for implicit teaching of engaged reading strategies, Rosenblatt’s (1986, 1994) reader-response approach, and Sumara’s (1998) framework for a Commonplace Curriculum. In summary, the curriculum was informed by research-based recommendations for effective literacy instruction serving non-dominant adolescents. While allowing for the familiar discrepancy between the written and enacted curriculum, I observed the participants as they experienced these instructional strategies and pedagogical theories, hoping to gain insights into their affordances and constraints, and to offer a loving critique (Paris, 2012) on the efficacy of these pedagogies.

The classroom culture, social networks, and level of academic activity were both interrelated and informed by the different approaches to instruction. During the Bless Me, Ultima (BMU) curriculum, the teacher anticipated daily resistance and students needs for assistance, and as a result, tended to draw up agendas that reflected these assumptions. At times, this approach allowed for students to be off task for much of the class session while still being able to complete the day’s work. Ironically, the time spent not doing academic work allowed for the building of the social community, a relaxed and generally positive environment, with strong teacher-student relationships. The context allowed for the emergence of four social clusters that I named the Distracters, the Fellas, the Shockers, and the Quiet Kids, as well as six outside students who were not part of the clusters. These clusters would play a large role in determining the levels of academic work that was completed daily. The social clusters were both historically determined (many students had known one another for years) and locally produced, influenced by the teachers presence and by the academic activities in the curriculum (Wortham, 2006). Under the Alexie curriculum, the daily routines were unpredictable and allowed less time for off task behavior. The social culture of the class persisted, but because the curriculum was designed to invite out of school literacies and personal experiences, the nature of the social context took on a more personalized tone, while also being legitimized and tied to the academic work. The make up of the various social clusters remained stable, but the clusters themselves behaved in ways that yielded less distraction from the academic work and reflected higher levels of learning and engagement.

The two curricula differed with regard to what it meant to be literate and to learn. In the context of the first curriculum (BMU unit), learning meant completing a series of discrete tasks, often unrelated, and meeting the minimal expectations of the teacher. In addition, predictable and explicitly defined learning experiences provided students with a sense of security and familiarity that allowed them to re-enact student identities familiar to them. Being literate during the BMU unit meant
answering questions about vocabulary and grammar on tests, producing a five paragraph essay with highly structured supports, and discussing the primary text (however, reading the text was optional because the teacher provided multiple reviews). In the context of the second curriculum (Alexie unit), learning involved doing various tasks (reading, writing, reflection, research, preparing a presentation) all towards the end of pursuing a better understanding of a topic or issue of personal relevance. Being literate meant reading and making meaning of the book, connecting the book to other texts, and discussing the readings with others.

Constants that emerged across these two curricula were a general level of resistance to school work with participants more interested in socializing than engaging academically; a welcoming and “safe” classroom where students were rarely disciplined; and the teacher fostering a humorous and relaxed environment. During the BMU curriculum, students generally appreciated knowing what to expect on a daily basis with regards to the routines and agenda. Students also appreciated that in their view, the work that they were engaged in (vocabulary quizzes, worksheets, essay writing) “felt” like English class and therefore, felt like it was preparing them for future academic success. The higher achieving students, about one quarter of the class, especially appreciated the BMU curriculum because they could earn high grades with minimal effort. The targeted grade level of the curriculum was closer to a 9th grade level than an 11th grade level, and the high achievers were familiar enough with the “game of school” that they could meet the demands and still enjoy the other social aspects of school. Most students, however, did not read the book and complained about the test prep activities and what they saw as meaningless work. While a number of the participants expressed an appreciation of the primary text’s uptake of religious issues, no students reported feeling a strong connection to the book.

Most of the participants preferred the Alexie curriculum. They shared that the work seemed “connected to their lives,” was more enjoyable, and offered a measure of freedom and autonomy. Reading the Alexie novel and participating in the accompanying curriculum led most students to report that the practices allowed for deeper and more meaningful learning. For a few others, the self-guiding aspect permitted an “easy way out” so that they could focus on other obligations – such as final exams for other classes. Some participants suggested that given the “alternative” feel to the Alexie approach, it was somehow less legitimate or useful than the activities done during the BMU unit. As Jeffrey stated about the Alexie curriculum in his exit survey, “it was different because in most English class we only learn about English”, inferring that his notion of studying English does not include making texts relevant to one’s life, discussing issues and topics raised in the books, or exploring personally meaningful lines of inquiry. While Jeffrey preferred the Alexie approach, Alejandra seemed to prefer the BMU unit, saying, “it was different because we did less work on the actual book. It really focused more on our own lives.” These responses reflect a finding I am interested in exploring further - the notion that resistance from students to what many see as the values of what literacy has to offer has at its source an increasing student socialization towards viewing literacy as a set of skills, activities, routines, worksheets, tests, and projects. In the end, some students cannot see the greater societal purposes that these school-based
activities were designed to support. Much like the metaphor of not being able to see the forest through the trees, these students considered larger goals for literacy instruction, such as critical thinking, interpreting texts, exploring authentic inquiries, developing a lens for integrating texts in their lives, crafting literacy works themselves, as not being appropriate for ELA instruction. At the same time, other students, who had resisted the figured world of traditional instruction, thrived when these larger purposes of literacy were placed at the center of the curricular approach.

**Positioning Events and Positioned Lives.** The figured world of any high school classroom contains ready-made roles that participants were placed in, were formed by, and gave shape to, over the course of the study. Occupying such preformed roles occurred early in the school year and appeared immutable throughout the study. Sosa was the class flirt, Jet was the brooding loner, and Sandra occupied the role of the indignant pessimist. Roles were determined in part by the histories that students brought to the classroom, emerged through social interactions, and held consequences for their academic engagement, performance, and identities. While Rose was skilled at leveraging the students social identities towards being more successful academically, the strategy resulted in the reproduction of social positioning in the process. One consequence of this unspoken, but collectively understood, process for inhabiting particular roles was that positional identities that included academic success was made available to some students but not to others. Imagined dichotomies between social status and academic achievement colored the classroom culture for all participants.

Despite this limiting landscape, some participants did enjoy moments of repositioning in ways that provided them with a snapshot, if only briefly, of newly imagined selves in this context. Positioning events is a term I use to indicate experiences that either serve to reinforce or disrupt identities that are ordinarily relatively fixed. Carlos was repositioned over time from being a non-reader to an engaged reader. To a lesser degree, Andrea experienced a shift in positional identity. Her default identity as an indifferent academic low-achiever was a posture that had rewarded her with high social status. That identity was disrupted when she celebrated receiving a good grade on a major assignment. I observed students who struggled academically, enjoy positioning events that served to disrupt negative perceptions of their academic self in ways that promoted the development of more durable academic identities.

Given that students often conflate their subject positionings with fixed notions of identity, these repositioning events need to happen frequently and in varied ways if we want students to develop a dynamic, ever changing view of their academic and social identities. Most of the participants in the study reported that their views of school and of themselves as learners have remained stable since elementary school years. These views of schooling and of one’s academic skill and capabilities, for a handful of students, were challenged as they experienced multiple, public, and meaningful positioning events that framed them as engaged, strong, readers and academically capable.
Marginal Identity Theory. Repeatedly, participants expressed a desire to enjoy feeling recognized as complex, hybrid individuals; yet they also maintained narrow, scripted views of identity for themselves and others. As Jeffrey stated in his appreciation of the freedom he knew in Rose’s classroom, “In here, I get to be myself, but when I leave here, I’m just another black kid when people see me” (Jeffrey, in-class comment, October 25, 2012). In the initial survey, participants were asked to define their identities. They were given enough space to write three or four sentences in response, or about one fifth of a page. However, most students struggled to come up with multiple descriptors of self. Typical of most responses, Carlos wrote, “I am a chill person. I like to have fun and make people laugh”, and Tre simply wrote, “a cool guy.” While a few students provided more descriptors of their identities, the average number of terms used to define one’s identity was 3.1. In addition, referring to Gee’s four identity categories, most of the terms the students used would fall into the discursive category (i.e. calm, fun, sarcastic, energetic) or the institutional category (i.e. Mexican, Black, Latina). Students seldom offered affinity group identities (the one exception was a student noting a love of sports). Terms, such as artist, animal lover, activist, seldom emerged in their survey responses of in their academic writing about themselves. This glaring absence speaks volumes about what visions of self the schools are providing – or failing to provide.

The data in this study suggest that one of the challenges of being marginalized is that non-dominant young people enjoy less access to resources and practices for viewing who they are and who they might become. In addition, depending on the various ways they experience marginalization, even if they express interest in resources or practices that might offer newly imagined selves, social and institutional forces restrict access. The inequitable access to narratives of self and imagined futures, invariably inhibits agency and thus engagement in spaces meant to support personal investment – such as schools. Yet, Nasir (2012) contends that young people socialize into identities and that there is a need for schools to provide them with resources to develop positive concepts of self. Focal student Andrea, whose resistance to learning was a move to protect a specific discursive identity that she’d benefitted from, suggests that students learned identities can often the greatest obstacle in developing a more expanded sense of self or durable academic identity. As Norris states in her examination of the identities of young black women who resisted opportunities to engage in a learning activity meant to affirm the self, “rather than assuming that the young women were not ready to learn, this work reveals that they were not ready to unlearn...What some of them shared with others was an instantiation of the negative self-concepts that had been appropriated from social constructions” (2014, p. 74).

One resource for contending with a negative or limiting self-concept can be the acquisition of new discourses engaged for the purpose of re-authoring the self. Literacy and language is abundant in ELA classrooms, yet they are rarely treated as a salve to heal the struggles faced during adolescence, particularly for non-dominant youth viewed as lacking the competency or skills to do so. Cat turned to literacy to help her cope with feelings of alienation and fell in love with the novel, The Perks of Being a Wallflower – but she also had come to see such encounters with literacy as...
solely an out-of-school experience. Carlos, on the other hand, took up the messages about healthy families in the Alexie novel and applied them to his challenges in his home life – a move that was legitimized and rewarded in Rose’s classroom. Students benefitted from opportunities like the Touchstone Text project to explore authentic inquiries that they could reflectively and reflexively apply to their lives. The project provided needed access to literary language and discourses that they could engage for the purpose of dialogism with the discourses and narratives they carried. Finally, they needed to be in classrooms where they felt comfortable taking the social and academic risks necessary to reimagine the self and be publicly recognized as doing so.

The Uptake of Literacy for Identity Work. Phenomenologists (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and literary theorists within the reader-response tradition (Rosenblatt, 1986; Fish, 1980; Iser, 1993) have argued that reading encounters, given that reading happens at the point of consciousness, are phenomena that both create the text and shape the reader. As one reads, the convergence of the text and the reader brings the literary work into existence. This aesthetic encounter also renders the text anew. But what about the reader? To what extent is the activity of reading (particularly engaged reading over a period of time) an encounter that renders the reader anew?

Iser (1993) suggests that during and after engagements with literary fictions, readers produce knowledge about themselves that continues to function alongside existing knowledge – and serves to inform one’s emerging sense of identity. Sumara (1998), building on the work of Gadamer (1980), believes that the relationships that readers form with literary fictions become “interesting and generative locations for the interpretation of past, present, and projected identities” (p. 206). Sumara adds that in identifying with the characters that are not at all like them, and in traversing plots that are not their own, readers engage in the process of forming allegiances (or contentions) in fictitious and foreign worlds. As a cultural tool, literary fiction aids in the ongoing restructuring and reconditioning of the reader’s identity.

While relying on empirical data to explain a highly theoretical construct is challenging, Chapter 4 examines the public and explicit displays of identity that appeared to be influenced by engaging in reading and other literacy-based activities. By examining student talk and academic work, I considered the uptake of literacy-based texts (either encountered or created) as a resource for identity work. This examination involved distinguishing between learning for the purposes of completing an assignment or earning a grade, versus learning for the purpose of viewing such learning as integral to one’s identity and for applying the lessons to one’s own view of the world and the self (Nasir & Cooks, 2009; McDermott, 1997; Toohey, 2000). Specifically, given the background problems this research hopes to address, I was interested in noting the ways that the uptake of literacies for identity

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4 The field of cognitive literary studies has emerged as literary scholars became increasingly interested in what happens in the brain when humans read text. See: Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, dela Paz, and Peterson, 2006; Zunshine, 2006.
work involved developing agency, a critical lens towards marginalizing discourses, and the emergence of enduring counter-narratives of self.

Carlos and Jeffrey seemed to engage both reading the Alexie novel and the accompanying learning activities in ways that suggested a willing and involved process of identity construction. Carlos used the families portrayed on the reservation in the novel, and did additional reading and writing activities, to eventually create a comic book that helped him articulate his evolving views on what constituted a healthy family. Because he was struggling with family problems of his own at the time, his expressed stance on the issue, that all families are unhealthy but some cope better than others, allowed him to re-engage with his family and work towards repairing his relationship with his mother. Jeffrey, who was moved and angered by the problems of poverty and racism on the reservation for the main character, took up the task of better understanding race, racism, and its relationship to class. Initially, Jeffrey seemed to express feelings of internalized racism, as if he was somehow deserving of the racism he’d encountered. However, through a series of learning activities (both within school and out), he developed an emerging critical race theory from which to examine his condition. He was able to apply this lens to racist labor practices that his mother faced when she was working to organize other African American employees who’d been assigned to bus routes in communities with very few whites.

While Cat, Andrea, and Alejandra did not display the same level of interest or feelings of connection to the Alexie novel that Carlos and Jeffrey did, these three Latinas did treat the final project, the Touchstone Text, as resource for identity work. Cat elected to write a series of poems about love, loneliness, identity, and other themes that were important for her. While the writing of the poems themselves are important for identity work, Cat’s move to read two of the poem’s aloud proved especially meaningful. As a self-described “wallflower”, Cat rarely spoke up in class and felt disconnected from others, so the poetry reading was a brave and critical act. As a result, she reported feelings of greater confidence, an ability to heal, and an interest in participating in more public readings of poetry. Andrea, normally positioned as a resistant and defiant student, elected to remix the final project to make it her own – and thus to make it useful as an identity forming resource. After refusing to do work towards the final project, she produced, in a flurry, a manifesto on love in the form of a letter to “all the haters.” Like Cat, she read portions of this letter aloud in class. Andrea reported feelings of healing, a growing understanding about how she loves, and an appreciation for using writing, rather than violence, as a coping mechanism. Finally, Alejandra, who had been resistant to treating literacy as an identity resource because she did not feel safe to do so in class, found a way to take the risks while still protecting her self. Her final project on romantic interracial relationships offered an opportunity to explore her family’s narrow and conservative stances. Her exploration on the topic also served as a proxy for a personal consideration of her own identification as being bisexual. All of this was done in an objective and detached manner – providing Alejandra with the distance needed to feel safe publicly reporting her findings.

The focal participants, and others in the class, participated in literacy activities (i.e. writing poetry, reading literary works, making comic books, creating
and presenting presentations, discussion) as a resource for reflecting on the self, considering authentic inquiries, and imagining their futures. Reading level and academic skill level was not a deterrent from engaging in literacy as a practice of reconsidering and reimagining the self. In fact, students who struggled with what constituted school learning (completing assignments, following directions, doing well on tests) were more engaged and more successful when the unit of analysis upon which their learning was focused was less the texts and more the self. However, students tended to resist using literacy for this purpose if they did not feel the need to do so. Several factors determined when they did not feel this need – when they were secure and confident about the status of their own identity development (such as Alejandra), when they did not see the literacy activity as relevant to the self (such as Andrea), or if they did not feel safe in publicly displaying the dialogic engagements necessary for re-authoring the self (such as Cat and at times, Alejandra). Finally, given the ways students were socialized into ELA instruction, the perception that using literacy as a space to consider the self seemed too “non-academic” proved a deterrent for some. I would argue that if students were instead socialized to see the uptake of literacy as an identity resource as an integral aspect of the learning process, they would be more likely to view engagements with literacy as a salient part of their identities –academic and otherwise.

**Interconnected Analysis of Findings – Revisiting the Focal Students.**

Based on my findings, I would argue that if the goal is to promote counter-narratives of self, feelings of agency and the possession of multiple future trajectories, as well as stronger academic identities and an expansive social self – then we must consider the relationship between all three findings discussed above. In revisiting the stories of the focus participants in this study, it is evident that the relationships between the figured world of the ELA classroom and the curriculum employed, the positioning of students, and the uptake of literacy as an identity resource all were instrumental in the shaping of focal participant’s academic identities.

**Cat Retreats.** Cat seemed, early in the study, to be someone who would be open to, and excited by, the instructional approach during the Alexie curriculum. Much of what was asked of students included engagements with literacy she already enjoyed outside of school. However, because Cat felt alienated and judged amongst her peers, she was not comfortable sharing her own literacy engagements and interpretations with the class. This proved to be a real loss because she treated literacy, both in practice and in an idealized manner, as crucial for making meaning of the self and the world and could have really demonstrated this quality for others. Cat’s sense of alienation in the class could be typified by her identification as being “white” – a moniker she adopted even when completing an academic assignment. Born to Mexican parents, Cat saw so little of herself in her Latina peers, and felt so unwelcomed by the social clusters in the class, that she felt she had to limit what it meant to be a Latina to the behavior and actions of the other Latinas in the class. In fact, as the curriculum became more student-centered during the Alexie unit, and
students were encouraged to be the primary voices in class, Cat felt even less freedom to express herself.

Cat’s retreat suggests that culturally responsive, student-centered curricula, at least as played out within this context, can be scrutinized in that the meaning of culture tends to be reduced and the students who have the strongest personalities tend to dominate the class. An additional struggle for Cat was witnessing students display engagements with literature in ways that Cat believed was unique to her. Overtime, she grew resentful of her peers. In essence, the Alexie curriculum allowed other students to “steal her thunder” and hence, her literate identity. Over the course of this study, Cat’s academic identity remained fragile, and grew even more fragile when seeing others engage literacy with the passion she’d claimed as her own. Fortunately, Cat was able to reassert herself during the Touchstone Text project when she read poetry aloud to the class. Cat grew more confident because she was positioned as a poet in the eyes of her peers who celebrated her performance.

Jeffrey Shines. Jeffrey was positioned as a positive, hard working, but low skilled student. This identity was corroborated by his IEP, the teacher’s view of his performance, and his own view of his academic capabilities. He also presented himself as young – he quoted cartoons, talked about toys, and generally behaved as if he was about ten years of age. Jeffrey had struggled during the BMU unit and while he made an effort, he never enjoyed or felt he benefited from the work that was asked of him. In addition, Jeffrey seemed to have a narrow view of his own identity and future, his utterances revealed internalized racism, he dreamed of being an NBA player, and he was also naïve about his impending fatherhood. Jeffrey loved the Alexie novel. He read it each night, he asked lots of questions about the book, and he strongly identified with the protagonist. Because Jeffrey felt respected and appreciated by his peers and the teacher, he took social and academic risks in class that allowed him to publicly contend with his previous academic identity, his perspectives about his family, and his views on race and class. In doing so he modeled and aided in creating a culture of interpreters in the class. Jeffrey explored racism for his final project, hoping to better understand why it persisted and whom it served. He developed a critical lens about race he’d not enjoyed before. By the end of the study, Jeffrey had matured – he was less optimistic about a basketball career and was thinking about studying engineering in college, he was more realistic (and nervous) about impending fatherhood, and he was more serious in how he carried himself. His academic identity became more durable over the course of the semester. While he’d already been a hard worker determined to get good grades, he was influenced by the protagonist of the Alexie novel and began to treat academic learning as an integral aspect of his identity.

Andrea Defies. Given her history of being marginalized and abused by various authority figures and powerful institutions throughout her life, Andrea’s anger and resistance to learning was both understandable and also a clear coping mechanism. Her positioning as being a witty, argumentative, resistant and courageous fighter had allowed her to withstand many struggles she had known prior to this study. Her multiple brothers in prison, being forced out of her home by her mother, and the daily threats of violence she saw meant that shedding this
positional identity—while it may have served her in the classroom to do so—would endanger her elsewhere. And yet, as much as she verbalized “hating” school—she clearly enjoyed it. Not the work, nor the rules, nor some of the teachers—but the feeling of community, the chance to shed her defensive posturing for a few hours, and the deep and meaningful friendships she’d made. Andrea used literacy as an identity resource twice, and very much on her own terms—writing poems to her brother in prison and with her remix of the Touchstone Text final. While her academic identity remained consistently fragile, her social identity remained durable and as such, provided her with such a strong sense of security that she was not especially interested in developing her academic self.

**Carlos Blossoms.** During the exit interview with Rose, she identified Carlos as being the student that most benefitted from the Alexie curriculum. A resistant student who rarely did the readings or the assigned work and who was in danger of not graduating, Carlos turned things around both in this class (where he earned a B) and in other classes (passing all his classes in a semester for the first time in high school). A big reason for his success, I would contend, is that Carlos enjoyed two types of meaningful, potentially transformative, upakes. The first involved using literacy resources in the process of authoring the self. Carlos applied the Alexie novel and his touchstone project to redefine his troubling experiences of his family life and reconnect with his mother. The second involved a positioning event where his repeated and sedimented identity was suddenly overturned and a new identity began to emerge. The positioning event occurred when he was publicly recognized for being an “engaged” reader as opposed to the non-reader he’d been identified as in the past. This occurred after he returned from being absent for a few days, during which he read the entire Alexie novel. While he initially resisted being celebrated for this achievement, he later grew to appreciate it and was deemed by his peers as the “expert” on the novel in the class. As such, he was repeatedly positioned as a reader for the first time in his life. The repetitions proved necessary because he struggled to notice his emerging literary identity. Carlos’ academic identity became more durable over the course of the study. A durability that will no doubt benefit from another positioning event he had not anticipated, graduating on time.

**Alejandra Achieves.** Similar to Andrea, Alejandra’s evidently secure sense of self and her conviction that she was already an adult, proved a deterrent to engaging in literacy as a resource for identity work. Alejandra had been successful academically, but her academic identity was tied to grades and adult recognition of her success. Her guarded, yet willing, engagement in the Alexie curriculum suggests that her academic identity is not tied to seeking and experiencing moments of personal growth and learning. In addition, even if she was motivated to use learning and literacy engagements as an identity resource, she did not feel safe enough in the context of this classroom to do so. Alejandra’s history of living on the streets, having various and multiple romantic partners, being involved with drugs, all influenced how she was seen by others in the class and was a chapter of her life that she was working hard to put behind her. Alejandra viewed what was being asked of her during the Alexie curriculum as potentially opening up wounds that only freshly healed. Alejandra was determined to do well academically, to graduate with an impressive grade point average and to attend college and study medicine.
Therefore, she managed to do the work of the Alexie curriculum without risking exposing herself, but also while achieving high grades throughout. Alejandra’s academic identity was durable prior to and throughout this study, having been recognized and appreciated by peers, her parents, teachers, and even in a letter from the government. Her ability to do well academically even when the curriculum seemed to threaten her sense of privacy or put her at risk illustrates the importance of a durable academic identity.

**Case Studies Conclusion.** Students tend to be positioned in classroom in ways that limit freedom to define the self. However, classroom spaces are sites that offer potential positioning events that can provide tremors to seemingly sedimented identities. Literature and literacy practices serve as resources for identity work, yet the ways literature is often taught and what has come to constitute literacy and learning in ELA classrooms rarely promotes using literacy for this purpose. Even in classrooms with strong teachers like Rose, who value concepts of equity and social justice, the classroom environments where marginalized youth are found are figured worlds wherein students work to meet minimal expectations while maintaining and valuing social and peer group relations, pedagogy continues to treat student identities as fixed and reducible, and teachers struggle under the confusion and weight of competing and contrasting agendas and objectives.

**Implications for Teaching**

South Bay High is one of many schools across the nation, serving non-dominant students, that continue to de-emphasize meaningful engagements with literacy and move closer to teaching literacy for the purpose of high-stakes testing. However, when the curricular content gets narrowed to tested subjects, subject area knowledge becomes fragmented into test-related pieces, and teachers increase the use of teacher-centered pedagogies (Au, 2007; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Under these conditions, the gap widens between students like those in Rose’s classroom and dominant students with having an access to multiple narratives and future trajectories of self. Like others who are similarly marginalized, the participants in this study experienced daily reminders as they traversed the spaces of schooling and other social arenas that they are reducible, limited, stagnant, and unwelcome.

Literacy learning, especially with teachers eager to welcome and celebrate students uniqueness and potential, can be one space where students can “try on” identities not available to them in other contexts. Teaching English in ways that develop the skills and content knowledge necessary to foster meaningful relationships with literature and promote the use of literacy as a life skill is not a new concept. However, its central position in English classes has been threatened by various forces, such as concerns about high stakes testing, shifts to what counts as literacy in both the public imagination and from policy makers, and the censoring of books like the Alexie novel. These moves seem counter to fostering deep and meaningful engagements with literacy and as we marginalize meaningful and engaged encounters with literacy, our “marginalized” youth lose out.

One possible solution for this disparity of access and opportunity comes from an unlikely source. In the rush to enact the Common Core State Standards, a discussion about what is meant by “close reading” - a term used sparingly in the
Implications for Further Research

Studies of whole class cultures, or the shared academic identities of students, are scant in the literature and would benefit from further research. In this work, I noted the various social clusters within one classroom, how the curricular approaches shaped the academic identity of the class, and the influence of the participants’ figured world of the ELA classroom. Had I been able to follow the same group of students in different classrooms or studied the same teacher working with other groups of students, I would have gained more insights.

An important question that studies of whole classrooms need to take up is the larger macro-context in which the class resides. While the data in this study did not include larger contextual elements, my awareness of these elements and some of the historical forces that have shaped the space, as a former teacher at the school and resident in the neighborhood, certainly benefitted my analysis of the data. Given the earlier discussion about students being socialized to view ELA as the acquisition of skills rather than a larger appreciation of and relationship with literacy, it would be useful to examine how the policy initiatives that issue forth from the state and federal government influence neighborhoods, schools, and particular classrooms.

While I believe the attention paid to positioning events and the uptake of literacy and learning as an identity resource is promising, I can see various needs for further analysis. The first involves the presence of identity shifting across various contexts. To what extent does one’s emerging identity as being a reader, or being more academically capable and engaged become threatened or alternatively supported, beyond the walls of the classroom? Second, how does it change from classroom to classroom? To what extent does an emerging reader identity become vulnerable to social contexts where few books and public displays of reading occur? How does, for example, Jeffrey’s newly forming critical race lens color how he interacts with figures of authority outside of a classroom context?

In addition, what is the long-term effect of a positioning event? Carlos left the study seeing himself as more of a reader and with a more durable academic
identity. One could argue, as Carlos himself claimed, that it was a transformative experience. However, many events in life can be seen as transformative, including going to college, working for five years at Walmart, going to jail, and joining the military. While Carlos may see himself as more of a reader as a result of his being positioned as such in Rose’s class, how might he see himself in a year or two or ten after high school? Longitudinal studies of late blossoming readers such as Carlos, and of students who enjoy positive positioning events in high school that bolster their academic identities, would provide a better understanding of the salience of these seemingly transformative events.

**Final Thoughts**

In the end, I am unable to move past my concern and wonderings about Tre – the student who left the study, and the class, before its conclusion, and whom I hoped would have been served by it. Despite repeated efforts, I’ve been unable to locate him since he left the school. In my mind I still see his resignation and withdrawal into himself when his one effort to “try on” an academic identity was quickly silenced by another black male struggling to maintain his own fragile academic identity. Tre was excited to be part of the study early on. He used it as a motivation to engage more during class time and in our first interview he was extremely candid, thoughtful and generous in sharing his story. Tre had never seen school as a place of possibility, a place where he could re-author himself, but he did see Rose’s classroom as one of the few daily venues where he felt safe and valued. As a child he was taken from his mother because of her drug abuse and neglect and placed with foster families that ranged from caring and loving to abusive. High on drugs, he made poor choices that included stealing, assault, and resisting arrest. Tre was the most likely in the class to fall victim to the school to prison pipeline – in fact, he’d already been a part of it.

This sadly familiar story seemed to position Tre as someone who would have much to gain from the approach used during the Alexie unit. Perhaps, given its emphasis on authentic inquiry rooted in students’ lives outside of school, he might have developed critical literacies with which to explore the relationship between racist drug laws, systematic and institutionalized cycles of poverty and the oppressive criminal justice forces that had locked Tre up in one form or another eleven times since he was 7 years of age. If he had read the book, perhaps Tre would have seen himself in Rowdy, the best friend of Arnold in the Alexie novel. He might have related to or heard echoes of his own life in Rowdy’s abusive household, personal demons, penchant for violence, and daily realities of facing racism and poverty on the reservation. And had Tre seen himself in Rowdy, might he have engaged in reflexive and reflective analysis about his own life in ways that might support making better choices in the future? We cannot know these things because despite having perhaps the most to gain from the instructional efforts during the Alexie curriculum, Tre did not engage in the work and left the study and the school soon after Thanksgiving.

The lesson as a hopeful researcher, and as an idealistic teacher, is a humbling one. The work that teachers do is extremely important. Teachers can both demolish and uplift a vulnerable student’s sense of self and academic identity. And
yet, often teachers (and schools and curriculums) do neither of these things in spite of their best efforts. The multiple larger systemic and institutionalized forces shaping the lives of young people (especially young people of color and living in poverty) play a powerful role in determining which students find themselves alienated and embittered, like Tre or Andrea and which students find themselves included and hopeful, like Jeffrey or Alejandra. Regardless, the English classroom is one space that students traverse almost daily. It has great potential as a site for transformation. The extent to which teachers make the space one that values students as dynamic, multiple, and expansive can matter. When teachers provide opportunities for transformation and agency and the development of a durable academic identity, such efforts will never be in vain.
References


Appendix A

Initial Survey/Questionnaire

Name:

What type of participant do you want to be? A general or focal participant?

Being a general participant involves:
• Complete this questionnaire
• Get captured on film or audio recordings during certain class sessions
• Complete a written reflection at the end of the semester about your learning

Being a focal participant involves:
• Complete this questionnaire
• Being interviewed three or four times this semester, outside of class time
• Allowing the researcher to make copies of some of you work from class
• Being the focus during class video and audio recordings
• Complete a written reflection at the end of the semester about your learning

What type if participant do you want to be?

I want to be a ___________________________ participant. (Please write either “focal” or “general”)

What day and year where you born? Month: Day: Year:

If asked what your identity is, you would say...

Please provide a brief biography of your life. Consider the following – feel free to expand.
• I was born and raised....

• I have lived in the Bay Area for....

• My family at home includes....
• I have also lived (or traveled to)....

• What are some of your hobbies, talents or personal interests?

What do you know about your parent’s achievements as students?

How much school did they complete?

How might they describe themselves as students?

One of my favorite memories from school is...

One of my LEAST favorite memories from school is...

The school subject I am best at is __________________________.
I am good at this because....

The school subject I struggle the most with is __________________________.
I am challenged by this because....

What is your experience with reading? Consider both in school and out of school.

What is your experience with writing? Consider both in school and out of school.
Where do you see yourself in three years?

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

**Likert Scale Questions**

Scale:
Strongly agree: 1   Agree: 2   Disagree: 3   Strongly disagree: 4
Not sure/not applicable: 5

Example:
I think the 4th period class is awesome! 1

Statements:
I think of myself as someone who enjoys reading ______

Overall, I have had a good experience of school so far ______

Overall, I have had a good experience of English class in high school so far ______

I read outside of school for pleasure ______

I write outside of school for pleasure ______

I feel like I am free to be myself at school ______

I feel like I am free to be myself at home ______

What else would you like to share that would tell me more about who you are?

**Post Study Survey/Questionnaire**

**Final Reflection of Alexie Unit**

Name ____________________________ Date ________________

As I mentioned in the beginning of the semester, I will be writing up the research from this class for my dissertation. I need to use fake names for everyone. Please write down THREE names you’d like me to choose from for your fake name (just a first name). If they seem appropriate, I will choose one of the three you list here.
This reflection is divided into three sections: two surveys and an open response section. Please be honest and thoughtful in your responses. The responses you give are confidential and have no effect on your grade in this class.

Fully completing this reflection is an automatic 25 points of extra credit!

Survey Questions:
Below is a list of some of the major work we did in this unit. For each one please circle the letter for statement that seems the most true for you:

Reading the novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie

A) I both liked doing this assignment *and* I learned from it  
B) I learned from this assignment *but* did not like it  
C) I liked this assignment *but* I did not learn from it  
D) I did not like this assignment *and* I did not learn from it  
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall  
F) I did not do this assignment

Writing the Literacy Autobiography

A) I both liked doing this assignment *and* I learned from it  
B) I learned from this assignment *but* did not like it  
C) I liked this assignment *but* I did not learn from it  
D) I did not like this assignment *and* I did not learn from it  
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall  
F) I did not do this assignment

The visit from the Native American guest speaker, Mark Anquea

A) I both liked doing this activity *and* I learned from it  
B) I learned from this activity *but* did not like it  
C) I liked this activity *but* I did not learn from it
Participating in Socratic Seminars

A) I both liked doing this assignment and I learned from it
B) I learned from this assignment but I did not like it
C) I liked this assignment but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this assignment and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

Doing a presentation with the literacy detective teams

A) I both liked doing this assignment and I learned from it
B) I learned from this assignment but I did not like it
C) I liked this assignment but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this assignment and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

Sharing your reading artifact (a text or object that has shaped who you are)

A) I both liked doing this activity and I learned from it
B) I learned from this activity but I did not like it
C) I liked this activity but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this activity and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

Sharing your partner text (a text you saw as being related to the Alexie novel)

A) I both liked doing this activity and I learned from it
B) I learned from this activity but I did not like it
C) I liked this activity but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this activity and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

The Guided Writing Activity in your journal

A) I both liked doing this assignment and I learned from it
B) I learned from this assignment but did not like it
C) I liked this assignment but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this assignment and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

Creating cartoons, quote posters, or other art that related to the book

A) I both liked doing this assignment and I learned from it
B) I learned from this assignment but did not like it
C) I liked this assignment but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this assignment and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

The touchstone text project you did for the final

A) I both liked doing this assignment and I learned from it
B) I learned from this assignment but did not like it
C) I liked this assignment but I did not learn from it
D) I did not like this assignment and I did not learn from it
E) I am not sure / I cannot recall
F) I did not do this assignment

The next set of statements has to do with goals we had for this unit. Please indicate how well we did in reaching each goal. Circle the response that best describes your level of agreement with each statement.

In this class, I felt a sense of community in the class by participating in literacy activities (reading, writing, sharing stories, presentations, discussions, etc)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This unit expanded my thinking around identity and encouraged me to think about my identity in new ways.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Unsure    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
1                    2                    3                    4                    5

I read the novel in a deeply engaged way. In other words, I was fully immersed in the book when I read.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Unsure    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
1                    2                    3                    4                    5

Through the touchstone text project and other work we did, I challenged the assumptions and perspectives I carry about the world.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Unsure    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
1                    2                    3                    4                    5

I felt that for some assignments, I had some freedom to choose what I wanted to study and how I wanted to present my work.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Unsure    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
1                    2                    3                    4                    5

This curriculum provided opportunities to see connections between my own life and the work we were doing in class.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Unsure    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
1                    2                    3                    4                    5

Section 3 – Open Ended Questions (if you need more space for answers-let me know)

How does this unit compare to the Bless Me Ultima unit or other English classes you have been in? Was it the same? Did it seem different? Explain your thoughts please.
The touchstone text is an unusual final. You had some freedom about the topic you studied and how you would present it. However, this made it hard to get support and required that you be responsible and independent. Was this a good final? Would you prefer to take a test or write an in-class essay? How could it be improved?

One goal for the unit is to push you to think in a more complex way about identity in general and your own life in particular. What assignments helped us reach this goal and why? If we did not reach this goal, what should we try in the future?

As we mentioned early in the semester, our goal is to improve English classes. What aspects of this unit do you think we should keep and what should we change if we teach this unit to another class in the future? Explain your reasons.
What final thoughts can you share about your experiences of this unit?

Thanks so much!!!
You guys are an amazing class and I have really enjoyed learning from you and working with Rose. Have a great winter break!

Appendix B

Unit Overview
The Interpretive Inquiry Project (Alexie novel Unit)

Primary Text: The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, by Sherman Alexie

Dates for the project: Oct. 22nd to Dec. 7th

EQ: What skills and knowledge is needed to reach a deeper and more critical understanding of a meaningful concept or idea?
Over these next seven weeks we are going to think about the questions, ideas, concept and dilemmas that are authentic and meaningful to you. In order to do this we are going to read a great novel, we are going to discuss and write about major themes in the novel, we are going to produce creative works about the themes, and we are going to support you to think critically about a concept or idea that you care deeply about.

Along the way we will develop the following skills:

- Read books in a deeply engaged way
- Learn to write in various genres (narrative, creative, analytical, poetry)
- Preparing to act in a role the way trained actors do
- See the links between different types of literature and art
- Creative skills for presenting academic thinking
- The ability to critically explore a meaningful idea from various perspectives

Along the way we will build the following knowledge:

- Greater understandings about reading for different purposes
- Build awareness and knowledge about American Indigenous populations
- Greater understanding about what makes up our identity
- Shared understanding about important concepts and themes
- Expand your ability to recognize and analyze literary terms and devices
- Explore the notion of interpretation – and why it matters for learning and life

Nuts and Bolts:

Major Assignments include:
- Literary Device Detectives (small group project)
- Literacy History Assignment
- Character analysis and acting exercises
- Touchstone Text Project

Minor Assignments include (but are not limited to):
- Journal Warmups
- Note taking during lectures
- Socratic seminars and other small group discussions
- Responses (written and oral) to the readings
- Cartooning
- Reading artifact
- Vocabulary development
- Guided writing activities
- Finding partner texts for the novel

Reading Calendar:
(We will read some in class, some at home. Please keep up with the reading!)

Week One: 1-66
Week Two: 67-113
Week Three: 114-178
Week Four: 179-230

Final Word about the norms and expectations for this unit:
One of our hopes for this project is that this class culture shifts a bit from what we’ve experienced this year so far.

We are looking to all of you to really step up and take some ownership over your learning, this classroom, this curriculum, and having high expectations for one another. One of the greatest strengths of this class is the care and obvious respect you have for one another.

Let’s use this project as a chance to show our care by really sharing and listening to one another’s ideas and contributions. Let’s use this project as a chance to show your respect by really encouraging and demanding excellence from one another.

Over the next seven weeks we are going to read about, write about and discuss personal, important, meaningful and emotional ideas. The more we treat each other as a community of explorers into these great ideas, not just a class of students, then the more risks, passion and commitments we will feel safe to take on.

Touchstone Text Project

Touchstone Text Assignment
Rose/Johnston

EQ: What skills and knowledge is needed to reach a deeper and more critical understanding of a meaningful concept or idea?

The final for this project is the Touchtone Text Assignment. Worth 300 points!

What is a touchstone text?
A text of some sort (book, poem, song, work of art) that can be seen as ...
• A text that is shared by a group (like this class), returned to frequently, and is viewed as an essential part of what makes up that collective
• A text that inhabits the reader and the reader, in turn, inhabits the text into his or her life
• Texts that shape our identity in that we view ourselves differently from before we read the text to our identity that has been changed after reading it

Given the above descriptions, the Alexie novel itself might serve as a touchstone text.

Your goal for the final of this project is to produce a TOUCHSTONE TEXT of your own. This text will share your thoughts, developing views, and creative ideas about the SEED you select. Your touchstone text can take one of the following forms:

A creative short story – 5 – 7 pages typed  |  A portfolio or scrapbook of writings,
Over the next few weeks we are going to support you as you begin with your SEED and evolve it into a touchstone text. As the EQ states, this will require that you learn skills and gain knowledge necessary to reach a deeper and more critical understanding of your selected SEED.

An example of a SEED might be – Using humor to cope with pain. OR – in a question form: Where can I find hope when the future seems hopeless?

What you present is not the FINAL or CORRECT answer to the question in your SEED but it is a reflection of new understandings, evidenced by research on the topic you’ve explored and analyzed as you come to a new stance on this meaningful concept.

Grades are based on the following three criteria:

- The quality of your presentation – is it polished, reflecting multiple drafts and free of errors?
- The ability to show your thinking about the theme over time – how has your thinking changed? What changed it? What resources did you turn to? Have you considered multiple views? How has your thinking matured on this issue?
- A very thoughtful, coherent and critically determined stance on the topic you have selected.