

1-1-2015

# From Local To Global: Purpose, Process, And Product In The Narratives Of Eighth Grade Language Arts Students

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**FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: PURPOSE, PROCESS, AND PRODUCT IN THE  
NARRATIVES OF EIGHTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENTS**

by

**AMIRA SAAD KASSEM**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2015

MAJOR: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION  
(English)

Approved By:

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Advisor

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Date

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## DEDICATION

Because “The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr,” I dedicate this work to those scholars whose ink, voices and visions fueled my own ink, voice, and vision.

To S. H. N. who empowered the powerless and propelled a pedagogy of an oppressed into practice, a *conscientization* that resisted occupation and oppression...

To the spirits of Dewey, Foucault, Freire, Gramsci, Orwell, Giroux, Nieto, and hooks too...

To Helen Thomas, a trailblazer and Wayne State University alumni, who sought to keep presidents responsible for their utterances and pioneered language as a vehicle for truth and justice.

To those educators who taught me to name my thinking, to reflect, to question, and to resist...

To all who work in earnest for social justice,

I dedicate these words and this work.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In choosing to conduct this exploratory study, I was embarking on a personal journey that required many a collaborative other.

My participants, all ten of them, who enriched with their presence our 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classroom space, and gave up much of their time and peace to help me make good use of my time and this piece. Thanks for showing up each Saturday on time, in cheer, and with your stories and stances. You are all teachers in your own ways.

My advisor and mentor, Dr. Gina DeBlase, who deliberated on what I rushed through and treaded softly with bubbles of her keen critique in the margins of my oversights and over spaces of my fragile ego. To Dr. Arya, Dr. Whitin, and Dr. Abraham too whose classrooms were exemplars of engaged pedagogies that ignited the flame for this research and supplied it with fuel via speedy emails, valuable insights, keen advice, and encouraging words.

Of course, there were the collaborators at home: My husband, Maher, PHD skilled in three arts (**Person/ Husband/Dad**). You have been an invisible force in this project and the whirling wind beneath my educator wings. My daughter Julia who transcribed some of my interviews and dialogued with me extensively about the worlds in their words. Thanks for pioneering social justice in your own field. My two sons, Essam and Adam, who forfeited many Saturday privileges and Sunday playtimes to repeatedly check over my shoulder which chapter I was writing and the number of pages I now had. I do this for you both and for all the children who hope to pave in their classrooms better tomorrows.

I admit that I was never sure of my destination as I worked on this, yet, a tried and I hope true teacher, I proceeded with all your help to constructively navigate my data and experiences for something I can call this dissertation.

Shukran...Thanks!

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

### Purpose

This ethnographic exploratory case study used students' final multimodal projects in my Language Arts 8 class as a focal point for investigating the multiple discourses that went into their creation during the course of six weeks. In so doing, and because of the design and intent of these final projects, this research investigated the significance of locality to students' literacy experiences and the role of local literacies in empowering the lives of students. As Yagelski asserts, this focus necessitates our asking who the students are as much as asking about pedagogy or literacy skills (2000, p. 59). Thus, the aim of this study was to bring into question and deconstruct the grand narratives surrounding our American identity and the traditional literacies that serve to define and legitimize them.

I conducted three focus group interviews using a random sampling of 10 eighth-grade language arts students. These were followed by two additional in-depth one-on-one interviews with four focal members of the same group. The purpose of these interviews was to elicit talk about the various discourses that surrounded the production of the final projects in the context of this classroom and to define, from these students' perspectives, the literacy practices they engaged in over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year as part of their eighth-grade language arts class.

Through focus group and semi-structured interviews and employing a backward design—starting with an analysis of the end of the year project and unfurling backward to the beginning of the year—this study examined in depth the literacy processes used by these students to generate various multimodal artifacts that comprise the final project and the nature of the literacy transactions that fostered these processes over the course of one year in this Language Arts classroom. In studying how these transactions helped shape these students' literate thinking, my

intent was to investigate ways in which both local and global contexts interact to help students promote or resist social and political trends.

Moving from local to global then to local again, I explored ways in which classroom literacy practices pave the way for students to become critical thinking agents in their personal and academic lives and contributing citizens in a pluralistic democracy. Zooming in more fully on four students' experiences and backgrounds, I investigated how these students' individual discourses, acknowledged and nurtured, helped define their varying approaches to literacy learning in this language arts classroom.

As context is crucial to a wholesome understanding of a qualitative study, the background to this study was the pedagogical approach in this literacy classroom, which I analyzed as part of this study for its contributions to the final projects and insofar as it contributed to the unfolding of the literacy activities the final projects entail. Such unfolding was anchored in a deep belief that students—respected, questioned, and guided—can handle sophisticated thinking and take up intellectual challenges. As such, this study was a humble enactment of a democratic project that started, as Orwell suggests, at the language end.

## **Rationale**

**Background to the problem.** The intersection of local and global in education has never been felt as strongly as in the aftermath of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. This legislative piece, a preemptive war on a perceived illiteracy threat, paralleled in destructive measures the preemptive war President Bush declared on Iraq in 2003. Suffice it to say, both were built on false premises, and both had long lasting effects on education, society, and our national identities (Allington, 2002).

In education, twelve years later, we feel forcefully the effects. The rise of neoliberalism, with its expectations for market-based efficiencies, resulted in policy, media, and curriculum initiatives that not only offered simplistic solutions to the latest perceived literacy crisis (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 197) but shifted literacy practices and assessments from student-centered models to teacher (or technician) centered instruction. This led to a proliferation of the banking concept approach to education (Freire, 1970/2009), which relegated students to passive receptacles to be filled with facts. However, since literacy is democracy's basic ingredient (Chisholm, 1988), central to a democratic existence (Yagelski, 2000, p. 3), and because policies shape relations between human subjects and govern the flow of discourse and its local practices (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 197), it is the role of this study to reject these policies as "selective narratives that may serve overtly ideological purposes, expressing particular political and economic interests to the exclusion of others" (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 198) and offer instead counter *petit recits* (Lyotard, 1989): smaller, local stories about teachers' and students' everyday practice.

The center of my study was a project whose process is these eighth-graders *petit recits*, local narratives, on literacy education at a local middle school. With students' words and worlds at its center, this study sought to counter the grand narrative on literacy education forwarded in NCLB, which blamed teachers for perceived literacy problems, yet put agency with the government to fix them (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 203). The students themselves narrated via artifacts and interviews their lives and literacies as both they and I explored the intricate and complex ways in which the two were interrelated.

### **Beginning with the End in Mind**

I chose, for several reasons, to begin my study with the end-of-the-year project in Language Arts 8 and use it and the talk surrounding it to unfurl the story backward to the beginning of the year. Through this backward design, the project itself became a site for investigating the contexts of these students' literacy practices and how these practices helped shape both their personal and intellectual growth. In my effort to bring out the specificity of literacy to these students' experiences, and following three focused group interviews with ten randomly selected students, I zoomed in, through a case study approach, on four students from the group whose in-depth interviews best helped me investigate the personal ways in which their classroom literacy experiences as they worked on this project helped shape both their literary and social selves. In such an exploration, I aimed to understand how local experiences affect the ways in which literacy was practiced and received by this specific group of middle school students.

### **The Final Project**

This multimodal project was the final in the Language Arts 8 course. It represented the culmination of the students' collective experiences as well as the resulting artifacts and the literate thinking that helped generate them. It represented too different stages of their learning journeys—not only different themes, readings, and writings, but different modalities and methods of inquiry, too. For example, the project entailed different genres (poetry, letters, essays, lists, journal entries from the reader's notebooks, reflections) and different modalities (art, photography, painting, print, power-point, and video).

The project combined ten assignments that were either rewrites from earlier assignments, selections from the students' reader's and writer's notebooks, or choice pieces in which the

students selected both the topic and the genre of their writing, based on class discussions. The project entailed processes that students engaged in during the course of the year in which they asked questions, elicited opinions, made choices, and engaged in reflection. It was in many ways a departure from the traditional multiple-choice exam that defines many semester ends in the era of standardization. And it was an encapsulation of their year together.

The projects, and the processes involved, were intentionally designed to assist students in articulating and constructing their voices. They are a testimony to a view of literacy, not as a discrete practice that we can quantify and measure but as a social and cultural practice embedded in local contexts and having specific purposes (Street, 1984). The literacy work students engaged in during the course of the year is encapsulated in this project which is described in detail in Appendix G. It honored students' particular backgrounds and listened to their particular histories told in their particular ways about their particular struggles and successes. No two projects had the same theme, and each student finished and presented a project to the class. That would not have happened at the beginning of the year—the first week of school—when students would show up after school begging to be excused from presenting their token of identity assignment. In fact, many were begging in the final week for more than the 3-5 minute time interval allowed for final presentations. Some did not beg; they just took the time they needed.

As such, these projects were a validation of the students' experiences, colored by their perceptions and enriched by their perspectives. They looked at their histories as learners, considered their statuses as outsiders, and examined issues of redress. In this way, the work they did over the course of the year may also be considered a blueprint for what they are becoming. In fact, one of the project's assignments asked students to project themselves into the future by envisioning a possible future self.

In the particulars of these students' literacies and lives are our collective longings as a people and as a nation. And so, this study sought to explore and *read* the other to define ourselves, to understand our commonalities, and to celebrate, or debate, our differences. For in our multiplicities, our American identities intersect, mesh, collide, and branch off to a collective destiny, to a common end. We are the sum of all of our parts. In what they say is them, me, and, as Tennyson reminds us, all that we have met. From the onset, my efforts coincided with those of my students "to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 75). The process of doing so became crucial to understanding this quest.

This study was thus a systematic inquiry into the end result of these eighth-graders' presence in a classroom that had at its core the practice of freedom and the search for justice. For both me, as a "citizen teacher" (DeStigter, 2001) and for my students, these projects, the embodiment of our collective practice, are sites of investigation and reflection. With my ethnographic tools, I aimed to excavate for meanings I can extend to other sites, to other years, to other students, and to other teachers.

### **Researcher as "Citizen Teacher"**

I borrow DeStigter's (2001) notion of a "citizen teacher" to define my role as one who not only uses "rational discourse and the influences of power and authority" to participate in "democratic deliberations" in her English classroom, but also recognizes the power of "local, affective relations among diverse people" in the "equitable distribution of such authority" (p. 13). In this study, I connected my day-to-day work as a teacher to the broader social contexts in which this work takes place. The values I bring to my work as a critical literacy teacher "to empower the powerless, to transform social inequities and injustices" (McLaren, 1995, p. 29) stem from my daily observations of the "degradation of democracy in our nation's public policy



and civic life” but also in the “localized settings of schools” and “public spheres of U.S. society” (DeStigter, 2001, p. 13). In the scope of this study, and from the perspective of a citizen teacher, the sociopolitical and the educational merge into one as “schools are recognized to simultaneously reflect and contribute to the inequities of the broader society” (DeStigter, 2001, p. 14).

### **Students as Agents**

Both in literacy and in democracy, agency, the human capability to exert influence on our actions and environment (Bandura, 2009, p. 8), must rest with individuals. This study positioned students as agents with “critical consciousness” who can “reflect” to achieve “praxis” (Freire, 1970/2009). This is a central tenet of a practice of freedom pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2009) in which students “deal critically and creatively with reality” in order to transform their worlds. They were not talked at, acted upon, chosen for, or directed entities. They were rather authors of their own stories, makers of their own minds, and designers of their own destinies. Neither consumers of information nor products, the teens in this study took up real issues and discussed serious concerns. The literacy events (Heath, 1982, p. 93) discussed in this study were often occasions for the students to interact with each other over their writings, bring to them their own sometimes conflicting understandings, and interpret them through their own specific lenses. The curriculum was a regular part of these students’ studies in this language arts class and was not especially designed for this research project.

**Competing identities.** The study brings to bear these American voices, in their multiplicities, and the “demographic mosaic” (Nieto, 2010) they characterize. In their differences, the students in this study represent changing faces of an evolving nation, a notion that itself counters the grand narrative of a singular American identity. The demographic make-

up of this particular middle school as well as the community in which it is located resembles, to a large extent, that of our nation. European Americans, in their differences, still represent the majority population (70%). However, minorities both in this school, and in our nation, are becoming tomorrow's majority for, in Nieto's words, "the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that from 2000 to 2050, the total population will have grown from 282.1 million to 419.9 million, with whites expected to comprise only 50.1 percent of the total U.S. population by 2050, compared with 69.4 percent in 2000" (p. 50). Legal immigration, according to Nieto, will also be responsible for creating this new demography resulting in the number of foreign-born or first-generation U.S. residents (56 million) to triple the number in 1970 (p. 55). "The growth in immigration," Nieto writes, "has been accompanied by an increase in linguistic diversity," and that "currently, 18 percent of the total U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home" (p. 55).

However, and though this study explored the variations among the students in it, it did not necessarily investigate only the linguistic and ethnic variations. It also explored other differences that defined this study's population, such as economic factors. More than ever before, in this school and across the nation, we have a student population that is plagued by economic concerns. Close to 50% of this school's population receive free or reduced-cost lunch. And this economic issue is part of a national trend. According to the 2010 census, the poverty rate in the United States stood at 15.1 percent—48 million people—the highest since 1993. Economic setbacks are, of course, compounded for minorities. Poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics greatly exceed the national average. In 2010, 27.4 percent of blacks and 26.6 percent of Hispanics were poor, compared to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 12.1 percent of Asians. Poverty rates are highest for families headed by single women. In 2010, 31.6 percent of

households headed by single women were poor. Children represent a disproportionate share of the poor in the United States; they are 24 percent of the total population, but 36 percent of the poor population. In 2010, 16.4 million children, or 22.0 percent, were poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010, pp. 68-73).

I talk about issues such as poverty simultaneously with my research purpose not to examine their dire effects on my students' academic experiences, in which they unquestionably play a critical role. I summon these issues rather to shed light on social disparities that are out of students' control, yet mitigate, as Catherine Compton-Lilly (2004) suggests, assumptions on the part of educators about our students and their families that prevent the type of partnerships required to make the literacy classroom an authentic arena for the practice of freedom. If we are to forge the partnerships that critical literacy requires, according to Compton-Lilly, "Teachers must come to know and respect the families of their students" and avoid "simplistic explanations" that "blame parents" (p. 34) and their children for their economic or political powerlessness. The whole notion of local literacies is predicated upon the need to synchronize English language teaching with the sociocultural, political, and economical contexts in which it takes place (Wallace, 2002) and thus to allow for a "situated practice" that works from a bottom-up fashion rather than through top-down expertise delivered styles. Compton-Lilly stresses the need for English teachers to understand their students' backgrounds and to help them thus combat "systematic oppression" in a "social landscape" that begs "extensive restructuring" (p. 34).

This study reflected a pedagogy that strove to make room in its center for students, in their competing and multiple identities and across their differences, to view literacy as a relationship they have with their worlds, both local and global, and to use it to create and recreate

themselves to intervene in their own contexts (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 173). That is, literacy became a means of engagement, reflection, and action, and a tool to help them make sense of their ways of being and becoming not only in the smaller world of this classroom and school but also in the larger social and political contexts, as contributing and active members of a pluralistic nation. At its center, students' work and words spoke their experiences—local and specific—and perhaps allowed us to understand the various ways we might have misunderstood them and their literacies.

**Deconstructing grand narratives.** The grand American narrative has constantly framed poverty in America as a personal lack: lack of initiative, lack of investment, lack of character, and lack of personal responsibility. Kozol (2005) claims that the existing poverty and segregation in our nation, and the ensuing and unspoken shame resulting from them, are covered in “linguistic sweeteners, semantic somersaults, and surrogate vocabularies” (p. 21), employed to absolve ourselves of having to conduct real and candid conversations about poverty and segregation in our schools.

And it is a grand narrative in politics as well. According to a recent University of North Carolina study that looked at media coverage and US poverty policy over the last five decades, (Rose & Baumgartner, 2012), media discussion of the topic has shifted from focusing less on its structural and social causes to personal portrayals of the poor as “cheaters and chiselers” and of welfare programs as “doing more harm than good” (Abstract, p. 1).

The last presidential national election (Election, 2012) is a classic example of this point. Many of us still remember nominee Mitt Romney's comments during a fundraiser in which he blamed the 47% who don't pay taxes for our nation's economic woes. Romney told wealthy donors that 47% of Americans are government freeloaders who see themselves as “victims” and

who can't be persuaded to take personal responsibility for their lives. "My job is not to worry about those people," Romney said. "I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." The remarks, reminiscent of many I hear daily in school spaces, pierced our national consciousness in a way that few blunders do and became a defining element of Romney's candidacy, which he lost, ironically, having reaped votes in that same percentage upon which he pontificated.

My job here is not to wish words away. It is rather to expose, for the purpose of this study, the diverse range of backgrounds that play into our American identity and to justify the purpose of my research, the deconstruction of a metanarrative that serves to alienate and marginalize diverse populations. It is also to point out the need, as this study proposes in its purpose and design, to make the language classroom an arena for the interplay of diverse thinking. Gee (2001) states that language is neither neutral nor objective but communicates rather "perspectives on experience and action in the world, often in contrast to alternative and competing perspectives" (p. 716). This study, like the project on which it centers, allows for competing perspectives to surface and flourish, so that a demography of difference becomes a source of wealth in the classroom and serves also to pave the way for a healthy and defining element of our democracy.

Dewey's ideal of democracy (1916/2012) posits that "full and free" communication allows people to identify their common interests, to act together in pursuit of these interests, and then to reap the fruits of such collective activity. This role of the English classroom and of the literacy events that define it help establish this type of culture required to make literacy a situated practice (The New London Group, 1996). Recognizing always that culture is a "fractured, porous, and contested terrain" that is neither "a coherent nor a shared value system," DeStigter

(2001) proposes that therein lies the notion of identity as having the capacity to emerge with “democratizing potential” (2001, p. 17). Here, and again, agency must rest in the student and his/her teacher too, both of whom must recognize that sociocultural forces definitely influence but do not define who people are or what they think or do.

Poverty is only one of the many sociocultural issues that define the diversity in our classrooms. Other factors play key roles even when we ourselves are not cognizant of their existence. In an attempt to show how issues of gender, race, class, and ethnic background complicate our understanding of literacy, Yagelski (2000) talks about his and his brother’s lives revealing how reading and writing functioned differently for each of them, despite the fact that they were both males raised in the same community and in the same household. Though “subjected to the same discourses—of education, of gender roles, of sports, of work, of economic possibility,” he seems convinced that he and his brother entered these discourses differently due to differing inherent ideologies that played out differently for each of them as literate people (p. 28). He thus, as does this study, portrays how complex literacy practices are as we use them to understand the construction of social selves, a premise he uses to argue for the need to narrate local literacies in their inherent unpredictabilities (Yagelski, 2000, Ch. 2). Literacy, according to Yagelski (2000), is far from simple. It is ambiguous, complex, complicated, and always local. Hence, we need to understand the need to study literacy in its own specific environments and in its multiple facets and purposes.

### **Literacy as a Process of Democratization**

Because it is more, literacy must do more. My purpose in this study is based on my belief that literacy pedagogy must serve a higher and nobler purpose of leveling the field and empowering the player, hence making literacy a tool for “navigating and reconstructing

boundaries across discourse communities” with the ultimate goal of teaching middle school students “how to participate in and construct a just and democratic world from the complex world into which they are venturing” (Moje & Sutherland, 2003, p. 149). This purpose cannot be served without taking literacy out of its traditional role, an autonomous literacy divorced of its contexts, and contextualizing it, embedding it in its natural environments, to serve those who use it. Autonomous literacy, like autonomous democracy, has no place without agents and contexts. So, too, it must be outplaced in our classrooms though it may live in the minds and practice of some, the likes of those who refuse to acknowledge that minority vote in America won the election, just as they refuse to see that English education today represents a literacy embedded in the context of the lives of those who we serve. Their power is our power.

### **The Agency of Self-Definition**

In deconstructing a larger American narrative of an essentialized American identity, this study seeks also to question the narrative of a singular prevalent view of the American adolescent. This view, part of a prevalent discourse of adolescence in the media, portrays teenagers as individuals in crisis (Alverman, 2009) spiraling out of control, heeding equally turbulent peers, and other such essentializing notions. Many of these views fail to acknowledge how schools, and society, are failing to fathom the complexity of adolescence, and thus partaking, according to William Ayers (2005), in “construct(ing) the myths” that “construct us” (page ix).

Especially in our present era of high stakes testing, these myths seem to gain high ground and momentum as decontextualized literacy assessments and sensationalized versions of the adolescents who frequently flash before us on national screens. Our national consciousness is

heavily burdened by statistics that represent nothing more than the autonomous model that neoliberalism propagates frequently and fully.

One such example is the recent NAEP (2011) results, which state that only about one quarter of eighth-graders performed at the proficient level or higher in writing. Reading scores, the report proclaims, were equally dismal (only 34% of eighth graders scored proficient). These autonomous test results, together with the disengagement that flashes on adolescent faces via our screens, portray images of troubled and incarcerated youth, an abandoned generation left to fend for itself. The frenzy is fed by isolated and recent national events, a part of a long trend and tradition, which posits teens as disturbed, hormone-driven groups, weighing heavily on our national conscience and national budgets and falling off cognitive cliffs, visions which present challenges to our American narrative of exceptionalism and superiority (Giroux, 2012). It is the aim of this study to challenge the official narrative of failing literacy students and offer instead alternative images of who these eighth-grade students using literacy are and how they view both their words and worlds.

### **Adolescents: Critically Literate, Engaged, and Productive**

As capitalist consumption and the media behind it continue to destroy the notion of the adolescent as anything but a canny consumer (Giroux, 2012; Chinn 2009), critical literacies offer a way out. In allowing them healthy modes of self-expressions and affirmations, in our classrooms, teens are less likely to engage in the destructive behavior that flashes on screens daily. In authoring their positions and perspectives, we allow them to become producers in their own lives. This study asks eighth-graders not only to generate ideas but also to produce talk around them. In this, it takes teens from consumerist roles that society and the media has allotted



them and positions them in roles of intellectuals who have much more on their minds than consumerist cares.

Faced with the above research and the data, this study also heeds a call by Cook-Sather (2002) “to embrace more fully the work of authorizing students’ perspectives in conversations about schooling and reform—to move toward trust, dialogue, and change in education” (p. 12). The study utilizes student voice to engage middle school students in inducing the type of substantial changes—both in their attitudes toward education and in society—as one mirrors the other, by engaging them in talk about both.

Since literacy is often used in its narrow sense to denote reading and writing, I, like Langer (2009), find it useful to focus in this study on what she terms “literate thinking” (p. 51). According to Langer, this concept extends beyond the acts of reading and writing themselves to also include what the mind thinks about and does when people gain knowledge, reason with it, and communicate about it in a variety of contexts. Literate thinking, she affirms,

assumes individual, cultural, and group differences and leaves room for teachers to invite students to use what they understand and have experienced as a starting place for learning. It expects differing perspectives and gives students a place to try ideas out, to manipulate what they think, and to use language in ways that help them refine and rethink. It moves students to become analytic about the content at hand as they gain skills and knowledge to relate to new content and learning. Thus, literate thinking is literacy with a bigger than traditional context. (p. 51)

This study proposes to take up Langer’s (2009) view of literate thinking, which is critically needed at a time when educational reforms have become relegated to “experts” who are far removed from the world of school and literacy. It fills a gap by exploring how local middle school narratives question and deconstruct the premise of an ongoing metanarrative on literacy education.

Thus, this study is also significant because it situates literacy in its natural place, the lives and experiences of the students (Street, 1984), and sees it as part and parcel of a bigger and wider Discourse (Gee, 1990). It thus questions the notion of literacy as an autonomous entity—with all the political implications—applied in much the same way one applies ointment to relieve a rash. In the unveiling of these students' literacy processes via these projects is a deeper unveiling of the lives that went into their production, with all of the social, political, and economic webs in which they are entangled. The words and images these projects depict represent funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) students bring to their literacy practices and ones that help them make sense of both their words and their worlds. As such, unlike autonomous literacy, the literacies used by students in this project are not at all skin deep; they are deeply and definitely about the skins that they speak (Delpit, 2008, p. 47).

Especially when art and music have been moved to the margins of the curriculum, this multimodal project and this study offer insights about the need for more rather than less of these forms of expression in students' lives. In its multimodal approach (Kress, 2000), literacy is encompassing and egalitarian. It recognizes all sign systems as valid and useful. In bringing to use their multiple forms of expression, this project affirms students' ways of knowing and being and allows full and free communication of those ways.

Nor does this study stop at the local level. It fills a gap not by suggesting isolated strategies but by drawing links, building bridges between the local and the global, the specific and the general. In that way, it reiterates claims that local literacies weigh heavily on the national scale. Also, and because it is exploratory in nature, this study does not see a specific end in mind. It is, as Freire (1970/2009) suggests, “imbued with a profound trust of people and their creative power” (p. 56).

A major component of this study is of course the pedagogical process itself, narrated by students and their artifacts. As “public intellectuals” (a call by Giroux), teachers bear the responsibility of recognizing the high tides of educational change, literacies at their center, seizing them boldly and shrewdly, and via them, conducting their students far out to seas of possibilities. Should we miss these opportunities, our and our students’ lives will remain confined to existence’s shallow bays, fated to repeat and repress these nudges of fate (or free will), however one chooses to “read” them, and miss massive opportunities to balance the scales of justice, equality, and power in our lives. Perhaps Shakespeare did not name it such, but such is the case for critical literacy. This also is the case for this ethnographic case study. As such, these are my research questions:

- 1) In what ways does the practice of freedom, enacted through classroom literacy events, empower students personally and academically in the English classroom and also as critical and engaged citizens in a larger social project of change and agency?
- 2) What happens to classroom literacy events when teachers aim to situate them within students’ lived experiences and authentic concerns?
- 3) In what ways can local narratives of middle school students problematize and/or deconstruct the grand American narrative of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy?

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

### Introduction

This ethnographic case study examined a variety of eighth-grade students' end-of-the-year texts and the talk around their construction. Such constructions represent each of these students' use of literacy to make sense of the world which they inhabit and also the different and perhaps similar ways they each engage in the discourses of that world. The study's aim was therefore to examine the ways literacy functions as an individual act of local self-construction though also embedded in certain social and political contexts.

This literature review is truly a theoretical mosaic. Critical theory, with Freire's concept of education as the practice of freedom at its core, drives the research. Woven into this literature review and informing my research proposal are Dewey's notion of democratic education and major theoretical theories of social constructivism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism. I initiate my review by examining the purpose of education in general and of literacy education specifically. I then employ a poststructuralist analysis of language and discourse to argue that literacy, the writing act specifically, is used by the eighth-graders in this study to perceive and perform a self within multiple and changing discourses that are sometimes also competing and conflicting. The literature proposes that a variety of factors specific to each writer's unique situation and experiences allows the agency inherent in self-interest, a term I will later explain, to mediate this construction of self. Our efforts at shaping literacy and thus the student/writer self, I argue, must therefore too necessarily be contextualized and localized in each student's unique and specific discourses.

A framework that encompasses such understanding of both writer and the writing act would aid in developing meaningful pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing that move

the discussion of literacy from arbitrary preconceived standards to a discussion of the writer's own discourses. This renders the writer's self as a natural site for literacy's practices and purposes. Such rendering addresses both literacy's many possibilities and limitations. In discussing discourses, I summon postmodern theorist Michel Foucault's (1972) understanding of discourses not as signifying elements or symbols but rather as practices that constitute the objects of which they speak (p. 49). After all, many postmodern theorists such as Foucault (1972) have already established that meaning unravels through discourse which in essence constitutes our world. These thinkers reveal not only that words and discourses are often unstable and fluid, but also, and equally as significant, that these shifting words and discourses often result in a transient and fragmented nature of self that is formed by them. It is this self that is strikingly absent in versions of standardized literacies which plague official discourses that are rampant with perceptions of presumed individual selves that are often devoid of their social and political contexts, and thus delivered as standard, unified, identifiable, and fixed entities.

However, the nature of the writing self is not the sole debated discourse. There is also significant recent research that has focused so much on what we now refer to almost unthinkingly as the "dominant discourse" (Gee, 1989) and the need to distance students, especially those from nonmainstream groups, from its oppressive effects. This dominant discourse often results in isolating and totalizing categories such as gender, race, religion, and sexuality. Such intensive focus on categories has sometimes rendered it easy to lose sight of those individual student writers trying to find places to call their own in their daily discourses. Thus, and as we acknowledge and understand the social and the political configurations that impact and even sometimes define acts of reading and writing, we must and with equal earnestness attempt not to obscure the prominence of the locality of these acts of writing by

recognizing the many possibilities in which each individual student, equipped with a unique set of differences, can exercise an agency propelled by self-interest within such literacy acts.

In highlighting *difference* as it applies to diverse discourses, it is worthwhile to pause here and examine its meaning and relevance to the individual writing act. The word, after all, is often used to refer in superficial and essentializing ways to race or class or gender. Such superficial references fall short of understanding and identifying (and ultimately honoring) the many complex distinctions among individual writers and readers *within* these very broad social categories. According to Maureen Hourigan (1994), these larger categories must and always do coalesce in different and creative ways but, as she well affirms, none can safely or accurately predict or measure in everyday situations, whether in life or in the classroom, how individuals will choose to represent themselves and their gender, race and class identities (p. 73). It is also difficult to forecast how these complex identities will manifest themselves in individual literate acts. Paul Smith (1988) helps explain these manifestations by pointing out how our students constructed within larger given discourses, might be understood as *selves* or *individuals* equipped with the potential to develop agency within those discourses.

In helping expound on such local approaches to literacy, this study was designed to help put forth a pedagogical methodology that recognizes acts of writing that our students engage in as specific acts of self-representation and performance in which students are able to exercise an agency that is often missing in much of their daily lives. The focus is on understanding, via the texts and the talk around these texts during the interviews, how these individual writers used their contexts to construct their writing and themselves via their writing, in ways that matter to them. Such an approach to literacy is essential in aiding the development of effective literacy

pedagogies in schools, where literacy remains, for the better part, simply and poorly understood and enacted.

### **Dis-coursing Education**

The language that inhabits—inhibits too, perhaps—the world of education today is, to put it mildly, a curious one, and one worthy of examination, Orwellian style, for it too, “is in a bad way,” and has become “the defense of the indefensible” (Orwell, 1946, p. 1). Reminiscent of political language, it has become a method for “concealing or preventing thought” rather than “expressing” it (p. 3). All one has to do to be convinced of this blatant claim is to visit an educational facility, attend a professional development event, read a pamphlet from the field, or suffer through many staff meetings. A great number of educational exchanges today have become little more than bizarre bazaars of acronyms—LD, ELL, RTI, ADD, ADHD, AYP, APR, LEP, SEP, SIP, IEP—sound bites strung solemnly in the long and arduous melody of attacks on public education and a field flooded with analogies borrowed (or stolen) from medicine and money metaphors.

In fact, the terminology that has flooded educational arenas today—of our educational discourse, so to speak—is a fantastic testimony to how we have come to view both our students and ourselves. For how can we practice freedom when it is relegated by default to those who coin and own the terminology? The language of education today, what Giroux terms “hedge-fund and casino capitalism” rhetoric (2012), its acronyms so reminiscent of maladies, medicines, and money matters, renders students (and their teachers, by association) products by many measures, yielding prices and profits, and accruing losses too. Hence, as Giroux (2012) emphasizes, this kind of rhetoric “harnesses schools to the needs of corporations and the warfare

state” (2012, op-ed) thus failing to recognize them as individuals or even as human beings at all. They are discussed as objects on an assembly line or patients in hospital rooms.

It is thus easy, in both our social and political arenas, for one to feel helplessly lost in a state of stupor, in seas of stagnant language and logic, a vicious cycle of words. Like Orwell (1946), I assert that words are not mere nature. Rather, their decadence, their collapse, results from economic and political causes, that language *is indeed* an instrument that we shape for our own purposes. And like Orwell, I recognize that our political predicaments are closely connected to decadent language practices (p. 1), and I intend to bring about some improvement by starting at the pedagogical end. This is my purpose in this study and in the critical literacy classroom.

### **Educating for Democracy**

An attempt to explicate the purpose of education here seems futile as we still have yet to agree, as a society, on what that purpose might be. And while the viewpoints vary, and the narratives clash, in the highly utilitarian environment of our day, much of that purpose seems to lie in raising competent employees to take on the reins of a faltering economy, and little seems to exist, in public documents at least, about the need to raise a democratic consciousness. That is not altogether surprising if we consider Joel Spring’s (2010) claim that public schools do not necessarily promote a common good and are rather structures invested primarily in economic and political gain (p. 4). Spring emphasizes the strong role teachers play in the schooling of children when he asserts that individual and social benefits result only from the curriculum we elect to teach (p. 4), which, according to Spring, requires critical thinking on our part because of its influence on society (p. 4). In vesting the power of critical thought in the curricula we choose to teach, Spring recognizes the might of the weight placed on the classroom teacher who must lead the way to a healthy democratic consciousness.



Detailing an ever-changing historical role of public schools, Spring sees that public schools originally sought to develop citizenship, promote economic opportunities, and reduce crime (p. 5). These goals remain prominent even today. However, and as Spring demonstrates, these purposes were expanded to encounter the needs of a growing population and a new set of problems that accompanied such growth (pp. 6-8). This fact rendered schools an arena for political intervention. Schools were used as tools to solve social, political, and economic problems. This, according to Spring, is the reason they become targets for critical politicians who continue to try to abdicate themselves from the responsibilities of finding solutions to social and economic problems and find it easier to blame schools for them. This tendency to shift issues from an economic and social level to a personal level made reform of the individual take precedence over social reform (p. 26) and plagued the world of education with anti-intellectual projects aimed more at economic gain than democratic deliberations.

In the context of a global economy, Spring asserts, students are defined economically and their perceived value becomes vested only in how they, as human resources, are able to potentially contribute to economic growth and productivity (p. 26). This type of thinking goes against the foundations of a democratic education, and it is precisely what leads Spring, and us too, to question whether economic prosperity and growth are good enough goals if the quality of our lives remains stagnant and deteriorates (p. 26). Spring wonders what, if not education, can improve the quality of living and ultimately contribute to a healthy and prosperous nation. And one must wonder along and search for answers.

### **Education for Freedom**

One answer comes directly from Dewey in his book *Democracy In Education* (1916/2012). Dewey regards education as cultivation (p. 10), a process whose function is to

continuously reconstruct experience rather than preparing student for some remote future (p. 46). Dewey discusses the important role that a community whose members are driven by a common interest plays in this process of enculturation (p. 7). And while Dewey acknowledges that one can be educated simply through socializing and living with others (p. 7), he equally emphasizes that merely getting people together is no guarantee for this socially influenced process (p. 7).

Neither is time. For according to Dewey, education cannot cease when one leaves school, as the purpose of school education must be threefold: to organize faculties of growth, to help instill skills that will help students learn from life, and be life learners, and to make the living process a simultaneous learning one too. That Dewey regards as the finest schooling product (p. 31). Formal education builds a society—“one word and many things” (p. 47)—because it makes possible the transmission of a complex society’s various resources and achievements (p. 8). At the heart of such transmissions, Dewey places communication, which he defines as “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” and one that has mutual benefits since “it modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it” (p. 9). However, here Dewey cautions much against a stagnant and routine communication that stays on the mechanical level and thus loses its power to educate (p. 7). The spark in this process may be a sound bite, he asserts, for sounding into another ear can convey an idea (p. 12), but the effective nature of it is a sharing and partnership that helps the learner partake in what Dewey calls the “emotional attitude of the group” (p. 12). Such attitude provides the learner with an opportunity to escape the limitations of his birth environment and expand it into a broader social environment (p. 15). Such process, Dewey insists, can only take place through communication which is identical to social life (p. 7). He concludes that all communication which in essence represents genuine social life is always educative (p. 7).

In other words, and to use Lesley Rex's (2010) term in *Discourse of Opportunity*, schools become places where students enter *discourses of opportunity* (Ch. 2) that allow them to shape their powers, form fresh habits, and arouse new feelings and emotions. This conscious transformation, a process ever in flux, represents what Dewey (1897) regards as the only true education, which stimulates "the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (p. 77). Especially in the context of our times, in our fast-paced environments, when it is impossible to predict just what our world will be like in the next decade or two, preparing our students and ourselves for the future means giving them the tools, and freedom, to think about and for themselves. Dewey (1897) rejects the claim that anyone can prepare a student for any set of future conditions (p. 77). Instead, he advises that preparation for the future requires us to prepare children to take charge of themselves by sharpening their faculties of thinking and experience and enhancing their judgement and critical thinking so that they are able to grasp their living and working conditions and live economical and efficient lives (p. 77).

This notion of education, not as preparation for life but as life itself, resonates also in Paulo Freire's own vision of purpose in education. According to Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2009), man's occupation, preoccupation rather, is to reclaim his humanization, to liberate both himself and the oppressor (p. 44). For what higher purpose is there for education but freedom—for only then can we help free ourselves—to think for ourselves—and invite others to share in this freedom and thinking? For without these two, we become brutes stripped of our humanity. We become guilty of taking others' humanity as well. Dehumanization, Freire suggests, is a two way street that affect those who propagate it and those who suffer it (p. 44). The latter proclamation/liberation situates education in the life of the person and not outside of him.

Like Dewey, Freire situates people in a world that shapes and is shaped by them through communication, for life can only hold meaning through communication (p. 77). The goal of a liberating education, for Freire, becomes not a process of transferring information but rather of active cognizance (p. 79) to which dialogues are indispensable. Both student and teacher, in a collaborative reading and writing of both the word and the world, stand responsible for each other's mutual growth (p. 80) and authority rests no longer with the teacher, but on freedom's side (p. 80).

Thus, education, according to Freire and in the broadest sense, is essentially “a practice of freedom,” which denies that “man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (p. 81). Critical pedagogy acknowledges, honors, and affirms such claims to freedom and sets such claims into motion via literacy.

### **Re-conceptualizing Literacy**

Thus, literacy, and its agents too, as I will discuss later, are entrenched in contexts, embedded in [*with*, Freire would add] a social world in flux that changes and is changed by them and are political, politicized entities. It is precisely this premise that is the starting point for any discussion of what purpose the literacy classroom must serve in the lives of those who enter it.

A fair discussion of the purpose of literacy education must begin with a definition of literacy itself, a task as complex as the term itself. Gee (1990) argues that literacy is not limited to words but comprises the full set of attributes and attitudes—“Discourses”—that one brings to a social interaction. This echoes Scribner and Cole's (1981) earlier definition of literacy as a “set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it” (p. 236). According to them, literacy is not simply learning to

read and write certain scripts. It is rather applying such reading and writing knowledge for specific purposes and in specific contexts (p. 236).

This local literacy situated in the lives of the students (Street, 1995) clashes with a reductive autonomous view that is prevalent in policy and that takes literacy out of its social and cultural contexts and views it as a series of discrete skills. Additionally, Scribner's and Cole's stance frames literacy in a semiotic perspective (Street, 1984) based on the notion that every human construction is a text that is composed of signs and therefore has potential for providing a meaning to be constructed by its readers but is also contested in relations of power.

The New London Group (1996) suggested an even broader set of literacy practices, multimodalities and multiliteracies that reflected and sometimes refracted the ideological, cultural, and economic perspectives that were lacking in conventional notions of literacy. These linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, gestural, and multimodal expressions propelled many researchers to reject "a seemingly indestructible belief, so commonly expressed in our public discussions about school reform and literacy crises, that literacy is a relatively straightforward matter of learning a set of rules by which to communicate through written language" (Yagelski, 2000, p. 29) and forward instead a broader, more encompassing one that underscores "complex relationships among local acts of reading and writing...and broader economic cultural, political, and social forces" (p. 47).

But the more encompassing these literacies seem, the tighter the grips of policy became on the English classroom in the form of mandates and assessments that did little to advance the purpose of English education and the literacy classroom (Allington, 2002). If anything, such discourses serve only to alarm the national consciousness into permissive passivity and steer

discussions away from qualitative comprehensive efforts to quantitative measures, something else that is not literacy, but skills discrete and divorced from contexts.

In that respect, literacy in public discourse, like democracy, has become a myth of a sort that we ourselves construct as it too continues to construct us. In the political sphere, wars (for literacy and democracy) were waged and continue to be under various auspices and pretexts: no child left behind, no nation left undemocratic, the war against illiteracy, the war against terror. And when conflict ensues, sides are selected—if you are not with us, you are against us—and this battle for our children’s minds becomes a battle against their wills. No dialogues of freedom. No questions asked.

### **Goals of Literacy Education**

Aronowitz (2009), in his analysis of Freire’s work on literacy and critical pedagogy, provides one comprehensive goal that Freire envisioned for literacy education. Literacy did not prepare students to manage careers but rather to manage their own lives. This self-management meant that they needed to fulfill three goals of education. The first was to know themselves and their worlds better through constant reflection. The second entailed becoming aware of the forces that have shaped their lives and thinking. And the third, perhaps the end result of the first two, is to help produce a new life through a new set of conditions (p. ix).

These three goals of literacy education were echoed in a collective statement at the May 2005 Conference on English Education by a group of eminent researchers in the field who unabashedly admitted to the marginalization, in recent years, both of themselves and their discipline from the educational and political scene (p. 278). Unequivocally, they voiced their main goal for the teaching of language arts, which reflected both Freire’s and Dewey’s visions for a liberating education. The success of English education, they affirmed, lies in a just society

and a critically literate citizenry (p. 279). “English education,” they asserted, “more than any other academic discipline, because of its focus on language and representation, contributes vitally to the process by which our society defines, understands, maintains, and *transforms* [emphasis in original text] itself” (p. 279).

With such high expectations for the literacy classroom, the conferences went on to define the role of the literacy classroom in the current social and political climate. It [literacy] should thus represent a tool for change; for personal and social investment and commitment (p. 280). Especially in these turbulent times where truth is indistinguishable from lies (p. 281), and in this game of “discrepancy detection-read critical thinking,” (p. 289)- this “doublespeak political environment,” (p. 290)- literacy requires a constant challenge of “word-reality relationships” (p. 289) because “the correspondence between words and reality can never be certain” (p. 290). The English classroom is thus, as the conference reiterates, part of a grand social project, and English teachers thus have “a solemn responsibility to resist ideological domination and to help their students learn to do the same” (p. 290) so that we hold “all authorities to account for their utterances” (p. 290).

### **Words, Worlds, and Wars: A Crisis of Schooling, Democracy, and Public Life**

It is this holding others—ourselves too—responsible for their utterances that forms fertile democratic grounds. In a world such as ours, where words start wars, and truth and propaganda mesh, it is contingent upon us to take extreme care in how we receive language, how we generate it, and how we live in and with the world through it. Socializing students to confront the lies, the propaganda, and the trials of their times in order to exercise their own agency and alter the world in which they live, and perhaps the ones which lives in them too, requires the kind of transformative education that critical pedagogy advocates. The need to teach student to do so is

especially urgent at a time where those in power dominate society, not through Hitlerian tactics, but rather through what Antonio Gramsci (1971) terms hegemony, domination through ideological control.

### **Words and Wars**

On March 19, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq. In his war-waging speech, Bush vowed that every effort would be made to spare the lives of innocent civilians, that the campaign would be “broad and concerted” and would use “decisive force,” that no outcome but victory would be accepted, and, of course, America's freedom would be defended, and freedom would be brought to others. Bush proclaimed, “The people of the United States and our friends and allies would not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder.”

And though casualties of conflicts come in many forms, and the accuracy of the information available on different types of The Iraq War casualties varies greatly, the numbers remain astounding, with a total of 4,486 U.S. soldiers killed (I will not venture to count those maimed or scarred). The casualties on the Iraqi side are much less precise. Both civilian and military estimates remain conflicting and a function of reporters and human rights groups. Still, Opinion Research Business (ORB) poll, an independent polling agency located in London (Friday, 14 September 2007) estimated 1,033,000 violent deaths.

Casualties, though, are just one effect of war's many atrocities. Volumes could be written on the effects of this war on those who survived it, both here and abroad; a majority who were displaced physically, emotionally, and financially; and a minority that reaped outrageous profits and brought in huge gains. Perhaps the greatest disappointment of all was that this whole war turned out to be quite unfounded. A CNN article claimed that President Bush and his top



aides publicly made 935 false statements about the security risk posed by Iraq in the two years following September 11, 2001. The article goes on to state that “the Bush administration led the nation to war on the basis of erroneous information that it methodically propagated” (Study: Bush, aides made 935 false statements in run-up to war, January 24, 2008). But, see, as Bush himself affirms, in his line of work, “You got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda” (Athena Performing Arts Center at Greece Athena Middle and High School in Rochester, NY Tuesday, May 24, 2005).

The danger in this kind of control lies in the fact that instead of resisting it, the public propagates it via what Gramsci (1971) calls the superstructures of society (media, arts, and entertainment), which themselves manufacture the consent of the oppressed, a “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group,” (p. 12) where the people tacitly succumb to domination through acceptance of assertions of truth propagated by those in power regardless of how these assertions contradict their interests and experiences. Their socialization does not allow them to see “that this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) makes this broad point a specific (and local) case in point when she talks about her own educational journey, which began as a “messianic zeal” and “pure pleasure” to learn (p. 3) in the southern feminist black milieu of segregation and, ironically, during the era of integration when she and her classmates were bussed to white schools, morphed into informational knowledge only where “too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority” (p. 3). There, and true to Gramsci’s

claim, school became a place where hooks learned that “obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us” (p. 3).

As in hooks’ own experiences, social institutions and specifically schools reflect and mediate what Bourdieu (1979) calls *dominant cultural capital* thus helping ensure generational continuity of the cultural (and, hence, the socioeconomic and political) privilege held by the dominant classes in capitalist societies. Lankshear and Lawler (1987) too agree that schools help maintain a political power imbalance because they represent structures where the dominant class interests are maintained at the expense of subordinate class interests (p. 25).

By the same token, Giroux and Freire (1988) reject the notion that school knowledge is objective by asserting that school knowledge represents a particular dominant culture, and a privileged discourse that is constructed through a “selective process of emphases and exclusions” (p. xxx). This plays a significant role in legitimating and reproducing certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, and ways of relating to the world that privilege the type of knowledge and skills that only certain students have received from their family backgrounds, gender positioning, and/or class situations.

Thus, Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony is closely linked to education in two ways. First, Gramsci understood that the process of schooling, rampant with its own assertions, socializes students to the hegemonic processes and ideologies of society, thereby insuring continued domination of the masses (p. 23). In this way, schools, through teachers as moral leaders, become the arbiter of hegemony from the elites onto the masses.

However, Gramsci also theorized that hegemony can be overthrown via education which Gramsci sees not simply as matters of curricula but also ideology or the whole social complex expressed by teachers (p. 25). In this, he vehemently rejects autonomous approaches, ideologies

of hegemony, that define much of our standardized methodologies today, and which aim at training students to be complicit in their own domination. Gramsci's (1971) deliberate denunciation of autonomous curricula in favor of networked and sociopolitically grounded approaches help combat the hegemonic agendas of those in power.

Like Freire later, Gramsci points to how education can be changed by challenging its hegemonic agenda. In this way, Gramsci viewed education both as a tool of the oppressor that also has the capacity to be a tool of the oppressed who, in unmasking hegemony, transform and liberate society. In a similar stance, Fairclough (1989) argues that educational discourses play a role in social reproduction on one hand—that teachers and students reproduce particular social structures when they occupy certain subject positions (p. 38), but, on the other hand, he argues, subjugation can lead to social change and that their very constriction in certain discourse types renders students likely, through active and creative measures, to become social agents (p. 39). Fairclough's claim captures well the paradox of hegemony as articulated by both Freire and Gramsci, that domination both propels and produces liberation. It also calls on us to move to declare discourse sites as spaces of resistance.

### **Discourses as Sites of Resistance**

This idea of discourse both as a site of power but also a space of resistance is a hallmark of Foucauldian thought. Like Gramsci, Foucault does not vest discourse only in language. He regards *Discourses* as practices that produce knowledge because they entail meaning-making (cited by Hall, 1997, p. 44). As Stuart Hall (1997) points out, Foucault's definition is as much about ways of thinking and practices as it is about language. However, like Gramsci, Foucault (1998) contends that Discourses do not always have to either serve power or be completely antithetical to it. They may also pose hindrances or stumbling points and thus stand as starting

points of resistance for opposing strategies (p. 100-1). Gee (1990) also conceptualizes discourse in a way closely related to Foucault. He sees discourse as a socially negotiated practice (p. 143). Gee's and Foucault's definitions reveal that discourse has salient features that manifest identity; call upon conventions; effect exclusion; propose power; negotiate knowledge; and thus, as literacy, discourse becomes a socially and politically contested field, the reason many scholars such as Gee (1990) view literacy in terms of discourse (p. 153).

Two such scholars, Lankshear and McLaren (1993), adapting Foucault's theory of discourse, argue that "educational discourses consist in so many structured, ideologically informed, and sanctioned views about what should be done, how, and why it should be done" (p. 12). Like Gee and Foucault, they view discourses as "norm governed practices and involvements around and within which forms of human living are constructed and identities and subjectivities shaped" (p. 11).

In the language classroom, this has many implications. As bell hooks (1994) notes in *Teaching To Transgress*, language is a tool used by the oppressor and must be claimed in the fight against oppression. She admits that the English language itself does not hurt her, but how the oppressors use it as a tool to limit and define, humiliate and colonize makes it hurtful (p. 168). And because it is this language that oppresses, she calls on it to be appropriated and claimed as a *space of resistance* (p. 169) in our search for self-actualization. As a site of resistance, language thus becomes a site for perceiving, constructing, reconstructing, and performing self.

### **The Search for Self**

As the contexts of school and society overlap, interact, and mutually influence each other, we must recognize that what happens in one sphere spills over to the other, and that our students

and ourselves often work and wander in search of an elusive self amid many varying and often competing discourses (Gee, 1990). Students, in their search for self, are enmeshed in many different discourses simultaneously. The significance of local acts of writing lies in these often overlapping and sometimes competing discourses (Yagelski, 2000), where student writers need to find a self even if they too must claim it in these same spaces of resistance. Before I move to examine how English teachers can invite student writers to carve spaces for themselves amidst multiple competing discourses, it is first worthwhile to examine the evolution of “author” across multiple theoretical perspectives and within multiple competing discourses.

### **Author within Discourses: Subject with Agency**

Throughout much of the current educational discourse, the view of “author” remains, at best, a manifestation of the grand narratives of individual opportunity and personal responsibility inherent in capitalistic ideological thought, which to a great degree still defines much of how formal education is structured today. Our current educational system with its emphasis on standardization, specifically in its treatment of literacy as a set of invariant skills (Hourigan, 1994, p. 21) remains ambivalent to sociocultural claims about the role of context and culture in the act and event of writing, to the writer herself. The student writer thus is still perceived as one without a real identity, faceless, in need of universally required skills that he may or may not possess and rarely, if ever, as a language using self who is part of a larger language using community and moving across various discourses (Yagelski, 2000, p. 35)

Standardized definitions such as this, rampant in official discourses, help explain why the English classroom, under state mandates and standardized assessment pressures, has once again devolved to an arena where rules of language and grammar and formal features of texts are often catalogued and taught as isolated skills that lack any personal or contextual basis. It would

also explain why so many of our adolescents have chosen to take their literacies underground (Beers, Probst, and Rief, 2007, pp. 9-10), preferring virtual and vicarious worlds to the sonority of words that defines their presence in classrooms that follow banking concepts of education where neither authors nor ideas are legitimated. The real irony, as Yagelski (2000) asserts, lies in the paradoxical claim that, while standardized writing measures claim to assess an individual writer's skills, the skills that these assessments proclaim to measure are often conceived of and assessed without much regard for the writer's personal experiences and background (p. 35). To understand, though, the absurdity of such proclamations, it is necessary to look at how this highly charged and contested term *author* has come to be understood across various theoretical perspectives.

Foucault (1969) argued that the term author does not necessarily denote an individual, not an actual individual at least (pp. 130-131). Rather, an author is a subject that must be a complex though variable product of discourse (p. 138). Foucault's view is consistent with that of Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia which regards the function of author as more of a blending of worldviews through multilayered language that creates complex unity from a hybrid of utterances.

Both Foucault and Bakhtin's views clash significantly with a modernist conception of the author as an autonomous and stable individual working intentionally and solo within fixed language parameters. This latter view, as I have discussed earlier, still permeates much of the present educational discourse on writing and writing assessments, ignoring much of what we know about both the writer and her practice today.

It is this modernist conception of a cognizant writer and autonomous entity that represents the core of all substance and the maker of all meaning that John Clifford (1991)

challenged (p. 39). Using the ideas of linguist Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford (1991) pointed out that writers do not simply express their unique ideas or their individual consciousness. Their writing, rather, reflects linguistic and cultural codes that reflect broader universal patterns in specific textual forms. These universal codes limit a writer's autonomy and force him/her to negotiate, rather than determine, meaning. The writer's identity thus becomes, according to structuralist thought, a function of these codes.

### **The Poststructuralist Writer**

Poststructuralism stretched this conceptualization of the writer further. Theorists such as Foucault and Derrida challenged altogether the notion of intentional meaning in writing, thus the whole concept of author as meaning-maker. Meaning, according to Foucault, is not determined by the writer. Rather, it rests in the discourse. For Foucault (1969), an author is not even necessary for texts to function within discourse, for he [author] is a single element of many others that constitute the discourse of the text and it can be easily imagined without his participation (p. 138).

The focus of a poststructuralist analysis thus is not on the writer per se, but rather on the discourses of which the writing is inevitably a part. The writer, solely a manifestation of the discourse itself, is a subject that lacks any autonomy and therefore must be seen as part of a whole discourse and not its sole creative source (p. 138). Commenting on this poststructuralist tendency, Clifford (1991) contends that poststructuralism sees both writing and the writer as a result of a plethora of preexisting discourses that are primarily determined by more than both historical and social meanings, which are, themselves too, ever in flux and ever conflicting (p. 40).

However, and in situating author as simple subject of clashing and competing discourses, a mere vehicle for various social codes and discourses, we leave little room for agency in the writing act. As such, poststructuralist propositions may begin to seem useless, threatening perhaps, to English teachers who are faced with the everyday pressures regarding the urgent need to deal with a room full of students defined within institutionalized education (and within our culture generally) as individuals. To these teachers, poststructuralism offers little practicality in their professional duties where they must still face piles of writing turned in to them by individuals with faces.

### **Agency and Self-Interest in Writing**

Attempting to find a balance between these two seemingly bipolar views, Yagelski (2000) advises teachers to use the post-structural lens to examine subject as resulting from multiple discourses but, at the same time, he urges them to heed a crucial call to distinguish between subject and agency (p. 76). This, then, requires a clear and concise distinction between subject and subject/agent. Here, again, Yagelski (2000) proves quite helpful. He observes that at any given time, a writer, writing a specific text, is subjected to multiple intersecting, and sometimes conflicting, discourses (p. 77).

Quoting James Berlin (1996), Yagelski (2000) defines the subject as an intersection of all these various conflicted discourses about race, gender, ethnicity and the like (p. 78). Agency, Yagelski (2000) asserts, becomes possible when the subjects acts, either by accepting or resisting, on these discourses rather than simply accommodating them (Yagelski, 2000, p. 78).

Invoking the striking differences in the ways two African-American men in his prison class, Mr. Green and Mr. Jarrel, approached a conventional writing assignment, he shows how limiting it can be to rely only on the often-invoked and broad categories of race, class, gender,



and so on in trying to understand student writing. For although both men grew up in urban environments in the Midwest, were in their late 20s or early 30s, and had spent several years behind bars, the two men negotiated the task in different ways, invoking, in that specific context, various interactions they each had with broader cultural and rhetorical discourses specific to their lives (pp. 65-82).

In essence, both Mr. Green and Mr. Jarrel moved beyond mere subjects in discourses to become agents who acted upon, resisted, and even negotiated the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing discourses to which they belong. Those discourses are not solely limited to race, gender, or class.

Reiterating a call by Paul Smith (1988) to remove a subject from a theoretical, abstract stance, one which removes the latter almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live (p. 79), Yagelski commits himself to the ways in which an individual subject can act within the very discourses that shape him/her (p. 79). Accepting Smith's claim that the *subject* is a heterogeneous and shifting one (p. 156), he sees that there is an inherent contradiction that is always present within the subject that is sure to allow a potential opening and a space for agency (p. 79). Smith sees this space for resistance as a tension that results from the subject's having to adopt several subject positions simultaneously (p. 157).

Yagelski argues that this kind of tension is what allows the writer/subject to articulate both his needs and his self-interest (p. 80). Invoking self-interest, as I explain later, is the crucial move in our efforts to answer our previous questions about agency, about how a subject acts.

### **Self-Interest in Discourse**

For Smith, understanding those decisions—those acts—requires understanding self-interest. However, as Smith himself acknowledge, self-interest is too a shifting process and its

meaning is also shifting and problematic (p. 157). That is, one cannot determine precisely a subject's self-interest, since that self-interest is continually in process. Smith also conceives of self-interest as partly conscious—that is, partly a function of decisions and motives of which the subject is aware—and partially unconscious resulting from fears, anxieties, and insecurities (p. 157). We understand self-interest, Smith affirms, when it moves from subconscious thoughts to conscious actions (p. 157).

In other words, while we can never entirely pin down one's self-interest precisely, the subject's self-interest as an ongoing process is manifested in its actions, which are expressed through signs, including the sign system of language (Yagelski, 2000, p. 81). Our students' self-interests too are available to us partially through their actions, which are manifested partially in their words, written and oral.

Each student, constituted by discourses already in place, reflects a unique though continually changing and circumscribed self-interest. And that unique self-interest is, as Smith puts it, tied to an individual history, a singular and exclusive narrative (p. 81). At the same time, that subject's actions "are also equally engagements or interventions in everyone else's history, and have real effects there; these two histories are mediated in a dialectical process as the 'subject' negotiates its self-interest in relation not only to itself, but to the world" (p. 158).

According to Smith, self-interest is thus a social negotiation. It can never be seen exclusively as the product of a subject's self-narrative, nor is it only a product of the intersection of various self narratives (p. 158). In essence, to understand the subject adequately, and to understand agency as well, requires both the specificity of the subject's history and its negotiations with other selves and histories (p. 158) all of which, of course, takes place within discourse.

## Literacy as Local and Specific

Agency understood that way becomes not only a vehicle for resistance, but also a means to begin to understand students' texts and the differences between them. Yagelski sums it up thus:

If we understand agency in the way Smith conceptualizes it—as both enabled and limited by discourse—as a process of negotiation within and among discourses mediated by an individual's self-interest—then we must conceive of literacy not simply as a social and cultural activity, but as an inevitably *local* act manifested in specific statements and specific texts, as a set of social and cultural practices that play out in myriad ways in the individual acts of writing and reading completed by individual writers and readers; literacy is thus a function of discourse, but at the same time it is a product of individual agents working within and sometimes against discourses—a manifestations, that is, of a writer's circumscribed and situated agency (p. 82).

Such conception of literacy and agency illuminates the struggles student writers often face in writing and reading for their courses but also the ways in which those struggles reflect the local decisions those writers make in constructing their texts and their participation in the discourses of school and society—decisions that are often hidden from us as we think about students and writing in more conventional ways. It enables us to recognize the crucial differences in the ways in which students experience and engage in reading and writing activities within broader academic and cultural discourses.

Each of our students, as a function of his or her self-interest, participates in these discourses differently, and their respective texts manifest these differences. Thus, their decisions—about the assertions they make in a specific assignment for the class, about how they position themselves in that assignment, about the sort of texts they write—reflect their agency. It is in this sense that literacy is inevitable *local*.

### **Framework for Understanding Local Literacies**

Ultimately, this framework helps explain writers' differences without resorting to an oversimplified conception of the writer as a collection of specific cognitive skills (or "deficiencies") or presenting that writer's intentionality as autonomous and unproblematic. It is also about understanding those individual student writers who sit before us writing teachers daily and who represent myriad of ways to engage the broader discourses that shape their lives. It works against a limited conception of literacy and focuses on the individual writer as he/she writes within and against existing discourses.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) first pioneered such approaches when she examined the nature of literacy practices in two communities and described differences in those practices and their value to the people who lived there. Heath concludes from her study that literacy could only be understood, as Scribner and Cole (1981) put it, "in specific contexts of use" (p. 236)—that is, as local.

The personal nature of student engagement with literacy is thus mediated by unique self-interests of each writer. Students write in ways that are inevitably local, even as their writing can occur only within broader contexts and discourses. According to Yagelski (2000), it is that "local-ness" that teachers ultimately must confront in working with their students. And it is no simple matter to do so (p. 87). The "local-ness" of literacy can be insufferably complicated (Yagelski, p. 88).

### **Teaching as Liberatory Practice**

It is such complications in the literacy classroom that lead hooks to ascertain that "education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge; it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom" (p. 147). In this type of education, which Freire (1970/2009)

terms the problem-posing method, student and teacher roles are often reversed and authority of knowledge takes precedence over authority of teaching as both teacher and student seek mutual humanization and democratic living.

DeStigter (2001) sees these types of educators as “citizen teachers” who, invigorated by hope, believe and act on the notion that they can further social justice and release human potential (p. 13). A citizen teacher is able to be reflective and inquisitive as she recognizes that what she chooses to uphold in the classroom reflect on the type of society she helps create outside its walls (p. 15). This practice, a manifestation of what Paulo Freire (1970/2009) terms “praxis”—critical reflection and action that changes conditions of being in the world—is at the heart of education as the practice of freedom and it is a requirement for both teacher and student.

Teaching as a practice of freedom thus means that teachers reject the roles of technicians afforded to them in recent years and aim instead to assert themselves as *citizen teachers*, or “agents whose actions have enormous political, pedagogical, and ethical consequences,” and who must be willing to “share and exercise power” as they reflect on their work and their relationships both with their students and the larger society and as social agents be able to understand and comprehend “how they might be complicitous with forms of oppression and human suffering” (Giroux, 2006, p. 7).

Equipped with what Freire (1970/2009) terms a “language of possibility” that allows them, according to Giroux (2006), to contest power relationships, they must be ready to challenge the existing power structures through a “poetics of imagination” that helps them to distinguish between fact and fiction and too imagine “alternative realities as a means of making a better existence into a real possibility” (p. 7).

The arena for such creative imagination must thus be the English classroom, which, in the face of extended political pressures to narrow the margins of critical democratic dialogues, must open wide the doors of opportunity for such dialogues and provide the students opportunity, through their multiliteracies, to tackle, creatively and collaboratively, complications that they face in and out of the classroom.

### **Liberating Literacies**

Henry Giroux (2000) recognizes the many complications students face outside the classroom. To help them navigate their worlds and their concerns better, Giroux calls on teachers to be “oppositional public intellectuals” rather than “public relations intellectuals,” a necessary component in an effective critical pedagogy that is our only hope in the face of what he deems a “corporate culture” that encroaches our and our children’s lives. This culture, toxic in all measures, denies them opportunities to roam, rumble, and reflect, opting instead to imprison and institutionalize them (a \$25 billion dollar industry, he claims, quoting sociologist Mike Males). Giroux (2000) warns against a privatization that has not only claimed our public and recreational space but has also seeped to the very concept of our citizenship selves to claim that as well (pp. 10-11)

While physical public space is first to go, mental private space is sure to follow. Giroux (2000) warns us against undue pressures to grow up which face young people as their freedoms are curtailed and their constitutional freedoms and civil rights are more jeopardized than ever (p. 11). A minority adolescent is further marginalized by the added burden of being reified either a suspicious social presence or a gullible consumer (Giroux, 2000, p. 14) and a silence and complacency by critics and academicians in our country regarding the many ongoing injustices

experienced by these young people, specifically their subjection to the state's increasing resort to incarceration and punishment (Giroux, 2003, Intro. p. xiii).

This moral and political ambivalence equates, as Giroux (2003) proclaims, a form of *domestic terrorism* (p. xiiii) that plagues poor children who, denied healthcare, stable homes, and access to good schools, are also often denied both their humanity and citizenship rights (Giroux, 2003, Intro. p. xiv). He, thus, concludes that childhood has been partially reinvented through the interests of corporate capital (Giroux, 2000, p. 14), and democracy appears more fragile in these times of civic and political crisis (Giroux, 2003, Intro. P. xiii). Giroux (2000) finally questions if children can ever find “narratives of hope, semiautonomous cultural spheres, discussions of meaningful differences, and non-market-based democratic identities?” (p. 11).

### **Narratives of Hope**

It is in Freire that we find an answer to Giroux's question. Freire (1970/2009) suggests that in the classroom at least, itself a gateway to the larger society, we abort the banking concept of education in favor of a problem-solving education where “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (p. 83).

In describing the methods of this pedagogy, Freire notes that its symptoms are creativity, true reflection, and action upon reality, thereby “responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (p. 84). This transformation, a painful childbirth to use Freire's own words, *must* be the end of literacy education.

## Education as Liberatory Transformation

**Dialogues.** How do we—students and teachers together—begin such liberating transformation? Like Dewey (1916/2012), Freire places communication again at the center. Dialogic exchanges are a good starting place. It is in the dialoguing process, an already existing one, that we create and recreate ourselves. According to Freire, dialogue is the *democratic* choice of educators. And educators, seeking to promote free and critical learning, should create the conditions for dialogue that encourage the natural love of learning which is synonymous with curiosity of the learner. The goal of the dialogic action is always to reveal the truth interacting with others and the world.

In his dialogic action theory, Freire distinguishes between dialogical actions, the ones that promote understanding, cultural creation, and liberation, and non-dialogic actions, which deny dialogue, distort communication, and reproduce power. However, this libertarian education cannot be a simulated feat. It has to have authentic elements and be bred under auspices of equality (Shor & Freire, 1987). Perhaps it is well worth our purpose here to reiterate Freire's notion of dialogue, which he conceives of as “a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (p. 13) and as a “sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study” (p. 14). However, fearful that educators might simplistically transform his notion of dialogue into mere method, Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1995) characterizes it as an “epistemological relationship” that is an indispensable component of the learning process (p. 279).

Later, Donald Macedo (2009), in his introduction to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, again cautions against a dialogue that is an end in itself as, he affirms, one could end up with dialogue as mere conversation where individual lived experiences are given primacy. Dialogue,



Macedo reiterates, “must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge; otherwise, it becomes no more than an overindulgence in the legacy and importance of [our] respective voices and experiences” (p. 17-18).

**Why dialogue matters.** In any of the many roles literacy teachers are called upon to play, dialogue is an integral and fundamental part. Vygotskyian theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1962) was one of the first psychologists to acknowledge the role of dialogue in organizing our understanding of the world. He insisted that our ability to talk and think is in the first instance social and only later becomes individual. Talk is an invaluable tool for learning and for communicating that learning. It is also a natural gateway to learning new skills and new rhetorical methods. Community, he emphasized, plays a central role in the process of “making meaning.”

Barnes (2008) proclaims that “the communication system that a teacher sets up in a lesson shapes the roles that the pupils can play, and goes some distance in determining the kind of learning that they engage in” (p. 2). In creating this ecology of literacy, talk and the other modalities of literacy—reading, writing, and listening, too—must be interwoven in new and creative ways to produce optimal benefits and make literacy education a true practice of freedom. The development of student voice through dialogue and conversation is central to learning processes that require students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning, with the capacity for self-reflection. Furthermore, the development of personal agency must be actively supported in middle level and high school classrooms and be effectively taught by integrating what Gilles (2010) refers to as *talking to learn* (p. 14) in the classroom experiences of teachers and students.

**Dialoguing to learn.** Carol Gilles' work (2010) underscores the rationale for meaningful classroom talk and highlights the purposes of integrating "talking to learn" across the curriculum. Gilles emphasizes the need for teachers to teach students explicitly how to use talk as part of effective learning processes; she reminds us that "although we spend time each day learning how to read and write, little time is spent learning and practicing how to talk and listen" (p. 9). She also cites the issues of control and preparation as two central factors in teachers' reluctance to harness students' natural tendencies to talk and to utilize talk in enhanced curricular learning. "Talk throughout the curriculum" (Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008) is essential to boosting the role of student voice in talking to learn.

Brian Street (1995) reminds us that engaging with any literacy event is always a social act, and the "ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power" (p. 78). Smith (1992) takes Vygotsky's idea of learning from a more capable peer (MKO) and uses it to reiterate the power of social learning when he proclaims that "we learn from the company we keep... We grow to be like the people we see ourselves as being like" (p. 434). All of these ideas support Bakhtin's (1981) claims that self and other cannot be separated, just distinguished or pointed out, and so with grave difficulty as they are intertwined. The tension between the personal-inside-voice and the social-outside-voices ("symphony of voices") stimulates the talk necessary for intellectual growth.

Part of owning our own cognition requires us to know ourselves as teachers and adult learners, communicate our preferences, interests, what we struggle with, and how we learn best. Under the right circumstances students too will articulate their understandings of themselves as

learners in the contexts of instruction we design for them. The “right” circumstances include our urgent need to know our students—their interests, passions, strengths, and need—and a commitment to use the information gathered to create responsive programs for unique learners. In any classroom, student-teacher interaction is a critical foundation for effective and efficient instruction (Darling Hammond, 1997).

Listening to student voices should serve as a major guidepost for teachers of young adolescents because it is those voices that announce the type of democracy that will define not just how we live as people and citizens but how we thrive as a human race.

### **A Final Thought**

Literacy is the basic ingredient of democratic living and existence. It is local and specific. It is not basic and autonomous skills that represent individual cognitive abilities. Understood and enacted thus, it loses what Freire and Dewey envision as its democratizing potential. In fact, if standardized practices and beliefs about literacy can often prove destructive because they do not attend to literacy’s social and political uses or even its complexity and ambiguity. They can thus propagate various types of oppression—social, economic, and political—that we claim to be helping students in our classrooms escape. This can leave millions of student-citizens without the necessary critical thinking skills required to navigate their real and virtual worlds and an even deeper conviction which many of them have held for so long and continue to hold that that literacy practices in their classrooms, literacy in general, bear no central significance to their lives.

Still, and perhaps equally oppressive and marginalizing, are pedagogical strategies that bell hooks (1994) deems as totalizing and oppressive to students’ dominant discourses (p. 10). Rejecting essentialist notions, hooks asserts that effective pedagogical practices must account for

the “complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives” (p. 10). Like hooks claims, “Even though I share strategies, these works do not offer blueprints for ways to make the classroom an exciting place for learning,” for to do so “would undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (pp. 10-11).

hooks’ pedagogy and position embodies Freire’s call for teachers to contextualize their pedagogies. The task of literacy then is to allow participation in ever-shifting discourses that shape our lives and to find ways to give students some measure of access to power even as we continue to acknowledge, examine, and elucidate the ways in which literacy can be marginalizing, even violent.

The purpose of this study is such a task. It seeks to question how a piece of writing came to be and how students understand their texts and contexts. In doing so, and as Yagelski (2000) suggests, we offer ourselves ways of understanding the many complex and individual ways literacy functions in both our students and our own lives (p. 14). So anchored, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) In what ways does the practice of freedom, enacted through classroom literacy events, empower students as readers and writers in the English classroom and also as critical and engaged citizens in a larger social project of change and agency?
- 2) What happens to classroom literacy events when teachers aim to situate them within students’ lived experiences and authentic concerns?
- 3) In what ways can local narratives of middle school students problematize/deconstruct the grand American narrative of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy?

## CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

### Overview

This exploratory case study fused a critical ethnographic approach (Madison, 2012) with a constructivist paradigm. Its purpose was to investigate the ways local literacy practices by a group of eighth grade students contribute to the establishment of their literate and social identities. Using ten students' final projects in Language Arts 8 as well as a series of semi-structured focus group and individual interviews as sites of investigation, I probed both people and products for discourses (Gee, 1990) that shaped them. Employing a combination of case description (Yin, 2003) and mini- and cross-case (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005) methods of analysis, I searched for core and recurring themes and patterns in the data to help discern these students' literacy purposes and processes in the context of their language arts classroom as evident on their final projects and as they communicated them via interviews in this qualitative study.

All focus group and individual interviews were conducted at a conference room of a local library using methodology employed in ethnographic research. The data for this study included the assignments that composed the final project itself which students completed as part of their 2012-2013 school year; the teaching notes that I write as a normal part of my practice and which I call, for purposes of this study, my practitioner notes; my reflective research journal, including my research memos and the data collected over the study's ten-week duration, which include the ten students' responses to an anonymous questionnaire given to them before the first focus group interview; transcripts of three focus group interviews with the ten students, and transcripts of two in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews with four focal students from the group. The purpose and rationale for the three focus group interviews and the two semi-structured one-on-one interviews with four focal students are explained in detail later in this chapter.

As a researcher, my goal was to explore, from their own point of view, these eighth-graders' experiences working on this project as well as the discourses that shaped those experiences, and frame this understanding within a pedagogical practice that has, at its core, the practice of freedom (Freire, 1970/2009). Thus, I tried to ensure that student perspectives are represented as accurately as possible by collecting relevant and accurate data, making use of different sources of data (final projects, interviews, field notes, memos and reflective journal) and checking with my research subjects often to ensure that my findings and interpretations are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299).

The focus of this research was the students' culminating project in Language Arts 8. To represent the diverse approaches to this project, and the local and literate thinking inherent in such approaches, I conducted three focus group interviews with a random sampling of 10 eighth-grade students who were enrolled in my Language Arts classes during the academic year 2012-2013 about their final projects. The protocol (Appendix E) for these focus group interviews served as part of the data set designed to help answer my research questions regarding the specificity of their literary experiences and the relationship of those experiences to larger competing discourses in culture and society.

To help shed even stronger light on this topic, I zoomed in on four case study students from this group and conducted two additional in-depth one-on-one interviews (Appendix F) that focused on their lived through experiences as they worked on their projects throughout the course of the final marking period. My intent was to contextualize their responses within the literacy pedagogy of this classroom and to explore in what ways, if any, each was able to carve within multiple and diverse discourses a social and literate self. Situating literacy events in the context of the lives of all ten participants, I address the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways does the practice of freedom, enacted through classroom literacy events, empower students personally and academically, but also as critical and engaged citizens in a larger social project of change and agency?
- 2) What happens to classroom literacy events when teachers aim to situate them within students' lived experiences and authentic concerns?
- 3) In what ways can local narratives of middle school students problematize and/or deconstruct the grand American narrative of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy?

In this chapter, I present my methodology, description of data collection methods, data sources, and analysis procedures that I undertook as I conducted this research. I also explain the positioning complexities of my role and stance as both the teacher and the researcher and the procedures I took to monitor my bias. A thorough description of the locus of this study, the final project in Language Arts 8 (Appendix G), is also provided.

### **Case Study Research**

As a teacher-researcher using an ethnographic case study design, I aimed to study individual students' works and words, in their specific contexts, to gain insight into a central phenomenon (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2006). In this case, I analyzed ten eighth-graders' English language arts final multimodal projects and conducted a series of interviews around both the projects and their participation in the class over the course of the year in order to understand the literate thinking that went into composing them in this eighth-grade classroom. Case study design best fits my research because I premise the study's core on the uniqueness of each subject, exemplified in their unique final project, while still recognizing that commonalities do exist (Stake, 1995, p. 1). In examining the final projects these students created, the study also

aimed to understand, from these students' perspectives, the pedagogical contexts that allowed for their literate thinking to surface, and thus the case study approach seemed a best fit.

Dyson and Genishi (2005) write that the case study researcher “uses particular methods of observation and analysis to understand *others'* understandings (their sense of what is happening and, therefore, what is relevant) and the processes through which they enact language and literacy education” (p. 12, original emphasis). The use of case study in conjunction with other ethnographic methods allows for teacher-researchers to re-envision curriculum in order to explore a “clash of cultures” (Applebee, 1997, p. 28), through conversation and the tradition of knowledge-in-action. This clash of cultures results when coexisting voices speak their experiences and other realities begin to surface.

It was my objective in this study, both as a literacy educator and as a researcher, to provide a platform for these students to speak their literacy realities as manifested in their final project in Language Arts 8. However, to examine in detail all that went into framing these students' thinking is quite a daunting task, so as Yin (2003) suggests, I set boundaries for the case study with regard to the time period, the relevant social group, and the type of evidence to be collected and analyzed.

### **School Community and Research Participants**

**Demographics.** This study involved ten students from Charles Middle School (pseudonym used), a Midwestern suburban middle school enrolling 560 students grades sixth through eighth during the 2012-2013 academic year. These ten students were enrolled in three of my eighth-grade Language Arts course during the 2012-2013 academic year and completed a final project for that course.



**Introduction to school and community.** The story of Charles Middle School is, in many ways, the story of America. Depending on where or whom you hear it from, the plot, characters, and themes vary. The viewpoints and the priorities amongst the stakeholders vary also. Situated in a once-thriving community in the upper Midwest, it is now a ghost of its former self. Like many other American cities across the states, this city suffered tremendously from a deep decline in the state's manufacturing economy, which led to a steep rate of unemployment among its working class families. Unemployment in the city today is at a 15% high. And the effects are starkly obvious when you look at the faces of the students in this middle school. When you engage them in telling their stories, however they choose to do so, you in essence hear multiple narratives, ones rampant with complexities. There are the narratives limited sometimes by language, other times by perception, and most often by the mere fact that no one seems to listen, and students learn to swallow, along with everything else, the bitterness of their residue. It is not just the stories these students tell that this research seeks, but also ones in formation. It is being and becoming, and it is the method of this research to bring to bear the complexities of both who these participants are as middle school literacy students and who they are becoming: citizens who will be managing a morphing nation.

**Charles Middle School.** Charles Middle School is a public school located in an industrial Midwestern state. It is one of seven middle schools in a fairly large district. It is in the west end of the city and serves approximately 562 students from sixth grade to eighth grade. Charles Middle School's demographic distribution resembles in many aspects that of our nation: a white population of around 73%, an African-American population of about 15%, and a growing Hispanic or Latino population (YMS's Latino population falls short of 12%, somewhat less than the nation's 16.4%, according to our 2010 Census data). During the 2012-2013 school

year, the school consisted of a 25% special education population (up from 20% last year) and housed hearing impaired, autistic, and a range of other students with disabilities from across the county. Our economically disadvantaged population (measured by those students who are eligible to receive free and reduced-cost lunch) was our biggest and fastest-growing population, constituting 50% of the total school population. Males represented 52% of our student population and females, 48%. The principal of Charles Middle School, for the first time in the school's history, was an African-American woman; other than her, there was not a single African American on a staff of about 45 (30 teachers and 14 paraprofessionals). In fact, I was one of three minority staff members and one of three secondary certified members of the staff during the 2012-2013 academic year.

**Participants.** Because the research also explores how middle school students' literacy events and activities help deconstruct the grand narratives of an essentialized literacy, the initial phase of this study was three focus group interviews with 10 students chosen by convenience sampling. Through them, I aimed to capture a range of perspectives and identify multiple, perhaps common, themes across a population regarding their *purposes, processes, and products* for this project.

I focus on eighth-graders in this study because I taught four sections of eighth-grade Language Arts during the 2012-2013 academic year, and I think they tend to be well equipped to speak candidly about their experiences. Prolonged engagement with most of these students was met over the course of the 2012-2013 school year, and some were students of mine longer, as many of them had entered my language arts classroom as seventh-graders.

I asked a colleague who still teaches at Charles Middle School to mail informational sheets to all students from three of my language arts classes, inviting them to participate in this

research study and asking them to call or e-mail her within ten days if they were interested. The names and contact numbers of the students who responded within the frame of time given (a total of 21 students) were ranked in order of contact. Of the 21 who did respond within the frame of time given, we selected the first ten on the list. This is how we ended up with the final ten who became my research group. Following is a list of the ten participants with pseudonyms they themselves chose. In the course of the interviews, they give their reasons for choosing these names.

***Bella: "I am from colored pencils***

***From Crayola and Rose art and Puerto Rico."***

Bella is Hispanic American (Puerto Rican). She is also a special education student. She is shy and reserved and not much of a speaker. In class, though, she spoke volumes in her art and often used her drawings not only to communicate many of her ideas but also to jumpstart her writing. She was the first to call wanting to join this study.

***Celine: "I am from behave and eat your veggies***

***And el cucuy will come get you if you don't sleep."***

Celine is Hispanic American and Italian. She struggled socially and got into multiple fights in school in sixth and seventh grade. Her parents were divorced, her father remarried, and mom was in jail. She was living with her dad and stepmom during her eighth grade year. Though her grades did not denote it, Celine was an intelligent young lady. She was a popular student and maintained a tough tomboy exterior. During the course of the final focus group interview, Celine followed me to my car to share with me that her older sister, who was also a student of mine two years before, was pregnant at sixteen. She seemed distraught and pledged in the parking lot never to let that happen to her. Her mother had also become pregnant at sixteen.

***Frank: “I am from the cold basement floor of early morning breaks,  
With tasty buttery Eggo waffles to eat, and a PS2 to play.”***

Frank is a German-American student who came from a working class single family home. His grandmother plays an important role in his life, too. He is a star student and respected by all around him, both staff and students. Frank is an avid video game player and is highly involved in his local church. He was quite vocal in the classroom.

***Hind: “I am from San Francisco and Jerusalem  
From the olive trees whose existence is endangered.”***

Hind is a Palestinian American who dresses conservatively—she wears a scarf over her head and long-sleeved pants and shirts. She was born and lived in the States most of her elementary years. She moved to Jordan with her family for two years (fifth and sixth grades) and returned to the States during her middle school years. She speaks, reads, and writes Arabic fluently. Though quiet and reserved in big groups, Hind is highly expressive in small groups or one-on-one. She warned me at the onset on her eighth grade year that she is not a good writer.

***Huda: “I am a spotted writer, pressured and pressed  
Just like a well written newspaper.”***

I first knew Huda as a shy and withdrawn seventh grader. She is also of Palestinian-American origins and came into class also dressed in long sleeves and pants, but not for religious reasons. She later told me that because she had vitiligo, she felt uncomfortable with people’s looks and did not want to deal with that. Over the course of the two years, Huda’s story with both vitiligo and literacy would evolve and change in ways that only she and her project would be able to describe.

***Kat: “I am from the chaos of a house of guys***

***From unusual creations and stressful messes.”***

Kat is German American. She comes from a working class family that had fallen into poverty in the last few years. Kat has two brothers, one older and one younger. She does not say much in a large group but writes prolifically. Her dad suffers from a bipolar disorder, and the mother keeps the house functioning. They moved at least seven times in the last fourteen years, and the last of these moves was into this part of town. Her grandparents play a huge role in Kat’s life.

***Ray: “I am from long, greasy hair***

***I am from air guitar and head bangs.”***

Ray boasts a German-Swiss heritage. He is an athlete and musician who plays several instruments, mainly the guitar. Ray attended a private school until seventh grade when he came to Charles Middle School. He has a speech impediment and a highly supportive mother.

***Riley: “I am from Scottish dance, strength and grace***

***Point, turn, brush, high-cuts, shedding.”***

Riley is Scottish American. Unlike many of the other kids in this study, she comes from a higher socioeconomic background (upper middle class) and is the only one from the group who transferred last fall to a high school in a more affluent district. Riley is quiet, soft-spoken, and shy. She participated in many extracurricular activities and was an accomplished dancer.

***Salwa: “I am from imagination and pharmacy dreams***

***I am from Lebanon’s summers and [Our City’s] winters.”***

Salwa is a Lebanese-American student who also wears a headscarf. She is a hard-working student and committed to academics. She was enrolled in my seventh-grade language arts class

too. Salwa is reserved and calm. She is also a mature young lady who listens a lot more than she speaks.

*Shay: "I am from the corner house, a child with dreams*

*I am a poetry lover, a re-sharpened pencil."*

Shay is an Italian American who loves video games. He is classified as special education for his poor organizational skills and poor writing habits and skills. He has had negative school experiences and is a loner for the most part. He engages well in verbal exchanges, his most preferred mode of learning. Shay's parents are divorced and he lives with his mother. She is very supportive.

When the list of participants was finalized, my colleague then provided these ten students and their parents with assent and consent forms to fill out and return. Once the assent and consent sheets were returned to the researcher, the students and their parents were invited to an informational meeting at a local library room. At that meeting, any questions they still had were answered. A schedule for the focus group interviews was finalized between the researcher and students and shared with the parents who transported the students to and from the research site.

As my research is premised on the locality of literacy, any student who volunteered for this study would have been a good fit, which is why convenience sampling was used. Each student provided a unique perspective, both in the ways in which he/she interacted with literacy in the classroom and also his/her ability to understand and articulate his/her interactions well. The diversity and similarities that existed among the participants, and which I aimed to shed light on during the focus group interviews, helped explain the different ways they engaged with literacy via this project and in the classroom context and how such engagements led to the

development of their literate and social selves. It is worth mentioning here that neither I nor the recruiter taught any of these students the year of the study (2014).

At the conclusion of the three focus group interviews, I compensated each of the ten volunteers with a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card. After the initial three focus group interviews with all ten students, four of the ten students (Frank, Huda, Kat, and Ray) were selected to participate in two follow-up one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews that helped shed light on the specific nature of their literacies and attempted to “place [their] specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). These four were selected based on both their rich experiences and the depth of the responses they used to convey these experiences. I looked for those students in the group who both are able to articulate their thinking well and who also represented diverse backgrounds and approaches. Each of these four students was also given another \$25.00 Barnes & Noble gift card at the conclusion of two semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews.

### **Research Site Selection**

All interviews took place in a conference room on the second floor of a local library. The site was chosen both because of its public nature, its accessibility to the participants, and its separation from all library traffic, which provided the privacy and noise-free environment necessary to conduct all interviews. I obtained permission from the library administration to use the conference room for all focus group and one-on-one interviews.

### **Research Protocol**

A research protocol (Yin, 2003) consisting of my rationale and research questions, as well as questions that I have to keep in mind as I work through my research, guided the collection of data for this study. This protocol referred to the theoretical frameworks and

pertinent readings about the topic and laid out the data collection procedures. As this study was exploratory in nature, my attitude was an open and responsive one, and I did not treat any surfacing phenomena as threats to this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

**Background.** It is worthwhile to pause here to relate a little bit of my own background which might help shed more light on my purpose and interest in this research. I am a 44-year-old Arab-American woman entering her 20<sup>th</sup> year of teaching language arts. I started teaching at the middle school level (not at Charles Middle School) but spent the bulk of my teaching years at one of the three high schools in this suburb, the same high school I had graduated from a decade earlier. I entered the teaching profession, like so many before me, full of youthful zest and desire to change the world for the better. Twenty years later, my zest and desire have not changed. My worldview has, however, as a result of my many experiences.

Assimilation remains at full force in our public schools. It is often not only in the scripted curricula but rather in the attitudes that truly shape education. And the evidence of it remains stark today. The most “successful” students in our schools remain those who are the closest fit to a WASP ideal. In schools, many students, as did I, first learned to tuck an “other” identity away and adopt a standard and safe one that resembled them less and less each day. When I was a student, my language arts classes became an opportunity for me to possess, take, and claim the English language as a space of resistance (hooks, 1994). I did so aptly into college to major in language and beyond college into teaching where I learned to teach language as a form of resistance, and I found many students ready and eager to learn language on their own local terms.

And so this research, at its core, is also the story of language—literacies—claimed, *locally*, as a tool for freedom and resistance against oppressive and dominant discourses.



**Researcher bias.** In this ethnographic case study inquiry, I am both the narrator and the teacher-researcher, both of which by no means represent an objective stance. As their language arts teacher during the 2012-2013 school year, I engaged in the lives of the students in my class while also observing the details of social dynamics and patterns (Spradley, 1980). I am an active participant observer—with an emic view—in the study. I taught all these students over the course of their eighth-grade year, and I taught six of the ten students in my research group as seventh-graders too. I knew all of them well.

For the last decade of my teaching practice, I have relied on extensive notes to document my observations and feedback on many classroom events. These have served well my reflective pedagogical practice. Through them, I supplement my students' observations with my own. In addition, I kept for the duration of this study a reflective research journal that was also used to record my thoughts, questions, and memos. I consulted with a colleague during the observations and inferences and with a peer de-briefer on research data and analysis.

I come with my own baggage of backgrounds. I too was a student in this school system, though never at this specific school. I also have many experiences—my own stories—as a minority student in a district reputed for its discriminatory heritage, and I have also my experiences as an outspoken minority and female teacher, a position of practice that has relegated me to the margins in a profession that has increasingly become about acquiescence and compliance.

Undoubtedly, my experiences color the lens through which I look and listen to stories around me, and while my choice topic represents a deep-seated concern with issues of power and representation, my past experiences with marginalization—as female, an Arab-American, outspoken educator, and so on—make me quite suited to understand many middle school

students' marginalized status in the structure and systems of schools. And I admit, when I first transferred over to this west end middle school from the east end high school, and with the clear demarcation that exists between east (read Arab-American) and west (read European-American) ends and the constant reminders in the news and schools of this demarcation, I was somewhat concerned about how I would be received by the community there, the majority of whom are European Americans with many of their family members serving or having served in the military. In light of the political climate in our nation and perceptions of Arab Americans, I had reason to be concerned.

And while my concerns were not completely unfounded, I can safely claim that three years later, many of my students at Charles Middle School, and consequently their parents too, have come to respect and see me as a vested and trusted stakeholder.

I am regarded as a challenging but supportive teacher and perceived as an advocate by my students who often engage in candid and critical conversations with me. Actually, I selected this research topic because I believe that every school, each classroom, is endowed with its own cultural funds, sometimes untapped into, ignored completely, or misused, especially in the era of standardization when the drive to make all students *quantitatively* better has resulted often in dismissing not only their perspectives but also their cultural capital and the funds of knowledge (Moll, 1973) they bring into our classrooms.

Literacy, I believe, is made in the image of its users, and so the literacy events this study aims to discuss are issues unique to this group of students and to this classroom culture. Still, and in order to enhance the interpretation of this study, I attend to my thoughts, values, and interests of the study by keeping a researcher's journal, providing thick descriptions, and engaging in weekly conversations with a peer de-briefer.

## **Purpose of Final Project**

The final project and the artifacts that compose it (Appendix G), which students completed in the final card marking of their eighth-grade year, are used as the locus of this study. In this section, I provide a brief introduction to it: the purpose it serves in my classroom, a description of the assignments that compose it, and a rationale for its use in this research study.

However, the important point to make is that the final project was more than just a review. It was an opportunity for inquiry and exploration, for students to venture to make their own choices and “produce” ideas that they can call them their own, to see themselves as originators of learning, and to connect that learning to the worlds inside and outside of them. It was also an opportunity for me to learn more about my students’ learning through their choices, about me as their teacher as they reflected back to the beginning, and about us as a community of learners as I read, through their narratives, their personal and academic progress too. This process of discovery and reflection, as well as the final projects themselves, is a significant component of this research.

And although each year, the project’s parameters as well as some of its themes and assignments changed drastically to fit curricular demands and student needs, the centrality of its place in my pedagogy and the philosophy behind it did not. Still, and over the years, as I worked in and out of the classroom to hone my teaching skills and pedagogical approaches, I found that my students’ projects became better, their skills more refined, and their thinking deeper. They were better imagined, better thought out, and better written. Consequently, they became sites of investigation for me as the classroom teacher, and, in this study, as a teacher-researcher. I aim in this study to understand, through this project and from their perspectives, how these students, in the context of this language arts classroom, came to engage in the literate thinking that defined

these projects and made their production possible. I also will explore how they navigated through multiple and perhaps competing discourses, to find the literate and social selves their projects demonstrate.

I provide next a detailed description of why I chose to center my study on this final project and how it was indeed a true summation of all the literacy activity that defined my Language Arts 8 classroom over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year.

### **Rationale for the Project**

I chose to use the final project as the object of this study for several reasons. First, and as I already mentioned, it is the culmination of the year's literate thinking and literary events. It has been a part of the final assessment in my language arts classes for a decade though its themes vary by class and students. It represents various stations of our literacy experiences—it includes assignments from the beginning of the year to the end—and thus serves as adequate representation of our collective endeavors. Because it falls at the end of the year, it allows students to glance back, using their writings and the long time frame, to earlier parts of the year and reflect on any changes they encountered in themselves, as readers and writers, of course, but, equally important, as individuals too.

Second, the project is evaluated by the students themselves. We concurrently come up with the rubric, and they assign the grades in groups. This frees them from worrying about their grade and allows them to focus on the process and messages they themselves deem important. It also sends a message that I reiterated all throughout the year and that needed constant reinforcement through both words and actions: that the grade was the symbol and their minds and the products thereof the real deal. It also puts them in an evaluator position and thus empowers them to become reflective critics of their own work.

Third, it is the ultimate and final opportunity they have as eighth-graders in this class to construct and present, via their multi-literacies and their funds of knowledge, knowledge about themselves and their academic and social worlds and to dialogue in groups with the teacher and with the class about that knowledge, a process itself worthy of studying and which formed the essence of our literacy practices this past year. It is a testament to the use of literacy to make sense of the world inside and outside of them.

The above are three reasons why I chose to study the final project, but this research aims too to bring forth from the students themselves the purpose of this project as they envisioned it, the purpose of literacy in their lives, and how the project was an expression of those purposes. The description of the project follows.

### **Description of the Project**

The final project for Language Arts 8 (Appendix G) consisted of 10 required assignments. Seven of those assignments (“I Am From” poem, “I Am An Outsider,” “My Possible Future Self,” “My Letter to The World,” “A Book That Hooked,” the list of “100 Things to Do Before I Die,” and the op-ed) were ones students had completed earlier in the school year and which they had the choice to redo or revise, a process that was an integral part of our writing workshops. The assignments did not have to be in any particular order, but they had to be included either in original or revised form as the students thought best.

In describing briefly the contents and rationale behind the final project, I offer a case for why I chose to make it the center of my study. I believe it truly encapsulates the literate thinking that defined Language Arts 8 and that was part of a whole classroom culture. In choosing this ethnographic case study to examine the projects in detail, I open up a number of capsules to look into the contents so rich in detail that they will allow for the “thick descriptions” Geertz (1988)

speaks of. In centering the text, however, I do not decenter the students. The interviews served as important data for this study, and they provided the students with an opportunity to reflect both on the written texts they authored as well as the contexts of those written texts. Here, too, I must emphasize: text, author, and context cannot be separated. That is precisely what makes the ethnographic case study approach an appropriate fit for this type of study.

### **Data Collection (Sources and Procedures)**

Data sources for this study include primarily students' writings and artifacts for their final project, the students' responses to the anonymous questionnaires, and audio transcriptions of both the three focus group interviews with the ten randomly selected students and two semi-structured interviews with each of four focal students selected from this group of ten. Serving to triangulate the latter data are my practitioner notes, which I keep as part of my regular pedagogical practice, and my reflective research journal, which includes my daily observations and reflections. As I conducted this study, I made extensive use of memos as part of my research process.

**Anonymous questionnaire.** At the beginning of this study, following an informational meeting for parents and students and before the first focus group interview, students completed an anonymous questionnaire (Appendix D) that I designed and that aimed to elicit retrospective feedback from the kids about the project a few months after its completion. The questionnaire contained both "hard" data questions (asking them, for example, to rate the degree of class content represented on their final project and the degree of the project's difficulty) and more open, unobtrusive, and unstructured questions such as which assignments they enjoyed or did not enjoy. It thus served as a "safe" initial transition to this research study where students, now outside the context of the classroom setting, could look back at their experiences during the

course of this project and reflect anonymously and candidly on them. The questionnaire also allowed students to glance retrospectively at the project they completed a few months ago, and it helped me to design my first focus group interview questions better.

**Interviews.** I conducted two sets of interviews during the course of this ten-week study. The first set consisted of three focus group interviews with all ten students. The second set consisted of two in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of the four focal students. Interview protocols (Appendixes E and F) organized the interviews into three categories: purpose, process, and product.

**Focus group interviews.** I conducted my first focus group interview during the second week of this study, then used that week to transcribe and study my data and prepare to conduct my second focus group interview the third week. The third focused group interview took place during the fourth week of this research study.

The interviews were about 60 minutes long and followed an interview protocol (Appendix E) that helped me gather the necessary data from the students about their literacy experiences and explore the diversity of thought and approaches while looking for patterns and themes (Schensul & LeCompte et al., 1999).

The protocol for the focus group interviews included 17 questions grouped into three organizational categories (purpose, processes, and products), which can be thought of as “broad areas or issues that you establish prior to your interviews or observations, or that could usually have been anticipated” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). *Organizational* categories (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97) facilitate comparison between things in the same category and helped me to develop some theoretical concepts. These categories did not change how I listened to my data, and thus, as the

interviewing was underway, I stayed flexible in order not to bore the participants and also to generate new ideas and information (Schensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999, p. 62).

I group-sorted (Schensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999, pp. 91-92) the focus group interview questions (Appendix E) into questions on purpose (Week 2), questions on process (Week 3), and questions on products (Week 4). To understand their writing/reading purpose(s), I asked questions such as “What do you believe motivated you to complete this project?” or “What do you want people who see this project to know/think about you?” In exploring the students’ processes and the literate thinking that went into the project’s assignments, I asked questions such as “What do you remember about working on this project?” and “What were the most difficult or challenging parts of this project for you?” The third group of questions interrogated the products themselves with questions such as, “What theme did you choose for your final project? Why?” and “Select a segment/sentence/or part of an assignment you worked on that you think especially speaks your thinking. What makes this selection significant to you?”

I realize that some of the questions combine two or all three categories at once, and I am not sure that could have been avoided as purpose and process inform one another and both result in a product. I also made sure that none of my questions were vague, leading, or misleading (Schensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999, p. 91).

***Semi-structured interviews.*** The second set of interviews were conducted Weeks 5 through 8 (see Table 1) of this research study, with four students selected based both on their responses during the focus group interviews and their diverse and unique approaches to the project. These interviews also served to define recurring patterns and themes. Availability and ability to articulate their thinking were also factors. Two 60-minute interviews with each of the



four individual students followed a semi-structured format (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 149-164) and a prepared protocol (Appendix F).

The first of these interviews was conducted to probe further into students' purposes, processes, and products based on what they said in the focus group interviews and also their project artifacts. I sought to clarify and expand my existing understanding of individual responses during the two focus group interviews and to help me discern the variety in each of the approaches in detail (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 150). There were some pre-set questions specific to their responses during the focus group interviews, their project artifacts, and my own teacher-researcher observations.

The second interview's aim was to allow scope for open-ended talk based upon what the students deemed noteworthy, so I attended to their mental and physical journey as evidenced on the project. My experience shows the value of the participants' own contributions to the understanding of their creative processes, and thus my probes during this second interview were based solely on their words.

The guidelines for constructing good semi-structured interview questions (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 154-156) were observed, and a protocol was prepared by the researcher. Once I chose the four students, some of the initial protocol questions were revised to reflect specificity to the person based on his/her project and also his/her responses during the focused group interviews. The semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me.

**Practitioner notes.** My practitioner notes, a long tradition of a reflective practice approach to teaching that I have adopted for the last decade, reflect "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and entail a combination of descriptive and reflective notes (Fraenkel & Wallen,

2008, p. 507). The descriptive aspect helped me keep accounts of what happened during the final project unit, where and how and even why, as evidenced in my own observations in the classroom as well as conversations I had with the students or listened to them having together. The reflective aspect allowed me to glance back at my own thinking of what was happening as I observed it. By allowing me ongoing evaluation and judgment of my observations and data, this process helped me control for the danger of observer effect—my letting my subjectivity spill into that of others too much.

**Reflective research journal.** I kept this to reflect on my research study. In it were my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings made visible as I sorted through my “interpretive crisis” (Denzin, 2001). It helped me become transparent about my aims and check my motives and biases. It also allowed critical self-reflection on my design. It helped me clarify the research aim and approach, ask my questions, explore, and answer ontological, epistemological, and methodological queries about what I could know, my relationship to what could be known, and how I come to know it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I wrote in it frequently in order to explore and settle issues around methodology so that I may conduct my research and justify my decisions. It served as my personal story of how I came to interpret my stories and my data as I did.

**Researcher’s memos.** Throughout this study, I used memos as a tool for thinking, for serious reflection both on my research and my analysis (Maxwell, 2005, p. 13). These memos were part of my reflective research journal, and I wrote them to explore ideas, to compare data, and to direct further gathering of data.

### **Procedures of the Study**

Beginning the first week, the students, parents, and I met at a conference room of a local library both to gain familiarity with the site, to collect their final projects and hold on to them till

the end of the study, to reiterate the goals of this study and the interviews that will take place, and to fill out the anonymous questionnaires. These were turned into a large marked envelope at the end of the meeting, at which time I again surveyed consent and assent forms and reminded the ten students of our first focus group interview the week after. A schedule of subsequent interview dates, as agreed upon by both researcher and research participants, was distributed.

I met with all ten students for five consecutive weeks, for two hours each week. Their final project was made available to them during every meeting. I conducted a total of three focus group interviews (Shensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999) with the group. Each was no longer than 60 minutes and followed a protocol prepared beforehand (Appendix E) that consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit data from them about their local literacy purposes (second week), processes (third week), and products (fourth week).

I digitally recorded and transcribed all focused group interviews and made them available to students for member checking during the fifth week at the last group meeting. At this last meeting for the whole group, all students received \$25 Barnes & Noble gift cards to thank them for their participation.

Based both on the depth of their responses during the focused group interview and the specific ways they interacted with literacy as evidenced through their final projects, four focal students were selected to participate in two more one-on-one in-depth interviews of 60 minutes each. Scheduling for the two semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of these four students took place with each student selecting the times most appropriate for him/her to meet also in the conference room of this local library. An interview protocol (Appendix F) was followed with questions geared specifically to those four students (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 154-156), based both on their responses during the focus group interviews and on the ways they

engaged with literacy as evidenced in their final project. I asked them to narrate their experience working on this project, its specific assignments, and explain what they believed made their project so personal. My purpose here will be to investigate how literacy worked differently, but also similarly, and in local ways, for each of the four participants.

During the sixth through ninth week of this study, I conducted a total of eight semi-structured interviews (Shensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999), two with each of the four focal students. These were scheduled concurrently with the students themselves at a time convenient for both of us. The purpose of these interviews was to further clarify the specific ways these students engaged in literacy as evidenced both in the final project and in their responses during the focused group interviews, to help configure themes and codes in the data, and to provide the details needed to write a descriptive analysis of each of the four cases.

The goal of this study was to understand the specific multiple discourses each of these four students navigated in his/her search for a literate and social self. I thus follow each of their mental and physical journeys from the project backwards, and forwards sometimes, which allowed me to understand better and in more detail the specific and local ways that literacy worked for each of them. Following is the schedule I followed for all recruitment and research procedures:

Table 1

*Timeline for Research*

<b>Duration</b>	<b>Recruitment and Information Process</b>
	<p>After proposal defense and IRB approval:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supplied colleague with information sheets. She contacted students to recruit them for this study.</li> <li>• Supplied consent and assent forms to first ten who expressed interest.</li> <li>• Ensured all potential participants still had copies of their projects.</li> <li>• Ensured all consent and assent forms were turned in.</li> <li>• Set up meeting for students and parents.</li> <li>• Asked them to bring final projects to first meeting. Requested permission to keep them during the study's duration.</li> <li>• Determined tentative schedule for Focus Group Interviews.</li> </ul>
<p>Week One of Research Study</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students and parents met in the Ford Room of a local library (informational meeting) to gain familiarity with the site and to fill anonymous questionnaire.</li> <li>• Students filled out the questionnaires and turned them in.</li> <li>• Finalized schedule for focus group interviews.</li> </ul>
<p>Week Two  Focus Group Interview #1: <i>Purpose in Final Project</i></p>	<p>Focus Group Interview #1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Went over interview protocol (Appendix E).</li> <li>• Asked if they have any questions.</li> <li>• Spent no more than 60 minutes on interview.</li> <li>• Digitally recorded and took notes during the interview.</li> <li>• Transcribed FGI #1 and study and analyze data.</li> <li>• Sent copies via e-mail to students to review/edit before next week's interview (FGI#2).</li> <li>• Revised/Edited FGI#2 questions based on FGI#1.</li> </ul>

<p>Week Three</p> <p>Focus Group Interview 2</p> <p>Topic: Process in Final Project</p>	<p>Made copies of FGI#1 available for students to read/revise/edit.</p> <p>Focus Group Interview #2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Went over interview protocol (Appendix E).</li> <li>• Asked if they have any questions.</li> <li>• Spent no more than 90 minutes on interview.</li> <li>• Audiotaped and took notes during the interview.</li> <li>• Transcribed FGI#2 and studied and analyzed the data</li> <li>• Sent copies of the transcription by e-mail and asked students to read and feedback any changes.</li> </ul>
<p>Week Four</p> <p>Focus Group Interview 3</p> <p>Topic: Product</p>	<p>Made copies of FGI#2 available for students to read/revise/edit.</p> <p>Focus Group Interview #3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Went over interview protocol (Appendix E).</li> <li>• Asked if they have any questions.</li> <li>• Spent no more than 60 minutes on interview.</li> <li>• Audiotaped and took notes during the interview.</li> <li>• Transcribed FGI#3 and studied and analyzed the data</li> <li>• Sent copies of the transcription by e-mail and asked students to read and feedback any changes.</li> </ul>
<p>Week Five</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had one last meeting with the focus group. Made copies of all interview transcripts available for them.</li> <li>• Attended to any unfinished business and thanked them all for their time.</li> <li>• Distributed \$25 Barnes &amp; Noble gift cards to the ten students who were part of this research till this point.</li> <li>• Worked on schedules for the following four weeks with the four students selected to continue interviewing.</li> <li>• Revised semi-structured interview protocol-Appendix F (for focal students' interviews).</li> </ul>
<p>Week Six</p> <p>(two semi-</p>	<p>Interviewed, transcribed, studied, and analyzed data for focal</p>

structured interviews with focal student #1)	student #1.
Week Seven (two semi-structured interviews with student #2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewed, transcribed, studied, and analyzed data for focal student #2.</li> <li>• Looked at patterns between student #1 and student #2.</li> <li>• Compared with data from focus group interviews and other sources (ongoing analysis).</li> </ul>
Week Eight (two semi-structured interviews with focal student #3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewed, transcribed, studied, and analyzed data for focal students #3.</li> <li>• Looked at patterns between students 1, 2, and 3.</li> <li>• Compared with data from other sources.</li> </ul>
Week Nine (two semi-structured interviews with focal student #4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewed, transcribed, studied, and analyzed data for focal student #4.</li> <li>• Looked at patterns between all four focal students.</li> <li>• Compared with data from other sources.</li> </ul>
Week Ten (recurrent data analysis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Met with focal students individually for member checking.</li> <li>• Completed make-up work.</li> <li>• Distributed \$25 Barnes &amp; Noble gift cards to the four focal students.</li> </ul>

### Data Analysis

I approached data analysis for this qualitative research study through multiple strategies. My analysis of the data was iterative and cyclical, consisting of reading and rereading, initial coding, reflecting, and rereading, then sorting and sifting through the codes to discover patterns and themes. These methods were used to triangulate the evidence of the data (Lincoln & Guba,

1985) and strengthen the robustness of this qualitative study. Multiple data sources, multiple theories, and multiple data collection methods helped me confirm findings and reduce systematic bias in my data.

For the efficacy of this study, it was crucial to follow the leads of the fluidity of the data emerging from the students' conversations, writings, and other artifacts. The data analysis for this study was recursive and ongoing across the ten weeks during which I interviewed the students about their final project. A recursive, back-and-forth process helped me identify themes and patterns in my data and answer my research questions. I followed a typological data analysis (Hatch, 2002) as described below:

**Reading the data.** Since a key feature of ethnographic data analysis is its recursive nature (LeCompte & Shensul, 2010), and due to the exploratory nature of my study, which requires me as the researcher to raise questions continually from the data, my process of analyzing my data began with the first day of my study. The initial step was to *read* my data (Maxwell, 2005): the interview transcripts as they become available and go back to them often, my research notes, the project artifacts and field notes. According to Maxwell, this first step of qualitative data analysis must be planned for, as it allows the researcher to write notes and memos on what she sees or hears in the data and “develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (p. 96).

**Memo writing.** While memos in my study performed other functions that are not related to analysis, such as reflection on methods, theory, or purposes, they also represented an essential technique for my analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 72-75). Memos helped me capture the analytical thinking about the data and facilitated such thinking, stimulating analytic insights (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). I made use of memos in all their various forms and capacities.



**Coding of data.** Due to the huge and multidimensional data I had, I set boundaries. Per LeCompte and Schensul (2010, Ch. 7), I began my analysis by chunking my data from the focus group interviews into “large conceptual categories or ‘bins’ and thus aiming at making sense of what I was observing,” which required me to engage in several ongoing levels of analysis at once (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 204). I did so using a set of definitions grounded in critical theory (See Chapter 1) and some initial organizational categories derived from my research questions and the definitions of terms as used in this study to develop a matrix (Maxwell, pp. 102-103; Miles & Huberman, 1994) as an initial guide (See Table 2).

My study, as evidenced in my research questions, sought to examine students’ local literacy practices from three main categories: purpose (literacy as *practice of freedom*), process (*situating literacy* in students’ lives and concerns/problem solving education), and product (project artifacts *deconstruct* the notion of a *standardized/essentialized literacy*). I had also structured the focus group interviews questions around those three categories and initially, at least, much of my data were grouped around these three categories. This is not to say that I did not heed the fluidity of the data. Rather, it was a starting point that allowed me to anchor my analysis in my research questions but also to be able to keep my research purpose in mind as I looked at the voluminous data that I had in front of me.

Table 2

*Initial Data Analysis*

Research Questions	Theoretical Categories	Data Sources
Question 1: In what ways does the <b>practice of freedom</b> , through the application of <b>classroom literacy events</b> , empower students personally and academically but also as critical and engaged citizens in a larger social project of change and <b>agency</b> ?	<b>Purpose</b> As “ <b>Practice of freedom</b> ”	Focus Group Interviews Semi-Structured Interviews with focal students Project Artifacts Questionnaires Field Notes
Question 2: What happens to <b>literacy events</b> when we aim to <b>situate</b> them within <b>students’ lived experiences and authentic concerns</b> ?	<b>Process</b> As <b>Situated Literacy</b>	Focus Group Interviews Semi-Structured Interviews with focal students Project Artifacts Questionnaires Field Notes
Question 3: In what ways can <b>local narratives</b> of middle school students <b>problematize/deconstruct</b> the grand American narrative of a <b>standardized, essentialized and decontextualized literacy</b> ?	<b>Products</b> As “ <b>local narratives</b> ”	Focused Group Interviews Semi-Structured Interviews with focal students Project Artifacts

**Initial data analysis.** In the initial phase of data analysis and following the focus group interview transcriptions, I coded the data based on the theoretical categories in search of themes and patterns, making sure to leave room for any emerging themes or categories. A constant comparative method of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) helped me discern such themes and patterns.

**Intensive data analysis.** This began after I had completed all interviewing and transcribed all interview data and after a careful study of all data sources: practitioner notes, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, transcriptions, reflective research journal, and final project artifacts. Using the theoretical categories anchored in my research questions, I examined each of the four participants' purpose(s), processes, and products as they worked on the final project, visiting and revisiting emerging data and comparing and contrasting data as I attempted an explanation-building (Yin, 2003).

**Mini-case analysis.** After each semi-structured in-depth interview with my four focal students was transcribed, and based on the themes that emerged during my initial analyses of the focused group interviews, each participant's case was investigated for its distinguished contribution in relevance to the case and purpose of the study and to the emerging themes (Stake, 2006). All of the data were looked at closely, based on my initial findings to foster building up the assertions with evidence. I then wrote a descriptive narrative of each of the four mini-cases using my emerging themes (Choice, Turning from Silence, Liberating Literacies) as structure. The students' words and worlds were at the center of these vivid descriptions. Students were asked for feedback on the written narratives after they are completed.

**Cross-case analysis.** Once I developed an understanding of how each of the four participants engaged in literacy, and conveyed that understanding via a descriptive narrative, I

began a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) using the dominant themes that emerged earlier to point out how literacy worked similarly or differently for these students. I compared and contrasted the data in order to identify commonalities and salient themes but also to point out contrasts across the case for each of the participants and also to triangulate my data.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethics**

**Credibility.** I established credibility of the data collected through a triangulation of data sources and data types (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As their teacher for at least one year, prolonged engagement was met over the course of the 2012-2013 school year in the classroom with all of my research participants, some of whom I knew longer. Rapport with them was established and I sought to represent their multiple perspectives in this study. I employed persistent observation (as evidenced in my field notes) and constant comparison method of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) across a range of literacy events, meeting times, with different students, and through a variety of methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to reduce the potential effect for social desirability responses in my interviews with these students.

To further enhance the credibility of the collected data and the categories, I consistently met with my major advisor and a peer de-briefer to facilitate my consideration of methodological activities and to provide feedback about the accuracy of the data collection and analysis procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My advisor, an impartial colleague, and the students fulfilled the following member-checking responsibilities: provided the opportunity to check the intent of the respondent, allowed for the correction of facts or interpretations, provided the respondent an opportunity to add more details to the notes, provided an opportunity to summarize as the data is being collected, and provided the respondent an opportunity to give assessment of overall accuracy (Spradley, 1980).

**Confirmability.** I established confirmability by creating an audit trail consisting of the tools for data collections (e.g., interviews, digital recordings, questionnaires), the raw data (e.g., transcriptions of the interviews, project artifacts, practitioner notes), my research journal, and outlined procedures for analyzing the data.

**Dependability.** To establish dependability, I implemented a process of double coding (Krefting, 1991). That means I coded a set of data, and then after a period of time, I returned and coded the same data and compared the results. I met regularly with my major advisor who also helped me ensure that the findings and interpretations were sufficiently supported by the data and were logical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ethics and Limitations**

Prior to the commencement of this study, approval was sought from the Wayne State University Human Investigation Committee. Since ethical issues permeate interview research, participants and their parents were fully informed prior to the study about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Written consent and assent were obtained prior to participation in the interviews from parents and students. Though no potential risks were evident in this research, identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms that only the researcher can identify, and no lists linking students to their pseudonyms were kept. Participants were made aware that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and without consequences. Their agreement to participate in this study, they were told, was purely voluntary. Data were stored on the researcher's personal computer at home and in a locked filing facility on the researcher's premises. Only the researcher and research supervisors had access to the raw data from the study. Confidentiality was maintained by not revealing participant identities in any future published material arising from the study.

Heeding postmodern theories, I tried, through this research, to evoke the *Other's* voice. In attempting to do so, listening to all possible voices and letting them be heard in their own words, I, as teacher-researcher, ran the risk of over-subjectification. However, in combining the strengths and weaknesses of several research methods, I freed myself from methodological bias, recognizing fully well that ethnographic research is never free of personal bias.

Also, in eliminating the distinction between subject and object, issues of representation may arise. I thus kept my self-reflective stance and maintained sensitivity to the problem of representation in the inherently unequal and sometimes manipulative relationship between researcher and the subjects, me and my students. Here, and heeding the issue of authority, the extent to which I used or imposed my own voice on the voices of my students in this research, I maintained a dialogue with them so that they may comment on my inscriptions and interpretations.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided the methodology overview as well as methods of analysis I engaged in while conducting this study. A combination of constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) as well as mini- and cross-case analysis helped to guide this exploratory study of the significance of localizing and contextualizing literacy in students' lives as they navigate through multiple competing discourses in their search for social and literary selves. The aim of these various approaches investigated via a constructivist paradigm may help to pave the way to move middle schools students' lives and concerns—their purposes and processes—from margin to center in the language arts classroom.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the various social and academic discourses that ten students, chosen by convenience sampling (see p. 60-63, Chapter Three) across three of my language arts classes, used to create their final projects in eighth grade language arts and the significance of locality to these students' literacy experiences. In studying the nature of the events and transactions that helped shape these students' literate thinking and how local literacies empower the lives of students, my intent was to investigate ways in which both local and global contexts interact to help students promote or resist social and political trends.

The backdrop to this study was the pedagogical approach in this literacy classroom, which I analyzed as part of this study for its contributions to the final projects and insofar as it provided for the unfolding of the literacy events and practices which the final projects and the interviews around them entailed. To provide structure for my observations, the interviews I conducted, and the collection of artifacts that constituted the students' final projects, I use Heath's (1982) definition of a literacy event as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 93) and Barton and Hamilton's (2000) description of such events as "observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them." Other data used in this analysis consist of the initial anonymous questionnaires given to the ten students at the start of this study, my practitioner's notes based on classroom activities and events, and my reflective research journal, (see pp. 59-64, Ch. 3).

Table 3 provides a summary of the literacy assignments and activities that students included in their final projects and also discussed during their interviews. I also included the

dates they were assigned and, when applicable, any readings students completed before they did their writings.

Table 3

*Description of Final Project Assignments*

<b>Project Literacy Events 2012/2013</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Linking texts</b>
“I Am From” Poem (September 2012)	A poem in which students described their early lives, families, and values.	George Ella Lyon’s “I Am From”
Personal Narrative (October 2012)	Students narrated an event of their choice that taught them an important lesson in their lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annie Dillard’s “The Chase” from <i>An American Childhood</i></li> <li>• Maya Angelou’s Ch. 15 of <i>I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings</i></li> <li>• Richard Rodriguez’ “Complexion” and “Aria: A Bilingual Childhood” from <i>Hunger of Memory</i></li> </ul>
I-Search (Mid October 2012)	Students, in research teams, selected questions anchored in their interests and lives. Their questions propelled the research and writing of this paper that consists of three parts: The story of the search, The Search Results, and Reflections on My Search.	This paper was anchored in Ken Macrorie’s (1998) concept of an I-search. Students engaged in reading research articles and books relevant to their topics and questions.
My Possible Future Self (December 2012)	Students imagine—through a genre/modality of choice—their possible future selves. This was born out of Dickens’ Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come idea. Each of them traveled with their own “Yet To Come” vision and imagined a future self	Charles Dickens’ <i>A Christmas Carol</i>



<p>“My Letter To The World” (January 2013)</p>	<p>A letter that students wrote to the world (or a part of it they chose) inviting action on a cause important to the writer</p>	<p>This followed the poetry unit and specifically Emily Dickinson’s “My Letter To The World”</p>
<p>The Op-Ed (February 2013)</p>	<p>Students opined on a topic of their choice about which they felt strongly.</p>	<p>Throughout the semester, students read informational articles and op-eds from local and national newspapers/magazines that presented a spectrum of views on current events</p>
<p>“I Am An Outsider” (March 2013)</p>	<p>An exploration (through a student chosen genre) of ways in which students have felt like outsiders at sometime in their lives</p>	<p>S. E. Hinton’s <i>The Outsiders</i></p>
<p>“A Book That Hooked” (April 2013)</p>	<p>Students chose one of six books (one per marking period) they read during independent reading and explained why this was their favorite and what they learned from it.</p>	<p>Based off Nancy Atwell’s Reader’s Workshop Model in <i>The Reading Zone</i> (2007).</p>
<p>“100 Things I Would Like to Do Before I Die” (May 2013)</p>	<p>A list of things the student intends to accomplish before he/she dies.</p>	<p>This event followed a reading of Helen Keller’s (1933) “Three Days to See” in which the blind author writes about what she would do if she were given three days to see again.</p>
<p>Choice Assignment (May 2013)</p>	<p>Any assignment the students wanted to do but were never assigned.</p>	<p>This was anchored in our writing suggestion box which students deposited ideas for writing in. It gave each of them their suggestions as choice.</p>
<p>“My Learning Journey” (June 2013)</p>	<p>Students reflected on their year in language arts</p>	
<p>“Evaluating Mrs. Kassem: Here’s Your Grade for this</p>	<p>A letter in which students grade their teacher and give</p>	

Year and This is Why” (June 2013)	her feedback on how to improve using the language of critique/feedback we used throughout the year.	
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The literacy events and activities described and analyzed in this chapter convey the literacy practices and concomitant values and beliefs related to literacy, of this language arts classroom and its students. In analyzing both, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways does the practice of freedom, enacted through classroom literacy events, empower students personally and academically in the language arts classroom and also as critical and engaged citizens in a larger social project of change and agency?
- 2) What happens to classroom literacy events when teachers aim to situate them within students’ lived experiences and authentic concerns?
- 3) In what ways can local narratives of middle school students problematize and/or deconstruct the grand American narrative of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy?

Essentially, this analysis consists of two chapters. In Chapter Four, guided by the research questions, I provide my findings on how the literacy events (Table 2) situated in the practices of this language arts classroom helped empower these students both personally and academically as revealed in their final projects and in their responses during the three focus group interviews and the one-on-one interviews with four case study students. I describe in chapter four two main findings. The first reveals the role and practice of choice in the context of the pedagogical approach (Research Question 2). The second analyzes choice as a necessary

condition for students' empowerment and a (re) performing of their academic and social selves (Research Question 1).

### **Literacy as Choice**

According to the findings of this research, the practice of freedom in the language arts classroom empowered students in several ways. For the sake of the task at hand, I shall enumerate them here, reminding myself and the readers of this dissertation that both practice and empowerment mesh and coexist rather than numerically follow each other. It is also helpful to assert here that these same purposes allowed the students to steer their processes in creative and personal ways which, in turn, resulted in producing texts that held meanings beyond these final texts only. Rather, there were meanings rooted in experiences as complex and as versatile as the students themselves.

### **Reconceiving Choice in the Literacy Classroom**

Throughout the interviewing process, all ten of the students reiterated that the element of the project they most appreciated was that of choice. And while they were adamant about recounting all of the other elements that played equally motivating roles in the completion of this project, such as pleasing their teacher and their parents or doing what is required and getting good grades, the element of choice remained for all of them, both in the focus group and in the one-on-one interviews, the most outstanding. Even on the anonymous questionnaires (Appendix D) given before the interviews, when asked to rank their top three favorite assignments for this project (Question 4), all ten students ranked the choice assignment as one of their top three, with the op-ed assignment coming a close second. On Question 9 of this same questionnaire, students were asked an open-ended question, "What is one element of this project that you would keep?" Here again, all ten students reiterated that one element of this project they would most want me

to keep is the element of choice, with one student summing it thus, “I would keep the choices and decisions we could make ourselves because that made this project our own.”

**The challenge of choice.** If the casual observer were to look at the final projects and read through the students’ writing, he/she might miss the challenge that choice presented these young teens. Initially, they did not exactly covet the challenge required to create the projects. From the onset, students seemed “convinced of their own unfitness” (Freire, 2009, p. 63) and lacked confidence in themselves. Most of the ten students who participated in the focus groups initially had very negative attitudes about their reading and writing abilities, and about themselves too. These attitudes were revealed in the writing surveys I gave at the beginning of the year, asking about their perception of writing. In my teaching notes, I write about how the students early on differentiated between *writing for school* and *writing for self*, and how they viewed the latter more unfavorably. In the interviews, several of them discussed these earlier notions of school writing as “for the teacher.” And as Frank and Huda vocalized in the first focus group interview, many of them would have preferred a lined ditto with room for three paragraphs, and sentence starters, and perhaps transition words too. Less investment in making choices on their part translated to more investment in their grade. This was especially the case when they were assigned writing about topics of which they knew little. Ray attested to this idea in his second one-on-one interview when he spoke of “going through school” as a process that “I learned to do early on. In order to get a good grade, I had to learn to listen only to one voice which was the teacher’s.” When I asked him if sometimes he disagreed with it, his response was, “Not always, but when I did, my voice did not count.” Salwa confirmed Ray’s viewpoint in her own end-of-the-year reflections. She wrote, “This year, I learned that I can make choices in my life and in my learning without having to worry about losing my voice or grade.” District prompts—

prescribed topics that asked students to choose between two stances on an issue—represented students’ least preferred type of writing. This is a finding that manifested itself both in their words during the interviews and in their choice not to include any of these prompts in their final projects. As several of them stated in the course of the interviews, and as Shay later admitted, the prompts given by the district “did not relate to us, were not chosen by us, and did not really measure how well we could read, write, or think. We did not care much about them either.” However, as this analysis reveals, the prompts were reminders of standard literacy practices that left many of them feeling inadequate and unprepared. On Question 9 of the questionnaire, when asked if there was anything he/she would like to add about this project or any part of the class, one student had this to add: “The district prompts were constant reminders of exactly the type of writing that I hated to do. Unlike the rest of the writing I did this year, I have no memory of what I wrote or why. I wish we could have chosen the topics ourselves.”

While they embraced choice as selection right from the beginning, the process of making choices pertaining to their literacies and lives proved difficult, frustrating, messy, and uncertain at times for all involved, and its manifestations followed these students into my classroom from the onset of the year when they were directed to write *anything* and their anxieties soared. It was always as if they were guessing *my* intentions for *their* writing. What am I looking for? What am I thinking? What am I expecting? These were the kinds of questions they were asking of me. The literacy events and the choices inherent in these events were completely outside them, and they were looking from the periphery of their eyes outwardly, never in. However, I wanted them in essence to trust their experience and “to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge” (Freire 2009, p. 19). Trying to do that proved for all involved a frustrating process.

Riley, a reserved but dedicated student who transferred out of the district after her eighth-grade year, echoed many of the frustrations that I saw in students' faces whenever they were told at the beginning of the year to make a choice to approach their writing assignments in a way that was meaningful for them. She admitted during the first focus group interview that it was "challenging to start this class" because "I've always known to be assigned my work, three paragraphs with a checklist about how this character is a hero...and the teacher would say *write about this topic*. In your class, it was really confusing at first." Frank agreed, "We were emailing you, like 'Mrs. Kassem, what are we supposed to do?' and you were like, 'Think of a way you want to approach this topic,' and we'd be like, 'What?' We'd be lost because we were always used to being given an assignment that was specific and stringent with a checklist. We didn't have that with you and it was scary and weird."

Making choices seemed bizarre to many of them at first, and it was definitely scary. That in itself was a testament to the ways many of them had, over the course of their years, both in and out of school, come to distrust themselves to make choices. They were often living in worlds others had chosen. Such lack of agency is well articulated by Ray, who transferred to this middle school two years ago from a private school, in his second one-on-one interview when he lamented the fact that he and "teenagers in general do not control much in their lives. At home, it's your parents making all the decisions. At school, it's your teachers. And even if you go out and get a job, you aren't really your own boss either." For him and many his age, this translated to a form of silencing, one that relinquished many of them to assume a disconnected, distant, and disinterested stance in their lives and in their literacies. Both Kat and Bella articulated this silent stance repeatedly in their interviews: "I did not think speaking was necessary." In the second focus group interview, Kat, whose silence through much of the first few weeks of school was

striking, shared, “No one listens anyways.” Bella, a quite reserved Puerto Rican special education student and talented artist, smiled and nodded her head in full agreement.

Transitioning students, thus, from depositories of standardized choices, or as Freire deems “a mechanistic view of reality” (2009, p. 130) in which students are anesthetized and inhibited (2009, p. 81), to problem-solving agents making their own choices was thus an arduous task of commitment to a pedagogy of freedom. It required a trust in their ability to gain a power of consciousness that would “condition their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality” (Freire, 2009, p. 130).

The final project represented that type of development and a culmination of these students’ conscious conditioning of their attitudes and ways. The final project was a long and time-consuming investment that asked much of them, both personally and academically. Yet most of them moved forward to embrace the possibilities this project offered. Some, though, like Shay, waited for others to pave the way, which they later walked on by themselves more bravely and self-assuredly. Or, like Bella, who, in her own words, preferred to “give myself a little time to think about all that was required, and to start drawing a plan for how I wanted to complete it.” Each of these students found, in the many literacy events they had practiced during the course of this year, means and motive to get through the process.

It was, yet again, the actual going and getting through the process—that many of them later detailed—that helped once again allay their anxieties and concerns, as each, in his/her own personal way, sought to make meaning of his world and words. Salwa writes in her learning journey, “Even though I was nervous about completing this final project, I was also sure that the support of my teachers and friends would help me find my way. It has happened before in this class and I was confident it would happen again.” The need to go through the struggle was a

significant and recurrent lesson in their literacies and lives. It was also one that they reiterated clearly through their projects and in the interviews around them. It is also depicted clearly by each of the four case study students as I describe in Chapter Five.

I pause here to emphasize the significance and challenge of teaching choice as a necessary component of literacy pedagogy, both for what it can yield but also because it is an integral component of critical pedagogy. Literacy as choice sets the stage for informed, engaged, and empowered citizens both in a classroom and in a democracy. (This point will be further discussed throughout this analysis.) However, and as I allude to later, choices are not just exercises in selection between two or more tasks. They are complex and creative cognitive and metacognitive tasks. They require critical thinking skills, and as students' reactions and words in this study show, choice often gets left behind in our curricula as we succumb to standardized versions of imposed choices and literacies on us and our students. In vying to cover more content tested on standardized assessments, we forsake to discover, as partners with our students, new ways to help navigate options in literacy and in living that they can call their own. As an essential practice of freedom, making choices represented exercises and/or trial runs and practices for the skills, attitudes, and understandings these students will need to be critically engaged citizens of and in the world. As such, they represent a necessary, authentic, and deliberate component of the literacy as practice of freedom.

**Choice as complex literacy.** The idea of choice, though, is not in itself novel. It is rather how they conceived of choice and how they practiced it via this project and during the course of the year that is illuminating. For choice was for these eighth-graders no longer a process of mere selection. Reflecting Foucault's notion of discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Ch. 3, p. 20-21), choices represented manifestations of the many



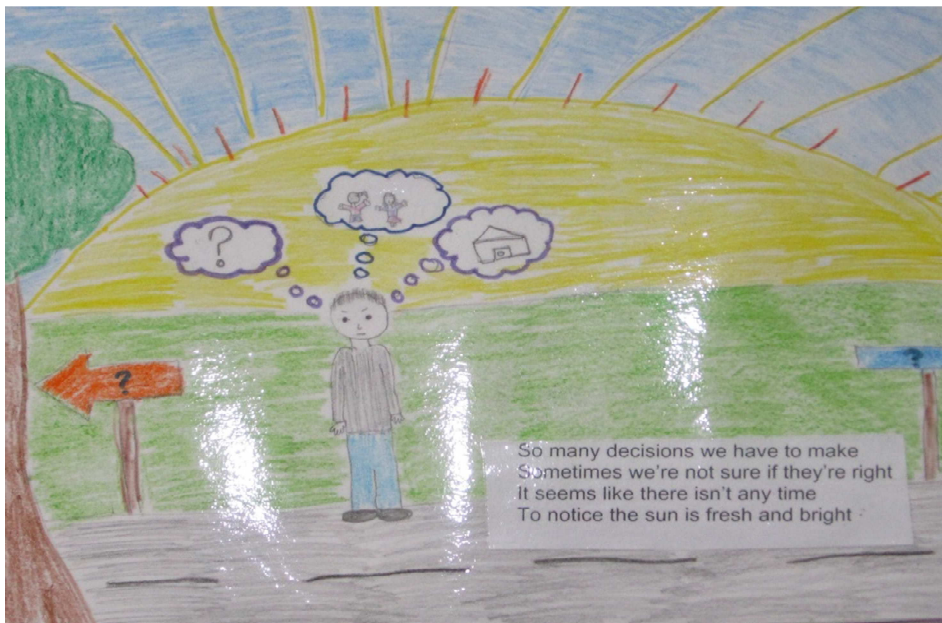
ways each of these ten students existed in and with the world. Students, like Riley, during the first focus group interview stressed that having options was important because it presented them with “an opportunity to show what we can do with our writing.” For these students, then, choice was not simple selection. Choice was rather an opportunity for thinking, a primarily instinctive drive to “turn our writing,” as Shay vocalized, “into what we wanted to turn it into.” Based on how they conceived of and practiced it, choice represented a complex process of cognitive and metacognitive maneuvering, a form of literacy, so to speak. Such literacy allowed them to probe their minds, options, and experiences in search of a suitable best.

**Choice as critical thinking.** It is worthwhile mentioning here that the fact that they had multiple options to think about and to choose from added to the complexity of this literacy task since it placed more, rather than less, responsibility on the students. That idea was well articulated by Huda, a Palestinian-American student with vitiligo, during the first focus group interview. In thinking out their many choices, from searching for a theme for their project that best depicted their experiences throughout the year, to creating the design of their covers which required them to stay within the boundaries of their theme, to selecting which assignments other than the required ones they chose to include, why they chose these assignments, and in what order and genre, they engaged in critical choices that formed the basis of the project’s purpose.

Huda remembered:

I was never too confident of a writer. I kept doubting myself. But I felt in this class and with this project that I had to make choices and decisions about my writing. I had to decide what I want to write about and that didn’t mean that I had to decide about one thing. I had to jump between different ideas, decide on what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to do it, how I wanted to write it.

In her choice assignment, Salwa, a Lebanese-American conservatively dressed student, recognized the deliberations and questions that went with making choices. She included a visual of a person deliberating on his choices, and accompanied her visual with a short poem:



*Figure 1.* Salwa's Visual of Making Choices

The visual (Figure 1), as Salwa reflected in the second focus group interview, represented the difficulty in making decisions in and outside of class. The visual itself too represented an expression of her choices. In deciding on the content of the visuals, the color and placement of the objects, and on the message of the visual and the forms the message will take, she was, as she claimed, “making difficult and significant choices.”

Bella agreed with Salwa's opinion, adding that “even thinking about how others read you via your choices is a choice you make too. We live in a world that judges us constantly by our choices, and we judge others by their choices.” Hind recognized that it was a skill that “we need in our own lives that we are not always taught,” which is why, in her opinion, “many adults cannot make their own decisions.” She added, “I see it all the time around me—grown-ups who

do not have a way that works for making decisions about whether they should buy a house, or who they should marry, or even how to live their lives. They have not learned how to make their own choices.”

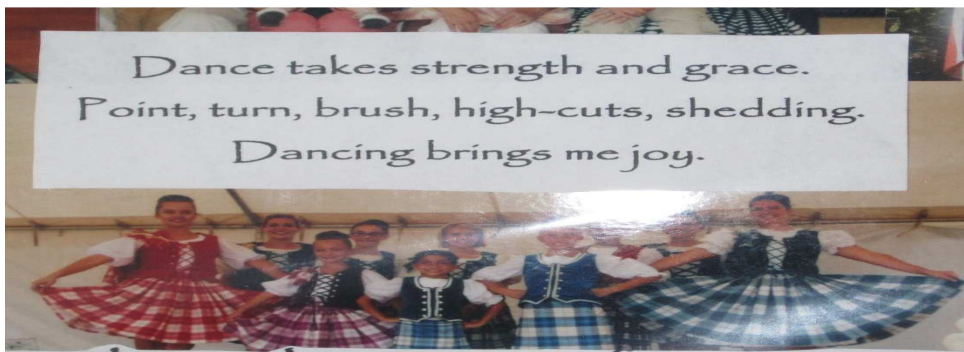
Throughout their work on these various literacy events, students were learning that their decisions are their own. And because they were such, and entailed struggle and responsibility, some tended to resist making them, though they all came later to appreciate the options and freedom that they provided. In an open-ended question of the questionnaire about which element of the project they would keep, eight of the ten students stated that making their own choices was an element of the project they would keep. Throughout the year, and well into the final project, the complexity of making choices represented an integral element of the practices of freedom that defined this classroom.

A striking example of the cognitive complexity that accompanied choice-making comes from my teaching notes as students worked in groups of four on writing a proposal for their final project. The first part of the proposal asked each student to choose a theme that best represented him/her as a person and as a student. In teams, they brainstormed ideas, selected a theme, and shared their rationale for their choices. This gave them a much desired audience for their ideas, helped them receive valuable feedback from others, and allowed those students who were still struggling to find ideas and themes the metacognitive modeling necessary to develop their own strategies.

Each member of the team took turns telling the others what his/her choice was and then getting their feedback on his/her choice. I walked around listening to their conversations. In a discussion with her group, Riley expressed that she thought the best theme for her project might be dancing because “like writing, it takes strength and grace.” Her rationale was that in dancing,

as in writing, the music around you defines your moves and moods. The discussions and feedback in this class helped her write deeper and think better, she said (an observation she later included in her learning journey).

She would organize her project by her growth, and her first dance pictures would correspond to her first assignments in this class. As she learned more, through the many events that took place in this class, her pictures and poems got bigger and richer. She decided with her team that poetry—also a genre of rhythm and order—would be her genre of choice. Salwa suggested that Riley’s project should include all of her medals and a CD of the music she danced to. The music’s beat decided how fast or slow the movement was. That too represented the different activities in this class—some slow and some fast. Any scratch, Salwa emphasized, might cause her music to play less effectively. “You cannot hear the songs just by looking at the CD,” she explained, “You need a CD player to hear all my songs too. The CD player is a device, just like a pen.” Riley settled on the idea. “They both help record my sad and happy songs—both from my childhood and those about my future adult self.”



*Figure 2.* Riley’s visual highlighting her love of Dancing

The other group members—alert and probing—offered even more suggestions and expressed their approval and appreciation for Riley’s idea. Shay suggested that she include Scottish poems to reflect her heritage, an idea Riley took up in pictures that she included in her project (Figure 2). Others suggested that Riley could turn her personal narrative into a poem to

keep the *lyrical* effect, an idea Riley liked and later translated into action that rendered her project uniquely her own.

Riley's example points to the many complex ways students in this class had come to view their work and worlds. As she thought out her choices for her project, she made connections to her ways of being and revealed in sophisticated ways how she had come to define herself by the literacy events that defined her experiences over the course of the year. Her fluid movement between the event itself, such as the token of identity assignment—her medals—and her life as a dancer, shows that she had come to view her personal life as natural material for her academic one, and, in fusing the two, she was developing a double perspective that allowed her to understand via her school literacies her personal and social life. In doing so, she saw the potential that can grow from this fusion, which is why in her final project she admits that “though I wanted to give up when work became tough, this class meant the most because it changed my perspective on learning and on living. I learned to think in complex and creative ways.”

However, Riley was not alone in reaping the benefits of her complex endeavor. She was accompanied by peers knowledgeable, too, through the many events of this classroom about Riley and her preferences as they searched through her example for their own choices and preferences. Shay, an Italian-American special education student, spoke to the power of these shared choices in the first focus group interview: “I realized that I can do the same thing Riley did. I do not mean dancing [laughs]. I mean I can also use my own life and my peers' suggestions to generate my theme.”

Salwa—and using Riley's example—was also challenged by the ensuing discussion to find one theme that fit all her ambitions. She was not sure at first what she wanted to do, but then decided after hearing Riley's idea to search for similar ways to be different and unique. Her

theme and title, *A Blooming Bud*, reflected, as she pointed out during the second focus group interview, her metamorphosis since the beginning of the year. “I was thinking from the beginning of the year, my writing wasn’t so good and it started to bloom and I became better though I used to always stress out about writing and stuff.”

The first page shows only soil covering the whole bottom of the page with a moon and a star on the top—both tokens of her Muslim identity, which she brought in at the beginning of the year. “The soil,” Salwa emphasizes, “represents this class and all the different nutrients that went into my development.” On the following page, multiple seeds lie next to her “I Am From” poem, and from each seed sprouts a line that defines a different part of her identity—an imaginative person, a writer, a Lebanese American, a would-be explorer and world traveler, a prospective pharmacist, and an invested member of her family. The subsequent pages hold different stages of bloom, from seed to full petal. The final page, “My Learning Journey,” showcases a full in bloom dahlia, according to Salwa, a symbol of “dignity, grace, and elegance” that, she admits, “represented my presence in this classroom.”

Much like settling on a theme, through each assignment, these students were presented with a range of possibilities from which they had to decide what to do and how to do it, a practice repeated throughout their eighth-grade year. “I really liked the many choices we always seemed to have,” Shay volunteered in the first focus group interview, “We never felt locked in.” And when I pointed out that sometimes specific writing prompts were given, they still believed that choices were embedded in those prompts. “Though you told us to write about a specific topic such as about a time you felt like an outsider,” Ray commented, “we got to pick that time and what to write about.” The power of such pedagogy, Bella confirmed in “My Learning Journey” assignment, was that “all of us felt like we were making a choice that best fits who we

are and how we live. No two assignments were ever the same because no two people in this class were ever the same. Similar, perhaps, but not the same.”

Thus, from the onset of class and this project, students saw literacy as a choice or, as one of them affirmed, “a sea of possibilities” that “is not always easy to find one’s way in.” The students’ comments throughout the interview revealed how they recognized deeply the challenge of choice but also how they embraced its complexities fully and fashioned them in personal and meaningful ways.

**Choice as ambiguous literacy.** Through their many different and sometimes intersecting discourses, each of these students found ways to exercise, through the literacy events of this classroom, personal and academic choices. And though often, as many of them said, they knew their starting point, the end at first was nowhere in sight. In essence, they were learning to navigate ambiguous and uncertain territory. That ambiguous territory manifested the scope and sequence of the writing act for these eighth-graders. What they set out to do, and what actually transpired, represented sort of an awakening for them that dispelled, to a degree, common notions about literacy practices.

Instead of a focus on a product that pleases their teachers, as Huda reiterated in the third focus group interview, there were new priorities set, in which their search for their various identities—personal, social, and academic—among the multiple discourses of their lives, could come clearly into focus. “I had the passion,” Huda wrote in a letter to me, “but I did not know my cause. I began writing and did not know where my words would take me. As I wrote more about the social problems I faced, I realized where the problems rooted from.” The process for them proved, as I will discuss in more detail later, quite rewarding, and the ambiguity quite educational.

Bella, a highly reserved student of Puerto Rican descent, stood as a prime example of that when she ventured in her choice assignment to investigate all of the ambiguity of her situation as a writer and as a young woman dealing with issues of self-silencing and self-confidence, a stance she would never have assumed at the beginning of the year. The choice assignment was given in May 2013. In it, Bella chose to write a letter to her past self, an obvious inversion of the required “My Possible Future Self” assignment. The first striking feature of this letter is its length, two handwritten pages, initially an uncommon choice for Bella, a special education student who often resorted to very short paragraphs or chose art as her preferred mode of expression. The other is its candid reflexive approach which Bella usually avoided taking. She was not often one to speak herself to the group. The complexity of this assignment, reflective of both Bella’s personal and academic metamorphosis, lay in the fact that Bella chose to use her future self to speak with her past self—which is really her present writing self—about matters that only her past self, as she reiterates in the letter, would know. She reassures this past self that “though you have lost a lot of people you care about, most of whom were role models, friends, and father figures... things will get good.”

She then turns to offer advice to her past self. She tells her to “talk to that boy you have a crush on because if you don’t you will regret it,” and reminds her not to “give up on yourself.” The final, and perhaps most keen, part of the letter testifies to Bella’s newly acquired ability to diagnose her predicament and prescribe a panacea. She instructs her past self: “Self confidence is something we have dealt with for a long time,” and she offers advice: “Unless you try to believe in yourself, nothing will happen.” The last line testifies to the ambiguity of both Bella’s stance and her words. Her future self, exuding agency, signs off with “I have what I have because I fought for it. So, you have to, too!”



Bella's letter cleverly merges the ambiguities of choice that define both her life and her literacies. She investigates, via a literacy event, a position of agency that she often finds hard to adopt in her own personal life. By her own admission, she is "shy and quiet and cannot speak, not noticed at all." From that future position—one quite possible in her writing—she authoritatively invites her past self to assume a similar stance to save her present self. This literacy event, born, as she explained in the second focus group interview, from Scrooge's example in *A Christmas Carol*, proved instrumental in allowing Bella to simulate an agency that is otherwise lacking in her personal life. In doing so, she is able to imagine a better future self with better outcomes, one that she more accurately represents in the visual she drew depicting her possible future self (Figure 3). That visual, depicting her future self sipping a cup of hot chocolate because she does not like coffee (as she describes in the second focus group interview), reveals a sophisticated, confident, and composed young woman who has the attention and admiration of the young handsome man in the picture.

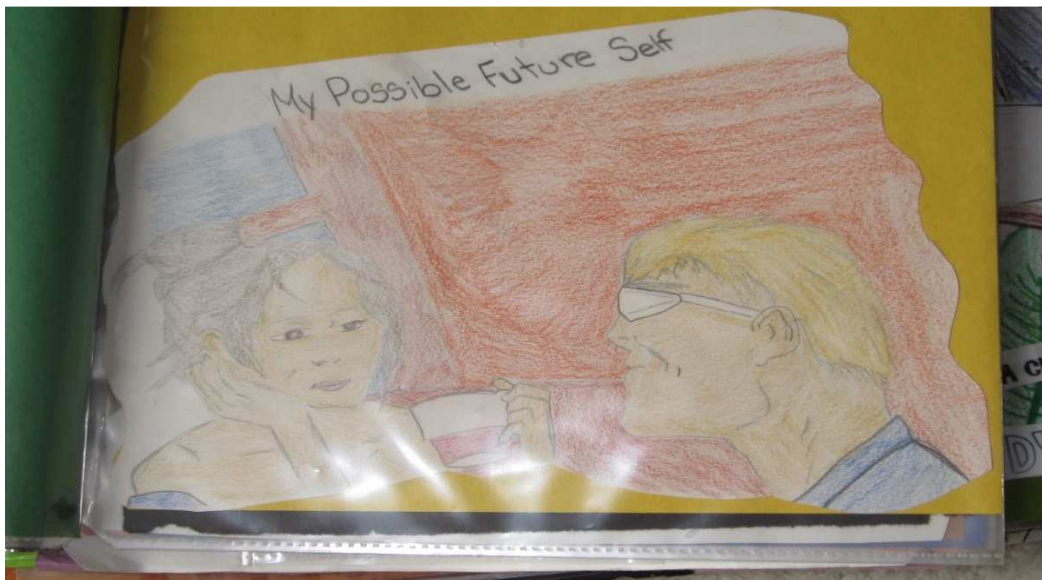


Figure 3. Bella's Future Self

In the second part of this chapter, I speak of how Bella and her classmates were empowered through the various literacy events of this classroom to find and adopt such stances. For example, both she and Huda, using Scrooge's example in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, go forward and back in their lives to deliver themselves from a past that proved troubling and confusing. In Bella's example, settling issues of confidence helps her move forward to claim agency in her life (and a handsome attentive male that her teenage self aspires to). In Huda's case, the letter from her mother written by Huda herself provides much-needed closure to a tragedy that still unfolds in the nuances of her conflicting self. Uncertain of where their journeys via literacy will take them, both remained resolute in making choices that were as complex and ambiguous as the lives they were leading.

As their teacher, I was sometimes equally uncertain of where they were going or what they would find in the course or end of such personal and literary journeys. I remained, however, convinced of their value and of these students' needs to learn to take ownership of and responsibility for their choices and struggles. The ambiguity of choice was inevitable, but I was "imbued with a profound trust of [my students] and their creative power" (Freire, 2009, p. 75). I was also ready to *partner* with them on these often ambiguous quests. Especially at this renaissance age, I was convinced that such quests presented numerous opportunities, both personal and academic, for these middle-schoolers to investigate, through the literacy events of their language arts classroom, the substance of their own lives and plan for future possible selves. And in doing so, in such practices of freedom, they could lay out the foundations of an affirmed adolescence.

**Choice as multidimensional.** Throughout the many literacy events that defined their presence in this literacy classroom, these students were, as Dewey (1916/2012) describes,

“cultivating” themselves and reconstructing their experiences as people and as readers and writers too (p. 10). Each found, in these types of choices, new ways of being.

Hind’s multidimensional reading self directly contrasted with the reserved, quiet, shy fourteen-year-old with sharp piercing black eyes, who often remained on the margins of classroom discussions. Hind—claiming agency as a reader—testified in her choice assignment to a multi-dimensional reading self that was born from many choices she had made and the many literacy events that defined this classroom:

As a reader, I have been reincarnated in this class and thus lived countless lives—both real and imaginary. I have lived as an adventurer, rebel, a romantic, a soldier, a heroine, a detective, a tribute, a shadow hunter, a witch, and an activist. I have moved forward and backward through time, ridden Pegasus to the underworld and soared with Nike high up in the sky. I have freed nations and enslaved others.

Frank, an outspoken and highly involved student, depicted the opportunity to work on this project as a “chance to show what you can do with your writing.” To him, writing became a means to explore the multiple dimensions of his personality and experiences, so it was natural that it too be multidimensional. Such multidimensionality is revealed through the choices that define every page of his project, first in his “I Am From” poem; he is a young man “cuddled with my grandma/On the LazyBoy.” He is at once a gamer, a reader, a speaker and a friend: “I am from the gaming computer/reading while playing while talking to friends.” His letter to the world reflects a universal scientific self that wonders about the “immensely large inanimate objects” of “Mr. Almighty Universe,” while lamenting in an endearing tone his “irregularly shaped head” that make “ball caps quite uncomfortable.”

Riley displayed such multidimensionality too and added yet another dimension—genre—to her choices: “I did this [the final project] almost entirely in poetry.” Her ability to choose even the format of her assignments represented a significant part of her expression of self. In the first

page of her project, she explains her choice, “I wanted poetry to be my chosen genre for my end-of-the-year project, but I also wanted to include the original written forms of my writings.” She follows this comment with “I can stand alone/To make my individuality be shown/Others might not approve/Yet I will not budge or move.”

Huda too embraced the different ways she made her choices, and appreciated what she saw as a lack of strict guidelines. For her, a writer’s purpose and a teacher’s purpose were not always aligned. And so, to honor a student’s purpose in the writing process is paramount and produces more candid and more effective writing because “if you have to do it the exact same way they [teachers] want you to do it and you don’t really think about it because you’re just trying to put in what they want you to do, then it makes your writing worse.”

And although, as Salwa stated, “We all always had a starting point,” they still needed “to take it somewhere.” And that presented them with purposes that proved quite personal. Bella, the visual learner as she calls herself, needed to see it to understand it. Her mind made patterns and shapes and colors of the words. Shay, an auditory learner as he described himself, needed to talk to someone about it. He explained, “I need somebody to explain it to me and maybe we’ll debate for five hours about something that doesn’t have to do with what they’re explaining, but I will get it five hours later.” Hind will “talk more in writing than I do out loud.” Out loud, she was coy, calm, and composed. On paper, like Bella, she was quick, creative, and, unlike Bella, sometimes quite rebellious.

Kat, having chosen puzzles for her theme, revealed only parts of herself, and the rest lurked in her silence during the focus group interviews and her candid articulation during the two one-on-one interviews (detailed in her case study in Ch. 5). Salwa, by her own admission, used writing to discover who she was, and listened to the voices of others to find, or as she best liked

to emphasize, *create* herself. Riley, a dancer, often during discussions danced to the group's beats trying very hard not to upset the collective rhythm. Her love for rhythm manifested itself in poems across the pages of her final project, and they, like her, were precise, proper, and reserved.

Unlike a tough exterior, and her “honestly, I’m brutal,” introduction to the class at the beginning of the year, Celine’s writing revealed a fragile, candid, and brutally honest and sophisticated self. Having suffered years of abuse, she found it, as she claims in her letter to the boy “I abused in 6<sup>th</sup> grade,” a confessional—a way out of the guilt she felt:

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade a popular term to use as a comeback was “your mom.” I said this term “yo motha” in 6<sup>th</sup> hour to a student who was antagonizing me enough to come back in a hateful way. Little did I know that this particular student’s mother had recently passed away. I was all over the bathroom walls and on everyone’s mind. Statuses on Facebook were made about me. Rumors, hateful rumors, had gotten around saying that I said someone’s mom died because she was fat. Not to lie, suicide crossed my mind multiple times. I felt like I deserved everything that was thrown on me.

Ray found in music his inspiration for each writing move and revealed, more than just in his op-ed, his longing for better times and on more than just the musical front. Frank balanced horror and heaven, moving from Stephen King to quoting the Bible often. For Riley, this project revealed “my personality—my originality and my differences.” Huda was “eager to start it, and it was easier now to do more creative writing—anything I wanted and I was happy about this.” Bella was already thinking about “how I prefer talking in pictures about my life,” and Shay, poet by choice and a special education student by label, was “ready to rhyme time.”

Each of these students spoke about the project as a time to make choices and an opportunity to present a final eighth-grade multidimensional self. In their words and worlds, choice represented an opportunity to navigate and create options that are commensurate with their own lives and experiences, knowing fully well that those options would not be rejected or “fined” points by the teacher. Celine best illustrated this idea when she spoke of the variety of

choices and options given to her as a communication of trust. If the teacher trusted her to make these choices, then she had to work hard at showing that she was more than capable of doing that. In her perception, choice on my part was a belief in her capabilities as a person and student, so she was bent on doing her best to show that she was “trustworthy.” Choice to her represented a form of respect.

**Choice as personal agency.** For each of these students, literacy endeavors were never separate from personal aspirations and endeavors, and in their search for better words to speak, read, and write with, they were also searching for better worlds to inhabit. For them, their written words extended into their knowledge of the world (Freire, 1986). Looking at their works and words, this became evident.

Throughout the interviews, they spoke of how their choices for reading and writing paralleled their lives with their inherent ambiguities. Celine illustrated this point best when she, responding to a question about which work she most considerably revised to include in her final project, declared that it was her “I Am From” poem, which she “redid completely.” When asked why she chose to redo that poem, her response was, “because a lot of stuff has changed since the beginning of the year. I went through a lot of family problems, and I didn’t want to include those people in my poem anymore, so they kind of got kicked out.” The poem, evidenced by Celine’s quote, represented her own personal space, her private territory, over which she felt empowered enough to be “kicking out” those who were unfit to live within her multiple lines and lives.

Examining both versions of her poem closely, one she wrote at the beginning of the year (September 2012) and the revision (June 2013), one discerns that the changes were not necessarily as drastic as her phrase “revised completely” indicated. They consisted mostly of excluding the line which initially had the names of her stepmother, stepsister, and stepbrother as

part of her Thanksgiving dinners. The latter version spoke of Celine as being “From Laura and Jaime and Maria” (her mom and dad and older sister) only. When I pointed out to her that her revision consisted of removing only one line, Celine responded, “True, but that one line contained many stories behind it.”

In fact, had she not pointed this out, and without the context of what I knew about her relationship with her stepmom at this point, that one deleted line may have almost seemed insignificant, and the ambiguity surrounding it might have never been resolved. In the context of her life, however, that line represented a choice to exercise, on the surface of the page, power over the ambiguities of a relationship she could not control in her personal life. Her relationship with her stepmom had so soured by the end of the school year that leaving her name in one of her poems would have bothered Celine. And though she was still living with her stepmom outside of school, the choice literacy afforded her made living without her stepfamily possible on paper.

**Choice as intrinsic purpose.** And thus their focus on literacy as a choice is perhaps the most outstanding element of the first focus group interview with the ten students. They regarded the open nature of this final project most as a real “opportunity” to do what they are best at. They considered it a chance for doing what they deemed creatively fit with the assignments given. They contrasted that with other experiences in writing they had where they deemed their purpose for writing and the teacher’s purpose completely unaligned, thus make their writing suffer. When you are required to do the work in a specific way and with a specific outcome, Celine declared, “You have to do it the exact same way they want you to do it” and “you don’t think about it because you’re just trying to put in what they want you to do.” Ray agreed, “It’s basically just what’s on that worksheet. There are no goals to see what kind of person you are.” Salwa contrasted her approach to this project with the “color and copy assignments” that “are easy to

grade,” where one “looks at an answer key and they just check it off and mark what you got right...it’s basically just what’s on that worksheet.”

The problem with such assignments is that they do not present students with an intrinsic purpose for literacy. Most of the ten students agreed repeatedly that district prompts were examples of writing that is done for no other purpose than to “force you to go in a certain way in your writing and you have to do it in a certain way that you start hating it.” This is ironic considering that the district prompts were persuasive prompts meant to elicit student-supported opinion regarding a given topic.

But even the topics, according to most students, were irrelevant to their lives. According to, Celine (focus group one), she refused to do the last one and turned in a blank paper. Huda claimed she was used to writing anything down to get it done, but still found herself painfully scavenging for support that she could not honestly muster. Shay wrote a poem about his dog because he could not think of anything else to write. Bella worked all hour on one paragraph of all her ideas. Ray and Riley feigned interest to get a score. Kat wrote with her pen but no passion or purpose went into her prompt. Hind said it was not the worst district prompt she had written. They were all “equally dull.”

Frank agreed and talked about the last district prompt they took. “I remember the last district prompt asking if we thought animals should be kept in zoos.” Then, he added, “To be completely honest, there are a few children that know about zoos but I don’t and I assume neither do most of you. And I don’t like to talk about that. I’m not good at it. It’s not bringing out the things that I can do best.” He went on to admit that some students may find purpose in such a prompt, saying, “It’s good for some people,” and that they offer a better alternative to accommodate more students: “It would be so much more accurate if everyone could just pick



what they wanted.” In fact, not one student in all my eighth-grade classes made the choice to include even one of the three district prompts we did that year in his/her final project. Repeatedly during the course of the interviews, they showed their aversion for such prompts and resented that schools used them to assess their thinking and writing skills.

And this sense of literacy as intrinsic never left some of their observations. During the first focus group interview, Huda admitted that writing would always be “very personal” and “a part of you.” She saw it necessary to make personal choices in the writing to improve academically. In this, as her case study later shows, she observes that students are more likely to invest in their writing process once “they push themselves open a little bit.” That push to be honest in your writing makes you a better writer altogether, she believes.

Both she and Kat later expounded on how their need to project personal and authentic experiences led them to revise their personal narratives multiple times without fearing all the work, both emotional and physical, which that entailed. After all, each saw the revision as a necessary and personal choice. “I was doing it my way and because I wanted it to sound differently,” Kat admitted in her first one-on-one interview. Riley agreed, adding that if you are forced to do writing “in a certain way,” then “you hate it.”

Hind observed that the personal nature of writing precluded a single approach, so when teachers expected or communicated a single approach, then students begin to look at everything else as being wrong, and writing was no longer about the student but rather about what the teacher wanted. “Writing should not have to be wrong,” Hind stressed. Even as they defended and discussed their writing choices, the students revealed how choice had become a natural part or their cognition. These conversations would never have taken place at the beginning of the year where their eighth-grade selves were still bound by others’ choices.

**Choice as wide open territory of options and risks.** And this personal territory of choice allowed them to steer their writing away from conventional notions of grammatically correct forms. Salwa proclaimed that writing in schools tends to focus more on isolated conventions of vocabulary and grammar than anything else, yet the assessments were always essays that required thinking.

Shay, who had suffered the pangs of having been an inadequate speller throughout his scholastic days, stated that the focus on convention is “almost inconsequential” as today’s technology precluded the need to be versed in spelling a word you can easily look up. “Spelling has nothing to do with the difference between plane and plain. Spelling has nothing to do with it. It’s the ideas,” he concluded. His choice was practiced in short poignant poems that represented his dense ideas in which he calls out for someone to “Lift the rage/Beat the demons I face/So I can no longer live/In my past disgrace.” Salwa confirmed Shay’s choice to heed ideas. She concluded that, “in the real world, if we want to write something that is grammatically correct, we have a bunch of resources like dictionaries and things we can look up but we can’t look up how to think for ourselves or how to write well or how to come up with ideas.”

Their choice of texts in the final project and their choice of words to talk around them substantiated these students’ views indeed. The focus on convention had left them many times unable to see the grand purpose of an assignment or a writing genre. Frank said, “I feel like I didn’t know what a personal narrative was. I thought that it used “I,” “me,” and I couldn’t really understand what it is.” And this, as I explain later in his case study, left him initially unable to fathom the cognitive work he needed to engage in to move towards accomplishing his purpose of writing a personal narrative that conveyed an experience and a lesson learned from that experience. He had assumed that grammatically correct sentences packed with “I’s were

sufficient. He went on to describe how the many examples provided in class helped him acknowledge the self that formed the personal basis of this literacy event. In sharing a universal experience—going to the dentist—in ways quite personal to him, and in learning that his alone were the choices with which to convey it, he also found himself exercising a choice to break many of the traditional taboos on homework in his life: “Even just writing one at home which was unheard of for me to actually like to write at home. I had so much fun writing about the most miniscule things, like going to the dentist’s office, which is something everyone has to do. It was so much fun making it unique.”

And Frank made it quite unique. “I have a deathly fear of all things oral,” he writes in his personal narrative introduction, “except for the standard toothbrush, floss, and toothpaste.” In his second paragraph, a fear he spoke of in his first paragraph, and that many “may think is quite unfounded,” is further fed by a female nurse who, initially a “soothing voice and sweet face,” became a “wicked witch with a wart infested face” who “flipped a switch and the contraction in her wrinkled hands began whirring, and I imagined a smell of smoke that plugged my nostrils and rendered my dry mouth longing for a taste of water.” The dentist, “who I thought may be my savior,” further intensifies Frank’s pain, “as he stood over my helpless little body, digging and scratching the back of my teeth with a sharp contraction that jabbed my gums. A burst of dull-metallic fluid flooded my mouth and I let out a dull whimper, such as a dog makes when left out in the rain.” Throughout the rest of the year, as his case study shows, Frank would use the literacy events of this classroom and his preferences for two genres, horror and fantasy, to fuel a unique approach to navigating his literacies and life.

This uniqueness, not so much of the experience itself but rather the perception of that experience and, hence, the communication of it, propelled Frank and others in that class forward

on their literacy journeys. These were journeys where they navigated an open territory of choices and risks that not only empowered them as students, but also helped them connect their personal lives to their academic ones in healthy and novel ways. That link between the personal and academic, self-born of the literacy events of this classroom, is very evident in each of the four case studies that I share later in Chapter Five. However, and in the next part of this chapter, my analysis reveals how choice, embedded and practiced via the literacy events of this language arts classroom, helped transform these students' static and standardized perceptions of themselves to more nuanced, dynamic, and creative versions. In doing so, they were able to better engage in academic, social, and political discourses that allowed for an ongoing constructing and deconstructing of their multifaceted selves.

### **(Re)Performing Academic and Social Selves**

From the onset, my stance in life and in my language arts teaching has been that writing and the self are always in flux, in motion, and that motion, though subject to factors in our various environments, is mitigated and recorded by the person we are and the person we are becoming. In such stance, I hoped to steer students through the literacy events in which they engaged to deliver themselves from *standardized* versions of a self often rooted in consumerist concerns to one that they envisioned and fashioned according to their needs and discourses. This of course required them to investigate their lives and their literacies—simultaneously and critically.

**Perceiving a self.** Initially, they refrained from perceiving any assignment given by me, their teacher, as truly their own. It was always “Mrs. Kassem’s paper” or “Mrs. Kassem’s project.” I write in my teaching notes about students’ tendencies to disclaim ownership of their thoughts and work. “For many of us,” Riley affirmed in the first focus group, “school is

something we do for our parents and teachers. We want to learn, but we feel we are made to learn what teachers want us to, and not really what we want.” Thus, my first lesson was to invite students to take ownership of their work and thinking. In adopting a language of self, they would focus on becoming more conscious of the words they used. “This isn’t mine,” I would say. “It is facilitated by me, but it is your poem, your notebook entry, the product of your effort and your thinking and your experiences.” I remained resolute in guiding them to recognize the power they possess to choose their words first and their worlds second: “Do not hand me all the power. It is your own. Without that power, you cannot learn or grow or be.” However, words were not enough. The literacy events around the words had to produce the type of transactions that would steer them to truly create and perform a self.

Asking them to track their own as well as others’ thought processes, consider their actions, and reflect on their outcomes initially proved too much to handle. Frank, sharing a common sentiment, wrote in his evaluation of my teaching that “during the beginning of the year, your personality came off strong. So much so that I was overwhelmed by what you were saying we were going to do.” And he was right. There was much to do, and it was hard and diligent work—on both our ends. It primarily required a plan of engaged pedagogy (hooks 1994, p. 13-22) that sought the “conscientization” through which all members of our learning community can learn through deliberate literacy practices and democratic dialogues. As their works and words attest, the literacy events of this classroom, situated in their lived experiences and authentic concerns, proved instrumental in helping them—albeit in different ways as I show here and in the case studies—break both a personal and academic silence that liberated their choices and helped them find meaningful means of constructing and performing new and multifaceted academic and social selves.

*Deconstructing standard silent selves.* In hiding behind labels, surface selves, or standard ways and words, these students found it difficult to perceive a past self or make it raw material for constructing present or future selves. They were not yet attuned to the ways literacy mined for self. As they came to practice literacy through the texts and contexts of their own lives, the literacy events in this classroom, as this research study reveals, helped steer them, in several ways, to identify a self that they could themselves construct, reconstruct, and perform. Presented with various models to perceive and narrate a past self (the “I Am From” poem and the personal narratives), they dialogued critically (via class discussions) and in collaborative ways (an empowering feedback process) as they engaged in constructing, deconstructing, and presenting their fluxing social and academic selves (mainly the I-search). Recurrent reflections on this process of empowerment helped them envision a future self rooted in an agency they have come to know and practice. I explore this idea via the findings presented below.

On the anonymous questionnaires given at the beginning of this research study, when students were asked (Question 10) if there was anything else they would like to add about the final project, their comments ranged from “This project helped me find myself and taught me to look with an open mind,” to “I was always learning about myself and I appreciated that.” One student’s comment, enacted through all ten projects, testified to the power of situating literacy events in students’ lives. This student wrote, “I *finally* felt like I can put myself into my work—my interests and my thoughts—without someone labeling me *nerdy*, *weird*, or even *gay*.” Having the power to immerse oneself in one’s literacies, without being labeled, represented for this student a long awaited goal that was *finally* attained. It is a longing that many of the ten students in this study shared and expressed. Their desire to put themselves under study was a function of their education of which they had been seemingly deprived.

However, it is this same self that proved, for many of them, initially quite elusive. This self that students yearned and learned to work with was not so easy to summon. It took patience and perseverance to dig for it in the standard details of their lives. And as the first few literacy events in our classroom proved, it was buried beneath labels and standards which confined these students to a unidimensionality that proved inhibiting and silencing. Especially in the beginning of the year, when students wrote their first draft of their “I Am From poem,” transitioning from what I deem standardized definitions of a teen identity laden with consumerist notions to ones rooted deeply and primarily in their personal and social experiences seemed difficult. Throughout the interviews, both the focus group and the one-on-one, students recalled how difficult it was to write both the “I Am From” poem and the personal narrative. Bella remembered the “I Am From” poem as “my hardest assignment.” When I asked her what she thought made it so difficult, her response was, “I did not like talking about my life like that.” I inquired, “Had you done it before?” and she responded “No, not really.”

Bella’s response confirmed that the difficulty was primarily the novelty of the experience into which she was being initiated. She articulated many of her peers’ initial discomfort at having to discourse a self. As her project revealed, she would later venture to speak about herself in personal and constructive ways. The issue was then not one of technique or strategy, but of trial. That is the struggle manifested in breaking the silence around the lives that many of them had learned not to invite with them to school. As Frank reiterated, both in his interviews and in his work, “Religion was not something I could discuss or even bring up in school.” Especially at an age, as Salwa reiterated, “when one fears judgment and unfair criticism,” learning to speak yourself can present many risks. In her learning journey assignment, she emphasizes this point, writing, “Most of us were afraid of how others are going to judge us, and so we tried at first to

say little.” Staying silent, especially in the parameters of school, was not taking risks or making choices. It was safe living. But it was also limiting and debilitating. They needed to take the necessary risks to perceive a self.

The process for most of them proved quite difficult at first. Kat summed their collective sentiments best in her comment, “I was never really comfortable before last year to acknowledge my own feelings and actually talk about what was going on in my own life.” This discomfort translated, as they expressed in their interviews, to either a purchasing power or a silencing of oneself as the case studies clearly reveal. Hind, who wore colorful headscarves that matched her clothes perfectly, said that writing was never a way for her to understand herself before this class because “I was more used to expressing myself through my clothes.” The silence was not just a physical one, either. It was a silence about things that mattered. For Bella, the silencing came in her prohibition to use her own discourses as “my teachers would never have let me turn in a drawing as an assignment.” But, even when they weren’t silent, as Shay remembered in our second focus group interview, “We were just saying and writing anything.”

The fact is they were not writing or saying anything. They were writing and speaking standard selves in standard literacies that had come to define most of their school experiences, one which, as Ray emphasized in his second one-on-one interview, consisted of “getting through school.” My reflections at the beginning of the year confirm that their first drafts of the “I Am From” poems reflected what I called “safe literacies.” They spoke selves that were visible, universal, and often, static and cliché. Shay included his first draft in his final project. “I am from special education/from Aeropostale,” it read, “From Coca-Cola cans and fast food meals/I am from the corner house with green awning and white fences.” His poem went on to enumerate in close to ten lines all things apparent about him. None of it spoke to a self that was other than a



purchasing self. And even his addiction to drinking soda, which he boasted about at the beginning of the year, was a consumerist one. He wore Coca-Cola shirts, sported a Coca-Cola backpack, and even his school folders and supplies bore Coca-Cola logos.

Huda's first draft, which she glued under her final, also had a standard quality to it: "I am from curly hair and dark skin/I am from dancing daily in front of my mirror/I am from dark clothes and loud music." Her various snapshots which unfolded in every line did not encompass her most visible aspect—her vitiligo—rendering it invisible as she still tried to maintain a standard self. Others like Kat (whom I discuss in detail during her case study) hid themselves behind metaphors and similes that were hard to explicate or discern. Reading through her first draft, one felt entrenched in the "unusual creations and stressful messes" that she describes and that defined the mysteries of her *puzzling* (her chosen theme for the project) self, which she kept in hiding for most of her school years (as she reveals later in her case study) and well into the first few weeks of this class—a self that ironically stood out by hiding.

***Transacting with model selves.*** George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" poem, which they read after having written their first draft of an "I Am From" poem, presented them with one model of perceiving and presenting a self. They read the poem as a class and then began to look at the various ways the poem, via artifacts and images, introduced the speaker's self. We first went over every line in class and used each line, coupled with an artifact I prepared, to talk about all the ways Lyon perceived herself. We emphasized that her poem was mostly meaning attached to things that were part of the speaker's environment as she was growing up—neither labels nor purchases. They took turns sharing what they liked or did not like about the poem. Their next task was to decipher the poem by extending its images.

*Academic and social selves.* In their writer's notebooks, they *extended the images* in the poem by writing or drawing—or both—about how an image they chose from the poem could have been a snapshot in the speaker's day or life. They imagined it in their own way. Shay remembered during the second focus group interview working on the third line of the poem: "I am from the dirt under the back porch." In his notebook that day, he remembered sketching a picture of a boy digging in the dirt for worms and his mother standing stiff with an angry look on her face. The speaker's image, he said, reminded him of his own childhood when "I would spend hours in the back yard digging in the dirt for worms and even tasting one once which drove my mom crazy." This line led the revision of his first draft in which he aborted the "Aeropostale" and "special ed" label that he initially used as his identifiers: "I am from hours digging dirt/I am from warm worms and cold stares," the revision read. The poem had thus served to help him find alternate and more representative ways to perceive himself, and not as a label anymore. The speaker's images of her past self served to propel his own. "I would have never thought of beginning my poem that way if we had not read Lyon's poem," he confirmed in the second focus group interview, "and I did not think that was even something to write in a poem." This literacy event proved helpful in allowing him to free himself of a standard "special education" label that had defined his school presence, and ultimately his image of himself, until eighth grade.

Each sought a personal purpose. Huda saw both this assignment and its predecessor, the token of identity, as catalysts for her own unique and long journey into her past. "I felt for the first time that I was going back—like her [the speaker in Lyon's poem]—to understand myself rather than just moving forward like a zombie without any sense of where I am coming from or where I was going."

This assignment, in which Lyon unlocks her past and shares it, as we discussed in class, represented for Celine, a child of divorced parents who had been subjugated most of her life to different forms of abuse and neglect, a way to unlock hers. “I remember liking how she mentioned her parents’ names in the poem. I did that too. It was almost as if that was the only place I could bring them back together again.”

Kat utilized images and words from Lyon’s poem to help her perceive her own past self. Her lines: “I am from sit up straight and go do that/And just leave me alone/I’m from come do this and would you be quiet” echoed, as she pointed out, Lyon’s line “I am from perk up and pipe down.” However, in the second focus group interview, she distinguished her intentions from Lyon’s, saying, “Her memories seems mostly positive. It seems she was longing for those times. The forsythia bush is a beautiful image. With me, I felt that the vines represented all the ways my life was entangled and messy. That is how I drew that line in my notebook—vines and dandelions.”

While she, like Shay, still used the images the poem encompassed, Kat managed to steer these images into a new vision of a self that is rooted in experiences and memories specific to her. Using the poem and the discussions of it helped guide her own journey back, but it was a journey with similar images though different meanings. “I think I could not have gone there alone. Writing from a vacuum. I needed an example, a guide sort of, to show me the way,” she added, “though my way was somewhat different.”

Bella too appreciated how they got to extend the images and words. “It helped me visualize better her life. That helped me make my own choices about what to draw.” The visuals that Lyon’s poem portrayed acted as a window through which Bella could glance back at images from her own childhood too. “I liked using her images. As I drew visuals of her back yard and

the Dutch elm,” she continued, “I remembered my own back yard too. We still live in that house so it was easy to draw my own images. Someone in class, I remember, said that the Dutch elm could reflect her background too. I liked that. That’s clever.”

The invitation to go back to their own pasts, via others’ words and images, allowed each of them to peek into a past self that was too buried beneath images and words that they could not—or would not—have summoned alone and learned to use. “Sometimes,” Salwa reflected in the second focus group interview, “you need someone to show you the way. Reading and talking about Lyon’s poem showed us the way. This is where you can start. You don’t have to go where she went, but you can start there.” Lyon’s “clothespins” brought Salwa memories of visiting her grandparents in Lebanon and helping her grandmother use clothespins to hang their clothes to dry. “I am from my grandmother’s clothes/under Lebanon’s golden sun,” her revised first line reads. And as she remembered in the second focus group interview the picture she drew in her notebook of her grandmother’s warm face in the image of a golden sun, she shed a tear remembering the setting of that sun—the death of her grandmother—last year.

Ray, whose poem, as I pointed out during the second focus group, did not so outstandingly reflect an anchoring in Lyon’s choices, explained to us all that he thought it was. “She grew up in the South, and she spoke about part of her childhood,” he said. “When I wrote my poem, I used a similar concept, but mine was that of a teenager who grew up in the Midwest. My childhood was all, as I say in my poem, baseball mitts, batting gloves, air guitars, and picks.”

In transacting with the poem’s images, through choices they themselves made, these students had begun to heed different models of the ways they too could go back and perceive a past self. Infused with each of their intentions, the words—and sometimes the images born of these words—were extracted from Lyon’s poem.

Throughout the writing of their own poems, we came back to the words and images of the poem, and though most of them could not fathom Ella's southern delight for "fried corn," they embraced the pictures and what she deems "a sift of lost moments" that "drifted beneath their dreams." This literacy event allowed them to use Lyon's example and images to perceive their own pasts. "Until we talked together about the poem, and until we looked at how every line spoke volumes about who she was, who her parents were, her neighbors, her hobbies, everything, even where she kept her pictures and who was in them, I never thought a poem could contain so much." Riley declared in her learning journey, "I never liked poetry like I did that day." Riley continued throughout the year to elect poetry as her choice of genre both because "you can say so much in such few words," which defined her own character, and "well, the rhythm speaks to the dancer in me."

*Social and political selves.* George Ella Lyon's poem, however, was not solely an academic personal trigger. It was also a social and political one. Though Lyon herself did not infuse her poem with references to such issues, the students, through the discussions, mustered them on their own when they compared in one notebook entry Lyon's childhood to their own. Riley recalled during the second focus group that this discussion helped "me realize that there was more to us than the clothes we wear and the gadgets we own." This conclusion she takes up in her own version of the "I Am From" poem which she titles "Only One ME." In that poem, Riley affirms: "born to be me" is "exactly who I will be." Her agency resonates as she further questions "Why do we try to be someone we are not?" and resolves to let others know that as she accepts them, she will not be them: "I'm just not like you,/And I never will be."

Kat found in Lyon's poetic images visions of a poverty that entangled her in its complexities. During the second focus group, she spoke of the "dandelions" and "endless vines"

in her revised version as paralleling the “forsythia bush” and the “Dutch elm” that Lyon spoke about. Kat remembered drawing in her notebook endless tangled vines that covered every portion of her page, and which, she commented, “represent all the ways my life has been messy and entangled.” In her second one-on-one interview, she remembered this event from class as one that helped trigger her memory of the day “my parents, my brothers and I spent hours pulling vines from our backyard” because “we did not have any money to hire someone to do it.”

In Lyon’s line “ten verses I can say myself,” Frank was reminded of bible school where he, too, “with cotton ball lamb” managed to “restoreth [his] soul.” The little lamb he drew in his notebook, as he and Shay both recalled [laughing] in the second focus group interview, was a “Stephen King version of the biblical lamb that Lyon wrote about.” He appreciated, he added, Lyon’s religious outlook, which, as he said, “we often do not read about in school.” For Frank, the poem represented an initiation into a taboo subject in schools, which he appreciated. As religion was a big part of his home discourse, I asked him why he did not include anything on religion in his own poem. His responses validated how students’ choices and sometimes our readings of these choices conflict. “I did,” he replied. “My grandmother.”

The presence of his grandmother, a valuable resource of his own religious and spiritual education, in the poem represented for Frank, a salient way, like Kat’s vines, to bring into the poem a topic he deemed to belong outside academic realms. Following Lyon’s example, he began to venture into previously uncharted territory in school, a step that is followed by Celine who sprinkles some Spanish phrases into her poem, *El Cucuy*—the monster—for example. She remembered during the second focus group our discussion in class about needing to bring all we were during our childhood into this poem: “I felt that I had been hiding my Mexican side. Everyone knew I was Mexican but I did not write or talk about that part of me in school. I was

not too comfortable doing that.” When I asked her what made her change her mind, she replied “The discussions in class. You telling us about your background, and how students should not hide who they are because that’s what makes them unique. So many of my relatives speak Spanish, and that line, ‘El cucuy will come get you if you don’t sleep,’ my mom always used to say that to scare me to sleep. I still remember that.”

Salwa, too, found in the poem lessons in living better with others. In the second focus group, she declared, “I think I learned in this poem that when you are the poet’s age [they saw a video of the poet reading her poem too], you begin to look back at your life and to see the most significant things are not really things.” This is echoed throughout her project, where time and again she comes back to the central role of family in one’s life. “Some of my favorite moments,” she writes in her introduction, “have been spent with my family—both in this class, and the one at home. Like Lyon, most of my best memories are with them.” And it is this event too that Hind claimed “forced us to think about who we really are and what made us unique, and begin to talk comfortably about that,” though she added, “I did not like how she [Lyon] did not do enough with her female and racial side,” a thought shared by Shay who “before viewing the video” thought “she [George Ella Lyon] was a boy.”

The work, both on the poem and themselves, was never final. Even as they worked on the last version of the “I Am From” poem for their final project, the students found it necessary to go back often to add, delete, change, or rephrase its lines and/or stanzas. Their poems underwent much change from first to last drafts, and though some of them chose not to include their first draft, Ray claimed in the second focus group interview that, “with every revision, we moved forward slowly but surely as both writers and people.” They had their reasons for doing so, and throughout the process, their thinking was articulated via words they dialogued with. For Celine,

“things in my life had changed.” For Huda, “I felt I now had the skill to write it better.” For Bella, “I had not initially included my heritage, and Salwa did that, so I wanted to too.” In one sense, the poem became a manifestation of the changes that the students were making in themselves, both as people and as readers and writers, during the course of their eighth-grade year.

Their personal purpose resonated social and political implications. Though they did not include all the drafts of their poems, the students’ interviews spoke of multiple revisions and final drafts which, unlike Lyon’s, had become mosaics of their social and political identities. Reading through the final drafts of the poems, I clearly detect both the person and the inherent social and political discourses that were anchored in many of the events of this classroom. These poems indeed, and deeply so, were “self presentations of gender, race, and class identities” (Hourigan, 1994, p. 73). “I am from Oakwood and Canada and Puerto Rico/From rice and beans,” Bella affirms, attesting to her combined lineage. Celine, always a tension of opposites, originated “from Mexican tortillas and sausages/from dirty dishes and dog bowls,” but hers is also the glory of “a grandfather who was a decorated WWII veteran/whose medals are displayed on my walls.” This last line, she said in her second focus group interview, was added after she read her independent reading book *Soldier’s Heart* by Gary Paulsen. And though poverty “stole hours of [Kat’s] days,” as she tried “to laboriously remove” from her back yard, “dandelions” and “endless vines,” it also made this young woman “from the chaos of a house of guys” both “weak yet strong.” Like Bella, Hind has a mixed national heritage, “a Palestinian-American” who is “from San Francisco and Jerusalem.” Unlike Bella, though, the context of twenty-first century politics forced her to live in “a world at war with itself.” She is, as she bitterly asserts,



her enemies' construction: "I am from the haters that make me who I am." Like "the olive trees whose existence is endangered" in her ancestral land, she feels the force of "these 14 years."

Resonating race and politics, these poems were manifestations of individual literary acts practiced in the walls of this language arts classroom where these ten students learned to claim agency within their broader discourses. Hind's perception of self as a reader shines strongly through "I am from books/Fantasy, science fiction and nonfiction." Frank, embracing his oftentimes contradictory multidimensionality, writes himself "reading while playing while talking to friends," and attests to "papers filled with frustration and anger." Bella's multimodal identity emerges "from colored pencils/From Crayola and Rose Art," and Shay, shedding a special education label that had silenced his other selves, is now an "Italian Stallion," a "resharpened pencil," and "a poetry lover" from "an unknown side that loves to write."

In these ways, Lyon's poem, and the literacy events around it, offered students a way to go back, to find a past self or perceive an alternate one. In offering them Lyon's model and presenting them with choices anchored in its words and worlds, this literacy event allowed them access to tools Lyon used—words and images—that helped them summon and perceive their own past selves. However, trusting in their power to choose and in their many invested partners as they revised, they sought to use this event to investigate their and others' selves. "I liked sharing our poems as we worked on them," Bella responded to my question on what she remembered best from the "I Am From" experience. "I got to know other people better and understand them." Frank agreed: "Teenagers usually feel like hiding their real selves in fear of looking weak. Everyone was sharing, and by doing so, they seemed more confident and easier to reach."

What they packed into the writing of this literacy event, they would unpack in many literacy events that followed. One such event was the personal narrative, which proved to be a momentous event in allowing them to narrate a facet of that self they had perceived through poetry. Ironically, it was not just the writing of the event that stood out in the interviews. It was the discussions of the readings that led to it. Although I did not require them to include this in their final projects, many did. However, even for those who did not, the interviews and their work revealed how this literacy event helped them create and narrate a self that was deeply entrenched in the discussions and dialogues that accompanied it.

*Purposeful selves.* Here, also, models of others' selves and the conversations around them proved instrumental. We began this unit by talking about how people often go back to revisit their past—events, memories, and people—to understand their present selves. Again, they were presented with many examples of different types of personal narratives and different types of pasts. To honor their diverse backgrounds and interests, and to get them thinking about the role language plays in creating one's self, they were introduced to excerpts from Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*. Before I share this study's finding on how the personal narrative as a literacy event empowered these students not only to steer simultaneously an unfolding of an academic and social self, and to collaboratively move that self on a journey of purpose and empowerment, I want to include excerpts of the personal narratives they read. The reading of these narratives proved instrumental in negotiating this unfolding, and it is worthwhile to provide a quick synopsis of each.

Dillard's excerpt, "The Chase," narrated an event that occurred one winter morning when her seven-year-old self and a friend were chased relentlessly by an adult stranger at whom they

had been hurling snowballs. Dillard admits that she was terrified at the time, but asserts that she has seldom been happier since.

Maya Angelou's excerpt, Chapter 15 "Mrs. Flowers" from her memoir, describes a significant experience with a respected person in her community, Mrs. Flowers, which changes her life. Through their interactions, Marguerite Ann Johnson [Maya Angelou] learns the power of language (spoken and written) and relationships to transform lives.

From Rodriguez' autobiography, we read two short excerpts: one entitled "Complexion," in which Rodriguez becomes highly uncomfortable with his own dark skin and tries to shave it off, and a few pages of the other, "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," which depicted his first day in an elementary classroom, when he hears his Mexican name first spoken by a non-Mexican Catholic nun and conceives of two lives he begins to live: a private Mexican life and a public English one. Much like Maya Angelou's excerpts, Rodriguez also extrapolates on the power of language to transform one's life. The discussions around the events moved from mere summing up of what happened in the text to rich, reflective, and purposeful analysis of both themselves and other selves. In what follows, I present students' words and works, which serve to provide evidence of their empowering journey to self.

The students first read the excerpt from Dillard's memoir and reflected on it in an entry in their reader's notebooks. They did the same with the other two readings from Angelou and Rodriguez. They could reflect on any element in the text they chose or connect any element to their own memories. This allowed them to trust in their power of interpretation and frame the literacy event in their own experiences. In the third focus group interview, Salwa recalled how, after reading Dillard, she lamented in her entry how kids today, glued to their computers and video games, were no longer enjoying the same childhood fun that Dillard and her friends

enjoyed. Celine liked Dillard's "tomboy" and "football playing" image, with which she strongly identified. Shay's entry was about how adults were always trying to control kids or ruin their fun. "Why would a grown man chase after a kid because of a snowball that hit his car?" he questioned during the interview. Each of them saw in the narrative his/her own way of looking at the narrator's text and context. Sharing their reflections helped validate how we often transacted differently with texts. Honoring those reflections and perceptions helped infuse them with the confidence necessary to speak their selves and thoughts. This, however, did not prevent me from questioning or eliciting more information on a comment that I did not understand or conceive as incomplete or insufficiently supported—so much so that many of them began to anticipate and account for such inquiries. In her learning journey writing, Salwa reflected on this part of the class:

I remember at the beginning of the year how you always seemed to be questioning everything we said. You were asking us for evidence to support whatever we shared. At first, most of us did not like that at all. We felt like we were in court. However, I noticed later that I began to think hard about what I wanted to say, and how to say, before speaking. That forced me and others to think hard. I felt we were thinking more in depth. I believe that is what you wanted from us always.

At first, our exchanges all consisted of dialogues—open forums where they stepped in their speaking spaces alternatively to discuss what they noticed, what struck them as unique, and to opine on the narrative as universal or not, or whether and how much the narrators' worlds made them wonder about their own. No worksheets and no lined dittos. Each wrote down his/her own observations and thoughts and used them to volunteer his/her responses and participate in the discussions. I acted both as avid listener and keen inquisitive partner during those discussions. My purpose was to move them from standard observations such as, "Rodriguez is ashamed of who he is," and "Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou) fears to speak her pain," to more ambiguous and reflective territory.

And to do that, I invited them via another literacy event to do so. After reading all excerpts, and after discussing their comments and observations, they were asked, again in their writer's notebook, which of the three excerpts was their favorite, and how they were like each of the three main characters, and how they were different. In asking them to do so, my purpose was to guide their understanding of the ways our differences mark and define us, while, and just as significantly, to arrive at many commonalities in our collective struggles. They were asked to refrain from obvious similarities and differences. Examples helped frame our goal. For example, they could not write that both they and the main character are males or females. That was an obvious example. They could, however, write about how both they and the main character struggled to deal or come to terms with something in their own lives that they could not change. They had to support their observations with examples from both the texts and their own lives.

During the second focus group interview, it became apparent that it was the discussion that followed this activity that they remembered the most. Frank volunteered:

At first I did not think I had anything in common with Richard Rodriguez. He's Mexican and I am not. He is bilingual and I am not. I was thinking about all the ways we were different and other than obvious similarities, like our gender, I could not think of ways we were alike... With Annie Dillard, I had so much in common. I also thought about some ways we were different. They were not the best, but they were not surface either. I would never have thrown a snowball at a stranger, ever. That is not me, no! I chose her narrative as my favorite because of that. It was fun.

Frank articulated many students' preferences following this activity. In each of the three classes I taught, students overwhelmingly selected Dillard's narrative as their favorite of the three. During the second focus group, Riley remembered writing that though she liked them all, "my favorite at first was the snowball one because I identified with the narrator most, and easily thought of ways we were similar." Ray remembered thinking hard about how much he did not have in common with Rodriguez: "Wow! Shaving off your skin is quite harsh, I thought, violent even. With

Angelou's too, I honestly could not at that point identify with someone refusing to speak even though I understood that what she went through was harsh. I chose Dillard's narrative as my favorite."

Huda remembered being quite intrigued by both Rodriguez' and Angelou's narratives. "Reading both narratives," she remembered during that interview, "I began to feel for the first time that I was not alone in school. I had read stories like that before, by myself—not with my teacher and not with my peers." Still, in her notebook entry that day, she remembered choosing Dillard's as her favorite because "I was not yet comfortable explaining what I was feeling then." Hind said that she felt the same way Huda did. She liked Maya Angelou's the best because "like me, she could not speak what she knew. However, I did not trust myself to say it right so I too voted for Dillard's." Salwa claimed that, like Frank, she felt that Angelou's and Rodriguez' were "way too complex—race, gender, and everything. Dillard's was more straightforward and childish." When I asked her if she had a hard time understanding them, she said she didn't. "They were subject matter complex. You usually do not read that stuff in class or talk about it."

Celine liked best "how Rodriguez separated his home life and his school life. I had to do that too and for similar reasons." However, like Bella who identified with Angelou's silence, she preferred to stay silent and go with the status quo. She voted Dillard's as her favorite. Shay was the only one in his class, as he proclaimed in the interview, who chose Rodriguez' excerpts as his favorite. When I asked him why, his response was, "Honestly at the time, I just wanted to be different from everyone else." And for Shay too, that was too a standard position.

The students' comments—as my notes from that day indicate—support what they said in the interviews. Most of them, and in every class, voted for Dillard's as their favorite. And even when they believed that Rodriguez' or Angelou's memoir described or spoke to them more, they

still avoided “the complexity” that came with having to volunteer or speak their choices. They were electing to stay safe with their literacies, and ultimately silenced. During the second focus group interview, I asked them if they would again vote for Dillard memoir. Hind said she would definitely not, as she now saw Angelou’s as her favorite. I think I especially now appreciate how “language cured her and that for students that is a powerful message.” Kat, who said that she did not vote that day, remembered in her one-on-one interview this:

I knew that everyone voted with their hands, not their hearts or minds. Like they do for school elections. Vote for the popular kid. I knew that you knew that too. You asked us all to think about why we read and write. And that was a good question because it sparked a discussion that helped many people think about how they had voted the way they did. It made many change their minds about their choices though they did not want to admit it at first.

The discussion that day centered not just on why we read and write, but also on what they believed each author’s purpose in writing his/her narrative was. In discussing what they believed the authors’ purposes were, they came to better appreciate Rodriguez’ and Angelou’s narratives, and ultimately what those narratives represented.

In the first focus group interview, I asked these students what they remembered from the discussions on purpose we had that day. “Dillard’s purpose was probably to remember a fun day in her childhood and share it,” Shay volunteered. And Ray added, “We also discussed how she may have wanted to relive the happiness of that day again as it was the best day of her life.” This same purpose, to relive a happy day in one’s life, later proved instrumental, as Ray remembered, in his choice to write his personal narrative about the happiest day of his life: getting his dog. His words were quickly intercepted by Huda, also during our first focus group interview, who deemed, “Angelou’s was a deeper experience and purpose. She learned through language and her relationship with Mrs. Flowers to break the silence and perhaps by sharing her experience, she was helping so many girls—and boys—do the same.” Hind agreed with Huda that Angelou had a

far-reaching purpose. However, she had also an insight of her own to contribute: “In Ray’s I-search on education, we learned that Spanish-speaking students were the new majority in American schools. Rodriguez’s experiences help many of these bilingual children. I always felt like I had to choose between being Arabic and being American. Rodriguez tells us we do not have to. I think his purpose is to help everyone in America. Many Americans are not one thing.” In her final project, Kat goes back in her learning journey to that assignment: “I think that this class taught me more than anything that if you want to rid your life of its poisons, write them away. Maya Angelou did and Richard Rodriguez too. I did that this year as well.” Ray too referred to this discussion in his introduction to his booklet which he titled “Critical thinking.”

The discussion we had on why each of these authors wrote helped me make more of my choices based on what purpose I had. You asked us to think about what each author’s purpose was, and we talked in class about each author’s purpose and we began to look at writing as having a bigger purpose than just to entertain. I liked how that discussion got me thinking not just about writing, but about music, about everything else in my life really. Without purpose, life is bland and a blur.

In his project, he posted a quote that sums up the role purpose plays both in his academic and personal lives. It adorned the page on which he wrote his letter to the world where he asks people “to take a stand.” In his I-search, he again examined the *purpose* of education. That examination of education led him, via his op-ed, to examine the purpose of music, which came clearly into focus.

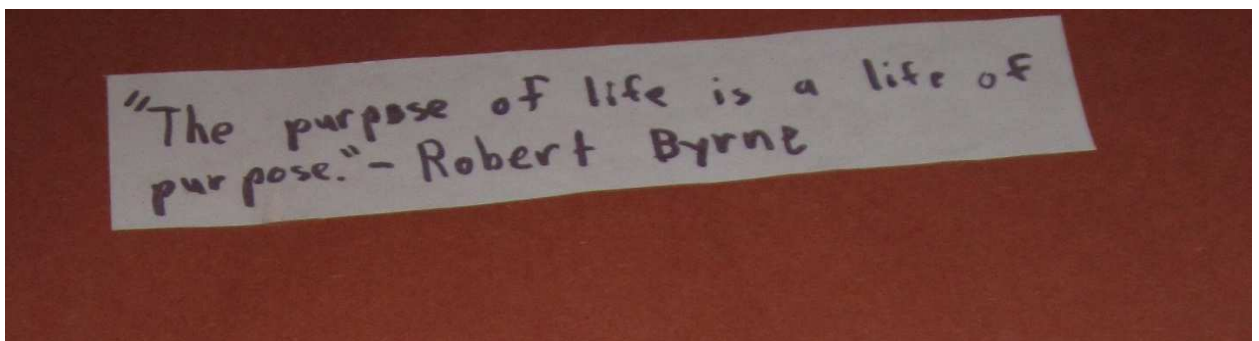


Figure 4. Ray’s Quote on Purpose



However, the discussion and the narratives did more than highlight purpose as the goal of literacy events. It steered many of them to begin to see their narratives, and lives too, as entities with purpose. In writing their own, they showed and talked about how purpose in writing dictated their choices and spoke their many selves. Following Dillard's purpose, to "remember and entertain," Frank commented in the second focus group interview that he chose "after long and grueling battles with myself—and sometimes you, Mrs. Kassem" to write about a visit to the dentist, infusing into his narrative another purpose still: "to examine an ordinary event in my life with the language of horror, like Stephen King did." Celine, equipped with Rodriguez' "brown eyes and dark skin," unleashed her private life in her public writing like she had never before done. She wrote about her "first fight with a white boy," who messed with my "little brown brother," and called him "a dirty Mexican." Her conclusion shows how much Rodriguez' essay, and the discussions around it, proved impactful. "We talked in class often about how we can't fight prejudice with fists. Rodriguez could not fight others' prejudices of his skin with a razor. He needed an education and a purpose. I believe I need an education and a purpose too. Then, I can help not only my little brother, but many brown little brothers too."

Kat and Huda both weaved Angelou and Rodriguez's purposes into their own narratives of "going through" struggles. For each of them, the narratives proved to be a going back and a going through in order to go forward. Hind's narrative, a trip back with her family to Palestine, represented, Rodriguez style, a reclamation to a land—a part of oneself—that the airport clerk she wrote about hoped to deprive them of once more. Their American public passports saved them: "He smirked when we offered up our American passports, and looking my parents up and down twice, he seemed unconvinced that Americans can look this way. He handed us our passports and let us through the gate." Hind remembered in her learning journey our discussion

on how Rodriguez did not resent the other in him but assimilated it as he found ways to empower himself with it. “I also,” Hind writes, “a creation of my enemy, learned to do the same.”

Salwa’s narrative of winning a track event in seventh grade helped her reassert a status that she was constantly negotiating as a conservatively dressed and unfairly judged young American Muslim teen. “Here I was first on the finish line, sweat dripping from both sides of my yellow scarf. I had won the race and there was none to deny me it.” Riley’s purpose extended beyond remembering and honoring her cat, who died two years ago, to include the statement “friends do not always come in human form like Mrs. Flowers. For me, it was a fidgety feline.” Shay’s personal narrative investigated a label (much like Rodriguez’ bilingual one) which he had come to abhor. He spoke of how his third-grade year in school changed both “how he saw school and teachers.” He writes, “All I learned in sixth grade was that I was a special education student. That was it.” In his interview, he added, “My purpose in my narrative was to show that schools can be evil places where instead of an education, I got to feel alone, inferior and rejected.”

These students, via the narratives they read and the discussions and activities around them, had learned to heed purpose in literacy and in life that extended beyond the parameters of the texts and contexts that served to ignite them. In using the models of selves that these literacy events presented them with, they negotiated, via the dialogues and discussions, ideas and choices that proved instrumental in helping them construct and reconstruct their own personal narratives—their own past and present selves as well.

The discussions had steered students to perceive commonalities that bound them to others in more than superficial ways. Initially unable to see similarities between Rodriguez, a bilingual Mexican, and himself, Frank wrote in his learning journey that “I learned that what brought people together is much more than what separated them. While I may have a different color skin

and a different language than someone else, we have in common a desire to feel heard and respected. We all deserve that.” Celine learned from Maya Angelou’s narrative that “we both had bad childhoods. She went silent and I went loud and crazy. We expressed our hurt differently until we both learned the power of words. I always wonder when I see people around me behaving like they do, which kind of hurt they have. I feel I am a lot nicer than I used to be. ” Ray believed that he and Rodriguez are more alike than he initially thought.

The discussions in class helped me see that it is not skin that makes us similar. It is our humanity and our visions. For him it’s his skin that makes others treat him differently.

For me, it’s my slurred speech. Everyone has a struggle that they must overcome.

Huda learned from Rodriguez that “we both suffered our own skins. He wanted to shave it with a razor, and I wanted to peel it with chemicals. There are many around us who still think they can change their skin, shed it like snakes. I think everyone should learn to speak it, like I did in this class.” Kat, in her own learning journey, resonated of Huda’s response when she affirmed that “silence can also be powerful. Maya Angelou was still powerful when she made a choice not to speak. That is freedom.” When I pointed out to her in her first one-on-one interview that Maya Angelou’s fear may have made her silent, she responded, “Fear and freedom are always together. Choosing freedom means having to fear how you will be judged or viewed. She was free to still choose silence.” Her response spoke more to Kat’s own life than Maya Angelou’s, as this young lady’s case study reveals (see Chapter Five). Her empathy with the young black woman who shared a lot of her struggles and pains as well as her love for reading and writing transcended both their skin colors.

And this empathy students developed as they worked to sort all the complexities of growing up—moving from throwing snowballs to discoursing race, gender, and religion—

extended its way to revisions of both their work and their lives. What initially proved a struggle for most of them—finding an event to narrate—morphed through their transactions with texts and contexts into opportunities to create communities of readers and writers relying on each other in innovative and confirming ways. The topics they chose to narrate revealed, as Riley stated in her reflections, “a bond of trust among all members of this class” that helped “me be honest about my thoughts and feelings.” Whether it was losing a parent or losing respect for someone, the narratives testified in sundry ways to the lives that these literacies carried. As I explain later in this chapter and in Chapter Five, the conversations among other literacy events in this classroom helped them, in meaningful ways, to construct and perform new and empowering literate and social selves.

Hearing them discuss and recall those purposes, almost a year later during the second focus group interview, testified to the power the class discussions had on them that day. In my research reflections, I comment on how the discussions that ensued during the first focus group interview, as they remembered the in-class discussions around these three narratives, represented clear and outstanding examples of how, multiple times, in class, they had exhibited through their many dialogues the same sense of literacy empowerment. They used words skillfully and responsibly and drew on their literacy events and experiences to help express their personal and academic selves. However, they also came together, symphonically, to investigate and build on past and present selves as they sought to construct alternative and future selves.

**Constructing a self.** The I-search paper (Ken Macrorie, 1988), which they started in November 2012, presented them with a means to search, understand, and create new dimensions of their academic and social selves, as this section of the study reveals. This event represented weeks of reading and writing about aspects of themselves that they chose to investigate. These

specific aspects are explored later in this chapter. Here too, they were able to understand how their academic selves and their social selves meshed in meaningful and creative ways, and in their search for one, they most often found the other.

For this reason, this assignment represented for many of them the highlight of their eighth-grade year. Students worked in research teams of four to five people on this project over a period of six weeks. However, as these findings reveal and as I explain later in this section, the teams became spaces for students to practice and perform collaborative academic and social selves. And though this assignment was not labeled for inclusion in their end-of-the-year projects, many of the students in this research included a copy of the final I-search paper in their final projects, and almost all of them referred to it repeatedly during the course of the interviews. However, the main value of the work students did around this literacy event and the exploration of certain self-aspects (e.g., questing self, collaborative self, and subject self) was the ability to solidify the interconnection between in- and out-of-school literacies. The culmination of the I-search research was a six- to eight-page paper answering a question anchored in their lives which they posed initially (which sometimes went through extensive revisions as well) and a three- to five-minute presentation to the class on their findings.

**A questing self.** As Salwa recalled during the third focus group interview, the I-search paper taught her that “it is ok to ask my own questions in school and find my own answers.” She was bent right from the start on studying more about why fast food was harmful. “You were always talking in class how you do not let your kids eat a lot of fast food, and I always wondered why. I mean I know it’s not that good for you, but I could not talk about why that was. I wanted to know exactly why.”

For Celine too, as she admits during the third focus group interview, “asking questions was not something I did. It was always something others did to me. My job was always to answer what others were asking me.” She thought hard about what she wanted to do; then she thought of her little brother, “how he was always so quiet and people were always trying to pick on him. It’s like he was a victim of abuse or something. That is what they said in court about us all. I wanted to research abuse and see what I can do to help my brother.” Her question, “What is abuse and how can teens and children survive abusive environments?” represented a way for her to help “my family and especially my brother.”

For Riley, this too presented a new way of being a student. “For one, we never really ask real questions. Sure we ask things like how long must this paper be, or how many sentences, or do we write on one side of the paper? We ask questions like that. But asking questions about ourselves and our lives in school, it did not seem, well, usual.” For her, as she claims in her introduction to her I-search, “In choosing to research Scottish dance, I am also looking for my own roots through something I love to do which is dance.”

For Kat, recently diagnosed with scoliosis, a debilitating medical condition that rendered her to the margins of her gym class as she explained in her introduction to her I-search, the question “How Does Scoliosis Affect a Teen’s Life?” (Figure 5) seemed an imminent one. “My mom talked to my doctor and asked all the questions. I could not bring myself to ask him all my questions. I had so many I wanted to ask, and not just medical ones,” she explained in her one-on-one interview, “but, in this class, for this research, I could ask and answer any question I wanted. And I did.”

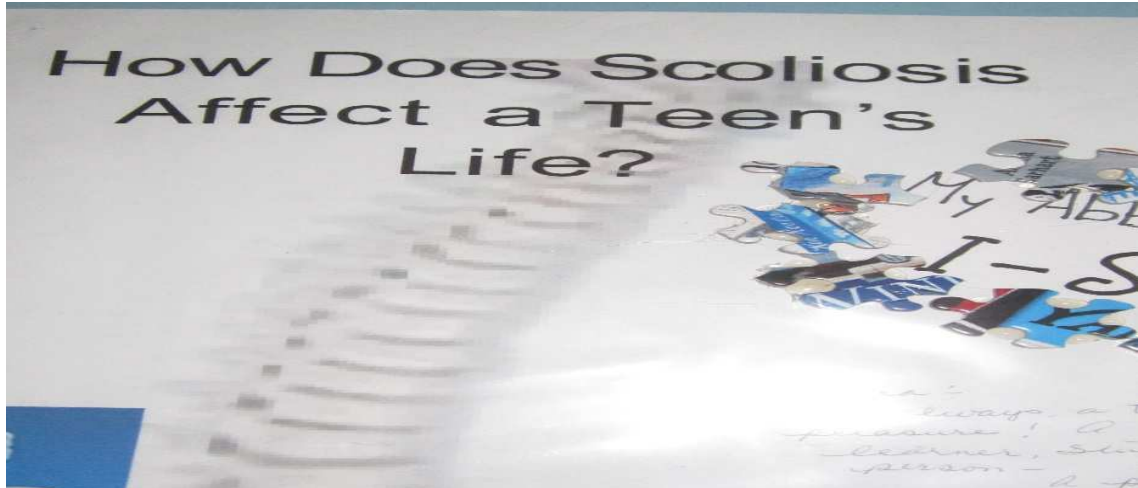


Figure 5. Kat's I-search Question

And while all of them said that they were quite excited about searching for answers on topics they themselves chose, they were, as Salwa said, still “first uneasy about doing research and keeping the *I*.” Riley vocalized their unease in the first focus group interview: “For research always meant only the facts and these were always in books and not in us.” This presented for many of them a problem in the beginning that Shay remembered in that same interview: “We were brainstorming topics, and I remember everyone was yelling out cliché topics like abortion and smoking, and we all knew, by what you said, these were not the topics that you had hoped for. None of us, you said, had abortions and so it was not who we were.” Hoping to elicit more, I asked, “So how did you steer away from such generic topics?” Hind provided a response: “I liked when you started going around and asking in class about what we would consider worth our time, what do we really want to know. At first, I was silent. I had never thought about it. The handout you gave for homework helped.” Huda remembered going home that evening and working on the handout too. She remembered in her reflections on her I-search deliberating on the handout’s first question. We had talked in class about various topics that pertain to us, and I kept playing it in my mind. I wanted to write vitiligo right away, but it scared me to. I had spent all my life acting as if it wasn’t there and now that is all I could think of.

Huda said that her conversation with me and her research team the next day helped her finalize her decision: “I remember you said that you did not know much about vitiligo, and that I was your first vitiligo student. You said you would like to know more and that I could teach you and my class about it.” In my notes, I allude to the conversation in which Huda was testing how safe I would make the classroom for her to experiment with bringing a part of herself to an audience of peers whose reactions she could not anticipate. I could not deliver a reassuring response. Her question “What is vitiligo and how does it affect my life?” helped her extend her understanding of herself and see what resulted.

The second question, *How would knowing more about this topic impact you and/or your choices?* challenged Frank the most, as he remembered it in the third focus group discussion. He was sure he wanted to research alchemy, but “I was not sure how that would help my life. I was asking myself a lot of questions like ‘how can knowing more about this help me?’” Here, Frank claimed in his introduction to his I-search, he felt stuck. “I understood that this research would help me,” but “I did not know how to articulate it.” This issue, he resolved, by “reading a little more about alchemy,” which I encouraged them to do before they settled on their topic, “and talking to Josh.” Josh, an avid reader who struggled with dyslexia, was a member of Frank’s research team (I write later about the collaborative selves that these teams nurtured), and like Frank, he wanted to research the alchemical symbols in the books he had read, specifically in the Harry Potter series and in Michael Scott’s books. Just by sharing his own question with Frank, “What are the origins of alchemical symbols?” Josh helped Frank formulate a better question for the latter’s own research, “What is the significance of alchemy today?”

**A collaborative self.** Though students were hesitant in the beginning to go to their teams for questions, I directed them often back to their teams for answers both because I did not want



them to see me as the only authority and also because I wanted the team to have an active and supportive role in everyone's progress. And from the start, as Shay remembered, the team exchanges proved quite helpful.

During the question brainstorming sessions for the I-search paper, he expressed to his team his frustration at not finding a topic. Right away, his team suggested that he should do his research on soda consumption and its effects on the body. At first, he was incredulous as to whether this would actually count as research. He was elated to know that the suggestion was a possibility, but he also remembered the anxieties and uncertainties that followed this process. "It was hard to formulate a question," he writes in his I-search reflections, the final part of the I-search paper. "I kept going back to my group and they kept asking me to revise either because it was too specific or too broad. First I had questions like *Why is pop bad for you?* and then *What does pop contain?* and so on. His team, following the many in-class mini-lessons on how to construct components of the paper, helped him formulate a more precise question, *What are the short- and long-term effects of drinking pop on a teenager's body and mind?* Without his team, Shay felt that "he would have been lost."

Bella, too, remembered choosing her topic after a team conversation. "I knew that I wanted to do something with art, but I was not sure what. I was sharing with my team how I loved doing self-portraits, and Celine said that she remembered her grandma had a self-portrait of a Mexican painter. We both looked it up and it was Frida Kahlo's. I wanted to know more about how she became this famous artist as I want to be one too one day." Bella's title for her final project, *Painting Dreams*, was actually anchored in her research on Kahlo. She also dedicated her project to Kahlo whose quote, "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best," adorns her first page.

However, this literacy event and the literacy transactions that ensued from it proved these teams to be much more than just venues for helpful social exchanges. The team collaborations on the I-search opened opportunities for these students to construct collaborative selves of multiple dimensions, ones that allowed them to assume new academic and social positions of agency.

First, as several of them reiterated both in their focus group interviews and in their project assignments, these collaborations on the I-search introduced them to topics they may never have ventured into themselves. Each team was composed of five students, and therefore they transacted with five different topics regularly. “Whether we were checking each other’s sources to see if they met the guidelines, or helping each other take notes, or find the main ideas,” Celine writes in her I-search reflections, “we were also learning about topics other than our own.” This delving into other topics, Bella added in the third focus group, “helped us understand both the topic and our team members better.” For example, Ray wrote about how working with Paul on the same team “helped me get to know Paul better who introduced me to a world of music I had never known.” Although he was with Paul in several classes last year, Ray appreciated “how the activities in this class allowed me to talk to him and learn from him.” Hind felt better knowing that her team members “who knew very little about the Palestinian Israeli conflict” now had a chance to hear about it from what she calls “the other side.” This, she said, helped “motivate me to read as many sources and articles as I can so I can answer any questions they had during our team discussions.” For Huda too, “having a small audience of peers listen and encourage you helped me realize that people can be caring and understanding. It felt good knowing they wanted to know more about me and my vitiligo.”

The team discussions were opportunities for each team member to practice speaking in front of an audience. Once a week, usually on Fridays, each team member took turns to report on

his/her progress, ask questions from the others, or just voice dead ends or frustrations. These too represented, as Salwa confessed in the third focus group interview, "...a great way for me to check how I was doing compared to everyone else. I sometimes did not feel too comfortable asking everyone questions, and so listening to others tell us where they were and how they were doing was very helpful." Frank agreed, "I liked hearing how everyone else was doing, especially Josh. He and I had different questions on the same topic, and I was having a hard time finding sources. His dad had found a site that he told me about and it helped me a lot." For Celine, having Elyssa on her team posed a challenge at first as "we never really got along and we fought last year." However, as she writes in her learning journey, "I learned that she and I, as teenage girls, were both struggling against the same forces of prejudice and unrealistic expectations that our society forced us, as young teenage girls, to deliver daily." This keen learning from Celine came, as she informed me in our third focus group, from working on the I-search team. Elyssa's research on her topic, *causes and symptoms of teenage girl bullying*, helped both girls, as Celine declared, figure out that that "we both acted without thinking. The images that we see on TV and society's expectations of us sometimes put too much pressure on us to be and act in certain ways. It was almost like we did not have any control."

And they exercised this control they so longed for in healthy and meaningful ways in their I-search teams, assuming sometimes simultaneously and at other times alternately, several academic and social roles, as the need arose. Sometimes, as Shay put it during the third focus group, "I listened attentively to others as they helped me figure out how to write my question better," and "sometimes, the team depended on me to do all the talking, especially when I was explaining how pop had tar in it." The I-search, as Salwa reiterated both in the final focus interview and in her learning journey assignment "allowed me to be both dependent and

interdependent. I liked both roles a lot.” The others too appreciated the multiple and sometimes dual nature of their stances in their teams—of speaker/listener, mentor/mentee, speaker/listener, guide/follower and teacher/ learner—that these collaborations provided. “I am not usually seen as the best student,” Celine said in her interview, “but sitting with three other A students made me feel like I had to be just as good, and so I made sure I came to the discussions ready. I was enjoying speaking to them and I could feel that they were beginning to change their minds about me.” Celine was right. Ray, one of her team members, wrote in his I-search reflections, “Paul helped me see the world of music differently but this class helped me see so many students in a new and better light. Celine would probably be the most outstanding example.” I asked Ray during his first one-on-one interview to explain what he meant about seeing Celine in a new and better light. His answer said much:

I have known Celine for two years now. She was in many classes with me in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. She was not exactly, you know, the best student. She got into a lot of trouble, did not do her homework, and she—she kind of scared a lot of kids—not me though, but a lot of others were scared of her. She changed in this class. I mean just thinking about how she talked to you and things like that. She listened to what you said and never talked back. I could see she liked you a lot. Even when she was in our research team, she came prepared and talked about abuse and she was really smart. I think it was her way to show us that this is really who she wanted to be, not the Celine who got kicked out or suspended or bullied others. She wanted to be one of the A students.

I asked him again, “So, what do you think made her change so much?” Ray’s response, short and telling, did not shock me, “She felt respected. That is how Celine is. If she feels respected, she will respect back. You showed her a lot of respect.” In making room for her on a team of A students, Celine felt both validated and ready to assume her new role, a role she could not have practiced alone.

In such roles, most of them were able to assume different responsibilities that enhanced both an academic and a social stance. It allowed them to practice stances that they did not often

assume in either their personal or their academic lives. They were sources and resources at once in ways even I could not be. I did not have Paul's experience or upbringing as a talented musician, or Joshua's knowledge of alchemical symbols, or even Ray's insights into another Celine. They were often better resources for one another. I realized that and stepped aside. I had only "a trust of their own creative powers," which I employed in healthy and constructive ways. During the I-search paper, my choice to nurture the relationships and dialogues around which they created healthy and constructive collaborations led me, ironically, to stay visibly in the margins of their exchanges. In essence, the collaborations proved constructive because as a "citizen-teacher" (DeStigter, 2001), I recognized the need to empower the students by moving to the margins so they could practice, in the center of this classroom, roles of subject agents. And they did, though with marvelous results. As they constructed stronger collaborative selves, they also practiced stances of subjectivity and agency—new roles in the classroom for many students.

**A subject self.** Huda remembered this time in class as a time of awakening, both to her vitiligo and to her potential as an activist for vitiligo. The I-search propelled her to unravel the mysteries of her skin condition and empower her to bring those mysteries to bear on an audience of peers which served to validate and vindicate her condition as detailed later in her case study. "I was reading night and day about my condition. I wasn't doing homework. I was understanding myself," she writes in her reflections on the I-search.

In her first one-on-one interview, Huda shared that working on her I-search empowered her as a person. She gave the interview with her doctor, her primary resource, as an example.

When I used to visit my doctor with my dad, they would often speak together, and I would just sit in a chair listening. The only time I'd speak was when either of them asked me a question. When I made an appointment to interview him [her doctor] for this research, I prepared some questions that related to what I wanted to find out. I would have never thought to ask these questions myself. And even when I got there, and as I spoke to him, it felt different. I did not feel like I was just listening to someone. I felt

significant. Talking to my team members and to you had helped me so much with my confidence. I did not feel like I was just a patient there anymore. I was a researcher and speaker. I was asking all the questions. That changed how I saw myself and even my doctor. It also changed my visits to my doctor. He and my dad both noticed that. My grandma, who sometimes drove me there, noticed that too. I was so happy with myself.

Huda's observation testified not only to the power of the I-search event on helping them position themselves in authentic and new subject stances that they practiced in the context of their literacy classroom, but, and just as significantly, how they extended these roles to their outside social contexts. In such social interactions, they often changed from a silenced presence to inquisitive, probing, and speaking agents.

Celine's interview with her school psychologist led her to further lose her faith in the latter's abilities. After explaining how our school psychologist was not very helpful to her in her research, she writes in her research journey, the second part of her I-search paper.

What she [the psychologist] told me about the most common form of abuse did not square with the information I had found. The survey I gave in school too showed that her information was *unreliable* (See, Mrs. Kassem, I am using the words we learned). I trusted my other two sources, and my independent reading book on Dave Pelzer, much more as they were true to my experiences and they were more current.

The way she ends this last paragraph, in which she strays from describing her research journey to vilifying her school psychologist, testifies to her new sense of empowerment: "I always knew she [the psychologist] did not care. Now, I know that she does not know what she is doing. And, I can prove it using my sources." This last comment by Celine, though somewhat harsh, reflected both her trust in herself and the trust in literacy processes that now served to empower her against a traditional school notion of authority as always knowledgeable, which Celine often, and in various ways, rejected. In questioning the psychologist's current knowledge, she questions too her role as healer/helper. In so doing, she establishes the authority of knowledge as the sole and only power. Celine's comments might be perceived as "rude,"

“insulting,” or any number of other labels some might conceive of. Such labels did not once cross my mind. My teacher citizen stance prevented me from intervening to license their thoughts and feelings, especially when I perceived a great goal of constructing literary and social selves in which these students engaged.

**Expanding academic and social selves.** The I-search paper thus was an opportunity for them to dig deep within themselves and make more and better sense of their experiences. They initiated academic transactions frequently and faithfully, reading their sources and then interpreting and writing the ideas within. They were also using what they were learning, as I show later, to nurture healthier social selves, learning to use people as valuable primary sources, and discovering better ways to learn from and interact with adults outside of schools settings. In nurturing a trusting and supportive environment for students to investigate and share their academic and social selves, which meshed quite well in this literacy event, opportunities abounded for adolescents at risk (which in my mind are all adolescents) to claim spaces to search and speak the anguish, pain, and mysteries of their many selves so that they may move beyond their debilitating effects in order to create healthier versions of themselves. In doing so, they relieved themselves, as Kat claimed in one of her interviews, of their toxic effects.

The I-search presentations during class testified to the many ways students had used this literacy event to construct social selves. Shay, a special ed student whose hyperactivity was constantly blamed on his consumption of pop products, serves as a prime example. During parent-teacher conferences, his mom shared that she could not get him to stop drinking so much pop, and it was really impacting his sleep and studies. He remembered in our second focus group interview how “at first I thought Mrs. Kassem was kidding when I told her I wanted to research a can of Coke, but she was serious. I went home and told my mom I am researching a can of Coke.

She too found it hard to believe.” During his presentation, an empty can of Coca-Cola in hand, Shay spoke both of his findings and fears. He read off the many chemicals and dyes that flavored each can and dwelled on a tar like substance used as an ingredient. Since doing this research, he volunteered during the third focus group interview, “I have thought twice about drinking a can of Coke,” he said. He pledged in front of the class when he presented his I-search findings to keep working on cutting down his drinking habit to one can of Coke a day and ultimately none. He often reported on his progress to me, and his mother, in an e-mail to me, did confirm that he had kicked the habit by the end of the year.

Hind went beyond sentiments she inherited about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In searching the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she learned much about her sociopolitical self. Several articles and books on a history of a conflict helped her share that “this is a conflict I did not choose,” yet found herself deeply entrenched in both her personal and social settings. She learned that there is much more to this conflict “than what I had heard from my family growing up,” she volunteered in her I-search reflections. Though she still, at the end of her research, found much that eluded her about the topic, she now had set on a course of action, a praxis, to learn to frame her own understanding of an issue that so impacted her and that continues to impact her world. In the second focus group interview, she affirmed that “I am still reading everything I can on the subject. I listen to more than one side of things too, though I do not think the media always shows that.” The peace that cannot be brokered in that region of the world ebbed and flowed in her Hind’s op-ed, which was a direct offshoot of her I-search efforts. In the third focus group interview, she articulated a conclusion she had already made in her I-search reflections, “This issue was more complicated than I thought. It was not just an *us* against *them*



kind of thing. The whole world is part of this conflict, and it is hard and messy. I am still trying to sort through it all.”

Hind’s I-search presentation offered Huda, also a Palestinian American, as the latter voiced in her first one-on-one interview, with a motive to start researching a topic so relevant to her personally and to our country and world. When I asked her if there is any other side of her identity she wanted to investigate but didn’t, Huda claimed that “I always wanted to know more about my Palestinian roots. I watched Hind present and share so much about her Palestinian roots, and I always felt she was more in touch with that part of herself. I was not as much and I wanted to learn more about that side of me.”

Celine, a victim of neglect herself, surprised her classmates as she shared during her presentation that in our nation, the most common form of abuse was neglect. Her definitions of neglect came from The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), and she started the second part of her I-search by defining it as “a type of maltreatment that refers to the failure by the caregiver to provide needed, age-appropriate care although financially able to do so.” Next she recounted the four types of neglect (physical, educational, emotional/psychological, and medical). She then tied abuse and neglect to poverty in healthy ways and described each one’s symptoms and manifestations. “Most abuse occurs because parents are either ill prepared or too poor to take care of their children,” she wrote, and “for me personally, this was indeed the case. I suffered all four forms of neglect as a child, and as my research shows, it was when a teacher in school reported my poor hygiene that things got a little better. They got worse too.” This traditionally at-risk student, who created knowledge about her condition and then spoke it out, had also reached out to other at-risk students, to help them do the

same. The last part of the presentation gave ways in which children abused through neglect can help themselves overcome its hurtful and enduring scars.

Other than providing information and guidance about a topic that had relevance to their lives, this paper allowed students the agency of being in positions of authority, positions which they, especially those from lower socioeconomic groups, do not find often themselves. Salwa's paper on fast food became the talk of the year as she became the designated authority on fast food for the whole class. For Salwa, it allowed her, as she voiced repeatedly in the third focus group interview, to practice a role for her future chosen career, a pharmacist. Rather than prescriptive measures, she opted for preventative methods because, as she writes in the second part of her I-search paper,

My search results prove that many of today's diseases are directly related to the types of food we consume daily. Our own generation, which consumes the most fast food, seems more vulnerable than any before it for such ailments. Some of today's major diseases, such as diabetes and obesity, are inflicting more and more young people. We have three diabetic students in this class alone, and I will not write how many are obese. Even Alzheimer's, as my research shows, can be linked to poor dietary habits. Prevention is the best medicine.

As others asked questions about a territory they frequently inhabited, as consumers of fast food, she stood knowledgeable and prepared to guide them back to more nutritional choices, a stance she modeled quite well throughout the year as she brought apple slices rather than cookies to our final presentation.

I still smile recalling Frank's failed experiment which was a culmination of his research on the origins and sources of alchemy. His readings and interests led him there, and though I attempted to dissuade him from such a difficult topic to research, he insisted, and I succumbed knowing fully well there were lessons there too. His I-search paper was a lot shorter than the four-page requirement, and he struggled to find credible and current sources. He decided to make

up for this shortcoming in his presentation. His cart full of toothpaste, rubbing alcohol, and warm water, among other ingredients, made its way into the class full of potential and inviting eager spectators. Several attempts at performing the experiment as part of his presentation failed, and when his minutes were up, he wheeled away the cart and his disappointment amidst sincere sympathy and applause. Little did he know that the real alchemy had already taken effect as they sought, via literacy, to change their words and worlds. In his first one-on-one interview, Frank refers to this time in class as a time of great change for him. When I asked him why he thought that, his response was, “In this class, and in the I-search presentation, I learned that sometimes you need to fail to learn. I learned a lot from my failure. I had not learned that well before this class.”

The I-search and the dialogues around it had expanded their worlds at the seams. They were reading and writing enthusiastically and prolifically. However, as Salwa writes in her I-search reflections, “Reading, I learned as I worked on the I-search paper, was not for taking a quiz or knowing what happened in a story. It had a brand new role in my life—to teach me about myself and the world around me.” Frank said, “Though I have always enjoyed reading fiction, I have never reflected on the many ways reading nonfiction impacts my life. I got to find that out via the I-search.” For Shay, “reading was always about doing well in school,” but now, “it has an even more important role. It is about doing well in life.”

They emerged from this assignment feeling informed, empowered, and ready to venture to other classroom literacy events. In his reflections on the I-search paper, Ray writes, “This was a long and trying process. As a researcher, I have learned how to find valuable sources, how to read them critically and how to answer my own questions about any topic I choose. I have also learned that reading and writing are always, always, about me. ”

As the role of literacy in their lives began to shift, these ten students began to also shift how they approached and performed their academic selves. What accompanied that shift is an expansion of their social selves too.

### **Performing a self.**

*Reinvisioning outsider selves.* The readings we conducted in class and the discussions around them fueled students' desire to read their words and worlds differently. The title of S. E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders* presented numerous possibilities for examining marginalization and self-representation. The novel depicts the struggles the main character, Ponyboy, faces as he tries to balance an academic and social self in a context charged with political and social tensions. The Greasers, the poor gang, and the Socs (or the Socials) represent separate and unequal worlds. Whenever the two worlds meet, tensions and trials ensue. We read a short biography of the author, S. E. Hinton, whom we deemed an outsider in the world of writing, both as a young female and as a teenager writing realistic young adult fiction anchored in some of the events of her own life. We spoke about the irony of her using the initials *S. E.* to hide her identity in a novel in which her multiple identities were revealed, an idea Kat found quite intriguing and which she later took up as she explained in her first focus group interview. She too expressed her desire "to hide myself by writing about myself."

As they read each chapter, and true to offering and respecting their "practices of freedom," they were given options on summarizing their reading from a character's perspective or via visuals or poems. They followed the summaries with short reflections about something they found interesting in the chapter. Here, again, the goal was to allow them to envision both characters and events in the novel from their distinct perspectives and contribute to new understandings that they could bring to our class discussions. Bella's visuals, which she chose to

do “in 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view,” were a testament to the power of offering students multimodal venues in their literacy practices. Her visual summary testified to a complex thought process that attended to every intricate detail. As she said during her interview, “I spent hours on the visuals but I wanted to. I do not think I will ever forget this book or what happened in it.” Her reflection following her visual summary (Figure 5) testified to the deep and distinctive thought that comes with empowering students to make choices and think critically about them. She writes, “Looking at the visual, one imagines a life like any other. The different objects in my visual can be from anyone’s life. Even if the same, they represent different things for different characters—Ponyboy, Cherry, and even Johnny. Even for me, as S. E. Hinton, they mean more than what meets the eye. It is the reader’s job to put the puzzle pieces together.” And to help guide her audience to her thought process, she writes in the second paragraph of her reflections: “I gave the title *Concessions* to chapter two because I feel all of us make them. The box of popcorn and a bottle of Coke may not seem like much, but I made them the biggest part of my visual. That is because they do harder work than many people are able to: They bring people together.” None of Bella’s comments compared to what she volunteered during our third focus group interview. Here complex thinking revealed itself in her visual choices in nuanced and noticeable ways. I asked her to elaborate on her reflections and this is what she said:

I did not want to use people in my visual because I think in this story, your social status is much stronger than you. It is more about things than people. I put things only, like the jacket and the empty glass bottle which can represent how Johnny got hurt by both his dad who is alcoholic but the Greasers also use broken bottles to hurt others. Cherry—she’s sweet so I put her on top of the ice cream—but she is also rich and her money puts her on top of all that whipped cream. The little puppy is Johnny as that is how he is described often and the soap bar represents how all the Greasers want to wash their problems away. The different ice cream colors represent the different Socs with their different personalities. They are all from the same place and so I put them in one bowl. Only school where Ponyboy and Cherry come together and food like popcorn and pop can bring them together. The heart represents that. I also included a cross on a church on the background because religion I think too treats everyone the same and brings rich and

poor together. [She paused] Jesus does. I also read ahead 20 pages and so that is why I put that sign with 20 miles. There are many other reasons, way too many. It took me hours.



Figure 6. Bella's Summary of Chapter 2 of *The Outsiders*

After reading the book, and throughout the paragraph reflections that followed her chapter summaries, Celine, who followed each of her summaries with a short reflection, questioned how a female (S. E. Hinton) knew so much about the male world. “Maybe Ponyboy is her male self,” she wondered. “I think all girls at one time want to be boys. It is easier to be one. You are not judged as harshly,” she writes in her reflections for the end of the novel. Yet she moves to judge the girls in the novel quite harshly, adding, “I did not like any of the female characters,” she continued. “They were all just somebody’s girlfriend, and not really their own person.”

In discussing the characters, the students found themselves more intrigued by an outsider frame. For instance, they discussed how Ponyboy was on many levels an outsider. Most obviously, as a Greaser he was an outsider in the world of the Socs. But also (and many students stressed this extensively in class), Ponyboy was an avid reader and writer. To some extent, this

made him an outsider among his own gang. And this idea helped them perceive *outsider* status differently, sometimes more favorably.

Johnny, we discussed, came from an abusive home and was an outsider in his own home, a status both Celine and Ray later adopted in their own Outsider assignments. (This assignment is discussed in detail below). We discussed how each of the characters—both Greasers and Socs— was, in some way or another, an outsider. We also talked about how, oftentimes, the characters' affiliation as either a Greaser or a Soc had more to do with their socioeconomic identity than with any of their other identities. This was an idea that Hind later took up and framed in sociopolitical terms as she discussed the disconnect between her American and Palestinian identities in her own “I Am An Outsider” assignment.

The students looked across socioeconomic status to find what binds characters from different social groups. They talked about how Darry (a Greaser) and Bob (a Soc) were friends at one time, and how Ponyboy (a Greaser) and the female character of Cherry (a Soc) had so much in common. The many facets of outsider status were brought to bear on those discussions and helped many of them realize that an outsider is something we all are at one time or another. It cannot be avoided. It does not need to be rejected. And to extend the idea to its limits, we spoke of leaders who were outsiders because they dared to question the status quo. They cited Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Susan B. Anthony. But they were cognizant of names we studied too like Richard Rodriguez, Frederick Douglass, and Maya Angelou. We examined how a fixed notion of outsider as always undesirable relegates us often to false stereotypes and judgments.

Several of them, as I write in my practitioner notes, ventured to look past the socioeconomic to the sociopolitical. Shay, during a class discussion, compared the Socs and the

Greasers to the East and West end of the city, the first considered the *Arab* side of town and the other the *American* side of town. We discussed these descriptors as problematic because many people in the East end have known no other country but America, and how there are many Arab-American families living in the West End. Others in class joined in the discussions to point out how the imaginary borders that are erected between the two sides of the city have sometimes forced them, during sporting events especially, to regard each other as rivals or enemies and how they rarely go into each other's *territories*. They gave examples of how that segregation by race, by religion, by gender, and by national origin also played out in the school cafeteria and shared stories from there that they witnessed.

The discussions extended from their cafeteria and city to race in our country as we spoke about segregation, in its different forms, being alive and well in many of our cities and suburbs. For our Monday articles of the week, the students brought in and shared, during the current events discussions, examples of this separate and unequal state of living across our country and world.

The assignment "I Am An Outsider" was designed to be an extension of these dialogues. The assignment (April 2013) asked students to envision a time when they felt as if they too were outsiders and share that time in a poem, narrative, or visual. Each found in his/her own search, within self and society, an outsider element that they explored in writing, a manifestation of that status that was different, their own.

For example, in writing about a time they felt like outsiders, each of them indicated an appreciation for this often rejected and marginal position. Salwa and Hind wrote about how wearing their Islamic headdress (the hijab) for the first time at the beginning of their eighth-grade year singled them out at Charles Middle School. Salwa's stories of strangers shouting



insults at her “when we were walking around the track” were poignant, and her claim that she is an outsider because of her “ethnicity and religion” resonated throughout her essay in a sad and solemn tone. She does not like how she is received but she cannot change others’ attitudes. All she can do is be proud of who she is.

On the other hand, Hind, a shy and soft-spoken member of the class who often was an avid listener during discussions, wrote an essay that reeks of rebellion. She introduced it with “I’ve never been bullied, but I’ve been hated. I never cussed, but I was cussed at,” and went on to describe the reactions of her peers and teachers after wearing her hijab at the beginning of eighth-grade year. Her narrative, plenty with pain, reflects a strong and resilient stance that reflected our class discussions on what being an outsider means:

The first day of 8<sup>th</sup> grade a lot of students didn’t recognize me, even one of my teachers. When they finally did, they drew confused expressions and surprised faces. One girl even came up to me and asked if I was *forced* to wear it. And of course, I wasn’t. My parents gave me a choice. They even thought I was too young to wear it, but I didn’t listen to them. She gasped when I explained that to her. My old friends said I looked prettier before and one random person said, “I loved your hair! Why did you cover it?” and that girl had *never* spoken to me before. I lost two friends that first month, which was odd since they both were readers and knew they aren’t supposed to judge a book by its cover.

The last two lines clearly show the reader identity configuring well into Hind’s own judgment of the girls who judged her. She shared this identity with them, and thus did not expect them, as readers, to reject her “cover.” She thus too was an outsider to a reading identity that she thought they too shared and would vindicate her in their eyes.

However, in the course of that investigation of her personal identity, other selves come into question. Her American identity has too come into question. Her anger flares as she shares, in her fourth paragraph, a story about her mom getting “cussed at” while dropping her off at school: “The white lady inside cussed at her and told my mom to get out of *her* country.”

This local act of prejudice unravels, in Hind's essay, a historical perspective and claim to justice—a reclamation of an identity both to a land and its people. She claims, “Americans don't even have a country,” and follows with, “They stole this one from the Native Indians.”

She does not stop there, of course, but ties this local experience to a long list of global injustices against her parents' homeland (Palestine), declaring on paper towards the end of her essay, “They [Americans] have no right telling us to go back to our country when they are causing problems there [in Palestine].”

In the context of her project, her op-ed specifically, this sentence, by one of the class' most soft-spoken and reserved girls, represents a strong indictment of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. This born-in-San Francisco adolescent saw this local act of prejudice towards her mother as a manifestation of larger/global acts of injustice. She also felt free to share this identity, not out loud with the whole class as that was not her style, but with a trusted teacher-partner who shares not only her Arabic-American identity but also her strong sense of justice.

In the final focus group interview, Hind admitted that she had not shared such sentiments with any of her teachers before. When I asked her what made her more willing to share such personal thoughts with me, she revealed a perception of her teacher as a trusted partner, “I felt that you would not judge me or think differently of me if I did. I could be as honest as I wanted in my writing with you because I feel you are always honest with us.” At the end of that essay, she resolved to “be an outsider for the rest of her life” rather than “live a life that's a lie”—by all measures, a strong and powerful stance.

While Hind's outsider status is grounded in sociopolitical events, Kat grounded hers in a debilitating medical condition. She writes a long poem about how having to wear a brace for her scoliosis made her an outsider for she could not participate in many physical activities in school:

“I’ve had scoliosis for many years/And though it provides me with many fears/It makes me me in many ways/And it will be with me all my days.” Like Hind, Kat realizes this condition puts new and unpleasant challenges in her way, but, also as Hind, she is “proud to call myself an outsider.”

For many thirteen-year-olds, the mere idea of not fitting in can present numerous insecurities, but for Riley, who questioned in a reflective poem the whole concept of fitting in, the deduction that someone who is not an outsider cannot be an individual represented an affirmation and triumph of a self refusing to surrender its character, its inherent elements. Relying on the dialogues that stemmed from our discussions of *The Outsider’s* themes and characters, she questioned, “In a country which is supposed to be free, why be like you, or have you be me?” Here, like Hind, she echoed a concern over a conformity that violates the very basis of our freedom to be ourselves.

This idea itself also represented a reassuring realization for Shay, who also celebrated his loner status through writing a poem about always being an outsider and “roaming alone” with no friends. That offered him a way to engage differently in class events, winning an audience for himself, which he was not hiding as much anymore. “I’ll be an outsider,” the poem concludes, “until dead I lay.”

Bella, too, no longer shunned her combined image as a special ed student, a Hispanic American teen, and an artist. She recognized, in a short paragraph, that outsider is outcast sometimes, and pain can arise from such status due to society’s ignorance, but “all these things together make me who I am.” She drew a picture of a sunflower in a field of roses and wrote an accompanying short poem about her outsider status. “Under this warm golden sun,” she ended it, “I flower among roses as the only one.”

Frank, an active member of his church's youth group, spoke about differences which sometimes made him an outsider among his peers in a poem. His poem did not elaborate on his ambiguous status as outsider though later during the interviews, he spoke in detail about what those differences were, as I explain in his case study.

While most of them spoke as outsiders to a stranger other, Ray surprised us all with the realization that, even within an often nurturing and functional family such as his, one can still sometimes feel the outsider stigma. He drew a picture (Figure 6) of his family gathered around a 2012 Christmas tree and he standing, his face on a silhouette of a sheep, aloof and looking at all of them who were not eyeing him back. "Black Sheep," he wrote on the bottom corner of his paper, and recounted this story to everyone in class when he presented his project in June (2013).



*Figure 7. Ray's Outsider Self*

Of all the outsider stories shared that year, none was as poignant as Celine's. She glued a not-so-flattering picture that someone drew of her in sixth grade and wrote about how "apparently in 6<sup>th</sup> grade this is what most students saw me as" and how she considered it "flattering because somebody that disliked me took time out of their day to draw this." She then

wrote a long narrative of the incident which was obviously still etched in her memory and in the picture she carried with her for two years.

I was always different from all the other kids. In elementary school, most of the kids came back the following year with brand new everything. A backpack with wheels on the bottom, a pack of crayons with a built in sharpener. Some kids didn't acknowledge me at all. Was it because I didn't have what the other students had?

Getting food stamps once a month, living with my drunken cousin, and picking fights with anyone that looked at me wrong was part of my everyday lifestyle. I knew that I had at home issues. Some point within the grades 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> I clocked a girl right in the face for making fun of me.

I remember 2<sup>nd</sup> grade being one of the toughest years I had experienced. I woke up one morning late for school. Searching through all my clothes, I could not find an outfit to wear. Everything smelt like cat pee. I ended up wearing my baby sister's jeans and my older sister's long, baggy, white shirt. The only thing that made everything twice as bad was the previous day I had left my shoes outside and it poured rain the entire night. Again, I ended up wearing my older sister's water shoes. I never had any brand clothing.

I don't like to talk about my childhood. My mom didn't have enough money to support my siblings, including me. We got our clothes from Value World and it was very seldom that we ever got any new "additions" to our toy collection. I have always been different from everyone else.

I am an outsider.

Celine's story proved significant not only because she was coming out in this assignment to speak of her poverty imposed marginality, a stance that Celine tried to hide often under rebellious acts of insubordination, but it was also proof that she had well heeded the discussions on poverty we had earlier in the year after reading Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. While they were afforded the opportunities to wander in the wonders of Christmas through that book, the research lessons on poverty and the articles we read on poverty in our nation and in our world had absolved them of the guilt and even inadequacy some of them felt about being poor. And while poverty, for many middle school students, is often a source of shame, which Celine desperately tried to hide and run away from under labels of brand designs and acts of physical aggressions, our discussions in class framed poverty as a systemic failure and a spreading epidemic due to our nation's educational and economic policies. We had many conversations about the impact of

poverty on families, especially kids. Via the I-search and other shorter research assignments, the students learned that poverty is a systemic problem and not a personal failure, and in so doing they became free to speak about its inherent evils and its dire effects on them and their nation. In her own I-search paper, Celine had talked about neglect as a form of abused often induced by conditions of poverty.

Creating and performing an outsider self represented for many of these students, as evident in their texts, an opportunity to affirm themselves on their own terms and in ways that contributed to a positive sense of self. In *reinvisioning outsider*, they envisioned new approaches to an adolescent self that has traditionally learned to shun an *other*—no matter how healthy—and live comfortably in conformity's shadows. In so doing, these adolescents embraced the many possibilities that this otherness can create. As they embraced more their own status as outsiders, the students also and simultaneously learned to appreciate and understand an outsider other. For these adolescents, such transformative events represented major steps in a process of creating and performing academic and social selves, ones whose evolution presents multiple and promising prospects for healthy civic engagements.

**Re/invisioning a writing self.** The process of creating and performing a stronger social self extended its advantages to a strong literary self as well. It allowed each of them to perceive revision, for example, not as a painstaking nor time-wasting mechanical skill which they engaged in to please their teacher. The benefits of heeding critique and giving constructive feedback became not options but requirements, part of the natural order of creating and recreating a self. Revising both their literacy skills and living choices went hand in hand for this group.

Hind remembered how the feedback process represented the most significant part of the class. Especially, as she claims, due to her lack of confidence in her writing abilities, she found in it an opportunity to better her writing and thinking. She remembers how in the beginning of the year, whenever anyone was given constructive comments about something they wrote or said, she took it as “oh, that was harsh.” However, she continued, “As I got to the middle, I was like, I like constructive feedback. Towards the end, I liked—longed for it.” Feedback became an indispensable part of their empowerment as readers and writers too. Revising their writing meant revising their thinking—identity work, so to speak. As such, revision was no longer regarded as extra work. It was now necessary work.

For Celine, rewriting the “I Am From” poem was required not only because of improved skills, but rather because “a lot of stuff has changed since the beginning of the year.” Revision to her meant revision of circumstances and more empowerment both as a writer and person. “I learned so much more about writing. I also went through a lot of family problems and I didn’t want to include some people in my poem anymore, so they kind of got kicked out.”

For Huda, the revisions also happened because “there were more experiences to talk about and discuss.” What once seemed far and felt uncomfortable was now quite familiar and founded the basis of her new self. Vitiligo, which came with the death of her mother, now invigorated her to step out of its shell to a world that literacy helped her change and effect change around her. The task was daunting but the world itself was no longer. She revised her whole concept of writing as a result. In her words:

Writing was no longer something that you get a grade on. I really never knew what I was going to get. I never knew how to write efficiently and I never knew really how to write—write well. It was kind of just busy writing we did before this class. And I never knew what grade I was going to get because nobody ever sat down and taught me. But it is not really something that you just sit down and teach somebody. I don’t think that it is.

For Salwa, revision was no longer a mechanical process. It was much more empowering for it entailed “finding out more about yourself.” She had revised her earlier notions of revision and now, “it wasn’t just paper, writing, sticking to one topic.” It was now “going all over the place,” and as also working in self-construction: “You could do that, because that was who you are.” The pieces of the puzzle seemed more meaningful as “you were not looking at just a little piece of the puzzle. It was the big picture.” Salwa’s earlier revisions had focused on “words you plug anywhere,” and in this class, on this project, she learned it was “thought, and time, and feelings and putting all into words.” Now, it was about how all—thought, time, and feelings—fit together, a more complex task. But her choice was clear. For the final project, “I decided to revise all,” she declares, and the opportunity, she said, “changed my writing style.”

For Bella, words have always been elusive, but she spoke volumes in her visuals and more loudly than any of her words could allow her to. Her process of writing and revision was anchored in lines and forms and colors, which became the scrap board for the few lines that accompanied them as guides for those who could not read her language. She did not feel comfortable talking about her life, and so the pictures allowed her to create a world in which she is represented in bold and beautiful colors that were often too revised for details and effect.

Shay, who turned most of his ten required assignments into poems and who struggled to write even a sentence at the beginning of the year, admitted that his writing at the end of the year was still not as solid as he would have like it to be, saying, “I still need to learn how to transfer thoughts and words into paragraphs better and have like a thesis statement and things like that.” However, he affirms, the amount of reading and writing he did in this class helped him get over “my fear of writing.” This understanding allowed him to separate his struggles in literacy from the benefits that literacy endowed, and thus his initial distrust and distancing from all literacy



events—born out of his sixth grade experiences, as his personal narrative testified—dissipated, and he had come to see himself as “a writer of poems” and a “resharpened pencil,” as he writes in his learning journey.

For these students, the literacy processes—writing especially—were no longer mere checklists of *dos* and *don'ts* dictated and religiously followed. Neither were they singularly perceived by all of them, as these ten students were not all in the same places physically, mentally, or academically, in their lives or in their writing. From the interviews, their writing, and my own notes, I can best describe this performance of their social and academic selves neither as linear nor even a cyclical process. I would venture to think of it more as a meshing of both the purpose for writing and the nature of the writer. Huda puts it best when she describes it as “a crazy experience, a crazy process, and it’s just not just pen and paper. It’s more like psychological, and it’s more emotional process, which is probably what makes it so difficult.”

**Reflecting selves.** Reflection for these students became a constant necessity. I, a reflective practitioner and person, encouraged them often to reflect on their choices, on their words, and on mine as well. I reflected with them on my teaching and showed them entries in my reflective journal. We reflected on current events, on their questions, and on their answers. In their final reflections, the students revealed that they were quite aware of this journey to journal the *self*. We had repeatedly paused, at several intervals, to reflect in their reading and writing notebooks their many reflections on their goals, the card markings, the readings, and their writing pieces.

However, the final reflections, “My Learning Journey,” represented the end result of their one-year journey in the class. As such, they seemed more comprehensive and as Frank voiced, he “had not really understood my mistakes until I went through, step by step, and repeatedly over

what I did. Then, I began to really understand how I succeeded and how I failed in the class.” These final reflections were outstanding evidence of the nature of the literacy events that transacted in this language classroom, and the effects these transactions had on the lives of the students that engaged in them. Reading through them, one finds that these ten students had indeed made reflection an ongoing and natural element of their lives, one that they used to understand their social and academic lives better and steer themselves to becoming better individuals and citizens.

In these reflections, the students were attuned to a self that was composed of many selves, often competing and contradictory in their essence (Yagelski, 2000). Celine wrote in her reflections that in school and in life, she was both “the bully and the bullied.” And leafing through her project and her pieces, the contradiction becomes even more glaring. Amidst her endless anti-school sentiments on every page, you see only school memorabilia—report cards, passes, write ups, IDs, letters—both hostile and heartfelt, a bookmark of the seven dwarfs under which she writes, “According to my mother, the 7 dwarfs represent my mood in 7 minutes (my 7 different moods in 7 minutes),” and right opposite that is her Michigan Modern Psychology therapist card which she claims to have benefitted from “as much or slightly less than the psychologist in school who never really cared about me or anyone else who walked into her office.” On one page is her mother’s letter to her family from prison (charged with sleeping with a minor) and on the other, a letter to her future self in which she is pursuing her dream of becoming a police officer and threatening to strangle herself in her sleep if she involves herself in something that can ruin her career or her reputation. Her op-ed, “Every Kid Has a Story,” strictly communicates that adults are not to be trusted. She enumerates the adults in her life that she cannot trust and points why she cannot trust any of them.

Her introduction points to how “school counselors do not fulfill their jobs. From personal experiences, I feel as if your therapist/counselor is judging you, whether it is from your personal life (family issues) or just past mistakes that you express to them,” and moves to pass a harsh judgment: “All adults do nowadays is try to break a kid down to the best of their ability.” Yet, on a lone middle page of the booklet, she trusts yet another adult, and writes, “This is not the best booklet, but it shows a lot of my past experiences. Mrs. Kassem, I hope you understand the items placed in this project. They all have some sort of interest for me. So, this is my last project. And I would like for you to keep it.” She follows that with a happy face signature and a heart next to her name, a classic example of a troubled adolescent who pushes away with one hand and holds the other hand for someone, anyone, to reach out.

**Claiming dialogic spaces.** So, from the beginning of the class, and of this final project to the end of it (the final presentation of their project), they were on a solo journey together to find the tools to help them (re)create and perform themselves. And though these tools came in many different forms, and from a variety of sources, words proved to be their greatest resources. Words helped them attend to their thoughts, frame and reframe their experiences, and shift their perceptions. Words empowered and healed them. In class and on this project, the many ways these students chose to understand and practice their words manifested the multiple ways they perceived themselves and inhabited their worlds. Words helped them claim spaces to speak their being and becoming, and their resisting too.

Thus, dialogues, themselves literacy events, represented this classroom’s most salient feature. Through them, other literacy events became possible and productive bridges over which both of us walked, back and forth, as we searched individually and collectively for spaces to reform and perform selves constantly in flux.

The dialogues were also gateways to the students themselves. They afforded students, and their teacher-partner, opportunities to reflect on ideas, share visions for their words and worlds, investigate modes and courses of action, and understand and appreciate the other.

The dialogues too were also opportunities to reach common understandings using their wills and ways with words. As they built more trust in the process and in their teacher-partner, dialogues transformed the reality of their words and worlds for them. The assignments in their booklets represented this gradual transformation through which a(n) re/envisioning of their language became also a process of representing, creating, and recreating themselves.

I can only partially enumerate the skills inherent in well-conducted discussions in which the teacher posits herself a probing and impartial partner. Through them, these eighth-graders learned to dialogue critically, to find their own voices; to listen and understand *other voices*; to compromise and share time, space, and other resources; to inform; to question; to debate; to accept or reject ideas.

The impact of these discussions on the students and on the class community was so intense that Riley, who left for a different district at the end of her eighth-grade year, remembers, as most of them, that these discussions represented “the highlights” of her language arts class. At a time when they lack much control over much that happens in their lives, their need to speak their thinking, openly, candidly, and without fear of reprisal, is of critical urgency.

That is not a finding specific to this study. However, what is a finding of this research is how they claimed these frequent speaking spaces and fashioned them each according to his/her image and how collectively, they stood in each other’s spaces respectfully, attentively, and patiently, lessons that seem especially critical against the backdrop of the images that flash on our screen from cities like Ferguson alerting us all to the dire consequences of single narratives

which deprive citizens of their right to claim their speaking spaces and thus abandoning them to adopt more destructive measures to be heard.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Case Study Analysis

### Literacy: Local and Liberating

**Introduction.** In Chapter Five, I provide my findings on the locality of literacy through four detailed narratives of individual case studies. I analyze the ways in which four focal students used specific discourses to construct the various artifacts that constituted their final projects. In analyzing each of their four unique approaches to the literacy events that the project entailed and their talk around such constructions, I show how the local literacy events of this classroom helped liberate these students from different forms of silencing and led them to practice agency in and out of the classroom. Such findings, as I discuss later in Chapter Six, challenge vehemently the notion of an essentialized and standardized literacy.

To help better understand the significance of the literacy events of this classroom in helping these four students develop stronger social and academic selves, and to better understand the local nature of literacy as it pertains to each of them in their diverse social and academic backgrounds and experiences, I begin each case study with a descriptive background vignette. Shedding some understanding on aspects of each student's identity before he or she transacted with the events of this class will shed better light on how each of them both changed and were changed by the key classroom literacy events, as described in detail in the previous section.

In each of the four case studies, the findings are discussed under two separate headings. I title one of the headings "Forms of Silencing" and describe different forms of silencing each of the four students practiced before the events of this classroom. The other heading, "Liberating Literacies," represents how reading and writing events were taken by each student, in varying ways, as means for personal agency and a sort of social, mental, and/or physical panacea. The students in this study, constituted by discourses already in place and in which they were only subjects, motivated by self-interest (Yagelski, 2000, p. 157), used the literacy events that

unfolded in this language arts classroom to help them, albeit in different ways, break the different clusters of silencing that surrounded them and move to liberate themselves and find other underlying discourses. They were thus able to transcend what I term *safe literacy* practices to more critical and meaningful approaches, and in so doing claimed agency. This agency was represented in each of the four students' specific assignments for this class, how they positioned themselves in each assignment, and the sort of texts they chose to write (See Yagelski's definition of agency, p. 43, Ch. 3).

I conclude this chapter with a brief cross analysis of the different forms of silencing practiced by these students and how their approaches to breaking their different forms of silencing and liberating themselves were similar and/or different.

It is worthwhile to note that while not all of these four students experienced the same transformational process that Huda (the first case study presented, below) describes, all were indeed empowered to engage differently in their academic and social lives and experienced a type of transformation both in how they perceived themselves and the worlds they inhabited. That, too, shall become evident as I discuss my findings.

Each background vignette begins with an "I Am From" poem that students wrote at the beginning of the year and revised for the final project. The students included only the final version of the poem in their final projects. I chose to use these poems as introductions to each case study both because I hope to represent the students on their own terms, using their chosen words, and because these poems entailed the multiple discourses used by the students over the course of the year.

In entrenching their literacies in their lives, both their academic and their social identities shifted and became stronger, both in and outside their immediate contexts. Each of these students

moved to use specific literacy events and practices to recreate herself/himself socially and academically on their own terms and in ways relevant and meaningful to each of their lives. As a teacher citizen, and a trusted partner, I helped them find those meaningful and relevant approaches via the engaged pedagogies of this classroom.

### **Huda's Story: Skin Speaks**

*I am from many colors  
Black and white,  
Living in the positive shaded area.*

*I am a spotted writer,  
Pressured and Pressed  
Like a well written newspaper.*

*I am an orphan  
Well, just motherless  
But I gained two families  
One being a group of spotted people  
Just like me and Lee [she is in a picture with Lee Thomas]  
And the whole group, see? [she is in a picture with her vitiligo group]*

*I am a dancer  
I follow the beat  
And trust where it leads me.*

*I am faithful  
I try my hardest  
And believe  
That God chose me to neither be  
Black or white  
He chose me to be me:  
Colorful*

I first saw Huda three years ago. She was a sixth grader performing a dance on stage during the end-of-the-year talent show. And despite the June heat in the auditorium, and the great effort she was making, she was dressed in a long sleeved shirt and long pants, sweating profusely. Her long curly black hair covered all of her dark face, but she moved effortlessly to



the beat. I remember thinking as I watched her dance on stage that day of those polyrhythmic African dancers whose language is all articulated in movements.

When I saw her again, it was the following fall when this reserved twelve-year-old who always “felt inferior” walked into my seventh-grade language arts classroom. Over the next two years, and through deliberate literacy transactions that defined a critical pedagogical approach, Huda would evolve into one of the most talented thinkers, speakers, and writers that I have encountered in my teaching career. And her story would be carefully and well documented in her end-of-the-year eighth-grade project. In her learning journey reflections, she writes, “These two years of English class have been the most metamorphing [sic] years of my life. I learned how to learn and to teach others. I conquered my fear of writing...read more and often...I can now speak to any crowd of people without the feeling of being inferior.” That journey of how literacy came to represent a sort of life line for Huda in her most turbulent teen years as she tried to sort through the confusions of her childhood and move confidently and strongly into her adolescent self is well depicted in her poetic introduction to her end-of-the year project:

*I'm an experiment  
Always changing.  
Vitiligo, a skin disorder  
Where pigment is lost  
Bold white patches form.  
This is the independent variable of me  
I depend on this disease  
It is not my crutch  
It is my strength.  
I will find the cure.*

As I analyzed the data for Huda, it became increasingly clear that the literacy events of her eighth-grade year facilitated her ability to work through personal and social struggles as she

claimed agency in her life and writing. It is this claimed agency which helped her make sense of her experiences and move to ascertain a strong academic and social stance.

**Forms of silencing.** Reading through her project, Huda's journey, in its physical and psychological dimensions, is well documented. The documentation represents the literacy transactions that defined her presence in this language arts classroom. Her story of "a spotted writer," starts literally as white patches on her dark skin, which she spent years trying to hide or deny through wearing long layers of clothing. "Pressured and pressed" to hide her own skin, Huda also hid all that her skin has come to signify: the suicide of a bipolar mother and the ensuing confusions of a personal and social life bound by these traumatic events. In essence, Huda hid all that she constitutes—or others construct—as shameful and embarrassing about her identity.

***Silencing skin.*** Huda's story with vitiligo, this independent variable as she calls it, began where her mother's story, a story of suffering through bipolar disease, ended. Following many examples of real narratives that spoke their experiences and pain candidly, such as Rodriguez' and Angelou's, Huda too was quite real in her own narrative (November 2012). In it, Huda wrote about that cold Sunday when "we spotted my mom's car outside a Family Dollar store" where they—her dad, her then nine-year-old brother and her seven-year-old self—discovered together the body of her mother "dressed in a white sweater, which now had a splash of red on the left side of the chest—her normal blue jeans and red lipstick."

It was at that same frame of time, "a few days later," that Huda noticed her very first patch of white on her dark skin. Her mom was "gone like that," and also just like that, Huda developed vitiligo, a skin disease that "made my skin white." The death of her mother was forever linked to the birth of her disease, both in her mind and in her writing. In her outsider

assignment, Huda admitted that her life changed drastically after that day. A different identity—an outsider named and later positively nurtured by the various literacy practices around S. E. Hinton’s book—emerged. In her personal narrative, Huda discussed this identity:

My grandmother became my mother and I became a “tomboy.” I was shy around my cousins and always felt like an outsider. The other cousins had moms and their mothers took care of them. I had my grandmother picking out clothes for me but I didn’t feel like I fit in. I heard the word “savage” sometimes when others would talk about me.

She recollects those times in our first one-on-one interview, too. Her grades went down, and her family moved from that part of town to another to escape the stigma and talk of her mother’s suicide. She had begun to fear the outside world and mistrust it. She was also going down a long path of self-hatred and rejection.

Another pain—vitiligo-bred as well—followed. According to her, she was in fourth grade when she started taking UV light treatments for her vitiligo. These “burned my eyelids and everyone used to think I was wearing hot pink eye shadow and made fun of me.” Intent on eradicating vitiligo, and perhaps all its inherent associations, both she and her dad succumbed to the hope injected by painful medical measures and methods that Huda later discovered “only made things worse.” She was missing school and her grades and confidence were further plummeting.

She talked about that period of her life as a time “I felt uncomfortable, inside or outside of school.” The only place she did feel comfortable was “in my room, with my brother and with my father.” This isolation—the silencing that ensued—resulted from this young lady’s inability to comprehend the events of her life or to own them. She thus became a victim of this lack of understanding, and thus a victim, so to speak, of her own skin.

In her first one-on-one interview, Huda spoke about hiding herself from the world before this class and hiding her past. “I have always felt uncomfortable, inside or outside of school,” she

asserts. In school, writing was painful because she did not feel she had anything important to write about. She explained, “I had been through so much but I didn’t have enough time to develop relationships with people or good friendships, and that’s what a lot of teachers want students to write about—like talk about your weekend.” She did not perceive that what she already had mattered, and she also did not know what to do with her emotions or how to express them.

**Eating one’s feelings.** Unable to project a personal self, Huda’s social self too suffered. She resorted to the only choice she conceived she had. “I used to eat my feelings,” Huda confesses. She admitted that this was a time “I kind of hated myself and my life,” and “I was upset with vitiligo too.” Her personal withdrawal—this self-censoring—was coupled with a social silencing. She narrates a story from her first day in sixth grade when a classmate turned around and asked her if she had skin cancer and “started laughing.” Huda remembers this time, and well into the first couple months of seventh grade, also as a time of going into hiding, saying, “I used to wear long sleeves. And I used to wear makeup to disguise myself so people didn’t know I had vitiligo.” Though this bothered her a lot, it was other people’s stares that bothered her more: “I’d rather somebody come talk to me and even tease me rather than to just stare and make assumptions and interpret it the wrong way.” The fact that she was more bothered by silent stares than potentially injuring words speaks to the power of different forms of silencing—ones that continue to damage adolescents today who, having found no alternative means to speak their individual plights, resort to destructive measures.

Huda’s father and grandmother, as her interviews and writing revealed, tried hard to help her speak her damaging silence. And though she appreciated and understood their concerns, Huda found their helpful approaches sometimes more agitating and less truthful.

They were trying to protect me. My dad tried to, you know, it's ok, it's ok, and it's not always ok to tell me it's ok because it's not the truth. Everybody was trying to say it's ok. But it wasn't. I wasn't ok and I knew it. They didn't let me go to her [mother's] funeral and that kind of upset me.

Those times rendered Huda defenseless, and she felt “embarrassed with myself, my mother’s death and my vitiligo, and I didn’t have enough practice with it. I wasn’t aware of what vitiligo was or how it was caused or the theories, or what doctors were currently doing.” The awareness, Huda claims in one of her interviews, “did not come until I did the I-search.”

Whether self-imposed or socially wrought, Huda’s silencing remained striking into the first two months of her school year. Her early interactions with others in and out of class were quite limited and often awkward. As I will provide evidence for in the following pages, it was her forged friendships with pen and paper that would open up a world of possibilities for her pain and allow her to transform her life experiences into fuel for action and advocacy for vitiligo and her other selves. The various literacy events that Huda engaged in during the course of her presence in this language arts class helped her confront her past, speak her skin, and as she ascertains in her first interview, write both about her vitiligo and her mom. This, as my findings reveal, allowed her to offer herself a new perception of her past, rewrite the course of her life as she claimed agency in her present and future. Transacting with the literacies of this eighth-grade classroom, Huda learned to liberate herself both socially and academically.

**Liberating literacies.** Huda’s past runs through the various pages of her project. She titles her booklet ***BACK TO BLACK*** and subtitles it *My Eighth Grade Learning Journey*, visibly having crossed out the word “Eighth” in the subtitle and written below it, in bold black letters, the word, “OVERALL.”

In a long tradition of reflecting that characterized this language arts classroom, Huda independently reflects on her title, saying, “The title of my project was ‘eighth grade learning

journey,’ and I felt like this was more so seventh and eighth grade and so then, I decided to cross out ‘eighth’ and write *overall*. I became a different person through these two years.” Huda’s eighth-grade project was the only one of the ten students’ projects which included most of the work from her seventh-grade year.

***Revisiting the past.*** As she goes back via the literacy events of the early part of her eighth-grade semester (her “I Am From” poem and her personal narrative), Huda revisits and reframes a past that left a perpetual painful mark on her present as well as on her skin. Through taking control of this past, through her writing of it, Huda relives it on her own terms and with her own agency, which enables her to move forward in healthy and meaningful ways. “I found in Rodriguez’ and Angelou’s essays the courage that I needed to tell my own story.” Whereas her mother had been banished from her life before, due to all the pain her memory summoned, a picture of her in a college graduation cap and gown now is stapled to the inside cover of Huda’s title page. “I started after this class putting a lot more pictures of my mom in my room and my binder,” she volunteered during her first one-on-one interview. Focusing now on a positive lesson from her mother’s own past, she adds, “My mom was the first in my family to graduate and she struggled a lot with it. She was married to my dad, and had my brother the year before she graduated, so she juggled having a degree and a child at the same time.” Huda had clearly experienced a shift in perception. Now, her academic and social selves were linked in healthy and empowering ways.

In her final project, she followed the introduction with about ten to fifteen writing assignments she retained from the seventh grade, including poetry, prose, and some work on a novel we read. The transition from the seventh-grade section to the eighth-grade section of her final project is thus, and appropriately so, a page with Huda’s handprint and the words, “This is

Vitiligo: A New Beginning—The Eighth Grade” written over a spotted hand which Huda claimed to have drawn “when she was bored and doodling.”

Across the page she has two hearts, side by side, one black with a white background and one white over a black surface. In the bottom of her page, true to theme, she writes, “PART ONE: THE EPIDERMIS—The outer layer of my JOURNEY.” Like her skin, her journey through life, through this class, and through her writing was a layered one. And throughout her interview, she talks about her engagement in literacy events as a process of “peeling layers.” This layered literary and life journey begins, as Huda attests, with the personal narrative. According to Huda, writing the personal narrative was on many levels a difficult process of “reliving my past again. It was sort of a going through.”

Speaking of this time in class, she remembers her choice to narrate the day of her mother’s death as “difficult,” and adds that “I would cry writing about my mom and stuff...And it was kind of a struggle to write about it but I would tell myself to write it like ‘you’re going to get better, you’re going to get better.’” Huda continues, “We read stories like that—Richard Rodriguez’ spoke to me. I felt every word of his. I knew why he tried to shave his skin off.”

In this narrative, Rodriguez believed that the color of his Mexican skin was preventing him from connecting to people the way he had hoped. In shaving it off, he was, in essence, eliminating all the problems which he determined came with being brown. Rodriguez’ narrative, Huda remembered, “helped encourage me to talk about things that have happened in my life; it’s like how to cope with things and rise from struggles. It was like therapy.” This—literacy as liberating therapy—paved her way to go through her own struggle, to go back, and go through, every little detail. During her first one-on-one interview, as Huda was going through her project with me, sharing yet more details about that day, about her mom’s infidelities and bipolar

tendencies, and the horror and violence of witnessing her body, she again broke down and cried. When I asked her if we should postpone the interview, she expressed her need to go through all these emotions to rid herself of “their poison” to help herself heal.

*“Going Through” literacies.* Huda’s life story, which she also deems the story of her vitiligo, unfolded with her personal narrative. The narrative, discussed in the classroom often as a way to look back to own our past so we can steer our future, allowed Huda to retrieve her past, to understand it and to claim it. She found in this literacy event an opportunity to come out. “You asked us to express ourselves more often and pushed us to write about things students often found uncomfortable to write about,” she recollects. The examples shared in class helped Huda confide in the process and trust herself in becoming a part of it. She testified to the power of examples in learning: “You showed us things that your students in previous years had written and that led me to open up more and led me to write about my life and my feelings.” She also expressed an appreciation for nontraditional narratives of adversity, saying, “We read stories about bad things that have happened to people in their life—like Maya Angelou’s—and that led me to want to share my story.” Providing students examples of people who struggled and overcame their struggles, as Huda illustrates, is a powerful element of an engaging and critical pedagogy.

However, it was not just what was on the paper for Huda. It was a total pedagogical package. “It’s the way you spoke to us—not in a fake voice—it was very real. It wasn’t pretentious, it was genuine.” It was also, according to her, a drive on her teacher’s part to not only voice struggles but also find solutions. As Freire (1995) maintained, we were “sealed together” in a “joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study” (p. 14). Huda did not



need someone to tell her things, but rather someone to walk alongside her in her struggle to liberate herself.

Reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, they give you quotes telling you to make good habits but how? How do you want me to make good habits? Your class showed us how to do that—not just by identifying a problem, but by rising up from it. Not just pacify, but go through it and writing is going through it. Going through obstacles.

And the *going through* obstacles was life and learning. All of the various pedagogical choices and approaches helped Huda address the obstacles she perceived in her life and thus break her silence and speak her story.

And in her desire to represent her own story—full of confusion, mystery, and violence—clearly, candidly, and without blemishes, Huda worked avidly to learn the best means to do so. She and others around her were eager and willing partners, both with me and with other classmates. I write in my notes about interesting and cohesive ways the students came to share their stories of struggle, revise them, and share insights about how they can be improved.

Literacy thus became a tool for excavating and conveying these students' life experiences. Huda and many other students learned to use literacy to dig for their pasts, which in Huda's case was a silenced and scaring one. Huda herself admits to her desire to speak her sad story more keenly and more beautifully as a main motive behind her striving to better herself as a writer. She recognized well the connection between relating a personal story and learning to write better. She was open to strategies that would help her do just that and declared it in her first one-on-one interview, saying, "I think it—I don't know—maybe it was because I was more open to things that I became a richer writer."

Going through the personal narrative delivered Huda from a debilitating psychological space to an enabling academic one. Writing in her personal narrative about that painful day, and

many others that followed, helped her “go through” the struggle and face it. Having traversed the trauma of her past, Huda was now at liberty to pursue, via another literacy event, an understanding of her present condition, a facet of a present self that was emerging.

*Re/searching a self.* The I-search signaled yet another turn in Huda’s educational course: a breaking of the silence she suffered in her own skin. For Huda, in her own words, the I-search represented one of the highlights of her education. The concept intrigued her because, as she affirms in her first interview, she never thought she could put herself in her research as she always thought the two could not mix. The fact that she was expected to do just that communicated to her a validation of a part of herself that she and others have always found problematic. She spent over six weeks and four of the required six pages answering the question, “What is vitiligo and how do I cope with it?”

It was during her research on this paper that she slowly and gradually began to change her perspective on vitiligo. We had spent that week discoursing the rationale for the I-search, formulating questions anchored in their lives, and reading some sample papers from the previous years which had helped Huda internalize a lesson I was adamant about helping them discover: that education was indeed a quest for self.

Writing and presenting this paper allowed Huda multiple opportunities to create a self empowered by literacy’s possibilities. For Huda, working on her eighth-grade I-search paper helped her realize, as she declares in her first one-on-one interview, that “my school and my skin can speak together.” Her I-search paper made her aware of what vitiligo was and helped her feel less defenseless. All her life, she claimed in her first interview, she had believed that she caused her own disease. She felt isolated, not only by the circumstances of her life, but also and equally shamed by the circumstances of her disease. As a child, following her mother’s death, she said,

she remembered being constantly either “upset about how people were always trying to hide things from me because they didn’t think I knew what was going on,” or “angry because they ignored what I was going through.” This, she said, led the child she was to conclude that “I had somehow caused my vitiligo.”

The I-search paper allowed her to interview her own doctor as a primary resource. And whereas she had always assumed a patient perspective with him, she delighted in a stance she adopted as researcher during the interview. I remember her excitement as she spoke in her presentation about that fact. As researcher, she learned more about her condition than she had as patient—a testament to the power of perspectives and their hold on our learning. She was also, through these purposeful acts of reading and writing, heading down new paths for her pain. At least in reading the literature on vitiligo, and then bringing her insights into her writing about it, she had begun to uncover and then discover this disease. As she discovered her disease, others with whom she shared it, and how to live with it, she no longer recoiled inward with it. Instead of hiding it, she was now bringing it to light, and thus she became totally absorbed in her research’s prospects. She discovered other worlds far beyond her own and other individuals with vitiligo whom she met through their personal narratives. In her second interview, she voiced the influence of such discoveries on both her conception of self and the world around her.

I discovered that people that are in the vitiligo community that are not necessarily local. For example, there’s this ballerina from Sierra Leone, Africa, and she was adopted and came here, and it was this story about her having vitiligo in one of the orphanages in Sierra Leone and how they didn’t treat her well in her village, so it’s just discovering these new people, in the public. Everyone thinks, ‘Oh, vitiligo, Michael Jackson,’ but there’s more people in our community and in the world that advocated more for vitiligo than Michael Jackson. He didn’t advocate. When people asked about his skin, he would just say ‘I have a skin condition’ [and] get really sensitive about that. If he just said the word *vitiligo*, it would have made a big difference.

Researching the topic helped her expand her world and trust in the power of words. She recognized too the power of one word, as her quote illustrates, to change her world, also a lesson I sought to instill in them through our many in class discussions.

Huda talked both in her learning journey and during the course of the interviews about this time as a time of “opening up.” It coincided with her study of her skin condition in depth. “I slowly began to peel off these timid layers,” she said, “and became more comfortable with myself and developing friendships with you and my peers, just by going through the writing really—the assignments.” Engaging deeply in the demands and delights of the I-search, she was starting to engage better in class, raising her hand more often, and sharing insights and questions. “I was once afraid to show my skin to everyone, so I wore long sleeves and pants to cover my bold, white patches,” she writes in her learning journey, “From then on, I would wear shorts and short sleeved tops whenever I pleased.” Once more, her fervency for the topic fueled her fervency for the associated literacy practices, and as she unraveled one, she marveled in the other. In her learning journey, she writes, “Not only was my writing improving, I improved in my intentions and my perspectives.” In her second one-on-one interview, she speaks of both marvels:

I was inspired to write better about my vitiligo and to be more comfortable with myself. The I-search also inspired me to get more involved with other people in the vitiligo community. It encouraged me to talk to Lee Thomas from Fox. And to be more involved in my vitiligo community.

For someone who once described herself as “fearing writing,” and “not a good writer,” Huda was breaking new literacy grounds. And while before, she “would write anything down on paper just so it looked I had a length to my writing,” she had now come to “conquer my fear, especially of district prompts” and move to embrace her writer identity with promising prospects. At the end of her “A Book that Hooked” assignment, she shares her commitment to reading and writing,

saying, “I have been inspired to write my own book about my vitiligo journey. I am doing that now as I write.” In her end-of-the-year letter to me, Huda again fuses a personal and literate identity. “I was an I-search paper within myself,” she declares.

*A speaking self.* The research presentation on the I-search was an opportunity for my students to assume the role of teacher on a topic they had extensively researched. This allowed them to see themselves in the role of an expert, which proved to be a crucial role in their learner identity. In her learning journey, Huda writes, “I think every student was once too afraid to speak and communicate with the class. This ranged from raising my hand to participate in the classroom conversations to presenting my work in class. I preferred neither of the two.” The fear of speaking was especially strong at the beginning of the year. I remember many of them timidly asking me if they would ever have to present in this class. “All the time,” I responded. To many adolescents, speaking was a cause for fear. Huda was no exception.

All that Huda bottled thus far—research, discussions, debates and dialogues—was emptied into her I-search presentation at the end of that marking period where she spoke candidly to her peers about her findings. In her presentation, she summed up her main points about finding other goals and talents to invest in, and connecting with a support group. By this time, they had had many opportunities to speak to each other on a constant basis: through in-class discussions, various team projects, literary discussions, and as they engaged and partnered on sundry literacy events.

It was following that presentation that Huda began to move to claim her new identity. She spoke in her one-on-one interview about how empowering it was for her to share knowledge about herself and her disease as her peers listened, shared, became aware, and empathized. In her second focus group interview, she spoke about how she enjoyed seeing her peers open up to her

and how she too became more aware of another self in her, one more comfortable expressing herself and speaking. “I saw people around me differently then,” she said, “I was not as judgmental and stuff, and I liked how everyone shared a lot of things that they too might not have at first been too comfortable with. They expressed themselves and shared.”

In describing how her peers felt sharing, Huda allows a peek into herself. “They were probably anxious about it, but they were willing to share it with everybody and I think that they were courageous and I respected them for that. I liked that.” These informational exchanges proved not only to be beneficial for all members of the class, but they also served to help members of this class community to come together in a common mission to help each other confront the tribulations in their own lives and develop tolerance and respect for the trials and tribulations of others. The literacy events in this classroom acted as magnets, the center of which, the discourses of their lives, brought them closer and closer also to each other. Again, through repeated practice, extensive modeling and feedback, authentic discussions, and a cohesive and accepting community, the students began to accept and embrace their speaker identities. Huda testified in her learning journey to this trend:

The classes in room 14 were different. The conversations were our conversations—issues we as students and as a society cared about. We debated often. With more assignments and practice, not only did my writing and reading skills improve, but my speaking skills did too. I presented, and presented, and presented more and more about my vitiligo in eighth grade than ever. I brought awareness through my speaking. I now saw speaking as a power, not a fear.

In reading, writing, and speaking about her vitiligo, Huda had begun a journey to unearth all the potentials that language and literate thinking offered in her quest for self. She was now using words to understand the mysteries of her vitiligo.

Following her I-search presentation and throughout her eighth-grade year, Huda’s “coming out” was taking place on more than just one level. She had been reading much on her

disease. She remembered, she said, my encouraging them to choose independent reading books that were consistent with their chosen topics. In one sense, she was not fighting her disease anymore and as she affirms, “The I-search taught me to deal with it in healthy ways.” Huda had peeled off yet another layer.

It was her work on this paper that led her to find and connect to a local vitiligo support group of which she was the youngest member. In her eighth-grade end-of-the-year presentation (June 2013), she showed her peers pictures and video footage of this group and introduced them to her new friend, Lee Thomas, from local Fox News, whose memoir—*Turning White: A Memoir of Change*—she had book talked during one of her eighth-grade book talks and about which she had written her piece, “A Book That Hooked.” In this piece, and following Lee’s example, she faced off to her vitiligo.

*A reading self.* Huda claims that she had always been an avid reader. However, it was not until the discussions about reading in our language arts classroom that she began to look to books as “life saving.” In one of her interviews, Huda voiced that she was always a “timid reader” because “I wanted to escape my loneliness.” However, the discussions around books in this class helped her see reading as “a need, a way to help yourself and grow” because reading helped me “find ideas to help me and words to speak those ideas.” She remembers one of her reading entries, which she had also included in her project. She was reading John Greene’s *The Fault in Our Stars*(2012), and she came across a part of the novel that I share in class during our book discussions. Greene’s young adult novel tells the story of Hazel, a young girl who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Huda indicated that this passage helped “me understand more of what you were trying to teach us about reading and how it helps us live better.” She goes on to cite the part that she wrote about and adds her own part:

When Augustus was talking to the main character, he was like, they always tell me to fight my cancer, to battle my cancer, but these cells are me, this cancer is me. So, I can't battle [pause] it's a civil war within yourself. And I've always thought of my vitiligo like that. How am I supposed to defeat myself?

Huda said that after the personal narrative and her I-search on vitiligo, this part of the book, which she shared in one of her book talks, helped her decide not to keep trying to defeat herself. She made a decision to stop her vitiligo treatment in March 2013. It was also a major influence in helping her advocate for vitiligo, “this independent variable” of herself that she had by the end of the year come to embrace fully, this “crutch” turned “strength,” as she describes it in one of her poems.

Several times, in her project and during the interviews, she discussed the many ways *Turning White* inspired her. She connected well to its writer who “has the same insecurities as me” yet “has taken a stand—something I wish to do.” She writes in her project that this book “hooked me to the pen and paper, thought and expression, revising and editing, life and beliefs.” She tells the story of how she acquired it, too: “When my father noticed how open and comfortable I was about my vitiligo, he purchased the book off Amazon.” She goes on to write that this book “encouraged me to express and think, write and continue to research myself and my emotions towards this disease.”

It was actually the title of Lee Thomas' that fueled the idea for the title of Huda's own project *Back to Black*. However, she established within those boundaries a self that was not altogether just one that followed Lee's life and example. Claiming amidst all her discourses a space for agency in her life (as described by Yagelski, 2000, p. 40-43), she voiced her dissent and an emerging affirmation of her individual self in her first one-on-one interview, “I read Lee's memoir my eighth-grade year, and so I didn't like the title—*Turning White*—because it was kind of the vitiligo taking over his body and personality and I don't want to turn white. I want to go



back to being brown.” At this point, Huda had been so empowered that she was no longer looking to escape “brown,” which represented to her a past she could not face, but embracing it and retrieving its significations. She was not succumbing to vitiligo, as she conceived Lee Thomas had done, but electing to return to discuss her skin, her past, and her race, all in their natural hues.

Even as she speaks of race, she recognizes the power of language choice: “But I also wanted to use alliteration and rhyme and so *Back To Black* sounded better.” Her choice of title reveals much about a strong and emerging identity that she was beginning to navigate openly. In that navigation, she came across complex discourses and engaged more deeply in them. In her one-on-one interview, she stated:

A lot of people see me and think I’m black; they don’t think I’m Arabic; they think I’m black...A lot of the stereotypes that surround African Americans and Arabs surround people with vitiligo too. A lot of assumptions get tossed around about them.

In her assertion, she combines highly complex ideas about the self, the makeup of that self, and its relation to a society that imposes labels. Her definition of her identity, which she sees as a fusion of Arabness, blackness, and vitiligo, represents a way for her to transcend a label-prone society and define herself on her own terms. And though she is not a black person, she identifies with a black discourse often marked in our society by stereotypes that frame us in the superficial boundaries of our own skin.

***Literacy as agency.*** Once she transcends the limiting labels, Huda continues to use her literacy as agency, a means of reaching out, resisting, and affirming self through defining and redefining notions and significations of race. Equipped with the tools needed to question the discourses of her own life and those of others, she begins to navigate matters that are more than

skin deep. Using the tools she learned in this language arts classroom, Huda reaches out to investigate other realms and other discourses.

*Writing as resistance.* Perhaps the most poignant piece in the portfolio is a poem Huda writes vindicating herself and responding to the degradation she felt during an incident that took place in her social studies class during her eighth-grade year. When she tells her eighth-grade social studies teacher she wants to go to Harvard, the latter advises her to be realistic. The following poem shows the extent of Huda's empowerment as a person, a student, and as a writer. She who once could not bring herself to go against "the king or queen" she perceived her teacher to be was now challenging the assumptions and misconceptions of her teacher. Reading through the poem, one cannot miss Huda's teacher voice which she developed and strengthened in the course of the events in this language arts classroom and which empowered this student writer to transcend, through assuming a teacher stance, what might have been a very bitter and defeating situation. This, through her literacy tools, Huda turns into a moment of affirmation, wisdom, and art. Huda first states her case

I reached for the stars,  
I wanted to chase my dreams,  
To go to Harvard  
And earn an education in dermatology.

Then, she reminds her teacher of her duties as educator and the hurt she inflicted on her student

You were obligated to push me,  
And help me reach my goals,  
But you embarrassed me in class,  
And made me feel like a zero.

Of course, she uses this as an opportunity to teach a lesson in teaching and to question the power dynamics within schools. All the while, she affirms a duality of a teacher student stance.

A teacher is in all of us,  
A student is in all of us,

So why does one have the power to override the others' power?

Without forgetting, as wise people should, to extract the healthy and empowering moral from this quite bitter lesson:

I guess this is a lesson,  
From the teacher within myself,  
That if you really want something in your life,  
You must reach for the stars by yourself.

*Writing as reaching out.* The skin connection thus does not present itself as Huda's sole connection to others. To her, these fellow *vitiligans*, especially in Lee Thomas' case, are also fellow writers and writing mentors. She partakes in this writing discourse too when she reaches out to him with a poem she wrote—in a long tradition of literacy practice, of writing and sharing poetry—which she had intended to read in one of her vitiligo meetings. She speaks in her personal voice of a collective longing as she weaves into her poem the many stories she heard from people in her group support meetings.

The poem represents a voice of her vitiligo group's total suffering—an other's perspective she assumes many times in her own writing and which empowers her to stand as also their prophetic wise teacher and liberator—a stance I encouraged in the classroom and she assumed expertly in her I-search and end-of-the-year presentations. She reminds them that she too has suffered the loss of those who left and filled her heart with despair, but that, like her, they must learn to love carefully. The entirety of her poem, initially her own past and her individual experiences, weaves well her group's collective and communal longing, another stance she had practiced repeatedly as learner partner in the boundaries of this language arts classroom.

To the ones who hide,  
Under itchy powder  
To not reveal their beautiful skin,  
And heavy articles of clothing,  
Because they don't fit in.

For the little boys and girls,  
Who have this disease,  
Who struggle everyday,  
With all the bully and tease.

My heart goes to the spouses,  
Once were in love,  
Until one wouldn't accept,  
What the other had become.

Others may leave,  
Fill your heart with despair,  
Although you might grieve,  
You learn to love with more care.

Her final project includes the e-mail Lee Thomas sent her critiquing her poem. In it, he praises her dense expression and asks her a couple of questions both about her poetic technique and whether she can further personalize the emotion. At the end of his email, he tells her he is on a flight to go interview Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn. He signs off with “I look forward to the next writers’ conversation.”

Beside vitiligo support and writing feedback, Huda finds in her vitiligo group diverse opportunities for social agency, for meeting people and planning events. She began a campaign to raise funds for her group and spent time writing letters and making phone calls asking local businesses for their support. She also engaged in social media literacies that were not particularly a hallmark of our classroom literacies (a learning I need to struggle and go through). She posted vitiligo awareness videos on YouTube, which she shared often with her class community. Via the Internet, she began a search for fellow vitiligans across the world, and specifically in her ancestral land. She expressed also in her second one-on-one interview a political and social desire:

I want to travel around the world educating children and adults about vitiligo. I want to travel in Palestine and Syria and I want to do skin grafts for burn victims in the Middle East and I would be interested in that because it deals with dermatology. You have the ability to put skin on somebody else. That feels amazing.

Looking down at her own skin during the last part of her final interview, Huda smiles. “Mrs. Kassem, I was trying to come up with this metaphor comparing vitiligo and Palestine, and I just thought about it. I was looking at the map of how Israel has taken over Palestine. My brown skin is Palestine.” I smile back. “See, there is a possibility for peace, for coexistence,” I utter. She understands.

By the end of her eighth-grade year, most of her eighth-grade peers had joined Huda’s vitiligo awareness site. At the annual vitiligo picnic on Belle Isle that summer, she invited me to meet what she called her “other family” including Lee Thomas. I was delighted to watch Huda, this girl of 14, the group’s youngest member, move effortlessly from one picnic table to another, people fitting their wrists into purple, green, and yellow bracelets that promised awareness and funds. She declares in one of her poems

I have found many like myself  
 People with more colors,  
 Within and Without.  
 Who is the outsider now?

As she goes through each one of her assignments in her final interview, and after commenting on all her different facets, the different ways she wants to be, she asserts and practices her new agency:

I don’t want to be just like my mother. She was a very insecure person. I do not want to go down into depression. I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want her past to be my future and I’m trying to break out of that. That’s why I’m having so much trouble with my outside family, my aunts, my uncles, and my cousins. They still think that I’m this kicked puppy crying over my mother’s death. But that’s not true.

*Writing as closure.* Huda's sense of agency has so intensified that she reaches, with her writing might, to the afterlife, where she summons her mother, and from her mother's viewpoint, writes a letter to her [Huda's] future self. Assuming her mother's voice and stance, Huda relishes in the possibilities language has offered her to make this unique perspective shift quite possible.

She appreciated "this small example of how flexible the project was" because this letter helped her "vent a lot of things that were on her mind." As Huda attests in her second interview, her choice of her mom's perspective allowed her to "avoid being too braggy." However, to Huda, the best part of this letter was that "it was closure." It helped her see that "my mom is safe and not in danger, and she's forgiven. She was just a sick person and whatever she did should not be taken seriously because she wasn't fully there." Through this letter, Huda is able to allay many of the fears and questions she has harbored since childhood. The letter assures Huda that her mother is in Heaven and encourages her to keep going and to forgive her for not taking good care of her because she was mentally ill—a sure sign of the daughter's readiness to move past her confusion and guilt. The letter also allays the daughter's adolescent doubts with a reassuring ovation. She tells her she is very proud of both her and her brother and asks her to keep working with Lee Thomas, Dr. Lim, and Dr. Rich, to find a cure for vitiligo.

In this letter, Huda's writer identity again emerges with promising potential, representing a major part of how she has come to view herself and anchoring that view in her middle school literacy experiences. The last paragraph of the letter states, "Your writing skills have taken good care of you, both through college and beyond. The doors were opened in seventh grade to you which led you to write your own story with vitiligo." It goes on to exalt the benefits of such literacies not only to her own life, but to many other lives around her: "Many people are aware now, and less teens are bullied because of it." The letter ends on a most significant assertion:

“You don’t save lives in a hospital, Huda,” her mother reminds her, and steers still the course of her will “You save lives in books.”

True to a preferred letter-writing genre, and in a final letter to me, which she also included in her project, Huda describes a “heart swelling with tears” and expresses also her fears that her future language arts teacher will not “encourage me to share my culture, my skin, my beliefs, and who I am as a person.” She promises never to hold the grade or the GPA over the learning, as she’s been taught, and goes on to remember and reflect and provide closure to a year spent wisely and well in literacy’s nurturing cradle:

I’ll never forget the things I learned in your class because you taught me to document my feelings. With every assignment, I peeled off a layer of myself I never knew existed. That “unknown” layer was the dermis of my writing. I always feared writing, yet in this class, I wrote out my deepest and hidden secrets and insecurities, thoughts and feelings. I was very timid. I was not the most social and I didn’t have many friends. It bothered me. I didn’t know why I was like that. As I began to write about the social problems I faced, I realized where the problems were rooted. You helped me shed light on my disease. I had the passion but I didn’t know what my cause was. I was myself an I-search paper.

She signs off her letter to me with “your student, friend, and daughter,” the last in quotation marks. The last two pages of her project signify in few words her journey of two years. True to her learnings—in her life and in her literacies—one proclaims that the true beauty in life is “one’s mind.” The other—the final page in her booklet—announces across a white page and in big bold black letters: “This journey has only begun.”

### **Kat's Story: Piecing a Puzzle**

*I am from lounging around on the living room couch  
From music and laughter  
I am from the chaos of a house of guys  
From unusual creations and stressful messes*

*I am from the dandelions in the back yard  
The endless vines  
That stole hours of my days to laboriously remove  
And made me weak, yet strong*

*I am from get togethers and fancy attire  
From my grandparents' house and many sleepovers  
I am from baking and pleasing  
And from working too hard.*

*I am from sit up straight and go do that  
And from leave me alone  
I'm from come do this and would you be quiet  
And you need to take a break*

*I am from Dearborn and Ludington and Frankenmuth  
For each place owns memories--good, bad, and in-between  
I am from indecisiveness and hard choices  
From pain and sorrow  
And things unknown.  
I am from the here and now.*

It is difficult to summon Kat here and now in a just manner. She is indeed the puzzle pieces around which she chose to center the theme of her final project. From the onset, her presence in this language arts class was a puzzle. She started the year a month later and did not breathe a word about this late start. I found out from her counselor that she transferred from a different middle school in the district. At a district meeting with other language arts teachers, hoping to investigate my most recent student, I asked her previous teacher about her, and her sole response was, "She comes from a poverty background. The teachers raised money to buy her a backpack and some binders to start the year." That was all. No talk of her studious nature, her sound writing skills, her evident love of books, or even reasons for her changing schools. I



wanted more than a socioeconomic report and so I returned straight to the source. Kat, however, proved a hard nut to crack.

**Forms of silencing.** Kat was a typical example of a perfect student. She showed up to class on time, understood the lessons well, finished her work fast, and aced all quizzes and tests. However, she never raised her hand to share, raised an objection to intercept a course of another's idea, or breathed a word during discussions. In middle school, that type of silence was rare. Her silence was striking. It did not resemble Huda's either. It was not a "timid" and fragile silence wrapped in skin stories. Kat's was a deliberate and driven one. In light of the token of identity poster she turned in, I was convinced she was hiding so much. Her face was always directed to a book in her lap, a book that changed at least once during the course of one week. There was no question about it. She was an avid and prolific reader. But what else was she?

*Safe writing.* Kat's writing, from the very beginning of her presence in this classroom, was structurally sound and mechanically strong. She varied the diction, projected voice, and transitioned smoothly. Her words were always correctly spelled, and her commas and periods in their place. However, she had a talent for writing pages without revealing an inkling of herself—a strategy I call *safe writing*. She could describe anyone or anything, opine about any topic, and turn any personal into an impersonal prompt. I could not once get her to tell me what lurked beneath the blue eyes that would sometimes fix their gaze upon me from behind the silver rim eyeglasses, and despite all the writing she did in that class for the first few weeks of school, she was still a mystery to me and many of her peers. Even when we worked in teams, Kat would listen the whole time, volunteer at the end to do the work, take it home, bring it back perfectly done. At first, all the efforts I invested to try to know her better proved futile. Then books came.

We were getting a collection of new books for independent reading under Title I funds, and I needed a few student volunteers to help me stamp and sort them out by genre. I made the announcement to all the students in her class and asked those who were interested. Five girls showed up and we worked for close to two hours on the books before four of them had to leave. Kat stayed with me until the very last book was stamped and sorted. For close to an hour, as we unpacked and stamped together, Kat remained an attentive listener as I questioned, probed, and commented on books, authors, reading, and bookrooms. Again, when probed, her responses were short and concise with an occasional *I don't know* interspersed. When we finished, I gave her first choice to select a couple of books she would like to take home that weekend.

For the next few weeks, Kat was always the first student in my room after lunch, sometimes as early as five minutes before the other students arrived. She would come in smiling with a load of books and her binder clenched tightly to her chest. Greeting me, she would take her seat and open her book to read. I would feign some questions to elicit some talk, such as what book she was reading or what page she was on or how she was liking the book. She was now responding to those more readily, but still in short sentences. After some time, she started to initiate the conversations—still about her books and her reading, but unprobed. However, she would still resort to her earlier silent stance when other students began filing in.

*Silent snippets.* The first “I Am From” poem that Kat turned in at the beginning of her eighth-grade year was still exhibiting signs of safe writing and loaded with generic phrases: books all teen readers read, activities all middle schoolers love, classes all Charles students loathe, and moments all teenagers relish. But that was not all of Kat. She was not all adolescents, or all teens, or all middle schoolers. She was herself. When I called her to my desk to look at her poem, I expressed that to her “This could be anyone writing,” I said, “but you are someone, Kat.

Your writing has to speak who you are.” She pointed to the second line of her third stanza “From my grandparents’ house and many sleepovers,” and said, “That’s me.” The gaze behind the silver rimmed square eyeglasses that framed her blue eyes galvanized. And though at the time, I did not think of that line as outstandingly personal, I understood through the many writings she later shared with me how her grandparents’ house was indeed, as she shared in one of her interviews, “a safe haven.”

When she brought her second draft to me the next day, before class, she had not taken away anything from her poem. She just added more, a trend I saw often in Kat’s revision as I pressed her to produce more of herself in her writing. The additions to her “I Am From” poem represented a total of nine lines: one in the first stanza, “I am from the chaos of a house of guys”; four that constituted the entire second stanza: “I am from the dandelions in the back yard/The endless vines/That stole hours of my days to laboriously remove/And made me weak, yet strong”; and four more that composed all of her fourth stanza: “I am from sit up straight and go do that/And from leave me alone/I’m from come do this and would you be quiet/And you need to take a break.” In these nine lines, Kat had given, as she declared in her first one-on-one interview, snippets of herself because she still “didn’t want people to see all of who I was.” These snippets helped me—her teacher—understand the sources of her silence a bit better and move alongside her to discover, via the literacy events of this classroom, more of Kat’s personal and academic discourses. She had briefly alluded during the token of identity presentation to that life, but it wasn’t until later in the semester that I began to understand and appreciate the forms of silencing that Kat created to deal with the chaos she defined much of her life.

*Silencing chaos.* “I am from the chaos of a house of guys,” represented, as I learned later, during the interviews, a silenced position that Kat had assumed in her family, especially as she

declares, after her younger brother arrived: “I kind of just learned when my little brother was born that I would be myself most of the time.” The focus on her little brother and two other guys in the house, her older brother and “a dad who acts like a younger guy,” left her mom silent. “My mom doesn’t really speak up much, and kind of just let them do their thing.” This stance, Kat copied verbatim in her first interview, “I kind of just let them do their thing,” and in her life too. It was at that time that I began to first understand the significance of the tokens of identity poster she had shared with her class a few weeks earlier, and which filled the inside cover of her final project.

The poster of her tokens of identity represented a visual metaphor of how Kat conceived of her life, her multiple identities, thus far. These tokens, words and images, would later become so much more meaningful as Kat learned to reveal much of the anguish and chaos of different forms of silencing that defined her life. The poster (Figure 7) declared, in big bold black shuffled letters, “My Life is a catastrophe.” The word *catastrophe* is enclosed in its own incomplete bubble/cloud with four definitions of the word clearly written underneath.

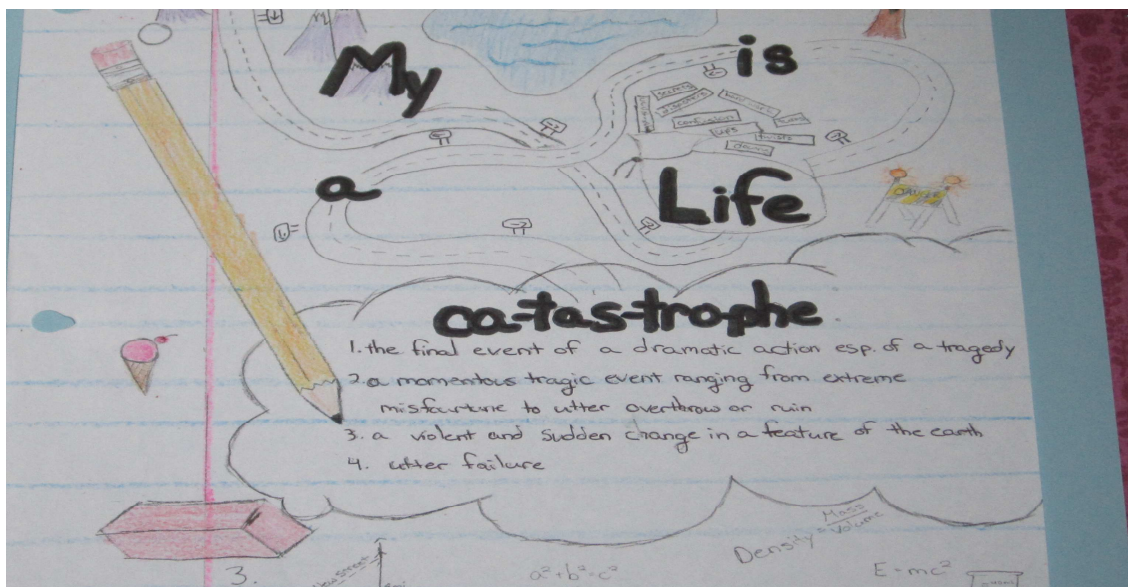


Figure 8. Kat’s *My Life is a Catastrophe* Poster

When she presented this poster to the class, Kat showcased it as an example of her artistic identity, and while she mentioned the chaos she felt in a house full of boys, she kept hidden the words on the sign posts and their associations. When I asked her about the title of her poster, Kat shrugged and replied, “All lives are somehow catastrophic.” Philosophically perhaps true, but still an evasion of a response I sought. In middle school, words like *catastrophe* and *disaster* and *tragedy* get ambivalently thrown or tossed around, but in the context of Kat’s silence, they held more and different meanings. Later in the interviews, Kat would speak of this poster, together with the fourth stanza of her poem, as visual and written depictions of “the painful chaos of my life.”

*Silencing poverty.* However, and true to her talents, it is the second stanza that spoke—and hid—the other silencing that Kat experienced. And though she added it as a revision to her first draft of the “I Am From” poem, this stanza, rich in visual images of “dandelions” and “endless vines” ironically represented, as I came to find out during the interviews, the pangs of a difficult and entrenched poverty that Kat suffered and how, like the dandelions and the vines, the struggles of being in poverty “stole hours of her days,” and made her “weak, yet strong.”

When she first added the stanza to her poem, she did not seem willing to share the story of her chosen images. “Only me and my family would understand about the dandelions and vines,” she said. I left her to her choice. During the first one-on-one interview, she voiced that she “put a lot more into that than I thought at the time,” and as she looked through her poem once again, I asked her again about the part about the dandelions and vines. The response came clearly:

We spent last year in our new house. It had a huge backyard. Vines started growing everywhere and then the landlord called and was like okay, we need to take care of those vines. We didn’t have money or anything to hire somebody to do it so we spent days

stripping the yard of vines. My hands were sore and my back hurt. It was a lot of work. I was mad at my parents for making us do it.

Kat did not frequently talk about her poverty in class or in her other assignments. Actually, this part of the “I Am From” poem was one of very few times that she even brought it up. And even then, it was not discernible to me until the interviews.

It was in another notebook, her choice assignment, which she left on my desk in May of 2013, that her story with poverty was revealed to me. Having dated her entries, she helped me discern that she had worked on this notebook for the last two months. Her first entry was dated March 26 of the same year.

In the notebook, her story about poverty—among other stories of many other selves—unraveled in painful episodes of missed meals, multiple chores, and missed special occasions. Amidst entries of feeling “inferior,” “unwanted,” “unvalued,” and “distanced,” she writes, “I’m getting hungry, but I don’t want to eat the same disgusting mac-and-cheese that me and my brothers eat every Monday. It’s disgusting. I am sick of eating the same thing over and over again. It is gross.” Many others entries tell stories of Christmases without gifts, Easters without baskets, and summers without recreation. “Talking about my problems is useless,” she writes, “which is why I stopped talking at all.”

And poverty is displacement—never living long enough in one place to trust yourself to indulge in its offerings. In her second interview, she admits that “I’ve lived in so many places, it’s hard to keep track.” However, leafing through her choice assignment, her notebook, Kat revealed that she indeed had “a semi-photographic memory” and she can “remember everything perfectly.” Her descriptions of the places they’ve lived, from Florida to her grandparents’ house after “her parents split for three years,” to at least a dozen other places, left her with a

detachment that both kindled and kept the silence that enveloped her academic and social presence in this language arts classroom.

The notebook contained endless “talk” of Kat’s silencing by her brothers who “tell me often to shut up,” and by her parents, “who don’t acknowledge my existence.” She described her “aggravatingly nondescriptive” mom as “having depression,” and she has yet to trust “a bipolar dad who kept me in my room for hours on my ninth birthday as punishment for something I did not do.” And in school, well, “they beat you down if you try to be yourself. If they don’t like what you’re saying, they’ll be like, no, that’s wrong.” Silence seemed to be the one strength Kat could possess, and she utilized it well.

**Liberating literacies.** “Paper,” Kat stated in her introduction to her notebook, “doesn’t talk back and tell me to shut up. Paper listens.” Perhaps her claim about the purpose paper serves—as listener—is what led Kat, an already proficient writer, to move during her eighth-grade year from *safe writing*, in which she was hiding herself, as she affirms in her first one-on-one interview, to *critical writing*, where she not only claims a lost voice but also learns to look at her life from a participant’s perspective. Her earlier writing, she says, was a lame attempt at being a perfect writer, but her eighth-grade year left her longing to be a candid and strong person. She admits, “I felt like I finally started learning and everything kind of just came out.”

**From safe to critical writing.** The wait thus was completely worth it. Kat, through her engagement with literacy in this class, was cracking the shell in which she locked herself and her emotions for five years, and it was “completely worth it.” The personal narrative represented for Kat a steppingstone to a new place.

**Writing as detoxification.** The personal narrative represented a significant piece in Kat’s overall puzzle. She, like Huda, included this writing in her final project. Prompted as she claimed

“by others whose examples we read and shared,” and perhaps having anticipated many of the questions that lurked in my mind, she introduced her narrative with her own question:

How would you feel if you were driving home from Indiana at 8:00 p.m., hadn't had any dinner yet, and on top of all that, your cat was thrown at you? Are you losing your mind, you may ask. Who knows? Maybe, I am.

She goes on to describe the “mayhem that struck a couple days after Thanksgiving in 2008” when her family drove to see her dad’s family for the holidays, and on their way back her father, in the passenger seat, experienced a bipolar episode that caused him to throw the cat at his children sitting in the back, threaten his wife, summon policemen to the scene, and walk away from his family—for three years. In heart-wrenching detail, Kat describes the event on a night that “ripped a hole in my heart that is impossible to patch.”

She compared her life at that moment to a war zone: “Some soldiers are proud of scars that they get at war. Some say that through the wounds, they get stronger...I have a deep wound to show that I too have been in a war and I don't know if I got stronger.” Like Huda, Kat engages multiple identities and discourses as she writes her narrative. She is the soldier, the animal lover, the daughter and sister caught with her siblings in her parents’ war, one mitigated by a medical condition—bipolar disease—from which her father suffers and she, too, indirectly at that moment and others like it that she will describe later.

The act of writing becomes a way for Kat to claim agency over a situation of which she once felt herself just a subject. Cognizant of a writer identity as she displayed her warrior one, a personal note at the bottom of the page expounds on her writing process—thus her source of empowerment—for this narrative. In the note, Kat, aware of a teacher audience and partner writer who mitigated this transaction, proclaims that “This personal narrative took seven drafts



and more time than you could possibly imagine, but I believe that's completely worth it!" Her agency, displayed in her decision to draft this five-page narrative seven times—and command its representation on the pages—holds value to this young lady. The focus on the draft count reveals Kat's investment in this assignment. I was convinced initially that her perfectionist self would lead her down that path.

However, I was equally convinced this time that it was not the wording or the sentence fluency she was seeking to perfect this time. She believed "that's completely worth it." What, in Kat's mind, was worth the time and mental investment? After all, she had alluded in her first one-on-one interview to the fact that the mere choice to write about that time in her life was wrought in self-hatred, saying, "I hated myself for having to do it." The hate was anchored in her knowledge that her parents would not have approved perhaps of her decision.

Such investment, a physical and emotional one, Kat indicated, came because she believed that "I needed to do it." Her decision to share that experience, a decision initially layered in doubt and hesitation, was anchored in a lesson she understood well, that "writing helped her escape, like it helped all those people we talked about in class." She decided to invest so much mentally because the ensuing relief from its burden, a lesson she heeded in Maya Angelou's narrative, was a compensation worth the investment. And although, like Huda, she was quite aware that this class helped her "to kind of take away the hidden layer," she also perceived it as an investment in trust. By her own admission, "there is no way I would do something like this for a teacher I had now [ninth grade]."

Her recognition that she had done this assignment for me reveals a deep and significant finding of this research. Oftentimes, students will not venture on such decisions—difficult psychological and physical investments—for themselves alone. In winning her trust and respect

on a personal and human level, and in validating and communicating that trust in the classroom through actions and words, I had encouraged Kat to traverse academic and personal milestones that she would not have envisioned doing alone. “Most kids are really scared of speaking out,” Kat emphasized in her second one-on-one interview, “and they need to feel confident and safe in what they’re saying and have the opportunity to say it.”

Her desire—her *need*, as she puts it—to escape back, via literacy, to the memory of that day, had more benefits than just unpacking her pain. There was yet another need that was met in this transaction. The terror of that day had grown with her, and the memory of it was preventing her from seeing the many good possibilities for her life. Kat recognized that writing it down would move this terror out of her and onto paper. “I needed to push the memory out so it would stop terrorizing me.” The use of *terror* to describe the emotion of that day shows the extent of the anguish and pain which had accompanied Kat thus far. It also shows the courage that Kat mustered before moving to confront, in writing, that day and dispel its terror. The examples given, the discussions about facing our fears, “the comments on every little thing, and not just for me, for every student,” had taught Kat that her well-being mattered to me, and because she knew it did, she moved to help me with my goals too: to free her writing, and ultimately herself, from the shackles of its silencing terrors.

*Writing as trust.* The journey back from that day and many days like it was Kat’s writing journey in language arts 8. At the bottom of the narrative, a testament to the role of qualitative writing feedback in helping her move forward along on her personal and academic journey, she displays a small rubric showcasing her “A.” She also glued my feedback to her in which I ascertain first my cognizance and validation of her human suffering and her triumphant spirit, then my appreciation for her language and academic skills. I wrote: “Kat, this story of your tried

and true young spirit is yours and this pain is yours too; but ours both is the pleasure of sharing your story and your pain, your insights too and your successful struggle to weave words into a moving and memorable narrative. I respect you.”

It is this feedback and much more of it that Kat later writes, in her letter to me—a whole notebook of her thoughts that she left on my desk in May—helped her see writing as trust, a way to confide in paper and pen to help ease the pain of living, or just understand it. The first page of the notebook, addressed to me, reads,

My writing is very important to me, and this notebook may be one of my most valuable possessions, even if it ends up being just jotted notes and scribbles. It is very hard for me to trust someone/something. If I were asked who in my life I trust, probably the first person to pop into my mind would be you. I am very lucky to have been placed in your class this year and last. If I were asked what object I trust the most, I would say paper. Paper can't talk, but it always listens.

And though writing, to her, has always represented an escape, she remembers times in her elementary years when it was also a time to trust its power to make sense of her life and its events: “My mom used to tell me that when I was younger, I would write these stories and the girls in these stories would be going through the same kind of stuff that I was going through.” She called this “journaling,” and lamented that she stopped doing it “long ago.”

She admits that before this class, she never felt comfortable writing about herself and that there was never an opportunity to open up, “It was just more prompts and stuff,” but, she adds, “The freedom to write about what you want, that in itself brings out more of who you are.” That freedom though, Kat admits, must also be coupled with trust, especially for someone like her, who has “trust issues.” For educators interested in finding out how to win their students’ trust, Kat has very simple advice, “Listen. Listen to what they’re saying. Or, better yet, look, look for what they’re not saying.”

After students are granted the freedom to choose, and once they learn to trust, another challenge ensues: that of choices. Choice, Kat knew, is all too difficult, especially as you try to balance what you want to add and what you prefer to hide, both in yourself and in your writing. The trust that Kat had begun to experience through engagement in her different literacy processes, in her teacher-partner, and in her unleashed creative and free processes and choices allowed her to navigate critically her multiple other discourses. In guiding her nurturing of this element and being at once its object, I hoped to help her reclaim her human identity and find alternate ways to deal critically with her reality. And while she and I both knew that there would be more struggles forthcoming, we both also knew that these struggles remained small pieces of one big and intriguing puzzle that we could trust ourselves and each other to go through successfully, in writing at least.

*Writing as multipurposed.* Another struggle Kat faced was when she tried to settle on a topic for her I-search. It was about the same time also that she was diagnosed with scoliosis, and though she wanted to understand what was this new thing inside her was, she was also “kind of pushing it away and trying not to think about it.” The example we shared in class on a student who had asthma helped Kat consider her scoliosis as an option. In her I-search paper weeks later, she discussed her scoliosis diagnosis and her search for a way to live as a thirteen-year-old with this debilitating condition.

She held her X-rays during the presentation and pointed to her curved spine as she instructed the class on back braces, pain, and perseverance. After all, “It was something I had but did not need,” she admitted in her paper and later to her class in her usual quiet dignity. She continued, “I had been pretending it wasn’t there until I couldn’t pretend anymore.” Her intense engagement with reading and writing led Kat to finishing the I-search paper first in class, before

the due date. I used hers as a model to steer her peers forward. She efficiently summed up in the last part of her paper her learnings and reflections:

I learned a lot during my research—about writing, time management, scoliosis, and about myself. I had to complete a lot of work in a very short time, and it taught me about being efficient while working. I believe that my writing improved slightly during this period of time, and I learned how to correctly credit my sources. I found a lot of new websites about scoliosis while researching, and I learned how to narrow a search for a topic by using key words and not wandering from my original search. I learned the aforesaid types of treatment (bracing, observation, and surgery), about limitations—both physical and emotional—and simply what scoliosis is. I am glad to find this information. I was able to learn how scoliosis could affect a teenager and, more importantly, how it might affect me.

*Writing as tension of opposites.* Kat taught me how opposites—pretense and dignity—coexist so beautifully and well and in one person. In fact, it was this coexistence of opposites both in her literacy and in her life that I found to be so striking. Kat, whose silence spoke volumes, was indeed a puzzle: the many imperfect pieces to a perfectionist striving self. Her writing—an escape—became a way to exist and have a voice; her desire to be invisible led her to be further noticed; her inability to trust people infused her with a love for animals that she hoped to translate into a career as veterinarian; her loneliness which she speaks of often eased by the many friends she had found in ideas. This thirteen-year-old girl who had thus changed homes at least thirteen different times had found a permanent home in books; homeschooled most of her life, she spoke of this class as “her home.”

I love this class (5<sup>th</sup> hour). I would say that it feels like home, but that would be lying. I don't like home—well, I don't like the goings-on of home. But in this class, I'm allowed to be me. I can write what I want to write. If I actually want to say something, I can say it; I'm allowed to think without being scolded for doing so. I smile just thinking about Mrs. Kassem's class.

In her learning journey essay, she admitted that this class did not teach her to love reading, only to read differently. It did not teach her to like writing but rather to do it better. Her writing, still an escape, was now an escape to a place of healing. And though she learned a lot,

her most important accomplishment, according to Kat, was beginning “an important journey towards self-discovery.” She learned to persevere, she says, and to surround herself with “good people” who “encouraged me and cared about me.” She wanted to continue working “to know when to just relax, and not try to make everything absolutely perfect” and “to show people the real me.” The eyes behind the silver-rimmed glasses which her grandma—an instrumental figure in Kat’s life—began to demand her to change, were now alive with hope and determination. Wisdom would soon follow. “My grandma complains that my glasses hide my eyes. She’s always saying she wants me to get contacts like my mom. I don’t care what my eyes look like. I care about what I see and don’t see with my eyes.” And that perception of her directing her own reality represents a new power for Kat. Giroux (2006) claims that student power can be harnessed and produced through the poetics of their imagination. Kat was now able to distinguish between reality as a fact and imagining alternative realities as a means of making a better existence into a real possibility.

In many of her later writings, Kat found herself in more tensions still: “I want to spend the rest of my life writing. But I also want to be a veterinarian. If I wrote about this conflict in my head and heart, I would end up with an extremely argumentative essay.” She adds, “At school, I don’t really talk, but that’s okay with me. I write.” In a long tradition, and exalting this power of writing in her highly turbulent life, she explains, “I guess like I feel as if I were to stop writing, I would cease to exist.” Kat writes as a way to continue to create herself and recreate, through her perception, a new self.

*Writing as speaking up.* As her notebook—her choice assignment—indicated, Kat did not stop writing. Even though she was still not talking in class, Kat was writing prolifically. She was also still coming early to class after lunch to exchange book talks with me. However, she was

still mostly silent among her peers, though often an avid listener. I asked her during the second one-on-one interview why she preferred writing to talking. Talking and writing, Kat explained, were not the same. With talking, “people can silence you, and ask you to shut up,” but with writing, “paper always listens.”

She also during that interview distinguished between public and private writing, explaining, “There’s writing for me and there’s writing for other people. There’s a big difference in the content.” The notebook she gave me to read in May was “writing for me.” The other writing she did was for other people.

And leafing through the pages of this 150-page notebook, filled page to page, back and front, it is readily apparent how this writing distinguishes itself completely from the writing she did in class. Here, sentences were often shorter—fragments sometimes, parentheticals abounded—and the time, registered in hour and minute, frequently accompanied the entry. There were asides and directions too sometimes. From the date and time, I could tell that Kat had sometimes written up to three or four times in the notebook in one day. Some of the entries were even written in other classes when Kat claimed to be “so bored.” The length of the entries varied. Some were a few pages long, and others no more than two or three sentences. As I read the entries over and over, especially in the context of this research, I arrived at discovering something that I had not discerned when Kat had first shared the notebook with me back in May 2013. And the discovery helped introduce me to an interesting finding. Kat, throughout her notebook entries, had been talking—prolifically, candidly and freely. She had been talking to me.

Going back to the notebook, I read the first page, her inscription. Kat writes:

Mrs. Kassem

As you may have noticed, you are the only one I have given specific permission to read/look through my notebook. At this point, I don't know what will end up written in it, but this notebook is extremely important to me, and some of the info contained may be very private. If you wish to look through it, you may. I trust you.

That was it, a seal of trust. And with the trust, and throughout the pages of the notebook, Kat discusses her life in its many facets and its many complexities. There she is preparing for Bible quizzing, and here she goes suffering another backache. Mom is yelling at her and dad is expecting her to wash the dishes again. "My older brother is such a fake," and "it's almost impossible to explain to people that I need writing. I'm not sure anybody understands."

One entry dated 4-19-13 catches my eye. It reads

Ha! My mom, dad, and older brother are playing a *would you rather* game. One of the questions was "Would you rather not be able to read or not be able to talk?" That's easy.

I'd rather not be able to talk; I already feel like I can't talk most of the time.

And still another dated 5-2-2013 (9:00 P.M.), after a long list of why she writes, which just covers every reason anyone writes, she adds, "This notebook listens. The notebook doesn't criticize. The notebook doesn't go and blab what I say. I can only really trust the notebook, and Mrs. Kassem.

As I read through the entries, I begin to notice how frequently my name pops up. "When Mrs. Kassem and I were talking during lunch today, I'm pretty sure Mrs. Kassem thought I was stupid, just standing there, nodding and saying 'yeah,'" and "I would like Mrs. Kassem to know that she can share any of my schoolwork in class," and "I love reading any comments Mrs. Kassem writes on any of my work—they are helpful and uplifting and they always make me smile," and "I can't believe I only got one more card marking with Mrs. Kassem ☺."



Kat, who fears the imperfections of talk, had in this notebook talked to me. Her voice, her style, her content, all had ingredients of talk—sudden, spontaneous, interactional, and responsive. She had summoned me to talk to me about a life she lives in the margins of her academic literacies which constitute the events of her life. “I work to perfect my work so I can escape the turmoils of my family,” she writes. “Even at home I’m an introvert. I shut myself in my room as often as I can. I don’t trust myself to be able to control my temper around my family. They treat me as if I were just someone to feed and house until they can get rid of me. I feel alone like Johnny.” I feedback to her on a post-it note, “I think you write like Ponyboy.”

We wrapped up the hour’s interview, and I asked Kat if she thinks that she will again break the silence in her writing—if she had done at all thus far in high school in any of her classes. She responds that she had not: “I can’t really see me doing another thing like this unless it was for this class,” she says. “No other teacher has the same approach to teaching outside of what they’re required to teach, so there are 20 questions on *Les Miserables*, turn it in, and they’re not worried about each individual student and where they’re coming from.” So the teaching approach “which wasn’t just *you have to do this by this time*,” indeed helped Kat feel that “we were free to be ourselves and we didn’t have to conform to what the teacher wanted.”

In finding her freedom to be herself—even if just on the page—Kat had also found the literacy events of this classroom both liberating and healing practices. She trusted their power to empower her.

### Ray's Story: Critical Muses

*I am from long, greasy hair  
I am from year round sports  
I am from baseball mitts and batting gloves  
I am from white t-shirts and shorts*

*I am from sun burns and tan lines.  
I am from a house cloaked in dog hair  
I am from guitar picks and amplifiers  
I am from warm summer air.*

*I am from a distorted tone  
I am from games under the stars  
I am from grass stained tennis shoes  
I am from Hershey candy bars.*

*I am from rebounds and putbacks  
I am from old time punk rock  
I am from strumming chords and picking strings  
I am from fun around the clock.*

*I am from air guitar and head bangs  
I am from dirty, scraped up knees  
I am from learning things the hard way  
I am completely unique. I am me.*

My first memory of Ray was actually his mother. She showed up to fall conferences and seemed quite frustrated with our system of educating her son. She volunteered to me that she no longer had faith in our school system, especially since her son's writing had not improved much in the last two years. I remained quiet for most of the conference, and listened. Her data centered mostly on his mechanics—commas and semicolons and periods he was still not using correctly. I was heartened by the fact that this mother was actually reading her son's work because that was not common in our school. There was a narrative of hope. However, I did not add much of my own to the conversation. Ray had been with me now for close to two months, and most of the first six weeks were spent on MEAP test prep. I was a bit dumbfounded, but I muttered to her something about doing my very best to change that. She had obviously heard that statement

before and did not seem reassured. She did apologize for her blunt nature and moved on to her next conference.

As I got to know Ray better over the course of the next two years, I developed a deep respect for the woman I met during conferences. Ray was well mannered and responsible. He always did his work, brought all his supplies, showed up to class on time, and followed all the rules.

However, Ray was somewhat withdrawn and reserved. He initially hesitated to speak in class even when he was called on. His speech slur (dysarthria) made him feel uncomfortable sharing his thoughts out loud. We could not always clearly discern his words, and he became visibly nervous about repeating them. In fact, I learned later that part of the reason Ray was moved from a private school to our public school two years ago was to find him the help he needed to overcome his speech deficiency.

Ray found more than a wonderful speech pathologist at Charles Middle School. In the context of the literacy events of his language arts classroom, and by his own admission, by the end of the year, he did not “resemble the person [he was at the beginning].” In his learning journey reflections, he wrote, “This class helped me forge new friendships and accomplish goals I never thought I would. My views on many topics have been altered and I have matured and learned. Most importantly, my reading and writing abilities have flourished.”

The story of his flourishing is told both in his words during the interviews and in his assignments for the final project. Part of it too is documented in my own practitioner notes.

***Forms of silencing.*** Ray’s silencing was not skin-imposed like Huda’s. It was not trust bound or self-imposed, like Kat’s either. His seemed neither troubling nor bothersome, which is probably why it went undetected, indiscernible almost. Ray masked it in a unique attitude of

pleasant smiles, cordial nods, and strict adherence to the rules. Here was a seemingly content student whose silence would not be recognized or spoken of until much later. For Ray, school was “something you kind of get through where you weren’t really learning anything.” And so, for him, “just sitting there and getting an A was not that hard.” In this class, Ray claims, “I changed.”

*The silence of isolation.* Ray’s silencing, as his interviews revealed, came from a sort of academic isolation, the type that classrooms and schools often impose when they do not allow communication to fully and freely flow. Language arts classes often left him scared and anxious: “Since elementary school, writing was always a struggle. Writing was always the one that got to me. I remember math came easier, science came easier.” When I questioned him about why he found writing a struggle, Ray’s response was, “I just didn’t really have strategies for coming up with ideas before. If a teacher told you to write about something, you’d write about it but wouldn’t really think about it.” Isolating writing and thinking also isolated any potential for Ray to merge the two and see them for what they really are, one and the same.

*Silence of standardization.* Based on his prior experience, Ray believed there was no wiggle room for much thinking on the assignments given. As he explained it, “We’d always have a rubric and a set formula to writing.” This rigidity left no room for Ray to experiment within the boundaries of his mind or the page for spaces that he could call his own. And so his approach to writing consisted of trying to follow a quantitative measure: a certain number of paragraphs in the paper, a predetermined number of sentences in each paragraph, and a word count, or even a check for punctuation and grammar. “Thinking,” Ray declared, “did not seem to matter or make a difference in your grade and we rarely talked about the ideas in the paper much. It was usually the grammar and the spelling.” Language arts, writing especially, in his previous school

experiences, was mostly “technical learning,” and so “we were hardly ever called upon to think about our lives.”

For a student like Ray, whose life—unlike Huda’s and Kat’s—seemed to be sailing quite smoothly, there was not much that initially engaged him in writing. Unlike both of them, Ray led a fairly standard adolescent existence, as his “I Am From” poem communicated. He came from a home “cloaked in dog hair” and “fun around the clock,” from “year round sports,” and “guitar picks.” His “long, greasy hair,” and “white t-shirts and shorts,” were his chosen mark, and throughout the first part of the semester, I remained convinced that “scraped up knees,” “grass stained tennis shoes,” and “head bangs,” were probably the only “hard learnings” that rendered this young man “completely unique.”

The material of Ray’s personal life defined the relaxed approach that defined his personal narrative, also a standard story, which described a battle with his parents for his first dog. He worked hard and well to revise multiple times and in different segments this piece of writing. Ray’s narrative detailed his sunny childhood self and the nurturing and supportive environment into which he brought his sweet little golden retriever puppy. This piece, his mother later told me, she framed and saved as a favorite. That type of affirmation at home helped confirm his secure status as a student in this language arts classroom. And though he worked to improve his writing by focusing on the strategies and discussions on the writing, he himself seemed somewhat removed during the first few weeks of school. Even to me, he seemed an embodiment of the *standard* student often envisioned in school discourses.

Ray declared in the first focus group interview that school was just “*something to go through*.” And, for him, it retained this routine quality well into his middle school years. However, his choice of topic for his I-search paper revealed that this then thirteen-year-old self

had already considered the problematic nature of schools across our country. After a discussion on why schooling was not always a guarantee of education, sparked by Mark Twain's quote, "I never let my schooling interfere with my education," Ray switched from researching smoking, a standard topic, to searching for why "America's education was at a standstill in some areas, and in others slowly decaying and eroding."

**Liberating literacies.** Having attended private schools most of his elementary years helped him dispel the myth of their superior quality. In the first focus group interview, Ray expressed his dissatisfaction [and his parents'] with his Catholic school experiences, saying, "Everyone says that Catholic schools are like, big with education. I remember coming to this school and being really behind in math and science, and it was surprising to me and my parents because you would think that St. \_\_\_\_\_ was really much better than most public schools." The idea to do the research on education was finalized because his cousins, who lived in a more affluent district, constantly teased him about the substandard district he attended. "I often get ragged down for our school system," he confessed. His drive to know why "we were ranked near the bottom in education" led him to undertake a six-week effort to find out.

**Education as choice.** The I-search paper helped Ray reach out to a larger society, one in which education is not perhaps as valued as it was in his own home. It was during his work on the I-search that Ray discovered how often we used words that don't necessarily mean the same thing interchangeably, like schooling and education, for example. In his second one-on-one interview, as he did in his paper, he voiced his discovery:

In school, someone else may control your learning—a teacher, or even the state. And you can just sit there and get through it. In education, you are in control of your learning. You

choose to take in skills, and you must understand them to be able to use them. You have to be learning throughout those times; you can't just sit there.

And this idea that education is free will and personal agency, fed by many discussions in class on the topic, led him to begin to change his initial ideas about school as a place you just go through. He began to see that education “cannot be measured in test scores,” and thus standardized tests, “did not measure education,” but rather “how well students were taking in information.” This revelation, Ray admitted, was “enlightening,” but it was also “very depressing.” The more we moved towards improving our standardized test scores, he believed, the further away we moved from education. And to top it off, in that moving and in that schooling, we were still doing poorly relative to other nations. He voices his discontent:

America compared to other first world nations was a lot lower than I expected. I thought top worst case scenario, we were in the middle of the pack. But we were straight on the bottom of the barrel. It kind of opened your eyes—like—we need to get our act together.

And one way to get our act together, Ray concluded, was to bridge the poverty gap. His research helped bring another significant realization to him and, through him, to others in his class: wealthier school districts do better on standardized tests. So the question of scores is also a question of money, he deduced, and now this conclusion, supported by his first-hand knowledge that his cousins, who do better than he on standardized tests, do come from more affluent homes, helped Ray frame more accurately a problem that he initially blamed on “poor teaching in his old school.”

At the end of the I-search paper, having discerned that the inequity in education is first and foremost a disparity in funding, he glued one lonely quote by Mahatma Gandhi at the bottom of the page, “Poverty is the worst form of violence.” Explaining the quote to me during the

interviews, he said:

Violence is not just physically hurting someone. It is also putting someone down and forcing them to suffer. Poverty puts people down by not allowing them to eat or drink or shelter themselves. Poverty does not allow people to think straight either. That's putting them through a lot of pain and a lot of stress. It's a cycle too. When people are not given a proper education, they are left to poverty and that is violent.

I wrote in my notes how Ray's I-search presentation brought a deafening silence to the class. In the feedback session after the presentation, the students seemed shocked by some of the findings. Many of them had not before seen the link between socioeconomics and schooling. It was a mesmerizing one. As a class and as a means to validate Ray's findings and students' newfound interests, we spent most of the hour after Ray's presentation opining on why that may be and drawing lessons and learnings from it.

In his I-search paper and during his presentation, Ray had alluded to the "lack of critical thinking skills in American schools" and blamed that for the deteriorating state of education in our nation. He saw the development of critical thinking skills as the solution to empowering students and getting them to think better about both the content of their learning and their lives. Appropriately, too, he chose "Critical Thinking" as the theme for his final project because that was, as he stated in the introduction to his project, "possibly the most valuable lesson I learned from this year." And that lesson, as Ray demonstrated both in his project and during the course of the interviews, was one that was progressive, slow, but well learned.

***Delivering dialogues.*** It was after this I-search, and the dialogues and events leading up to it, that Ray began to notice a change both in his understanding of his education and in the way he approached the work in this class. This realization, according to this young guitarist, began to take shape after his engagement with the first few events in our language arts classroom. "We did the *I Am From* poem, wrote a personal narrative, and completed an I-search, which is our



research paper, and each time we did that, each one I'd get progressively better and I'd try to beat the one previous to that." However, it was not an "instantaneous progress," Ray emphasized, "but it did progressively come" via "the different assignments." This progress began to claim a space to speak as soon as we, collectively, began to give it form. The first evidence of this progress towards critical thinking, as he affirmed both in his reflections and in his interviews, were "the in-class discussions" which in Ray's view "topped all the other assignments." And though he had had discussions in previous classes, these were different, Ray emphasized. He described in his second one-on-one interview what made the discussions we had in this class different from what he had experienced in the past:

They were student oriented, where the students ran it. And because of that, you went wherever the students wanted to go. We touched a bunch of different areas and almost all of those areas were in the present. They weren't things in the past. Some teachers would be so scared to enter that zone, talk about religion or something like that, like a war that's going on, or even politics...

*Unsanctioned and unimposed.* Ray obviously appreciated the freedom afforded to students to venture to choose their own diverse and different discussion topics. However, he too perceived that most teachers were "scared" of dialoguing about current issues that hold relevance and significance in their students' lives, which illustrated the general tendency by teachers to shed the role of "oppositional public intellectuals" which Giroux (2006) calls on them to assume both in the classroom and outside of it. Huda too had alluded to this fear on the part of teachers to tackle social and political issues that have great bearing on their students' lives, and thus they ended up, albeit unintentionally, modeling for their students a fear that inhibits healthy and constructive dialogues and action.

Unsanctioned, unimposed, and current, the dialogic literacies that Ray engaged in helped guide him to a critical thinking approach that changed the way he lives both his social and his

academic lives. One helped him face a corporate music culture that encroached on his and other students' lives, and the other allowed him to perceive literacy, much like music itself, a "reading of a combination of thoughts and ideas that you arrive at with others. You have to pick it apart and apply it to yourself and realize what the author is doing. Then you put what you picked apart into your own life and into your own writing."

*Dialogic literacies:* By examining Ray's final project, the impact of these class discussions, or what Bakhtin labels literary verbal performances, becomes apparent. Throughout its pages, Ray disperses quotes that held meaning to him in the context of this class. During the interviews, he often retrieved one or more of these quotes to illustrate his point and populate it with his own intentions (Bakhtin, 1981). In fact, across from each assignment in the booklet, he included three quotes that we talked about in class, either because they were significant to a topic we were discussing or because they helped him think differently about a familiar topic. The story of the quotes is also the story of the dialogues we had about them in class at the beginning of each week.

Every Monday, our current events day (though we broke that cycle often when a current event surfaced that they had to bring up), students brought in articles about major events in their city, state, country, or world to share in their smaller groups sometimes and as a whole class during other times. For the entire academic year, I would put a quote up on the board that spoke to a universal theme or truth or somehow tied to current events. The quote sometimes helped spark a discussion or direct us all in a nontraditional path. We usually spent about 5-10 minutes of each Monday reading and discussing these quotes in connection with our current events. Sometimes students responded in their writer notebooks to the discussions, and at other times the quotes were used to take a stand on an issue.

Towards the middle of the year, students would bring in some of their favorite quotes to share with the current events, and together we would select one for the board. By the end of the year, students were encouraged to write their own, following an example we co-created during our work on the I-search, “We begin to grow when we question what we know.”

Though he was not required to, Ray had copied every one of the quotes into his writing notebook. They lined up several pages of his final project. The first of the quotes for the 2012-2013 academic year, William Butler Yeats’ “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire” is spread across the page from Ray’s eighth-grade I-search paper on “How our American education compares to education in other parts of the world?” At the bottom of the same page are yet two other quotes on education, one by Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” and the other by Benjamin Franklin, “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.” Each of the quotes represented a part of the paper that Ray chose to focus on in his presentation. Countries that invest in education yield a better citizenry and economy. Education is a game changer around the world, and we spend more on inmates per year than we do on students, fascinating results for eighth-graders.

And this kernel idea of education matters, triggered by Ray’s research on education and nurtured and developed with guidance and dialogue, branched into many more. Whether we looked at Marley and Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*, or Ponyboy and Johnny from *The Outsiders*, the surface was never satisfactory. We delved deeper. When Shay complained of Scrooge’s stinginess and meanness, I asked him if his claim was placing Scrooge in a position of absolute power. Scrooge’s education had not allowed him to be in control of himself, I explained, though his schooling definitely allowed him to control his money. His human self, a self nurtured by education, was at the mercy of his economic self, a self nurtured by schooling.

That, of course, was first and foremost his loss because in not nurturing his human self, he was losing out on his relationships—both his past ones and his present ones.

Students considered Scrooge a victim of an environment that taught him to value his economic self before his human self. They used his father's relationship with him as an example. With the Ghost of Christmas Past, we looked at Scrooge's past self to allow us to understand better his present self. The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come showed Scrooge what he was bound to become as he was himself creating that self through his choices. Once he changed his choices, his future too changed.

We spoke often of a character having different selves, and which of the selves was more in control. The students enjoyed applying the lessons to themselves, and some spoke of how sometimes they allowed their gamer selves to triumph their student selves and their need to keep a balance of these selves in check. The "Letter to My Future Self" was born of those discussions. It was a method to reinstate the idea that our future is in our present choices, and to allow them to look to their present decision-making as instrumental and yielding.

It is discussions like this that allowed Ray to use the literacy events in the classroom to seek his education, liberate himself from schooling's drudgeries, and affirm in his music identity a new self and a new sense of agency. The discussions, Ray claimed, helped him realize that language, "which is expression," is a "way to create yourself." In the second focus group interview, he articulated well his belief in the omnipresence of literacy, "Language is in every aspect of your life. Language is in what we do for work, what we do for fun, how we communicate with our friends...Everything you look at, language is there."

*Collaborative critical thinking.* Ray indeed composed—recomposed himself—mostly from these classroom discussions, his initial fear. However, this creation was possible only

through a healthy collaboration of all elements of our classroom. As a teacher-partner, a conductor of a “free flow of communication” that defined every event of this classroom, I helped Ray communicate with Paul, a classmate collaborator, by removing myself from my traditional role of “knowledge giver” to allow a more knowledgeable other, Paul in this case, to share his expertise on music with Ray. The authority of knowledge came first, and thus whoever had that knowledge—Paul in this case—had also the authority to teach it. I, an invested educational partner, demonstrated my willingness to relinquish the central role to whoever had the knowledge, a significant and important lesson in the classroom.

The dialogues thus became too opportunities for student empowerment and with other members of their class, these students found in these dialogues opportunities for critical thinking, a process through which both assumed what Freire (2009) terms “an indivisible solidarity between their world and themselves” (p. 92). This process proved instrumental in nurturing Ray’s love for music but subsequently helping him challenge, as his op-ed reveals, its hegemonic tendencies.

*Music’s muses.* According to Ray, who “always really liked music and really liked playing it,” Paul “lit the fire.” The *lighting of the fire*, an expression Ray borrowed from Yeats’ quote on education, happened through creative dialogues between the two and in the boundaries of this classroom. Ray narrated how Paul, an outspoken student and talented drummer, led him and others in the classroom to begin to look at music differently. When I asked Ray whether he had met Paul before this class, he said that they had a science class together in seventh grade but “I didn’t really know him.” He added, “I knew he was there but I wasn’t really that close to him. In other classes, we just knew each other.” In the course of the literacy events of this classroom,

specifically as Ray pinpointed “The I-search teams,” Ray and his classmates came to know Paul and engage with his ideas in innovative ways.

Paul had a song for every theme we discussed in class and was constantly looking for an opportunity to share the lyrics. His lyrics became a hallmark of our class. He shared them by theme, spoke their stories with skill, and exposed their social and political roots. Paul’s I-search on music brought to the surface many lesser known but socially and politically active bands. We were all constantly delighted, and informed whenever he spoke. His writing too was keen and critical. His peers respected him, and Ray found in him a mentor and peer who would provide him with a newfound and critical music consciousness. During those transactions, as I write in my practitioner notes, Paul practiced the teacher-partner role with utmost expertise and amidst an intrigued audience of peers, a message to my students that the authority of knowledge trumped the authority of teaching.

Ray savored the benefits of Paul’s expertise during those team transactions in guiding his musical self to new and intriguing horizons. And though, as Ray reminded me, they were similar “in our thoughts and stuff,” they were quite different in the way they acted, “opposites,” according to Ray: “Paul’s very loud; he’s very outspoken; and I’m more laid back.” Still, they found meeting grounds. Ray admitted in his second one-on-one interview that Paul helped induct him to a new world of music: “Paul said, you know, this band, you need to check them out. And so he gave me some bands, very talented artists, and I was like, why haven’t I heard this before?” Driven by Paul’s words and guidance, Ray went in search of this elusive but coveted world. In doing so, he ventured to create facets of his musical self that helped him become both a critical consumer and a discerning listener. The drawing for his project cover (Figure 8) was actually a combination of images and words that highlighted Ray’s induction into Paul’s world.

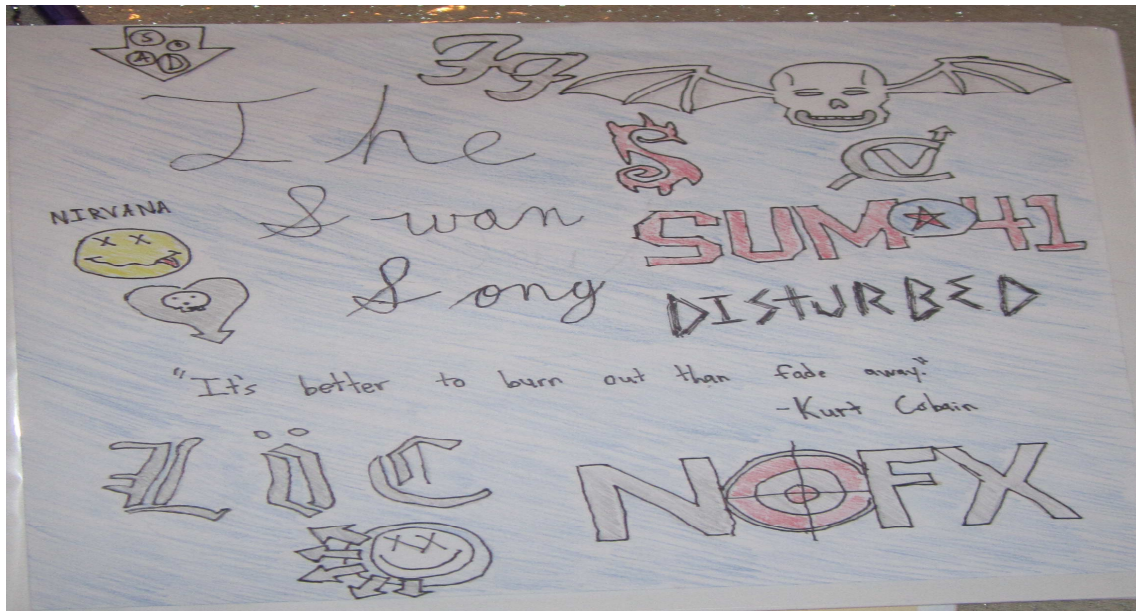


Figure 9. Ray's Final Project Cover

He had thus received from our multiple class dialogues and Paul's musings new ways of entering the world of music, in its various linguistic offerings, in ways he had not before experienced. He made much of the lyrics' words and looked discriminately and closely at their poetic structures. He also read a book that Paul recommended to us all during his second book talk on the novel, *Clockwork Angels* (2012), which was itself a collaboration between a music group, Rush, and a science fiction writer, Kevin Anderson. In fact, in the new world in which he existed with Paul, Ray learned more than just about music. He explored a social and political world that the music he was inducted to critiqued and often denounced. In that world, he found words for his own discontent. Ray modeled "My Letter to the World" (Figure 9) after a song by Sour Stone:

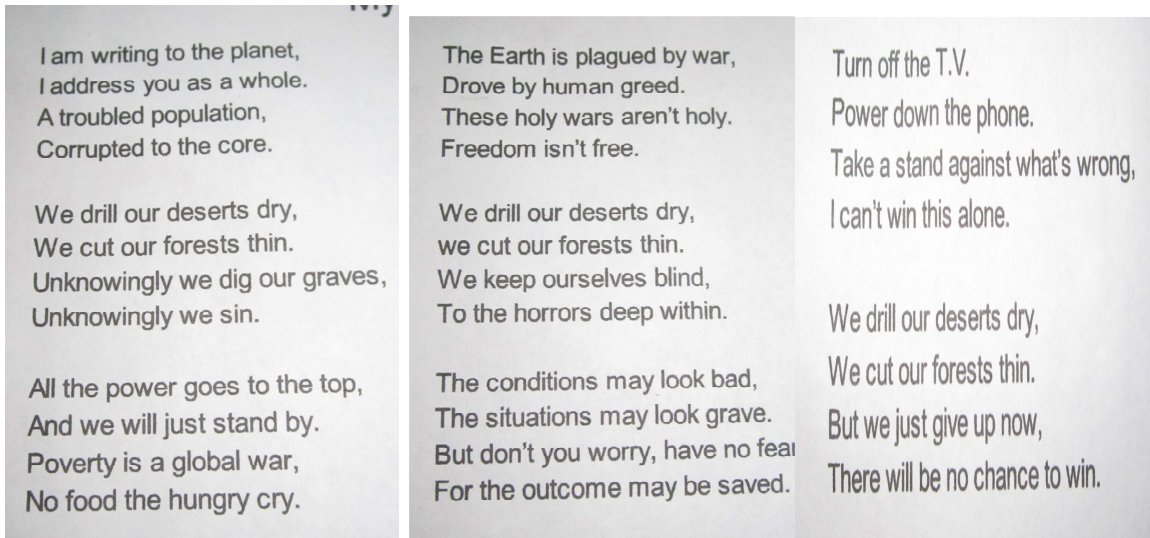


Figure 10. Ray's Letter to The World

The poem clearly depicts Ray's environment, social, and political self merging into both his musical identity and his student and writer ones. It also engages a "watching audience" who needs to "turn off the T.V." and "power down the phone," to "take a stand against what's wrong," because "I can't win this alone." Like writing, music is "a form of expression," Ray emphasized, and both must have power and purpose. However, like writing also, "when there's no power in the expression, and no purpose but to make money, well, it then becomes a corrupt system."

*Writing as social critique.* In his op-ed essay, the critical thinking connection stands striking. As a writer, Ray uses his own powers of expression to liberate the music industry of its corruption. The essay speaks to the benefits—personal, social and political—he reaped from his many dialogues with Paul and during class discussions. Having exercised the personal agency needed to move him to a new place as a musician and listener, he sought his writer's agency as he attempted to change everyone's conception of music today and brought to bear his opinion in an editorial on a "declining music industry" suffering under the pangs of censorship.



His introduction speaks to a mind enriched and intrigued by healthy collaborative meditations in the classroom. “As disheartening as it is to say this, today’s music industry is a mess,” his opening sentence claims. However, true to a “narrative of hope” he had learned in this class to grow, nurture, and heed, he continues in his second sentence, “It’s not as though all talented, thoughtful, competent musicians suddenly became extinct.” And in his third and final sentence of the introduction, his opinion rings loud, “They suffered a much worse fate: Censorship.”

The last word of the introduction unravels in the second paragraph denouncing “the different road music has taken,” and songs that today depict only “sex, drugs, or sappy, unrealistic relationship scenarios.” Lyrics have ceased, as they once did, to take on “many topics, ranging from political to environmental issues.”

He moves in his third paragraph to detail examples of such songs and their slow and progressive disappearance off the airwaves today. He faces off in the fourth paragraph with UMG (Universal Music Group) who, he claims, “is the dictator behind the North American music industry. They own most records, meaning they control who gets money and, in turn, the most popular artists.” He adds yet another charge to a list of charges he brings against this entity that had been “bribing radio stations to play music produced by Ashlee Simpson and Lindsay Lohan,” while, as he claims, “restricting bands like Streetlight Manifesto from the airwaves under labels such as ‘controversial.’” He laments at the end of this paragraph the fact that decent groups cannot “break a decent record deal as musicians with sub-par music and worshipped for appearances take over the airwaves.”

Ray’s next paragraph details the influence of YouTube and downloading on this spiraling downward trend. In the conclusion, in a tradition of always looking for solutions we practiced in

this class, his call to action, “Boycott! Don’t buy from a download website” is coupled with a suggestion to his classmates to “walk up to your local record store” and then “look for an independent label and find a small band you can support.” In doing so, he reassured them, “you are not only adding a healthy boost to the music industry, but you are also giving back to your local community.” Across the page, a Bob Marley quote (Figure 10) sums up nicely Ray’s own sense of agency as both a person and musician.

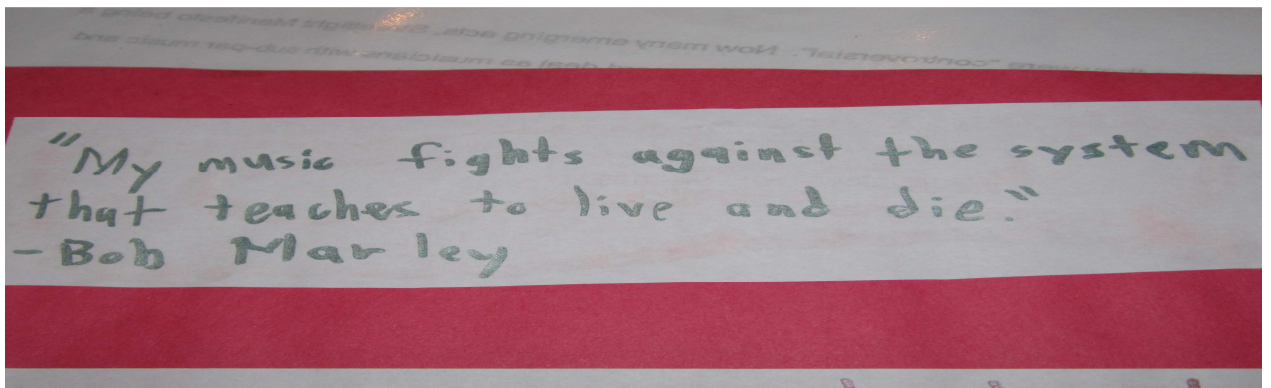


Figure 11. Ray’s Quote on Music

*Literacy as critical thinking.* Ray’s op-ed—one in a series of assignments that helped guide him to better use his skills, experiences, and resources as tools—served more than the purpose of exposing his opinion on a decaying and debilitated music industry. As my interviews with him revealed, over the course of his eighth-grade year, and in this essay specifically, Ray had come to know and practice critical thinking. In his first one-on-one interview, he admitted that he did not know what I meant at first when I talked in class about how they need to think critically. When I asked him if he now knew, he nodded. “*What is critical thinking, then?*” I challenged him. He pointed to the project “Critical thinking is this learning—this paper, this assignment. It is writing and education.” And finding it difficult still to find words to define the thoughts, he moved to tell me what it is not, “It’s not something that you can just sit down and

decide; it's not that black and white." "I can't teach it to others then?" I probed. "Exactly," he responded, "but you can guide them to it." And he continued, "Because critical thinking isn't the same for everyone. Critical thinking for one person could be something completely different to someone else." He finally found his thoughts, "Critical thinking is being able to take a topic and develop a standpoint on it. Think for yourself, look at facts, and say this is what I think. To look at ideas, and say this is my idea, and develop a standpoint based off that." I pushed his thinking further with a question, a habit of my Socratic teacher self and the engaged pedagogy that listens and learns too. "Isn't that what we do for the district prompts when you are asked to take a position?" I questioned. His response reeked of critical thinking,

Not really, we have ones on whether we should wear school uniforms or whether animals should be kept in zoos. They give two perspectives and you have to choose one. Critical thinking should be a spectrum, like giving a topic where there are multiple standpoints, more categories to pick from, and more ideas... because two ideas, not many things fall into two categories. There are two defined ideas, should we or should we not, and I think there are a multitude of ways to side on a topic. There are many different branches, not just two.

*Debilitating dichotomies.* There was this eighth-grader denouncing the debilitating dichotomies which often defined most of our pedagogical and political approaches, in the classroom and outside, as symptoms of false choice. They did not offer real choice, these dichotomies, but the illusion of one. Whether in our classrooms or in our elections, the choice that dichotomies often presented was limited and limiting, and thus did not honor freedom or respect diversity or deliver students, as bell hooks (1994) asserts, from pedagogical strategies that proved totalizing and oppressive to their dominant discourses.

In thus failing to offer real choices and engaged practices that account for the "complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives" (hooks, 1994, p. 10), we fail to induce critical thought and action. In essence, we fail to educate for freedom and fail to see students changed

and empowered. The quotes that Ray places next to his final letter to me serve both to emphasize the need to tell one's story and the significance of engaging pedagogies. From Maya Angelou: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you," represented, as Ray emphasized in his first focus group interview, the need for classrooms to engage students, and often, in bringing their own stories as study material into the classroom. The second, by Jim Henson, addressed to teachers everywhere, exalts the benefits of humanitarian education, "Kids don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember who you are."

In his final letter to me, Ray confirms the power of both this engaged and humanizing pedagogy—"the ability to think as a human," as Ray relates it—and the in-class discussions that defined it:

I cannot stress how much I have enjoyed the classroom debates. The ability to think as a human triumphs anything an essay could provide. Whether it be the discussions of a student's I-search on an everyday topic, or a quote on the board or in a book, having the time to share and express my beliefs was a crucial part of my maturity in middle school.

He adds, "Through thick and thin (and a large majority was quite thick), better or worse, good or bad, I have been blessed." He enumerates his blessings: "Blessed for having had you for two years," and "Blessed for the copious papers I had to write," and "Blessed for things I can't think of but surely happened," but "most of all," Ray ascertains, "I have been blessed with the ability to artistically sculpt my thoughts and ideas with language." He emphasizes, "I genuinely mean this: You have no idea how much you have influenced and helped me throughout my middle school years." The final page of his project is a lonesome quote (Figure 11) that he pulled from *The Outsiders*, one we spent much time discussing in class and which stems too from a Robert Frost poem. "Stay gold Ray, stay gold," I reiterate as we finish our last interview.

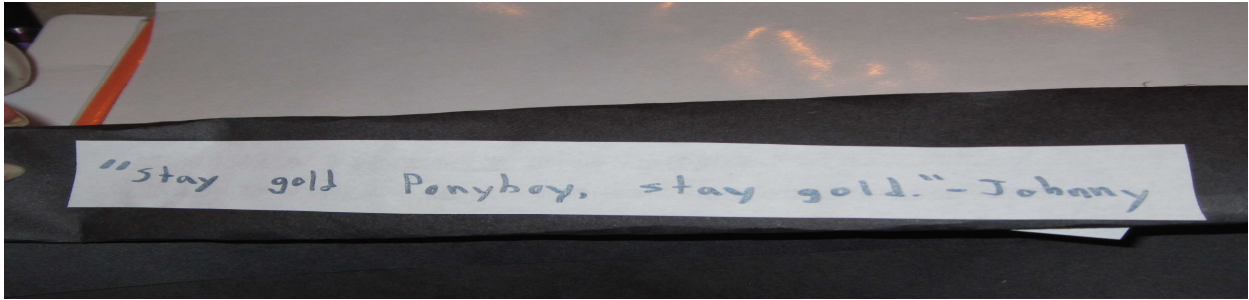


Figure 12. Ray's Quote from *The Outsiders*

### Frank's Story: Grandma's Gamer

*I am from the house on Polk,  
Cuddled with my grandma  
On the giant LazyBoy.*

*I am from the N64  
Hours upon hours attempting  
That annoying Super Mario 64 level.*

*I am from the upper bunk bed,  
With nobody underneath.  
I am from the cold basement floor  
Of early morning breaks,  
With tasty buttery ego waffles to eat  
And a PS2 to play.*

*I am from the gaming computer,  
Reading while playing while talking to friends,  
I am from long homework assignments,  
Procrastinating because I know what's ahead.  
My paper is filled with frustration and anger  
As I attempt to complete the darn assignment*

*I am from a home filled with care  
Support when I need it  
And jokes when I feel down.  
I am from.*

In many ways, Frank was a typical teacher's dream, a "cuddled" by grandma kid in every respect. From the onset of the year, he seemed prepared to play school well. His permanent grin made everyone's day, and he was adamant about asking the *right* question, giving the *right*

answer, and doing *right* by everyone. The teachers loved him and he had a great reputation as an All Star kid in school. In fact, early on in the year, I heard his name being tossed around in the teacher's lounge as a possible nominee by many teachers for our school's "Student of the Year." The students too "knew" he would be that year's student of the year and conversed about it regularly.

And Frank indeed had much to recommend him. He was a 4.0 student at his middle school, a member of student congress, a recreational baseball player, and a member of our middle school's swimming and science teams. Frank loved to read, too, and his grandmother purchased him every book from every teenage series I could recommend. His mother had always worked the night shift and came home tired at four in the morning, so Frank was raised by his grandmother. He often preferred the company of teachers to peers and volunteered often to help his teachers in any way he could. He spared no opportunity to offer anyone a compliment and had a gift for summoning topics of conversation and elaborating on them with ease, even, as he claimed in his focus group interview, "when I did not know what I was saying." Definitely goal-oriented, Frank was, as he claims in his learning journey assignment, on a mission "to pass this class with an A, by doing the least amount of work required to do so." This, according to Frank, had been the norm. He ended his introduction to his learning journey assignment with, "I soon realized that for this class, I have to put forth my best, and try my hardest to earn that A! That is my learning journey."

### **Forms of silencing.**

*Silenced potential.* Frank's journey thus became a reawakening of a dormant potential, one that had been buried under layers of high grades. It is the grade ironically that became a

source of anxiety to this wonderful thirteen-year-old during the first few weeks in this language arts classroom. And though he was an avid reader, he was not getting the A he so desired, and he could not understand why. “Though I had heard that this was a tough class,” Frank writes in his learning journey, “it was then that I realized this class was different.” After the first report card, Frank evidently became frustrated, and I began to see his bubbly cheerful self more composed and more somber in language arts. In fact, he writes in his introduction to his learning journey about this time, “My goal quickly changed from ‘ace this class,’ to ‘pass this class.’”

It was, however, during the time that we were starting the personal narratives that Frank became extremely frustrated. We were working on the introductions. We spent a week on going back to model narratives and looking at the elements of effective introductions. I asked them to choose their favorite and we dialogued in class about why they thought the introduction they chose was most effective (we did not use terms such as *good* or *bad* as those terms were relative, nondescript, and had no place in feedback sessions). As long as they were justifying their answers, I validated their responses. When they did not, the response was treated as “inadmissible into the court of reason.”

Based on the feedback sessions, each of them had to keep looking at the introduction he/she had written and revised. Their final grade for the introduction was when they chose to stop working on it even though I or their peer revision group helped them figure out what further work it needed. The introduction had the potential to earn a score of 5 if it was clear, original, and hooked the reader. Students could keep working on an introduction until they were pleased with the score the class (or their revision team) gave them. Some students stopped at three, and some worked for the four or five.

Frank was not used to that. When he received a 1/5 for his first intro, then a 2/5 for his second, he seemed crushed. And though he was still his polite and courteous self, he did not know how to deal with me or this grade. He had been used to constant praise and endorsement, no matter how rushed the process he followed or how cliché the product he presented seemed. Writing, he admitted at the time, was always a struggle for him, but his radiant personality always managed to cover up for his writing. I empathized with his crushed ego when he came up to talk to me about his score (as I gave them the option to speak one-on-one with me always) but remained adamant about building his learning potential to its fullest.

During our discussion, I expressed to him what I had noticed, and I reassured him that he would be successful in class. However, I was completely candid: I alone was not the agent of his success. His success was his own, though I was an eager collaborator. We often struggle when we learn something new, I explained, and that was quite normal. As I was invested in him as a person, reader, and writer, I was ready to offer him keen critique and guide him to move towards better outcomes. I wanted him to understand that the journey (i.e., the process) was extremely important, and as long as he was willing to invest physically, emotionally, and cognitively in his work and in this class, he would be more than fine. He later remembered this conversation during his first one-on-one interview. He had told me that he liked scary stories, but he also wanted to write about getting his braces. I recommended that he combine them in a scary story about going to his dentist. The idea appealed to him, and his revision yielded “Dental Dilemma,” his story of going to the dentist to get braces.

Such conversations, Frank recalled, were “ones that gave [him] ease knowing that if I’m struggling you would help me,” especially when struggling in school was not something with which Frank had much experience. It was through him, and others like him, that a brand of



silence was revealed to me that I later came to know as a silence of potential. Frank's silence, I realized that week, was a silencing I experienced daily in my practice. In my over two decades of practice, I have seen its worst symptom: a striving for high grades rather than the learning and its benefits. For Frank, a student full of promise and potential and personality, the grade became a goal and not a means to one. Once the grade was achieved, the investigation and struggle that defined literacy learning, hence his true and tried potential, became absented.

The danger of the grade, as in Frank's example, is that it capped his desire to strive and gave him a false measure of success. Instead of investment in his work and mind, Frank had learned that an investment in pleasing his teachers sufficed to guarantee him his goals, so that became his school goal: silencing his desires in his need to please others and get his grade. In fact, this silencing of self led to a silencing of many other sorts. He learned to take a big part of his identity underground, and speak solely to please: his peers, his teachers, and his ego.

*The silence of conformity.* In his interviews later, Frank spoke candidly about what I call a silence of conformity that depicted his school experiences. It began as a response to adult expectations around him as he sought to conform to please them both by how he behaved and by what he wrote. However, it extended itself to a silencing that took place on the personal and social fronts as well.

Frank, in his first one-on-one interview, remembers his first week of school in sixth grade, when "I got down to tie my shoe, and I get my focus card signed for disrupting the class." He recalls this "unfair" consequence as a first in series of unfair events that defined his sixth-grade year in the literacy classroom and consisted mostly of either "dictated essays" that were "not relevant to our lives," or "popcorn readings which weren't fun." He recalled this "awful" first year of his middle school as a "dreadful experience" and a "really long year" of "reading

logs.” And though, as he admits, “I love to read,” the logs were not an “incentive” but rather “a downer.” That year, Frank learned two things: “that teachers did not like to be in the wrong,” and “grading was completely unfair.” He recounted stories of kids having the same answers graded differently and also his learning that “if the teacher liked you better because you did not bother her or ask a lot of questions, you got a higher grade.” And so he moved fast to make this new rubric his goal, and by the end of sixth grade, “I was her favorite.”

Seventh grade, Frank admits, was not much better. It was all “packets.” He described these packets as consisting of “six pages worth of like 20-30 words each week. So, we’d have these packets and they would have the definitions on the first page, and in the next five pages, we would fill in the blanks. There were a lot of exercises and a lot of worksheets.” And Frank talked about how it got worse when the teacher found out that some kids had found the answers to the packets online, and decided to take action to redress that. Frank continued, “We then had to do them at school which meant that four out of the five days we were at school, we were doing the packets, and on the fifth day we were doing the spelling test [laughs] on those same words.” The pressure of the packets caused many of his peers to act out but Frank remembers sitting in class hoping the disruptions would not be many so he could “finish his work and get a good grade.” Arguments against the packets, or “anything else for that matter,” Frank remembers, “were shut out.” But he was grateful for all the time he was afforded that year to read as he tended to finish his work early and reading was an option he savored. That was yet another year that Frank, who was able to adapt well to being busy and silent, finished successfully and well. He also ranked high on the teacher’s list of favorites for his genial and cooperative nature.

*Silence of unidimensionality.* And it wasn’t just language arts packets that put pressure on Frank. There were “Warsaw packets” in history, too, and what he called the “one track

essay.” In his first focus group interview, he reiterated the frustrations he and many students shared about the dimensional and single form of writing often done in schools where the students were all asked pretty much “to write the same essay without being given any real choice.” This type of silencing prevented him from “really speaking his mind.” He blamed this tendency in schools, to “focus on one topic or one form of writing,” for “bad outcomes in school.” In this type of environment, Frank says, “there will be three or four kids that will excel but most will not because kids aren’t born to be very interested or good at that one thing.”

Interestingly enough, and in his first one-on-one interview, Frank saw this narrow focus on one form of reading and writing as a symptom of a society that is too narrowly focused on one form of social engagement: sports. “I hate how we’re so centered, in and out of school, around football,” he declared in his interview. And here, too, he felt silenced by the expectations that adults have for him to participate in this all-American discourse that to him seems irrational and rough. “Americans take pride in hitting fellow Americans over the head? with themselves? So, really all they do is run at each other, tackle at each other with a ball, for three hours! I feel like America, like North America—I’m not sure if Canada is doing the same thing—I feel like America’s really the only place that you’ll actually hear that parents are forcing their kids to play ball.”

He declared having himself been a victim of this single focus not just in school, but outside of it as well, saying, “I feel like a lot of times, I was not given the choice. I was always expected to play baseball. I like it, but I didn’t like it as much as I like other things. This was one of those things where it was my parents forcing me to play.” Like Ray, Frank felt the oppressive nature of dichotomies that often defined adult thinking: “I think parents and teachers think that we’re either playing baseball or we’re playing video games. It’s like, if they’re playing

videogames, we're not going to get anything done." And though he admits to the health benefits in sports, he mourns the loss of choice as he makes it in the interview, "I wanted an easel and a paint set because I wanted to get better at painting." He also refers in his "100 things to do before I die" assignment to another secret passion of his that was not endorsed by his parents or society, ballet dancing, which Frank really can "never admit to liking because it doesn't seem really masculine." He shared that sometimes he wished he had been born in South American countries "that love art," and "that really push their kids to become writers and artists and these other things."

*Silenced by the bill of rights.* However, it was not just the single discourse tendency that silenced this budding scientist. It was also, as he narrated in his second one-on-one interview, schools' tendency to absent the religious discourse altogether, which for Frank represented "an important part of my upbringing" and a strong and sturdy link not only to "Jesus whose life and lessons I learned from my grandmother and going to church," but also to this woman herself, his grandmother, who shared this same discourse and through whose elements she taught both Frank and his mom to remain patient and positive in the face of all the pressures. However, school did not provided spaces for him to speak that self, or that discourse. In his outsider poem, Frank admits that his religion discourse classified him an outsider in school. And oftentimes, like many with him, he believed that the constitution forbade this type of discourse because anytime they brought up religion even remotely, "The teachers would say to us, *no talk about religion in schools. It's against the constitution.*" Thus, Frank left that significant discourse in the vacant bunk bed underneath his own with many other selves he could not bring to school, and that helped reinforce a separation between one's school and one's life. You left your life at home

where it belonged, and in school, you were infused with a new one, one whose substance was packets and pundits.

Coordinating the literacy events in the classroom to help Frank recapture his silenced academic potential and reengage his own discourses proved to be a year's work, as his interviews and final project attest. In lieu of a single color that defined his presence at this middle school, Frank now lived across a spectrum of colors that defined both his final project and his ways of being.

**Liberating literacies: Frank's true colors.** Frank titled his project *Reaching Recognition*, a title he deliberately chose because it represented his progress toward a potential that had previously been silenced. The project represents a spectrum of color, from darkest to lightest shades. According to Frank, the color spectrum defined well his presence in the classroom, and “the opposite ends of the spectrum represent me well too as I go opposite ends of the spectrum on what I eventually want to do in life.” The beginning pages are darker colors, blacks and purples that represented, as Frank attested in his first one-on-one interview, his dark mood in this class at the beginning of the year as he ventured to challenge himself to reach beyond what was already there.

The middle of the project—orange and pink hues—appropriately symbolize the reconstruction of his perspective on school and literacy. This, Frank says, “would be the turning point in my understanding of this class, especially when we did the I-search.”

Last, “the clear white, which contains my evaluation of you and my choice assignment” represents the “best way to end because they reflect what I learned in this class and how I choose to express myself.” The lighter hues too represent a clarity that emerged as Frank engaged in the literacy events of this classroom and eventually defined Frank's world and work. Each of the

assignments represented, “me from eighth grade and all the years before, from when I was six all the way down to eighth grade.” And the assignments indeed represent Frank’s different colors well, for according to him, they “gave me some time to reach out and really discover what I wanted to do.” In so doing, they became opportunities for him to investigate both his presence in school and his other discourses, which he placed outside the margin of his academic life.

*Facing one’s fears.* In his learning journey assignment, and in both his one-on-one interviews, Frank summons the stress that accompanied the first two months of his presence in this classroom. The story of the personal narrative, “this story filled with frustration,” as he writes, forced him to face a fact that he never before entertained: that excellence is not a fixed state or even a grade. It’s a constant struggle. About that period, Frank writes, “I felt inadequate and weak because I could not get the five right away on my introduction.” His fragile feelings, fed by the constancy of a numerical score for so long, faltered, and he found himself, after only a couple of attempts at writing a better introduction to his narrative, “frustrated and angry and blaming you for it.” And when I asked him why he blamed me, Frank’s response was,

I’ve always known to be assigned my work. We’d always be given something to do with specific requirements like a three paragraph essay about how someone is a hero or not. We had to use specific words and examples and a template for our draft and specific words for our introduction and our conclusion. With you, it was different. You showed us a bunch of examples and we talked about them and then it was, ‘Ok, your turn to write.’ And we had to make so many choices that I had never before made, like what to write about, and how to start, and what to include. And it was difficult for me.

Frank faced the uncertainty and ambiguity of choice with fear, especially since his first two choices for introduction were met with what he deemed “failure.” The scores of 1 and then 2 for his introductions signaled to him that he was a “bad writer,” especially because his experiences with revision thus far had been limited to “changing words and spelling and making the final

neater.” The fear translated into frustration and hostile emotion that I detected in his attitude when he talked to me at the beginning of the process.

I spent an hour after school allaying his fears, explaining that writing is revision, that he had to go through the process, and helping him understand what his writing required to move him to a better score. The numerical points, I said, were a sort of dial to help him steer his writing. They were not an evaluation or a finality. I also gave him a book on grading that I used to steer my own grading. He refers in his learning journey assignment to how much this book, *A Repair Kit: 15 Fixes for Grades* (O'Connor, 2011), helped him understand my grading better. However, the conversation helped Frank realize three things as he describes in his learning journey assignments: “First, that you teach to your gut, and if there is evidence of learning involved,” and “second, that you actually follow grading principles to see if the students are getting and understanding the process of what you are trying to teach. You graded not on spelling and grammar, but on actually how we write,” and “third, I knew that you were understanding and loved your students, and I could come to you if I was struggling.” Those three conclusions that Frank alludes to—ones at the heart of a critical and engaged pedagogy—helped steer his attention away from the symbol to the substance of his learning. In his second one-on-one interview, he recalled revising his process for initiating this assignment:

At first, we did not have a list to follow on what we had to do. I was so used to that in seventh grade. So what was I now supposed to do it on? I did the introduction and did not do well on it. I was panicked, but you did mention during our talk that I could choose something that made me scared and I love scary stuff, now that’s fun. But you also said that I could also take something ordinary and make it scary like Stephen King did with the clown in *It*. My tooth was hurting at the time too, so I came up with the idea of dentists and going to the dentist to get braces. I was able to go from there.

And, from there Frank went. His motto of “I do not like the dentist,” which ignited the idea for this narrative, drove him to seek in the fear of that experience a way to overcome the fear of

writing about it. And these two fears, one helping overcome the other, served him well and induced a shift in his approach to school and to writing in this class. For him, a student who had often prided himself on being able to finish his work in school, this was a shift to new habits. In his first focus group interview, he depicts this shift:

I felt like I didn't know what a personal narrative was. I thought that all I had to do was use "I" and "me." I couldn't understand what it was. You went through giving a ton of personal narratives, giving examples and everything. I did my dentist one, it was really fun to write. I had a good time writing it. Even just writing one at home which was unheard of for me to actually like to write at home. I had so much fun writing about the most miniscule things, like going to the dentist's office, something everyone has to do. It was so much fun making it unique.

And Frank struggled evidently and well to render it unique. He struggled to make choices and decisions consistent both with his writing purpose and his own discourses. The engagement on his part was now evident. He brought drafts—he was not counting by then anymore—to share with me, with his peers, and took drafts home to share with grandma. His writing was now a process of many proportions and infused with multiple voices (Bakhtin, 1981). As I wrote in my notes, he was learning to maneuver in the ambiguous territory of choice and he, and his writing, were emerging healthier as a result. Again, his peers and I were patient and persevering partners. The experience of writing the personal essay and all of the lessons inherent taught Frank that the most important part of the literacy event is the “going through” and not the product per se. To go through the writing meant, though, to forsake the grade and focus on the gut-wrenching experience. The second might yield the first, but the first would never yield the second. Here, first, Frank says, he learned that “I was able to write all that I felt without having to suppress anything.”

Another learning that surfaced from this event helped Frank better understand a reading discussion we had in class earlier about Stephen King's ability to turn ordinary things into



extraordinary fears. Frank applied this lesson well in an understanding of his own fear as he traversed standard grounds in literacy, learning to venture across its more ambiguous and nuanced territory. He recalled this lesson well in our third focus group interview when he deemed that Stephen King was right in that “normal things can be more scary than anything.” He tied this awareness to his own academic experience: “For me, writing that narrative from my guts was more intimidating than anything I had faced before.” Frank remembered, months later, the feedback on that story he labored on, and he admitted that his conclusion needed more work, that “I knew that handing it in.” Still, he embraced its many other potentials: “Sharing it with the class was really fun. I liked it because it was exaggerated but it was completely different from the other ones and I felt special knowing it was different.”

*Nurturing differences.* And this difference proved defining in Frank’s case. It was no anomaly as often middle-schoolers are made to perceive their differences. It was rather a sort of anchor, stabilizing ground for him to perform a stronger academic and literacy self in synchrony with others around him. He moved to embrace its possibilities. Frank recalled in his interview a lot of other personal narratives from that year. He recalled Riley’s story of her grandfather’s passing away because, he said, it awakened his own fear and anxiety about the mortality of his beloved grandmother, so he connected well with both sentiment and author. He recalled too Ray’s story about his dog as he always wanted one but could not win the battle with his own mom. He recalled Bella’s story of the birth of her niece and remembered thinking he would never have one. The idea was a bit scary to him too. What was a solace, though, as Frank emphasized, was “how we were coming together to share all these different stories, and understand each other better. I felt that after each story, we came closer together. We had more in common though we were all different.” And this comment, of how these stories became a

gathering point, a magnet that brought them all together to understand as all of them reiterated throughout the interviews that we all have a story, helped cement a community of learners together through their differences, and helped us prepare them to navigate a bigger world to which they belonged where lie too many stories and many lessons.

*Collaborative alchemy.* It is in both the world of books that he was reading and the classroom that Frank found Joshua, another science fiction fan. Together, they exchanged independent reading books and discussed during book talks the topics and themes of their books. They converted many members of their audience. For the I-search, they expressed in their proposal an interest in working on a common theme but from different perspectives, a plan I approved and sent the two budding scientists on their way. They ventured to research the origins of alchemy and its influences, both literary and scientific, on our world today. Joshua owned the past and spent his I-search studying the origins of alchemy and presenting its codes and symbols, while Frank studied the influences of alchemy in our literary and scientific lives. His presentation distinguished between alchemy as magic and alchemy as transformation. He attempted the second during his I-search presentation which sought, in front of a live classroom and recruiting the help of his science teacher, to transform elements of his experiment into a toothpaste compound. The experiment failed amid peroxide smoke and such. However, true to learning stance, Frank spent his presentation, as he reminded me in his second interview, “talking about why it didn’t work.”

And Frank continued on his journey of finding outlets via the literacy events of the classroom for his other discourses. He relished Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and drew, through our discussions of it, constant allusions to the biblical themes in which he was nurtured. His religious reading of the story helped bring to other members of his class a discourse that is often

absented in middle school circles and one that allowed them to engage in a discourse that up to that point had been banished from his school experiences. They talked to each other about their different beliefs and about the role of charity in their daily practices. They drew parallels between the characters in the novella and the parables in their holy books. All concurred that Scrooge was not sharing his wealth and thus not exercising his full humanity.

And that discourse allowed for others to surface as well. Later, for example, after reading *The Outsiders*, a novel that Frank did not much enjoy because “he just did not relate to its themes or characters,” he still found in the assignment centered around it a way to examine “the different ways of thinking” that made him “an outsider among my friends,” a status he never before considered, as he shared in his interview. Although the poem itself did not speak in detail to how Frank considered himself an outsider (Figure 12), he did reveal in his first one-on-one interview an outstanding difference that he signified in that poem: “I am fairly religious whereas my friends aren’t and so I have different dreams I’d like to do.” It is this religious self that Frank felt was suppressed often in school. He spoke in his interviews about the fact that the discussions in class helped him investigate this side of his personality, and though he felt “alone” at first due to a perceived notion that others were not as religious, the discussions on many controversial topics, including religion, helped him see that “others liked to discuss religion just as much as I did, but they were too afraid because they too had come to believe it was against our constitution to do that.” And those discussions, Frank said, helped him see that maybe he was not “alone that way.”

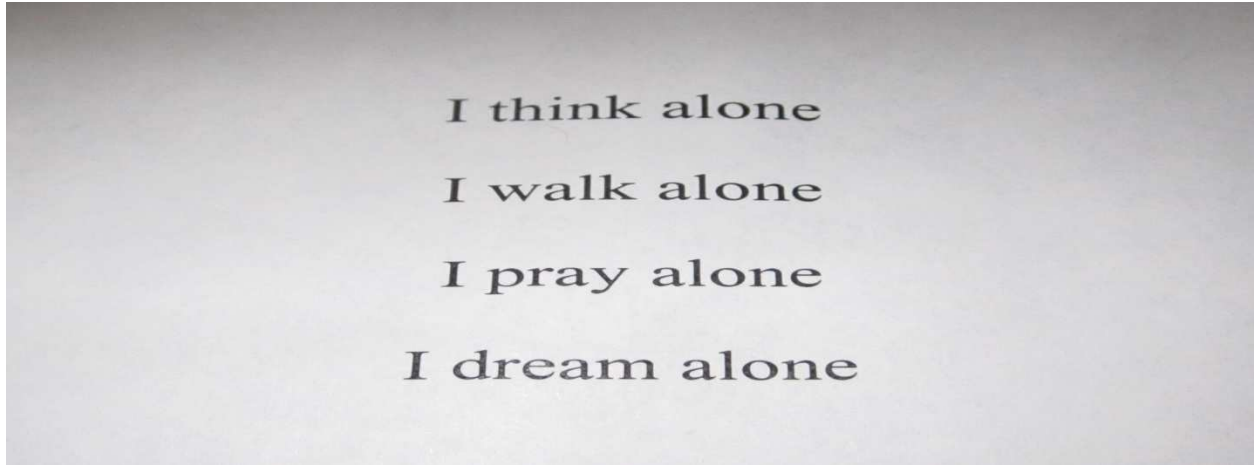


Figure 13. A Stanza from Frank's *The Outsider* assignment

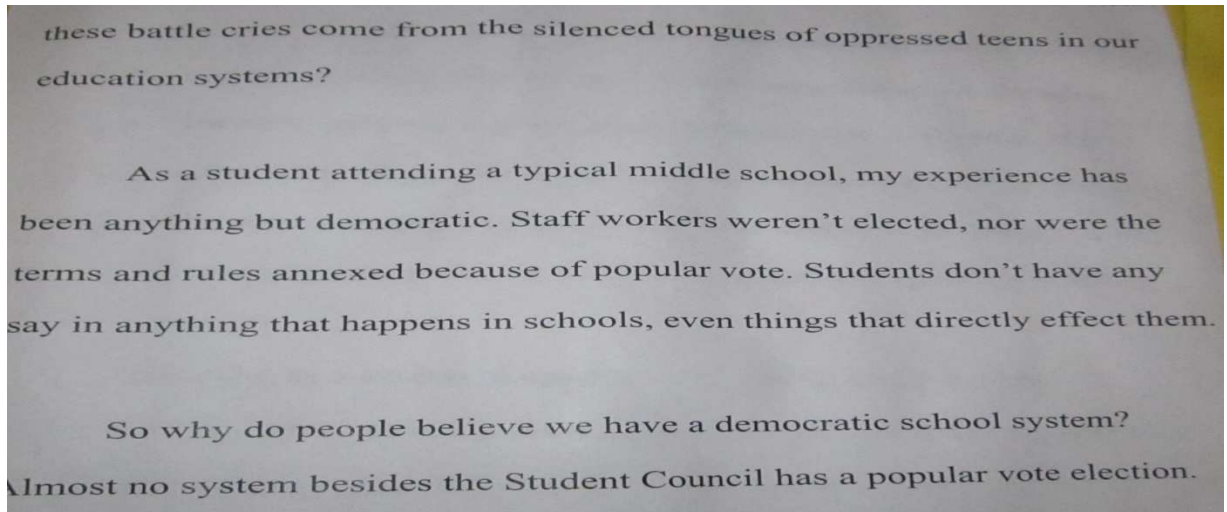
*Delivering discussions.* The discussions, which Frank describes in his evaluation of me, that they “couldn’t have even with our parents” helped him see “what a learning environment truly looked like.” They were many and presented many opportunities for all of us, me included, to reflect together, openly and candidly, about our realities. Driven by an earnest desire to think and learn and dialogue, they became tools of thinking that later the students used in their writing as well. In his final evaluation, Frank attests to the significant role teachers assume in allowing the full and free flow of communication in the classroom:

You allowed everybody to speak freely about their beliefs and some of the quieter kids even got into the discussions. It was truly a fun and enjoyable experience. I was really impressed by how you handled some of the more personal questions, and I loved how you allowed the most personal questions to float the room, with each student participating.

Frank’s tone here contrasts much with a tone he adopted earlier during the year, and he realized and discussed the change in himself during his final one-on-one interview. To describe it, he uses a language he learned within the walls of the classroom and in the confines of his church walls. “Like Scrooge,” he admits, “I underwent, not a transformation, but a transfiguration, and it was true and enduring alchemy.” In fact, he adds, “my perception of you changed too: “During the beginning of the year, your personality came off strong. You asked for

so much that I was overwhelmed by what you were saying we had to do.” Based on previous experiences, Frank had conceived of language arts class as merely long vocabulary packets and reading logs signed at home. When this notion was shaken and he was forced to traverse the unpredictable and nuanced terrains of literacy, he became frustrated and panicked. But a pedagogical partnership helped him see that “I still loved coming to class because I knew you were understanding and loved your students.” And with that knowledge, Frank found a path to a transfigured self, one that was less invested in pleasing and more in purposeful change. In navigating novel terrains in literacy, Frank found a new academic self that claimed agency over its personal and social discourses, then moved, as his op-ed “The Mystery of the Missing Democracy in School” attests, to challenge the status quo in schools and the hegemonic nature of classroom learning. His introduction summons his nation’s history to question his own present. True to a yearlong tradition we learned in this class and that helped guide them to adopt a historical perspective and attempt to frame every issue today in a historical context, Frank contemplates his local school experiences of having “no voice to question authority or protest,” in a fundamental frame of this nation’s past (Figure 13). His first sentence, “no taxation without representation,” summons the American Revolution in all its nuances, and the brewing revolution on the pages of this eighth-grader’s final project reeks of Freireian thought: “Why do we not hear these battle cries come from the silenced tongues of oppressed teens in our education systems?”

He reflects on his own school experience, which “has been anything but democratic.”



*Figure 14.* Frank's Op-ed

He turns to list his grievances, “Even as class president is appointed by popular vote, the president has little to no say in what goes on in the school. Class president has just a bigger voice in the crowd of students, just a bit more authority. He can’t make any changes.” The many discussions in class had helped Frank establish this well. He moves on to opine that “students are treated no different than slaves” and “I don’t think 48 math problems that take 15 minutes each are what we should be concentrating on right now.” In his bid for a system of check and balances that should define the teacher-student relationships, he declares, “I oppose this dictatorship in schools” and asks for a “part in the recruiting of new staff and the changes that take place in schools.”

Frank’s last assignment in his project is his “A Book That Hooked.” In it, Frank makes clear, through his reading and writing choices, the fruits of our collaborative labor: a balance of keeping high expectations for learning literacy in the classroom and staying grounded in humane practices of empathetic and responsive teaching. Both helped Frank uplift himself from a silenced school presence and use his many other discourses to grow into a better writer and reader. The beginning of that followed our first exchange on the personal narrative introduction.

The many literacy events that followed helped frame Frank not solely as a cheerful and bright young man seeking to please me and earn a good grade, but, as he proves in his “Book That Hooked” assignment, a young intellectual: “Deep within my imagination, horrendous monsters, grueling ghouls, and stalking shadows lurk. Within my whirring teenage mind, these creatures take shape and tear my sanity to shreds.” He describes how these monsters mustered their way there, he adds, “Reading, a tool used even before ancient Egyptians, was their passage to my mind.” That year, in my 80s collection, Frank met Stephen King, and “became a big fan of horror novels, short stories, and almost anything creepy I can get my hands on.” That year, too, Frank underwent an academic and social *transfiguration*.

### **Final Words**

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2009), Paulo Freire writes, “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world” (p. 88). My findings support his claim that “human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 88). These words, Freire stipulates, dialogic actions themselves, must be founded upon love for the world and its inhabitants, nurtured by humility and faith and trust, rooted in hope, and requiring and generating critical thinking (89-93). The students’ final projects and the interviews around them show how dialogues, as acts of creation, became sources of empowerment for these four students as they sought to liberate themselves from oppressive systems and realities. Literacy—the word that is the world—was at the core of such transformative action.

## **CHAPTER SIX: Interpretations, Implications, and Recommendations**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the various social and academic discourses that a convenience sampling of ten students (see p. 60-63, Chapter Three) across three of my language arts classes used to create their final projects in eighth-grade language arts and the significance of locality to these students' literacy experiences. Chapter Four looked across the ten students' words during the group interviews and the artifacts for their final projects to analyze how local literacies empower the lives of students and the nature of the transactions that helped shape these students' literate thinking. In Chapter Five, via four narrative case studies, the study investigated ways in which both local and global contexts interact to help students promote or resist social and political trends. The backdrop to this study was the pedagogical approach in this literacy classroom which I analyzed for its contributions to the students' final projects and insofar as it provided for the unfolding of the literacy activities which the final projects entailed.

In summarizing and drawing upon the findings from Chapters Four and Five, I discuss the way choice supported students' engagement with the literacy events of this language arts classroom to perceive and perform new academic and social selves that rendered them agents in their own lives. Situating these literacy events in the students' own lives allowed students to appropriate the language of these experiences to navigate and investigate their own discourses. This empowered them to turn away from different forms of silencing and toward liberating themselves and thus their literacy practices from standard, decontextualized, and numbing approaches to literacy.

In doing so, this study deconstructs/problematises the grand narrative of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy. Empowering literacy, as this study confirms, is a



contextualized practice of choices that seeks to work with students in breaking various types of academic and social silences as they exercise agency in both their classrooms and their lives.

In the final section of this chapter, I highlight both the implications and limitations of this study and conclude with recommendations for educators and suggestions for future research that brings more students' voices, in their multiplicities, to bear in future discussions of literacy.

### **Navigating and Negotiating Choices**

My findings revealed that the literacy events in the classroom, facilitated and negotiated by an interested and knowledgeable adult, offered these ten students a wide range of personal ways to practice academic and personal choices (Chapter Four). Significant to these findings, these choices allowed them multiple possible reading and writing venues for creating and performing both their academic and social selves, and for integrating the two, I drew on Paul Smith's (1988) notion of individual selves constructed within broader sets of discourses which, I argued in Chapter Four, resulted from each student's specific search for self-interest in the navigation of these discourses. In perceiving their past selves via models such as the "I Am From" poem and the personal narratives they read, the students used the class discussions surrounding these events to help them envision and write alternate and possible versions to being and becoming.

Following closely (via the case studies in Chapter Five) how four of them used the literacy events of the classroom to claim spaces to perceive and perform their voices and visions, the study revealed how students were able to turn away from a specific form of silencing, both on and off the page, and reclaim a hidden voice that helped them better navigate their lives and their literacies. This navigation transcended classroom walls to encompass larger social arenas in which students continued to perform and practice their literary and living choices.

In learning to navigate a spectrum of choices, students were also learning in essence to continuously reconstruct their experiences, which Dewey (1916/2012) proclaims is the function of education. Such experience, as Chapter Four showed, allowed them to envision many possibilities of a self and embraced difference as a defining element of self and a delivering ingredient of both classroom learning and democratic civic engagement. Drawing on their many different and sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing discourses (Yagelski, 2000), which I argued in Chapter Two are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), these ten students engaged in creative and critical dialogues which were at the heart of their transmissions (Dewey, 1916/2012, p. 9). Such discourses of opportunity (Rex, 2010) were anchored in the literacy events of the classroom and fostered authentic communities of learning and change. Students were thus able to break the mold on the multiple forms of silence that defined the fixed realities they had come to know and inhabit. As they engaged in critical thinking, their agency extended beyond their academic realms as they began to preoccupy themselves with reclaiming their humanization (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 44) from the pangs of standardization.

### **Turning from Silencing: (Re)Performing Academic and Social Selves**

It is significant to note here that the indications of silencing did not manifest themselves similarly in all four students. For each, the turn from silencing to the reclamation of voice represented an individual act that manifested itself in unique ways. As subject/agents, their agency manifested itself in how they negotiated and/or resisted the multiple discourses of their lives, rather than accommodating them (Yagelski, 2000, p. 78). For Huda, trapped in the boundaries of her own skin, a layer that enveloped a childhood full of anguish and pain, understanding vitiligo via her I-search represented an opportunity to, as she put it, “peel the

layers.” As she learned more about her disease via her reading and research and as she discussed it more via her writing and presentation, she was able to use these academic discoveries and discourses to resist the victim status she had adopted. In so doing, she peeled away layers of her social self such as her mother’s death and her writing identity, and she found an agency that allowed her to speak to the many injustices that she faced both in and out of school (e.g., her story with a social studies teacher and her story as a Palestinian). She used this new agency to advocate for vitiligo outside of the classroom (with a local vitiligo group of adults), investigate career choices (dermatology) that would help her spread her impact to others who also suffer the silence of their skins, and connect globally with those who shared her drive and disease.

Kat’s silencing, both in its physical and psychological dimensions, resulted from a world she inhabited that encompassed a chaotic string of events spiraling out of her control. Her only means of controlling the ensuing chaos was to academically silence it. She controlled it by pretending it was not there and, at least in words, she chose not to resurrect it. Through the literacy events of the classroom, the “I Am From” poem and her personal narrative especially, Kat chose to use her writing (following Maya Angelou’s example as she claimed in her interviews), to protest in words a world out of her control. She devised and used literacy in two unique ways. The first one was a private one that she kept tucked in the pages of a private notebook that detailed her innermost thoughts and which she shared with a trusted and invested adult, her teacher. The other lurked in pieces of a puzzle (her metaphors and symbols) to which only she had the key and that defined much of what she wrote in school. Unlike Huda’s agency, which extended itself to outside networks, Kat’s agency manifested itself in her ability to use her literacy to draw the curtain from or over the events of her life. In her I-search, she revealed how her scoliosis had made life debilitating yet rich. In her “I Am From” poem, she concealed under

her words a life of poverty and anguish. Doing so allowed her to retrieve control over what she once had no control over, namely a debilitating poverty, a bipolar parent, and a “house full of guys” that left this young lady in its margins. Of literacy, she had multiple brands, and each fit a self-interest that was anchored in her various multiple selves.

Unlike Kat, Ray came from a supportive and nurturing working class environment. Like Kat, however, he practiced silence in safe literacies that kept things that mattered to him, music especially, out of academic realms. Early school experiences had taught him to draw a big red line between school demands and personal interests. The literacy events of his language arts classroom, discussions especially, opened for him a forum in which he could fuse both an academic and social self. In an I-search paper, he investigated the disconnect between school and education. With Paul, a fellow musician and critical thinker, he engaged in critical dialogues that steered him in new directions in his thinking, his writing, and his agency, both in and out of the classroom. From this position of agency, he invited spectators (in his op-ed) from similar positions of marginality to the center where they could practice critical thinking and engaged citizenry.

For Frank, literacy events in this classroom served to affirm his outsider stance as a religious teen. In the many discussions we had on religion, especially in connection with *A Christmas Carol*, Frank was presented with multiple opportunities to introduce this self to the rest of his peers, not hide it. As he became comfortable academically navigating and presenting this new social self, other selves began to emerge. His empowerment came as he embarked on deconstructing a standard academic and a social self both constituted by *others* and constructing an agent self that embraced his own personal and academic choices of being and becoming. He extended the benefits of this self to other realms and other arena where he performed its nuances

on the pages of his final project and later, as his interviews revealed, on the stages of his high school and community theatres.

Through their many different and sometimes intersecting discourses, each of these students found ways to exercise, through the literacy events of this classroom, personal and academic choices. And though often, as many of them said, they knew their starting point, the end at first was nowhere in sight. In essence, they were learning to navigate ambiguous and uncertain territory. That ambiguous territory manifested the scope and sequence of the writing act for these eighth-graders. Invoking self-interest, “an ultimately unfixable process whose meaning is not unproblematically available” but which is manifested in a subject’s actions and sign systems (Yagelski, 2000, p. 81), each student, rooted in a self history or narrative, engages multiple discourses and negotiates unstable and shifting selves (p. 80). What they set out to do, and what actually transpired, represented sort of an awakening for them that dispelled, to a degree, common notions about standard literacy practices.

### **Appropriating Literacy Events as Tools of Empowerment, Liberation, and Collaboration**

Situated within students’ own lives and experiences, this classroom’s literacy events were appropriated by students and fashioned for their own uses and empowerment (Scribner & Cole, 1981). These events took on real and personal purposes as students transacted (Rosenblatt, 1978) with classroom literacy events in order to perceive and then perform literary and social selves. As the analysis in both Chapters Four and Five demonstrated, the “local-ness” of literacy can be insufferably complicated (Yagelski, p. 88). The ten participants in this study used their various discourses, their multimodalities (Kress, 2000), to tackle, creatively and collaboratively, complications that they faced in and out of the classroom. The texts and contexts of the literacy events engaged them deeply and in personal and academic ways. They often presented them with

models to help them negotiate, deconstruct, and construct selves that they liberated from standardized notions and practices.

The literacy events described in Chapter Five became tools that the four focal students in the case studies fashioned for their own purposes. The personal narrative allowed Huda the agency necessary to *go through* her past and pain, to resist, to reach out, and to provide closure. Kat also used the personal narrative to *go through* a terror of a day that left an indelible mark on her character. The process, an investment in trust—both of her literacy processes and the environment which nurtured them—proved detoxifying and multipurposed. For Ray, the literacy events allowed him to break the silence of standards he had also been *going through* and choose critical thinking, through unsanctioned and unimposed critical dialogues. His I-search paper on education allowed him not to let his schooling interfere with an education on music that he received not from his teacher, but from Paul, with whom he forged a productive partnership that investigated and challenged (in his op-ed) the corporatization of music. For Frank too, who had been silenced by standards revolving around a letter grade, the liberation came in the form of an academic struggle that he faced as he learned to write an introduction to his personal narrative and perform a new academic self. This self, as he shared, was a *transfiguration* resulting from facing his fears, forging *alchemical* bonds, nurturing difference, and challenging a missing democracy in schools.

For all ten students, dialogic relations served as a method of liberation from debilitating dichotomies and traditional notions of schooling and living. In essence, these teenagers were freeing themselves from what Gramsci (1971) calls the superstructures of society, which propagate assertions contradictory to their own interests and experiences.

The literacy events proved helpful in nurturing collaborative selves, members of one community driven by common interests (Dewey, 1916/2012, p. 7) where all can learn (hooks, 1994). What Kat described as the “loose nature” of the classroom allowed them the liberty to move freely and purposefully in its boundaries and beyond to find sources of guidance and help. They assumed partner roles well with each other. The interdependence was striking and useful. Everyone in class was at once a recipient and source of help and guidance. They shared research and tools. They dialogued about their findings and frustrations. They worked in teams to support and learn from each other. They built on their different strengths and conquered their common weaknesses. The I-search process, though difficult and complex, proved manageable as they tackled it as a community of learners. They were reading voraciously and avidly and bringing findings regularly to me and other classmates. The fact that they were researching questions anchored in their own lives and the matters of these lives made them very intent on reading all they could, and though they encountered struggles typical of any learning situation, they also seemed prepared to deal with them in healthy and constructive means.

These eighth-graders, as a community, steered highly controversial issues in new and innovative courses. In showcasing their different discourses and partaking in each other’s constructions and performances of their narratives and selves, they were in essence learning to heed democracy’s main ingredient. They were also carving classroom space for a problem-posing education (Freire, 1970/2009) where narratives of hope abound, discussions of meaningful differences surface, and non-market based democratic identities emerge with promising potential (Giroux, 2000).

### **Literacy Represents a Multiplicity**

The local narratives of these ten teens, spread across the pages of both Chapters Four and Five, challenge vehemently and in many ways the myth of a standardized, essentialized, and decontextualized literacy. Literacy, this inherently social process, became for these ten students primarily a local act of self construction within discourse, as Yagelski (2000) affirms.

This research study thus dispels the notion of a literacy that is imposed and prepackaged in a one-size-fits-all approach. In choosing to situate their literacy events in their own lives, the students reiterated and affirmed that literacy is locally bred and fed. It is nurtured and nuanced in their own experiences and their understanding of them. Discussed and delivered via the final project, the literacy in this study spoke the lives of its users. It is spotted with their vitiligo, branded with their poverty, shaped by their beliefs, refined by their perceptions, and delivered in their multimodal voices. It shaped and was shaped by its contexts. It also reflected and refracted its users.

Challenging by choice, the students practiced freedom in constructive ways. Throughout this study, students' choices were born out of their experiences, in and out of the classroom, and fashioned for their uses. These choices represented the many ways they were being and becoming. Their voices—multiple, varied, intersecting, disenfranchised, nuanced—synchronized to produce a mosaic of narratives, not one, which contested a grand narrative of one official literacy, under God, indivisible. The literacies students practiced were as nuanced as their choices, and just as compelling.

The serious sophistication with which the students in this study approached and discussed their lives and the matter of these lives in and out of the classroom challenge much of the narrative of a literacy crisis in our nations and the nature of the lives that are presumed to have



propelled it. In this study, the multidimensional purposes of literacy and the multiple forms in which students practiced them brought forth, across the pages of their final projects and in the interviews around them, a literacy that resembles its users—contextualized, broad, full of tension. The crisis, I believe, is in the official representation of this crisis, which is born out of a vision of literacy that limits choice and derails freedom. It definitely does not square with the findings of this research.

### **Summary of the Discussion**

Equipped with choice that defines an engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), as this study concludes, students can critically and collaboratively move to perceive, via the literacy events of their language arts classrooms, means to deconstruct standard versions of themselves. And, in so doing, they can construct academic and social selves empowered to liberate themselves and others from the silence of standardization.

As we examine more students' ambivalence about their literacy learning, we find that it results from their disillusionment of standardized literacy's effects. Disregarding the *petits recits* (Lyotard, 1984/1979) of students such as ones in this study undermines our efforts to make literacy an equalizing source of agency and empowerment (Freire, 1970/2009; Yagelski, 2000), forcing us to critically examine, once again, the relationship between education and democracy (Freire, 1970/2009; Yagelski, 2000). As long as we keep pressing forward, in practice and perception, a grand narrative of literacy that contradicts our and our students' experiences and oppresses the multiplicities of voices and visions that define our democracy, we shall not be productive in our proclaimed efforts to respond adequately either to the literacy needs of our students or to a self-fulfilling prophecy of an imagined literacy crisis.

## **Contributions and Expansion on Existing Literature**

**Reconceiving choice in the literacy classroom and other democratic arenas.** Choice in this study represented a gateway to other skills and helped empower these eighth-graders personally and academically. Although most of the students throughout the interviews conceived of choice as something *given* to them by their teacher, and not as a necessary component of a free classroom, examples of free and full exercise of choices was rampant through their final project. As their comments during the interviews demonstrated, they embraced, sometimes reluctantly, the cognitive demands of choice. Their academic experiences precluded their ability to recognize that choice is a cognitive prerequisite to full and free communication. And while they discussed choice as mostly a physical manifestation, their writing demonstrated repeatedly the critical perceptions of choice that steered their work. Repeatedly, the students talked about how schools had led them to relinquish their capacity for choice and how they often felt expelled from the orbit of decision-making.

Choice has often come to denote—in academic and social circles—more a process of selection and much less frequently a process of critical thought and reflection, of envisioning alternative narratives and ambiguous realities (Ch. 4). According to Freire (1974/2013), choices cannot be recipes and/or prescriptions. They must rather be critical perceptions that are devoid of others' expectations (p. 5-7). As students repeatedly articulated, the element of choice represented for them a major component of their language arts pedagogy and presence. This presence was mostly enacted by their ability to exercise choice, this one word that entails many meanings. In analyzing how these students conceived of and exercised choice, this study illuminated a significant, and often left behind, element of literacy as practice of freedom. In reconceiving choice, this study forwarded a worthwhile examination of its meaning and role in

our students' literacies and lives, especially if we aim to make the literacy classroom an arena for democratic deliberation and action.

**Recognizing different forms of silencing in our students' social and academic lives.**

Giroux (2003), as I wrote in Chapter Two, contests the “forms of domestic terrorism” American children who are “poor, hungry, homeless, neglected, lacking medical care or suffering physical abuse by adults” suffer in silence as we turn a moral and political eye of indifference to their plights and sufferings. In the classroom, and as harbingers of democracy, literacy educators cannot turn an indifferent eye to the many silences that students suffer in a state that “reifies them through a commercial logic in search of a new market niche” (Giroux, 2000, p. 14).

As several of the students throughout the course of this study revealed, silence defined much of their existence. Silenced in their personal lives (Celine, Huda, and Kat), their academic spaces by expectations others hold of them and they themselves have come to practice (Ray, Frank, Shay, Bella, and Riley), and on the social and political fronts in a society that renders them mere consumers and frames them in the margins of their socioeconomics and politics (Hind, Salwa, Shay), these students resorted to practice different forms of damaging silences that capped their potential to be active and practicing agents in their personal, academic, and social circles. Their only power, as Shay testified, was a purchasing one. By buying, they were being. This study revealed that silencing in the lives of these teenagers took many forms. Each of these forms masked underlying and hidden discourses that students felt they could not bring to school with them. Celine's silencing was manifested in acts of bullying and rebellion that she practiced in the hallways of her academic spaces. For Bella, it was a silencing of a visual discourse that proved marginal in the realms of standardized practices. For Hind, a silencing of a political discourse that is antithetical to mainstream politics left her with ambiguous allegiances. For

Riley, Frank, and Ray, the parallel nature of their academic and personal discourses left them trapped in their confines. Shay's special education label, and the expectation inherent within, silenced his poetic vision and potential to avidly articulate his thinking. By recognizing and attending to the different types of silencing students experience, critical pedagogy can help them shed the debilitating effects of that silencing and perform new and alternate selves.

**Expanding the notion of literacy as a local and liberating act of self-construction.**

The grand narrative of literacy education in our country continues to propagate a vision of literacy as one that is neutral, detached, one-size-fits-all and isolated from its contexts. This is a toxic and political perspective that serves neither literacy educators nor their students. Situated literacy is living literacy, and as such, the drive to move literacy from the lives of our students renders it numb, necrophilic, and needless.

This study, in blurring the demarcation between literacy and living, allowed a simultaneous and healthy merging of person and pupil. The writing process, often treated in classrooms as a mechanical and procedural unfolding of skills, was often perceived and discussed by this group more as an academic and social unfolding than a mechanical acquisition of skills. Beginning with the process of finding ideas to write about, the ten students dispelled the myth of a list of topics as even remotely helpful. Lists gave you, as many of them reiterated, something to choose, but not how to go about thinking about your choice. All concurred that what helped them most generate ideas to write about were the readings we did in class, their life experiences, and of course, the many discussions we had in class around "everything" that centered around those readings and those experiences.

The literacy process—a choice of creating and performing the self—was also an opportunity for them to claim a voice that was distinctly theirs. The discussions, as most of their

comments affirmed, were opportunities for them to test their voices and beliefs, to know each other better, to form a cohesive group identity, and, as in Bella's case, to listen to an assortment of claims and the evidence around them, in order to help form her own stances and opinions.

However, they proved much more. Monitored daily and refined by feedback, these authentic dialogues became, for many of the students in my classes, healthy exercises in spontaneous thinking and speaking. Authentic discussions helped Shay achieve a robust and convincing voice that, as a special education student, he struggled to bring out in writing. For Hind, Ray, and Frank, sundry discussions on topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the industry of music, and religious organizations gave each of them, respectively, an opportunity to steer themselves and an audience of peers into uncharted territories guided by a trusted and equally enthralled adult. After all, those are not always places that students, or even teachers, in middle school are made to feel safe enough to navigate, and doing so is never without risks.

And this situated practice that allowed them to perceive, perform, create, and recreate themselves was a progressive and patient practice in our literacy classroom. It was a recurrent one too. It became and continued to be lived in the many literacy events that defined their eighth-grade year: the discussions/dialogues that took place around their readings; the search, via the I-search, for ways to understand themselves and their worlds better; and writing revisions in which their periods and commas did not stand supreme. The feedback on their writing processes became, first and foremost, an investigation of their thinking and living processes, and so feedback, as evident in this study, offered students ways to recreate not only their writing pieces but also their understandings of themselves and their world. As such, they did not tire of it at all. In fact, they anticipated it, longed for its benefits, and embraced it wholly.

**Nurturing dialogic relationships as a defining element of the literacy classroom and other democratic arenas.** At the conclusion of the interviews with the students, throughout the transcription phase, and having read through their interviews multiple times, I cannot but once again marvel at the suavity of the spoken words used by these students, then in their freshmen year of high school, to describe their experiences in their various and wide worlds. It became clear to me, and to them, that they had acquired a habit of dialoguing with others their own thinking and on their own terms. Listening to them speak once again alerted me that no longer were their literacy events outside themselves, or imposed by an *other*. They were personal choices and personal journeys which they made together.

Throughout the analysis, I became quite attuned to Freire's claim that dialogical relations are critical to acts of cognition (Ch. 3, p. 27). The guidance, the facilitation and partnership, became possible in this language arts classroom only through a communication process that defined my interaction with my students and one that aided in the "transmission of resources and achievements of [our] complex society" (Dewey p. 25-26). I was, however, convinced that literacy was no straightforward matter, no mere words. It was rather part and parcel of the whole set of attributes and attitudes that were brought to our social interactions (Gee, 1990). It thus entailed complex relationships among local acts of reading and writing, and broader economic, cultural, political, and social forces (Yagelski, 2000, p. 29). Dialogues, combined with other literary events, helped frame these students' experiences in this classroom and move students beyond the parameters of their traditional literacies and lives. Because students during the course of the interviews and in their reflection referred to them often, these literacy events proved instrumental in an unfolding of the students' many discourses, which reframed their identities in new ways, as my findings reveal.

The dialogues also, as was evident throughout Chapters Four and Five, made the negotiation and understanding that defined the other literacy events possible. They served as the cement for all the other events, and as such, they proved to be the most salient feature of this language arts classroom. However, dialogues were not just bridges or helpful, useful means to a higher end. They were ends in themselves. Students claimed them as spaces for spontaneous deliberation and negotiation. They fashioned them as arenas of resistance too.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study yielded three implications which will be described in this section. Each of the implications ties the work that educators do in the classroom to its global contexts.

**Educators can benefit from recognizing the literacy classroom as a site of healthy democratic engagement, the core of which are students' words and worlds.** In the first two chapters of this study, I discussed how literacy is democracy's basic ingredient (Chisholm, 1988), central to a democratic existence (Yagelski, 2000, p. 3). Schools, I argued, are recognized to simultaneously reflect and contribute to the inequities of the broader society (DeStigter, 2001, p. 14). The role of education as a practice of freedom is to help students, in their competing identities, navigate and reconstruct boundaries across discourse communities with the ultimate goal of teaching them "to participate in and construct a just and democratic world from the complex world into which they are venturing" (Moje & Sutherland, 2003, p. 149). In so doing, we teach them to "deal critically and creatively with reality" (Freire, 2009) in order to transform their worlds and resist hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Dewey's ideal of democracy (1916/2012) posits that "full and free" communication allows people to identify their common interests, to act together in pursuit of these interests, and then to reap the fruits of such collective activity. This

role of the English classroom and of the literacy events that define it help establish this type of culture required to make literacy a situated practice (The New London Group, 1996). This too was reiterated by the May 2005 Conference on English Education, where a group of prominent researchers in the field unequivocally voiced their rationale for the teaching of language arts, which reflected both Freire's and Dewey's visions for a liberating education. The success of English education, they affirmed, lies in "creating a just society whose citizens are critically literate about their world" (p. 279). "English education," they asserted, "more than any other academic discipline, because of its focus on language and representation, contributes vitally to the process by which our society defines, understands, maintains, and *transforms* [emphasis in original text] itself" (p. 279).

**Practices of freedom: Students benefit from an expanded view of the practice of choice in the literacy classroom.** Oftentimes choice is conceived in superficial and totalizing ways as one of a set of options that is prepared and presented to students without their input or consideration. As this study shows, choice is a highly complex process that demands a navigation of ambiguous and multidimensional territory. Transitioning students, thus, from depositories of standardized choices, or as Freire deems "a mechanistic view of reality" (2009, p. 130) in which students are anesthetized and inhibited (2009, p. 81), to problem-solving agents making their own choices and solving their own problems in and with the world, stands as an arduous task of commitment to a pedagogy of freedom. It requires a trust in their ability to gain a power of consciousness that would "condition their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality" (Freire, 2009, p. 130). Nurturing choice in the classroom, as this study revealed, requires educators to loosen their grip in the language arts classroom and also accept that oftentimes,



authentic choices empower students and often yield unpredictable outcomes. Educators must be willing and able to take on the challenges of choice as well as embrace its many possibilities.

**Pedagogy of freedom: Educators can benefit from recognizing and teaching writing, not as strategies, but as a personal performance of a social act.** As discussed in Chapter Four, Celine's act of simultaneously pushing away and reaching out is an appropriate analogy for both the social and academic stance of the teenager and the writer performing a self. On the one hand, while the writing act is a performance of the self in which the writer yearns for the freedom to make her own writing choices and living ones too, it is at the same time, and with as much intensity, a social act that requires a supportive and invested other. And this *other*, in the writing classroom, is definitely not just the teacher who plays a leading role in remaining a partner and not a critic. She inspires, guides, cajoles, dialogues, and listens too. But it is also *other* students who, under a strong and purposive mentorship, form a cohesive, invested, and responsive team whose members all have equally important roles in the development of their own as well as others' social and academic selves, another rationale for nurturing healthy and open relationships among members of the literacy classroom community.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the sheer volume of data, which made interpretation and analysis quite time-consuming. The research process proved long and tedious. I revisited my data repeatedly and pored over it in detail, selecting what I deemed necessary to help me craft an analysis that was directed at answering my research questions, as I could not have possibly used all of the data I had. Still, it is quite possible, indeed likely, that a revisiting of the data would reveal other issues and aspects which are at least as interesting and important as those I chose to analyze and write about.

Another limitation to this exploratory study is its inherent complexities, which I found quite difficult to represent simply. Representing what is predominantly a cyclical phenomenon in a linear form of communication was difficult. Often, by writing about one aspect of the issue as, for example, in one person's story, other aspects of it were unintentionally concealed. There are often several different ways to present the same set of issues, each one of which is subtly different in its approach and emphasis. This situation can make the findings of such research very difficult to summarize.

As a veteran teacher, and having taught some of the students in this study for two years and known them well, my mere presence could have affected the subjects' responses. Another limitation could be that I might have unintentionally passed through them some of my own thoughts and perceptions. Several times during the course of the interview, a few of them mentioned that they did not give all of the details because "[I was] there." They sometimes withheld information because they thought I knew it already.

A convenience sampling of ten participants represented in this study volunteered for this study based on their availability and ability to get to the research site. Several populations were not represented. For example, there were about twenty students who chose to do digital final projects, and none of them were part of this study. None of the African-American students I taught during the 2012-2013 academic year participated in this study, either. I had a total of eight African-American students in my three language arts classrooms, and it is a minority represented well in our school despite the fact that African-American students in general are a transient population in our school and district. Based on what these students told me about their experiences in and out of the classroom at this specific middle school, their individual and collective perspectives would have enriched the study's premises.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

**Opening forums in literacy research for adolescents to share their narratives.** As the teacher-researcher in this study and as veteran teacher for over two decades, I have had the privilege of learning firsthand about the literacy practices that propel adolescents forward in their personal and academic journeys. I have also had multiple opportunities to witness and learn from their discourses, and their mediation of them, plenty about myself as a person and as a literacy educator. What they imparted served to help me critically reflect on my practice. Their words and worlds helped link literacy theory to its practice. I was served by this firsthand contact. And though I tried hard in this study to convey these servings as authentically as possible, I believe that the complex nuances of their literacies and lives remain elusive. Future research must make room in its center for students to share more of their stories and visions for literacy in their lives. More petits recits would enrich the field with firsthand adolescent perspective, which has much to contribute to the field directly and without interpretation.

**Utilizing literacy events and practices as tools to break academic and social silencing.** This study reconfirmed that students in our classrooms suffer different forms of silencing that prove inhibiting to their development as healthy and literate individuals and citizens. Literacy education has the critical role of breaking the different forms of silencing around their specific discourses. Professional development in literacy education needs to move from the technical sphere in which it still lingers to concern itself with what Freire terms “the ethical formation both of selves and of history” (1998, p. 23). Especially as schools stand unable to meet a growing adolescent population with increasing mental health issues, the need is dire to align literacy and life practices. Research should address the healing nature of a literacy situated

in the context of students' lives, which helps them navigate and recuperate from the effects of capitalistic and consumerist cultures.

**Designing language arts curricula around student discourses.** Another recommendation from this research calls on literacy educators to design language arts curricula around students' own discourses. In allowing the matter of their lives to become the matter of their literacy, educators allow for a healthy blending of words and worlds. In establishing an intimate connection between what we often term *school knowledge* and knowledge that results from students' own lived experiences, we address issues of apathy in our classrooms and communicate a respect constantly compromised in our educational facilities.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study was conducted to find out the complex and specific ways in which literacy functions in the lives of ten students who were part of three eighth-grade language arts classrooms. I discussed how choice, reconceived, functions to empower these students to perceive non-standard selves that they can perform in and out of the literacy classroom. I also discuss how situating the literacy events of their classroom in students' own discourses helps them break different forms of silences that often stunt their personal and academic growth. Inviting them to investigate, via dialogic relations, the substance and matter of their lives and literacies, students, motivated by self-interest, use their specific discourses to engage critically in the classroom and in a larger social project of change and agency.

This research calls for a shift in the way we engage students, both in the classroom and outside. Designing language arts curricula around student discourses and opening forums for adolescents to speak their multiplicities empower them to break clusters of silence that prevent them from exploring the many possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens as they expand and deepen their engagement in and contributions to an unfinished democracy. I end this chapter

with a quote I borrow from Ray's final project, from one of the books he read in class, *Clockwork Angels* by Kevin Anderson (2012):

When tending a vast and beautiful garden, you have to plant many seeds, never knowing ahead of time which ones will germinate, which will produce the most glorious flowers, which will bear the sweetest fruit. A good gardener plants them all, tends and nurtures them, and wishes them well. Optimism is the best fertilizer.



**Benefits**

The possible benefits to you for taking part in this research study are an increased sense of awareness about your literacy processes and the resulting products. This may increase your sense of agency and influence how you contribute to your future learning and thinking.

Additionally, information from this study may benefit other people (society) now or in the future by providing educators with models and incentives to encourage their students to develop their own literacy practices and collaborate with them on initiating local projects that change both the way they perceive their words and their worlds.

**Risks**

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

**Costs**

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

**Compensation**

For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience. A \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card will be given to each of the ten students who participated in this research study at the end of the fifth week of this study. Another \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card will be given to the four students who are selected to be part of the one-on-one interviews at the end of the tenth week of this study.

**Confidentiality:**

You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

**Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

**Questions:**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Amira Kassem at the following phone number (248) 596-1942. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or

if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

**Participation:**

By completing the questionnaire, interviews, focus group participation, your child is agreeing to participate in this study.



## APPENDIX B

### Consent Letter

#### Parental Permission/Research Informed Consent

**Title of Study:** From Local to Global: Purpose, Process and Product in the Narratives of Eighth Grade Language Arts Students.

Principal Investigator (PI): Amira Kassem

41979 Waterfall Northville, MI 48168

(248) 719-4696

#### Purpose

You are being asked to allow your child to be in a research study of 8<sup>th</sup> graders' local literacy practices because he/she completed a final project. This study is being conducted at the Ford Room of The Centennial Library. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at The Centennial Library is 10. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, I seek to understand how literacy is local. In other words, I want to understand how literacy reflects the lives of those who use it. I use the final project that students completed as part of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year to ask them questions about some of the reasons they made the choices they did in their reading and writing for this project and through the course of the year, and also to understand how their unique ways of thinking and being is reflected in these choices. In understanding how each of them approached the reading and writing event, I also hope to understand, from their viewpoints, how literacy is specific to them.

#### Study Procedures

If you/your child agree to take part in this research study, he/she will be asked to:

Fill out an anonymous questionnaire during the first week of the study at the Centennial Library. This questionnaire consists of 10 questions that are mostly multiple choice and fill in the blank. He/She will have the option of not answering any questions that he/she does not feel he/she can. Question topics include the project's rate of difficulty, how well it represented classroom material over the course of the year, favorite assignments, and least favorite assignments, as well as anything he/she would change (or keep) about the project.

Answer questions orally about his/her feelings, thoughts, and experiences as he/she worked on this final project and about the project artifacts during three 60 minute interviews group interviews. These interviews will take place during the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> week of the study

respectively. A sample of the interview questions will be available for you to read and you are encouraged to add details you deem important or ask for clarification of questions when necessary. After these three group interviews, four students from the group will be selected, based on their different approaches and responses during the group interviews, to take part in two in-depth one-on-one interviews of 60 minutes each.

If your son/daughter is one of the four students selected, he/she will also answer questions orally about his/her individual experience working on this project and some of the choices he/she made about topics and artifacts. These interviews will also take place in a local library room for 60 minutes and one-on-one with the interviewer. A copy of sample questions for these interviews is provided for you to read. Your son/daughter will be encouraged to give more detail where he/she thinks is appropriate or add any information that he/she deems necessary. He/She will also be encouraged to ask any questions and/or ask for explanations when directions are unclear. If he/she feels uncomfortable being interviewed, he/she has the option of asking not to be interviewed and still remain in the study.

### **Benefits**

The possible benefits to your child for taking part in this research study are an increased sense of awareness about his/her literacy processes and the resulting products. This may increase his/her sense of agency and influence how he/she contributes to his/her future learning and thinking.

Information gained from this study may help other people in the future by providing educators with models and incentives to encourage their students to develop their own literacy practices and collaborate with them on initiating local projects that change the ways they perceive both their words and their worlds.

### **Risks**

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

### **Study Costs**

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

### **Compensation**

For taking part in this research study, your child will be paid for his/her time and inconvenience with a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card at the end of the fifth week of this study. Another \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card will be given at the end of the tenth week of this research study to the four students who are selected to be part of the one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

## Confidentiality

All information collected about your child during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your child will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies your child personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your child's records.

## Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to allow your child to take part in this study. You and/or your child are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw your child from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you or your child are entitled to receive.

## Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Amira Kassem at the following phone number 248-719-4696. If you have questions or concerns about you or your child's rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

## Consent to Participate in a Research Study:

To voluntarily agree to have your child take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to have your child take part in this study, you may withdraw them at any time. You are not giving up any of your or your child's legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Birth

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/ Legally Authorized Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent Authorized Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
\*Signature of Parent/ Legally Authorized Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
\*Printed Name of Parent Authorized Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
\*\*Signature of Witness (When applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Witness

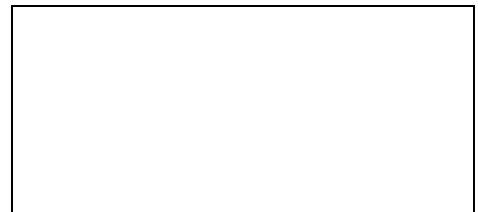
\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time



**APPENDIX C****Behavioral Documentation of Adolescent Assent Form**  
(ages 13-17)

Title: From Local to Global: Purpose, Process and Product in the Narratives of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Students.

**Study Investigator: Amira Kassem**

**Why am I here?**

This is a research study. Only people who choose to take part are included in research studies. You are being asked to take part in this study because you completed a final project at the end of your 8<sup>th</sup> grade year in Language Arts 8. Please take time to make your decision. Talk to your family about it and be sure to ask questions about anything you don't understand.

**Why are they doing this study?**

This study is being done to find out how reading and writing are affected by our individual purposes and backgrounds.

**What will happen to me?**

- You will fill out an anonymous questionnaire during the first week of the study at the Centennial Library. This questionnaire consists of 10 questions that are mostly multiple choice and fill in the blank. You will have the option of not answering any question that you do not feel you can. Question topics include the project's rate of difficulty, how well it represented classroom material over the course of the year, favorite assignments, and least favorite assignments, as well as anything you would change (or keep) about the project.
- You will answer questions orally about your feelings, thoughts, and experiences as you worked on this final project and about the project artifacts during three 60 minute interviews group interviews. These interviews will take place during the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> week of the study respectively. A sample of the interview questions will be available for you to read and you are encouraged to add details you deem important or ask for clarification of questions when necessary. After these three group interviews, four students from the group will be selected, based on their different approaches and responses during the group interviews, to take part in two in-depth one on one interviews of 60 minutes each.
- If you are one of the four students selected, you will also answer questions orally about your individual experience working on this project and some of the choices you made about topics and artifacts. These will also take place in a local library room for 60 minutes and one-on-one with the interviewer. A copy of sample questions for these interviews is provided for you to read but you will be encouraged to give more detail where you think is appropriate or add any information that you deem necessary. You will also be encouraged to ask any questions and/or ask for explanations when directions are unclear. If you feel uncomfortable being interviewed, you have the option of asking to not be interviewed and still remain in the study.

**How long will I be in the study?**

You will be in the study anywhere for approximately ten weeks. First, you will respond to an anonymous questionnaire during the first week of the study. Then, you will take part in three group interviews of 60 minutes each at the local library during the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and fourth week of the study. These are finalized and checked during the 5<sup>th</sup> week after which only four students will be selected to go on to the second phase of this study. If you are one of these four students, you will take part in two one on one interviews of 60 minutes each with Mrs. Kassem over the course of the next five weeks and based on a schedule we both set.

**Will the study help me?**

You may benefit from being in this study through an increased sense of awareness about your literacy processes and the resulting products. This may increase your sense of agency and influence how you contribute to your future learning and thinking.

Information gained from this study may help other people in the future by providing educators with models and incentives to encourage their students to develop their own literacy practices and collaborate with them on initiating local projects that change the ways they perceive both their words and their worlds.

**Will anything bad happen to me?**

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

**Will I get paid to be in the study?**

For taking part in this research study, you will receive a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card at the end of the fifth week of this study. Another \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card will be given to the four students who are selected to be part of the one-on-one interviews at the end of the tenth week of this research study.

**Do my parents or guardians know about this? (If applicable)**

This study information has been given to your parents/guardian and they said that you could be in it You can talk this over with them before you decide.

**What about confidentiality?**

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep your records (medical or other) and/or your information confidential. However, we do have to let some people look at your study records.

You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

We will keep your records private unless we are required by law to share any information. The law says we have to tell someone if you might hurt yourself or someone else. The study doctor can use the study results as long as you cannot be identified.

**What if I have any questions?**

For questions about the study please call Amira Kassem at (248) 719-4696. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628.

**Do I have to be in the study?**

You don't have to be in this study if you don't want to or you can stop being in the study at any time. Please discuss your decision with your parents and researcher. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

**AGREEMENT TO BE IN THE STUDY**

Your signature below means that you have read the above information about the study and have had a chance to ask questions to help you understand what you will do in this study. Your signature also means that you have been told that you can change your mind later and withdraw if you want to. By signing this assent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights. You will be given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant (13 yrs & older) \_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of Participant (13 yrs & older)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\*\*Signature of Witness (When applicable) \_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Witness



**APPENDIX D****Questionnaire on The Final Project in Language Arts 8**

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Please do **NOT** put your name on it. Place it in the marked envelope “**Anonymous Questionnaire**” when finished.

Directions: The purpose of this questionnaire is to help me understand your various feelings, thoughts, and processes on the final project which you completed in Language Arts 8. Please read each question carefully and answer it to the best of your abilities. There are no right or wrong answers for any of the questions below. Please ask if you are not sure what a question is asking.

1. In your opinion, how well does the final project in Language Arts 8 represent the material we covered in class?
  - a. Very well
  - b. Adequately well
  - c. Somewhat
  - d. Not too well
  - e. Not at all
  
2. How would you rate the degree of difficulty of this project for you?
  - a. Very difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Average
  - d. Easy
  - e. Very easy
  
3. What were some difficulties and/or challenges in this project for you.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  
4. List up to three assignments (from the attached list) that were your favorites (You may include the reason(s) in parentheses).
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_



5. List up to three assignments (from the attached list) for this project that you did not enjoy working on (You may include the reasons in parentheses).
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. I enjoyed all 10 assignments
6. Who did you rely on the most to help you complete this project? Circle one or two at the most.
- a. Myself
  - b. My classmates
  - c. My teacher
  - d. My family members
  - e. Other
7. How well do you feel this project represents you as an individual?
- a. Extremely well
  - b. Relatively well
  - c. average
  - d. Not too well
  - e. Not at all
8. What is one thing you would change about this project? Why?
9. What is one thing you would keep? Why?
10. Anything else you would like to add?

Thanks for your time!

**APPENDIX E****FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL:**

Title of Study: From Local to Global: Purpose, Process, and Product in the Narratives of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Students

**MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES FOR FOCUS GROUP**

- SIGN IN SHEETS
- NAME TENTS
- PADS AND PENCILS FOR EACH PARTICIPANT
- FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE
- TWO DIGITAL RECORDING DEVICES
- BATTERIES FOR RECORDING DEVICES
- RESEARCHERS NOTE-BOOK FOR NOTE TAKING
- PARTICIPANTS' FINAL PROJECTS

**Consent Process**

- Good Afternoon, and thank you for coming today. As part of my research for my doctoral dissertation on the locality of writing, I will be conducting three focus group interviews with you. I would like to conduct the first interview with you today because I hope to learn from you about your thoughts and approaches to the final project you completed for Language Arts 8.
- I would like to record the focus group interviews so I can make sure to capture the thoughts, opinions, and ideas I hear from this group. No names will be attached to the focus group and the tapes will be destroyed after I finish transcribing the interviews.
- You may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time.
- I understand how important it is that this information is kept private and confidential. I will ask participants to respect others' confidentiality. None of what you say today will be shared by anyone other than my research professor at Wayne State. Your names will be changed to protect your confidentiality.
- Your participation in this group is strictly voluntary and you may excuse yourself from the room at any time.
- Please complete information on the Sign-in sheet
- Any questions about this project or what I have told you thus far?

## **Explanation of the Process**

If you have not before participated in a focus group interview, you should probably know that they are often used in health and human services research. In focus groups:

- We learn from you (positive and negative)
- We are not trying to achieve consensus-have you all agree on something. We are gathering information.
- Logistics: This focus group interview will last 60 minutes. Please feel free to move around. The bathroom is around the corner.

## **Ground Rules**

First, ask the group to suggest some ground rules. After they brainstorm some, make sure the following rules are on the list:

- Everyone should participate
  - Information provided in the focus group must be kept confidential
  - Stay with the group and please don't have side conversations
  - Turn off cell phones, please.
  - Speak your mind and have fun!
1. Turn on Recorders
  2. Ask the group once again is there are any questions before we get started, and address those questions.

## **Focus Group Interview #1 Questions (60minutes)**

### **Purpose (Focus Group Interview One Questions-Day One)**

1. What motivated/helped you to complete this project?
2. What were some things you wanted people who see this project to know about you?
3. What were some issues/themes you chose to write about in this project that are important to you?
4. What would you have liked to include or write about in this project that you did not? Why didn't you?
5. What purpose did this project serve for you?

**Process (Focus Group Interview Two Questions-Day Two)**

1. What were some of your initial thoughts about this project?
2. What comes to mind as you recall working on this project?
3. What were some challenges/struggles/difficulties you had?
4. How would you describe the person and writer this project reveals?
5. Did you learn anything about yourself and/or others in the course of this project that you did not know before?
6. What do you think now as you look back on this project?

**Focus Group Interview Three Questions****Product (Day Three)**

1. What theme did you choose for your final project?
2. Why did you think this was an appropriate theme for your final project?
3. Select a segment/sentence/or part of an assignment you worked on that you think especially speaks your thinking? What makes this selection significant to you?
4. What if anything would you change about your project if you were to work on it now?
5. Final Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences with writing this project?
6. Anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX F

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title of Study: From Local to Global: Purpose, Process, and Product in the Narratives of Eighth Grade Language Arts Students

- I will be conducting two semi-structured interviews with you. I would like to conduct the first interview with you today because I hope to learn from you about your thoughts and approaches to the final project you completed for Lang Arts 8.
- I would like to record these one-on-one interviews so I can make sure to capture the thoughts, opinions, and ideas I hear from you. No names will be attached to the interviews and the tapes will be destroyed after I finish transcribing the interviews.
- You may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time.
- I understand how important it is that this information is kept private and confidential. None of what you say today will be shared by anyone other than my research professor at Wayne State. Your name will be changed to protect your confidentiality.
- Feel free to add any information you wish about your writing project, even if I do not ask about it.

#### **Purpose**

1. What motivated you to work on this project?
2. What do you want others to know about you from this project?
3. What main purpose did you hope to achieve via your project?
4. Which assignment (s) in this project best represent(s) your purpose? How?
5. What motivates you to write?

#### **Process**

6. Tell me about your writing process. How did you go about completing this project?
7. What helped you along the way?
8. What were some challenges and/or difficulties?
9. How did you overcome these difficulties?
10. What would you tell a student who is about to embark on a project?
11. What would you tell yourself if you could go back in time to that period in which you worked on this project?

#### **Product**

12. Which assignment(s) did you choose to share during your presentation? Why?
13. Did you have a personal favorite? Which?
14. What did you choose to do for your choice assignment?
15. Did your project turn out the way you wanted it to?

**APPENDIX G****FINAL PROJECT ASSIGNMENT BOOKLET****Handout #1-Final Project****Your Final Assignment (In a Poem):**

The final card marking, as you know, is finally here

You have much to celebrate, and many reasons to tear

In these walls we built many worlds with words

We summoned King Arthur, his knights and their swords.

We talked with Scrooge about poverty in our nation

We I-searched sunder topics, each with mission and station.

We read about roads least traveled by

We passionately debated every what and why.

Books through talks came alive for us all

To read more we had both desire and call.

We learned that writing's source is neither pen nor ink

It's the mind scanning life and the courage to think.

A few steps from high school you are today

So be ready your dues (and do's) in this project to pay!

As always, it's my purpose, my pleasure and my fun

To accompany you once more on this journey of one.

Best Work,

Mrs. Kassem

**Handout #2-Final Project**

May 2013

Dear 8<sup>th</sup> graders:

Your 8<sup>th</sup> grade learning journey is nearing its end. And it has been full of fantastic moments right from the beginning. I have followed all of you with interest and enthusiasm, inviting often, and sometimes even nudging you to take your rightful place as the conductor of your own learning journeys. I can honestly say that there is not a single student who has not moved steps in the right direction. Many of you ran-Olympic style-towards your goals, and in doing so, taught me more on how to persevere, how to invest, and how to turn my disappointments into valuable lessons. Thanks!

I know I have asked you to do much this year, and to be much too. I know some of you were more stressed than you have ever been in school (and not always because you were working ☺). We will leave that alone. But, I have seen so many of you become much more because of it and I hope that in this is a lesson for you about how doing more sometimes leads us to becoming more too. As you observed, read, wrote, talked, thought, became confused, felt vulnerable, asked questions, complained, you were also discovering aspect of yourself you did not know you had. Let that be a lesson you never forget. Sometimes, we must step out of our comfort zones to discover what we can become. Keep that up!

I ask you in this project to remember, revisit, revise, rethink, rearrange, reread, repeat, redress, reinvent, reimagine this year in Language Arts. You will be grading these projects in groups based on a rubric we design together in class. When you are ready (by the first week of June), we will be ready to hear you captivate us with your presentations over cheese and crackers, grapes and apples, cookies and milk.

Best Work,

Mrs. Kassem

## Handout #3-Final Project

### Rationale:

No test can measure the scope and sequence of learning that took place in our language arts classroom, in you as well, this year. Therefore, our final in this class will take the form of a multimodal and multi-genre project that is a culmination of all that you learned this year: ideas, strategies, concepts, vocabulary, books, writings, discussions, reflections, and all that went into making this year a learning project. Although **you will be required to include certain portfolio assignments**, you also have the choice to add other assignments and artifacts you wish. The title, theme, layout, and final form will be yours to design. Suggestions, guidance, and samples will be offered throughout this process.

### We will adhere to the following schedule:

#### Week #1:

- Present the assignment for final project (Day 1)
- Discuss final project both as a class and in your groups (Day 2)
- Co-construct the project rubric (Day 3).
- Submit your **proposal** to Mrs. Kassem about **what you intend to do** with this project, what **form** it will take (scrapbook/journal/newspaper/comic book/altered book/photo essay/CD/Sports pamphlet/history text/digital, etc...), and what **your title** may be (Day 4). All of you will have the **subtitle** of: *My Eighth Grade Learning Journey 2012-2013*. Once your proposal is approved, and after a brief conference with Mrs. Kassem, you may begin.
- Go through your portfolios/Readers' and Writers' notebooks to select assignments for your final project (Day 5).

**Week #2:** Choose and work on revisiting/revising/editing three assignments-or more- from the list. Please use the feedback and ideas from your writing group. Present to Mrs. Kassem for feedback and credit.

**Week #3:** Choose and work on three more assignments from the list. Follow the same procedures as week #2.

**Week #4:** This week we will write the end of the year reflections in class. You will then revise and prepare them in their final form. Once you finish the reflections, you are to work on three other assignments.

**Week #5:** We will use this week to finish revisions/layouts and prepare our presentations. Sign up for presentations next week.

**Week #6: Presentations and autographing. Bring healthy snacks to share.**

Enjoy,

Mrs. Kassem



## Handout #4-Final Project

**Your Final Scrapbook/Project will include the following pieces (Check as you complete):**

- 1. I Am From...(from Portfolio)**
- 2. My Learning Journey (Looking Back): This will be written as your reflective piece for the end of the year (Handout #5)**
- 3. My Possible Future Self (Handout #6)**
- 4. I Am An Outsider...(from Portfolio)**
- 5. My Letter to The World (from Portfolio)**
- 6. An Op/Ed (From Portfolio)**
- 7. Choice Assignment(s): the assignment you always wanted to do but were never assigned.**
- 8. A Book that Hooked Me (Independent Reading choices/Reader's Workshop)**
- 9. 100 Things I would like to do before I die**
- 10. Mrs. Kassem: Here's your grade for this year and this is why...(class evaluation)**

This project is your final in Language Arts. It is a testament to your thinking and learning, your reading and writing. It is also a personal statement of who you are. Let it reflect your best! As always, the only way to do this wrong is not to do it.

**As you Work on this project, in and out of class, please remember:**

- You may revise, revisit, redo any of your earlier pieces
- You may co-author a piece with another student in class
- You may add any writings/visuals/pictures/memories you wish from your portfolio/reader's/writer's notebook/personal journals
- You have the option of doing a digital portfolio/Photo Essays
- You have the option of being as creative as you wish!

*I look forward to your presentations,*

*Mrs. Kassem*

**Handout #5-Final Project**

**Here's a list of the Units we worked on this year. Your portfolio/reader's and writer's notebooks should help trigger your memory about what we did each unit.**

- I. MEAP Review (and Movie Poster of My Life)-CM1
- II. Overcoming Obstacles (Personal Narratives/Visual Journeys)-CM2
- III. A Christmas Carol-Mid Nov.-December-Followed by the Short Story CM3
- IV. I-search-CM4
- V. The Outsiders-CM5
- VI. Final Project-CM6

What are some questions you have at this point?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

**Handout #6-Final Project****IDEAS and SUGGESTIONS for Choice Assignment:**

- Look back over the past year and measure how you've grown. Write an illustrated autobiography. Include significant (not necessarily major) events and describe your own personal growth in addition to your hopes for high school. You could also write an original poem or short story, or create an autobiographical collage using magazine letters, words and pictures. Or use your digital camera to take pictures of people, places and things that illustrate your hopes for the future.
- Create a scrapbook of news clippings on major world events that occurred during your eighth-grade year. Include a self-written reaction and evaluation of each event and give an opinion on how each event will shape the following year. Or choose an ongoing issue that you feel strongly about and create a work of art -- video compilation or painting, for example -- that captures your feelings on the subject. You could also create a graphic timeline showing all the relevant events that occurred during the school year (choice assignment).
- Choose a part of your school to improve. Write or show (via visuals) how you would improve it. You may even submit a plan to the principal recommending these changes.

Lang. Arts 8

Final Project-Mrs. Kassem

Handout #7

### **Guidelines for End of the Year Reflective Writing**

For the end of the year reflective piece, “My Learning Journey,” I ask that you do the following:

**Look back** at the beginning of the year, through both your reflections for each cardmarking, the work in your portfolio and reader’s/writer’s notebook, as well as your own memories of this class over the course of this year. How has this class been similar or different than other language arts classes you have had? What aspects of this class did you enjoy most? Least?

**Reflect** on what you have learned over the course of this year about yourself, others, the world, reading, writing, etc...Think about ways in which you have changed (as a person/a reader/a writer/a thinker), new ideas/attitudes and approaches. If you don’t think you have changed, why not?

**Write** those reflections in your choice of genre- prose, poetry, or a mix of genres. You may include visuals or samples of work to help make your points more clearly.

Lang. Arts 8

Final Project-Mrs. Kassem

Handout #8

### **My Possible Future Self**

For this assignment, you have several options:

1. Describe a typical day in your life 10, 20, 30 years from now.
2. Create a facebook page for your future self.
3. Create a multiple frame comic for your future self. Include both your personal and professional life. Make sure you include a setting for both.
4. Write a monologue (soliloquy) about your upcoming middle school reunion.
5. Look back and thank those people who have helped make your future self possible.
6. Have your future self write a letter back to your 8<sup>th</sup> grade self.
7. Write a poem/song about your life thus far, with each stanza representing a different stage of your life since you left middle school.
8. Design a cover for a book written about you (by you or someone else)-Give a summary of it on the back cover.
9. Create a portrait of your future self and detail through it as much about yourself as possible.
10. Mix and match or come up with your own idea of looking forward to your future self.

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**ABSTRACT****FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: PURPOSE, PROCESS, AND PRODUCT IN THE  
NARRATIVES OF EIGHTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENTS**

by

**AMIRA SAAD KASSEM**

August 2015

**Advisor:** Dr. Gina DeBlase**Major:** Curriculum and Instruction (English)**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Using a convenience sampling of 10 eighth-grade language arts students, this exploratory case study examined in depth the literacy processes used by ten 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to generate various multimodal artifacts that comprise their final projects and the nature of the literacy transactions that fostered these processes over the course of one year in this language arts classroom. Following closely (via the case studies in Chapter Five) how four of the ten students used the literacy events of the classroom to claim spaces to perceive and perform their voices and visions, the study revealed how these students were able to turn away from a specific form of silencing, both on and off the page, and reclaim a lost voice that helped them better navigate their lives and their literacies. This navigation transcended classroom walls to encompass larger social arenas in which students continued to perform and practice their literary and living choices.

I conducted three focus group interviews with all ten students. The purpose of these interviews was to define, from these students' perspectives, the literacy practices they engaged in over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year as part of their eighth-grade language arts

class. In studying how these transactions helped shape these students' literate thinking, my intent was to investigate ways in which both local and global contexts interact to help students promote or resist social and political trends. The study brought into question and deconstructed the grand narratives surrounding our American identity and the traditional literacies that serve to define and legitimize them.

My findings revealed that the literacy events in the classroom, facilitated and negotiated by an interested and knowledgeable adult, offered these ten students a wide range of personal ways to practice, in new and innovative ways, both academic and personal choices.



**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**  
**Amira Saad Kassem**

The backdrop to my doctoral studies, my dissertation especially, was a collage of social and political upheavals that rocked our schools, our cities, our country and our world. There was no escaping the turbulence of our times. I began my doctoral studies as our first black president took office. A year before that, President Bush's *Mission Accomplished* declared the end of the Second Iraq War. A trickle of monumental events soon followed: A financial crisis, Wall Street, Trayvon Martin, Sandy Hook, Boston Marathon Bombing, legalizing Marijuana, Same sex marriage amendments, and Affordable Care Acts. Our schools were once again playgrounds for politicians who tested kids and evaluated teachers; who set standards and cut budgets; who created problems and demanded solutions.

The other part of my ancestral world was equally perturbed. Arab springs and springing conflicts. In 1976, I and my family left our first home to our second. I watched across my TV screens refugees by the millions leave their homes bound to no places. Humans practiced torture in sadistic forms, and others found spectacles in such practices.

Amidst such trials, *From Local to Global* was born, and with it new facets of both my human and teaching selves. In these students' stories was our collective American narrative, and our human one too. Their stories were mine as well. In them, I take refuge and because of them, I continue to commit to praxis.

