CRITICAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF BRAZILIAN WOMEN’S SCHOOLING

DISCOURSES: NEGOTIATING AGENCY AND IDENTITY THROUGH

PARTICIPATION IN FREIREAN CULTURE CIRCLES

by

MARIANA VALOIS SOUTO MANNING

(Under the Direction of Betsy Rymes)

ABSTRACT

Historically, discourse has often been studied from researchers’ perspectives without

giving voice to those involved. This study pays close attention to the voices of low socio-

economic status women, including my grandmother, who made sense of their experiences

through telling stories, subsequently analyzed their own narratives, and started negotiating

change on both personal and societal levels. Instead of taking a clear stance, offering

monological solutions asserting a priori moral stances, I inquire into the personal commitments

of these individuals situated within and subject to complex social discourses. I learned with them

as they acquired tools to promote change and started questioning institutional discourses. This

dissertation informs theory and research methodology and praxis, mounting understandings of

uniquely situated commitments.

Lying at the intersection of discourse analytic approaches, critical pedagogy, and feminist

type, this study focuses on women in Northeastern Brazil who were part of a

participatory/democratic literacy program, culture circles (Freire, 1959). In analyzing data, I

combine Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and Narrative Analysis (Ochs & Capps,
2001), establishing Critical Narrative Analysis, which aims at promoting conscientization (Freire, 1970) and language appropriation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). I analyze the cycle of oppression among rural women who dropped-out of school, migrated to urban centers to become domestic workers, some never returning to school. Additionally, I listened closely to the stories some women told, shedding light on how agency and identity were negotiated as women recounted stories of dropping-out-of-school (Rymes, 2001) as children and successfully returning-to-school as adults.

These women’s narratives first conveyed the morality to which they oriented based on generic (patriarchal) moral imperatives. After joining culture circles, they constructed a situated, collective moral compass, developing a sense of agency. As their narratives changed, they employed grammatical and framing agency, voiced as they engaged in personal action and shifting internal conversations (Archer, 2003). Findings indicate their narratives align with the goal of social action and change proposed by culture circles. Overall, the study elucidates the potential role of emancipatory educational practices in the lives of women marginalized in schooling and society and informs the schooling histories of their children.

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To all women who experience oppression due to overlaying patriarchal norms.
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CHAPTER 1
PRELUDE

My grandmother says I am everything she is not. She proudly presents me to every single person she knows. At least, it seems this way to me. My middle class status and my residency in the United States give her the impression that I am rich. I am educated; after all, not only do I know how to read and write—things she never accomplished—but I went to the university for more years than she could count. I decided to sit and talk to her about her life. I told her I’d like to tape record our conversations and write a paper about her. “You are too funny,” is how she replied, and she continued to say that I knew many more interesting things than she could tell me. Her life was not important. She had nothing to say.

After a few days, I approached her again, and explained that I wanted her to tell me about her life as a child, about her family. I explained that I wanted to understand how so many girls from rural areas came to the big city and ended up being maids for their entire lives. She started to talk about how being a maid was not a choice, as many rich people thought. After talking for a few minutes about becoming a maid in very general terms, using statements such as “girls come to Recife already to work in someone’s kitchen,” she started feeling a little more comfortable. She asked if I still wanted to write about her. I immediately replied yes. She asked me if her picture would be in the paper or in a magazine. She asked if her friends would see it. I told her I didn’t really know if her friends would see it, but that I would be writing it in English and that I would attach no pictures. “Oh, okay, then I don’t need to worry,” she said.
I explained my study to her, and asked her to sign a consent form to formalize my study. Proudly, she drew her name on the form. She told me that a lot of people didn’t know she couldn’t read or write because she signed her name. “Those who are illiterate don’t know how to sign their names, they use their fingers. That’s what people think.” Overcoming the strangeness of the moment, of a granddaughter asking a grandmother to sign a consent form to talk about her life and share her memories, we finally got started.

This work could be considered an auto-biography or a book of memoirs, except for its widespread implications and the repetition of our situations among so many women, especially my grandmother’s, that is. Making myself vulnerable (Behar, 1996) and including myself in this study requires courage, but it is necessary to put a face on a problem that can no longer be ignored. There are upwards of 559,000 female children working as domestic workers according to Brazilian government records (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004b). The International Labor Organization reports the Brazilian case as one of the most alarming in number of incidences of childhood work (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004b).

**Personal Connections**

In her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau mentions that in stark contrast to her own childhood setting “…twenty minutes away, in blue-collar neighborhoods, and slightly farther away, in public housing projects, childhood looks different” (Lareau, 2003, p.2). In my own family, three generations of women had quite different childhoods. Being the most privileged of all three, I went to private schools starting at age one and accompanied my mother to out-of-state professional conferences while in elementary school.
My parents were both medical doctors and I had a regular allowance. I thought childhood was hard at times though, since I didn’t have everything I wanted. Looking back, I cherish my childhood memories as I reflect on the price my grandmother and mother paid.

My Grandmother’s childhood

Mariana: Tell me about your childhood. Did you work? Did you go to school?

Mara: My childhood was no childhood. I never went to school. I don’t know this kind of animal...school. I helped my mother. My father left my mother with a bunch of children. That’s what their [men’s] business is. She had to work. I helped taking care of the house. My older sister took care of my brothers and sisters. I didn’t work when I was a child. I didn’t go to school either. I was a girl. Girls helped at home. I did that until I was nine or ten. Then my mother died and my sister gave me to a lady. She gave me to work at her house. Then I was going to have food to eat and a place to sleep. In the beginning I did what she told me to. I helped her with cleaning and cooking. Then I myself cleaned the house, washed the dishes and cooked. It was like that for awhile. Then, the lady said I was becoming a little lady and sent me back. I would give her too much work because I could find a boyfriend, and she didn’t want children at her house. I think I was twelve when I went back and looked for my sister. She wasn’t at the house where we lived anymore. Then, after sleeping on the field for a

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1 All interviews were conducted in Portuguese. The author of this study translated the interviews from Portuguese to English and transcribed them from oral to written format, performing a double translation (Behar, 1993/2003). Excerpts may be translated ungrammatically according to the Portuguese construction voiced by participants. Punctuation is used to indicate pauses. Periods indicate pauses longer than .3 seconds, and commas indicate pauses equal to or shorter than .3 seconds. Originals of excerpts used in this text are available in Appendix B.
couple nights, I found my father. Yes, my father, the one who left my mother. I told him I didn’t have a place to go. He sent me to my godmother’s house and asked if she could use some help. She did for sure. I started planting and harvesting coffee all day long. From sun up to sun down. That lasted about a year. That was until my godmother died. She died of tuberculosis. Then, I had no place to go. I had no job. They didn’t want people who didn’t know how to read or write to work at stores. Only the boys had gone to school. The girls had learned to clean and take care of the house. For what? To take care of the men or to become *domésticas* [domestic workers].

My grandmother went on to say, “When I arrived in Recife, there were two jobs I could do...I could work at people’s houses or I could be a prostitute. I chose to work in people’s houses...” In Pernambuco, Northeastern Brazil, women with limited literacy skills “continue to be a large group, the majority of Brazilian women possess limited schooling, and discrimination persists in terms of educational access for the subgroups of low-income women, and especially...[those] who live in rural areas and the North and Northeastern regions of the country.” (di Pierro, 2000, p.66).

The colonial economy encouraged migration, particularly by sons who sought work for wages on plantations and in cities. In the early 1900s, male migrants to cities had access to education and thus to more desirable jobs, such as those in civil service. Women who migrated to cities usually became domestic servants or prostitutes. (Freedman, 2002, p. 40)
Domestic Workers

Domestic workers are invisibilized (Patai, 1988) in Brazil. They are so common that residents don’t question the system. After leaving Brazil and living in the United States for several years, I decided to investigate these women’s perspectives of their situations. I started asking myself why one would want to be a maid. I talked to a few women who were domestic workers or had escaped from this cycle and learned that of those who became maids, all had migrated to a large urban center, yet none had made a conscious choice to become a maid. They all had ended up as maids, perceived themselves as illiterates, and had never attended school or had dropped out of school as children.

According to the women I interviewed, they became domestic workers because they didn’t know how to read or write. Such was also the case with my grandmother, who in the quest for survival, and not having gone to school, ended up working in someone’s kitchen for very little money starting at a very young age.

Mara: When I came here, my daughter, my dream was to study. To go to a school. But I didn’t have any time. When I finished working it was too late to go to school. Eight, nine o’clock sometimes. When I could go, I was so tired that I fell asleep in class, truly. If I knew how to read and write I would not have ended up working in someone else’s kitchen. But girls in the rural area didn’t go to school, no. Only really the boys. Girls helped with household chores.

My grandmother’s case corroborates Freedman’s (2002) assertion that we “cannot deny the significance of gender in a world in which seventy percent of those living in poverty and two-
thirds of those who are illiterate are female” (p. 8) and in which unskilled women have restrictive choices as they leave the rural areas and enter large urban centers seeking work.

Trying to break this cycle, my grandmother gave my mother up for adoption. This was one way to break the cycle of poorly educated women from rural areas migrating to big urban centers and becoming domestic servants.

Mara: When I got pregnant and had your mother, I didn’t want for her to go through what I did. Then, I gave her to my comadre. For her to have a better life. I didn’t want for her future to be working in someone else’s kitchen like me. But that only resolved her life, not mine.

This seemingly unique way to break the cycle is more widespread than I’d initially anticipated. At the University of Georgia, for instance, on the very same floor where my office is located, another Latina has a very similar story to tell. Her mother gave her up for adoption so that she’d have a better life and not be part of this cycle (Fournillier, Washington, & Thomas-Krause, 2004). One indication of the deterministic nature of this cycle of oppression is that my mother’s biological siblings who weren’t adopted are in a much different situation than she is. While my mother went to medical school and today is a professor of medicine in the state’s premier public university while maintaining a private medical practice, her sister is a housewife living on an extremely tight budget and constantly begging for financial help. Her brother is currently in a drug rehabilitation facility. Similar economic and social differences are also present in the case of this other Latina’s family.
These examples give the most vivid illustration of the interplay between agency, “the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings — and structure — the enduring, affording and constraining influences of the social order” (Carter & Sealey, 2004, p. xiv) that I explore. The socio-cultural-political structure (Archer 2000; 2003) in place is so powerful and the mechanisms that maintain the social order so stable, that women give their children up for adoption so that the structure will not curtail their children’s opportunities for living a different future. While this structure has been historically built by people, at this point in time as it affects the lives of these particular women, it comes to have disembodied effects. It counters the idea of the self as “dissolved into discursive structures and would seem to be denied agency if the ‘I’ is merely a conversational construct and not something given” (Archer, 2000, p. 34). Estrutura (structure) or máquina (machine) are terms commonly used in Portuguese to refer to the current socio-cultural-political structure that temporally, when considered cross-sectionally, has disembodied effects, but nevertheless affects the lives of many, including the women studied here.

Trying to find ways to break this cycle, alternatives to the way those who were adopted by middle class families challenged and changed their pre-determined location in society, I look at a Freirean participatory literacy program, the Circles of Education and Culture. I especially listened to what the women participants of this program had to say about it and what women who were maids in the big city perceived about this program.

**Gendered Schooling**

Girls in rural schools of Northeastern Brazil are often denied the opportunity to attend school beyond fourth grade (di Pierro, 2000; Patai, 1988). Northeastern Brazilian women of low socioeconomic status (SES) who were born in rural areas often have limited literacy skills because of restricted access to schooling. This was confirmed in the interviews I conducted
during the months of June, July, and August, 2003, including the one with my own grandmother. The prevailing sociocultural assumption was that only boys should travel the longer distances to attend the higher elementary grades and beyond.

Having grown up in Northeastern Brazil, this story is all too commonplace for me. I would go as far as to say that most everyone from Recife (the city where I am from) knows of at least one woman who possesses limited schooling and who is a doméstica (domestic worker). I myself can immediately think of a couple dozen of those women—including my grandmother, my mother’s maids and maids of relatives, friends and acquaintances. In general terms, gendered childhoods rooted in patriarchal assumptions of how a girl is supposed to be and act and limited access to schooling have produced great numbers of domestic servants, amounting to 20% of the female workforce, in many Latin American countries today (Momsen, 1999). This situation was confirmed and reported by the women I interviewed for this study. Women’s restricted access to education helps keep this system in place, after all “by employing someone to undertake housework and childcare, the traditional household patriarchal system is preserved” (Momsen, 1999, p.4).

In Brazil, 1,000,000 children between 7 and 14 are currently out of school; most of these are girls (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004a). Among those of low socio-economic status (SES), the situation is even more alarming. According to the United Nations (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004a), 9.2% of Brazilian children between 7 and 14 in low SES families have either dropped out of school or never enrolled. In Recife, 94.5% of domestic workers are girls. According to this same report, 30% of these are not remunerated—they are working in domestic servitude. One of the most afflicted regions, according to Nilmário Miranda, the United Nations Secretary for Human Rights (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004b), is the Northeastern Brazilian region.
In South America, more women than men move from rural areas to cities. This bias has been explained in terms of gender division of labour, with urban areas offering more jobs for women than rural areas. Many of the women migrants are poorly educated (Momsen, 1999, p.81).

Historically, illiteracy has been a reality for Brazilians. In this study, I describe an adult literacy program currently in practice in Northeastern Brazil and analyze how women in rural Northeastern Brazil narrate their experiences of dropping-out of school as children as a result of the socio-economic-political context in place and of returning to a participatory education adult literacy program, the culture circles (Freire, 1959). In Pernambuco (the state in which both Recife and Bezerros are located), there are large numbers of women with limited literacy skills (di Pierro, 2000). On a more personal level, I wanted to explore options that women like my grandmother might have, besides giving their children up for adoption, because of the structure in place which curtails agency on either a personal or societal level.

**Rural to Urban Migration: An Issue for Women**

In this study, I interviewed six women who lived in the city of Bezerros. The six women who lived in Bezerros were, at the time of the interviews, participants of the literacy program I studied. This unique program was an exception to the rule (di Pierro, 2000). I interviewed six other women, who work or worked as domestic workers, dropped out of school as children but had not returned to school, all of whom left the rural areas surrounding the city of Bezerros (within a 50-mile radius) to work in the capital city, Recife. Migration from rural areas to urban centers for domestic labor is one of the few remunerated employment alternatives for women of low socioeconomic status and limited schooling (Momsen, 1999), as indicated above by my grandmother’s narrative. There is a clear lack of progress in this situation since my
grandmother’s childhood. This is illustrated by the ages of the women in this study, which ranged from 18 to 79. Despite their age differences, spanning across generations, their stories of exclusion from schooling and subsequent migration to urban domestic work were very similar. This is reified by Roy, Tisdell and Blomqvist (1996), who stated that there are only two options available: domestic work or prostitution.

The underlying principle for interviewing these twelve women (biographical information, Appendix A) is that in Brazil, neither governmental or nongovernmental adult literacy nor basic education prioritizes women’s education (Rosemberg, 1993). The interviews took place in June, July, and August 2003. I conducted interviews asking the eligible and current women students their schooling stories, their perspectives of having limited literacy skills in a literate world and how that related to their backgrounds. I asked about various aspects of the Circles of Education and Culture. I scheduled a second interview for remaining issues with two participants. Following the interviews, I wrote journal entries regarding the interview (before and after listening to the tapes), listened to and transcribed the tapes. The two additional interviews took place in August, 2003 in Recife, Brazil, and lasted about 30 minutes. As a result of the interviews I conducted during the months of June, July, and August, 2003, I have approximately 15 hours of tape-recorded interviews, including seven hours of women student interviews and eight hours of interviews with women who dropped out of school as children and were eligible but were not participants of culture circles (six women).

All of the interviews included in this study were conducted in Portuguese (my first language); within the text you will find the English translation for ease of reading. Original transcripts are available in Appendix B. It is important to note that while I strive to capture both the meaning and form of the narratives conveyed by the women who participated in this study,
there may be some limitations due to the double translation (Behar, 1993/2003) of interviews, considering the fact that I translated from oral to written (interviews were tape-recorded) and from Portuguese to English.

I collected data for this study over eleven months, from June, 2003 to May, 2004. I employed critical ethnographic components of data collection--participant observation, field notes, interviews, life history and analysis of documents, coupling “the focus on culture with the commitment to use findings for change” (Patton, 2002, p.131). Interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and allowed the participants of the circles of culture to “describe what [was] meaningful and salient without being pigeon holed into standardized categories” (Patton, 2002, p. 56). I employed participant observation as it allowed me to have “a special interest in human meaning and interaction as viewed from the perspective of people who [were]...members...of particular settings” (Jorgensen, 1989, p.13). Of course, these descriptions are colored by my own biases and beliefs that education is a venue for social and economic change. Also, my personal investment in this issue must be brought to light. I employ “a very practical side to qualitative methods that simply involves asking open-ended questions of people and observing matters of interest in real-world settings in order to solve problems, improve programs, or develop policies” (Patton, 2002, 136).

I use narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001) as a vehicle for understanding agency as I analyze women’s stories in order to investigate the limitations and value of Circles of Education and Culture as a possible venue for educational and cultural democracy, freedom from oppressive conditions and life-quality improvement in the diverse Northeastern Brazilian society. As with my grandmother, many women in Brazil do not have a viable and humane way out of this cycle
of domestic serventry. I analyzed this program to understand how it is impacting women’s agency on a personal level and what the implications may be for transformation on a societal level.

**Migration: Departure and Destination**

Recife is the capital of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. It is a fast-growing urban area. This is where women from rural areas generally migrate in search of jobs. It is also my home city. A beautiful city, Recife is bordered by white sandy beaches, and got its name from the coral reefs that line the Atlantic coast. Recife has a very wide salary gap between the haves and have-nots. This can be noticed by luxurious buildings that could have been transplanted from Beverly Hills side-by-side with cardboard houses with no plumbing. Its population is around 1,500,000 inhabitants and on the order of 3,000,000 if surrounding suburbs are included. Recife is the fourth-largest city in Brazil (Koreisha, 2004). It is located about 70 miles from the city of Bezerros, location of the Circles of Education and Culture, the literacy program six of my study’s participants attended.

Established in the 18th century, the city of Bezerros has a large concentration of artists. The artistic and cultural production by locals is incredibly rich and diverse. The many non-print texts (Fairclough, 2003) represented in the culture inspired the city government to think about a way to use the culture of the place in combination with education to construct a meaningful and enjoyable educational program. This interdisciplinary program has the objective of educating its illiterate youth and adults and presents a thematic relationship within their history and place. With these premises in mind, the program adopted many of Freire’s ideas of circles of culture and liberatory education (Freire, 2002), combining basics (comprehension, interpretation,
explanation, implications, limits, values, potentialities, and fragility) with thematic situations, such as nature and culture, sustainable human development, the relationship between culture and economy, and social activism.

They wanted to make education not only available, but meaningful to the people of Bezerros. The banking system of education (Freire, 1970) had not succeeded in drawing students to and retaining them in school, according to the superintendent of education in Bezerros. This time they decided to try a socio-historical-political model that placed the teaching of students ahead of teaching the academic subjects. The nature of this program within the context of gendered schooling of Northeastern Brazil, led me to choose this city over others in the area. As I observed while conducting participant observation in Bezerros, history lessons, for example, focused on each individual’s history as opposed to the history traditionally taught in Brazilian schools, a history detached from the students’ realities.

The Text and Context of Literacy in Brazil

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing and rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work...[T]his dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p.35)

Knowing how to read, write, understand and interpret texts and contexts is important for advancing one’s schooling or employment. This is not the most important goal of education though--knowing how to read, write and understand the words. The most important goal of education is to learn to use the tools acquired through literacy to embody and exert a critical
comprehension of what happens around oneself. In this way, the word is a tool for understanding the world (Freire, 1970). Knowing how to critically use the word to understand and actively engage in changing the world is then the result of knowing how to use the tools acquired. According to Freire (1970; 1985), literacy must be a process of social inclusion; a process in which individuals learn to read and write words so as to read (or understand) and write (or engage in social change) the worlds of which they are part; a tool for personal transformation and social change, and to be so, what students are learning needs to be directly related to their lives (Freire, 1985).

Such is not the blueprint of education in Brazil, however. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (“A batalha”, 2003), the average Brazilian student can “read,” but does not show understanding of the words. This study compares Brazil to other countries, such as the United States, in terms of reading skills. Out of 41 countries, Brazil ranked 37th in 2003 in terms of the reading ability of its youth around 15 years of age. In contrast, the United States ranked 16th, and was slightly above the median.

Initially shocking, understanding this functional illiteracy situation involves taking into consideration the context and the timing of the implementation of education for all in Brazil. The United States, for example, established universal rights to education over 100 years ago; Brazil only began implementing the law establishing this right about 15 years ago (“A batalha”, 2003). This comparison offers a partial explanation for the difference between the functional literacy situations (development and resources) in these countries. As universal education in Brazil only became law in 1988, the process of implementing this law is still under way, a significant difference from the situation in the United States where the right to universal education was
granted over a century ago. In Brazil, illiteracy is a widespread reality, and the problem is even worse among the female adult population (Patai, 1988).

Written in 1988, the Brazilian Constitution (Senado Federal, 2003) requires that the government provide basic education (roughly the equivalent to elementary school education in the U.S.) for all children; attendance is mandatory. In addition to providing this educational opportunity for children, the Constitution also grants access to education for those who did not have the opportunity to do so at a traditional age.

According to recent data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (1997) roughly one fourth of the population in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco is classified as illiterate. Twenty-four-and-a-half percent of all people living in Pernambuco don’t know how to read or write. The small town of Bezerros has taken matters into its own hands and has developed a program to meet the needs of its 15,196 illiterate adults. This is a relatively small town with a population under 60,000 inhabitants.

Women-focused literacy programs in Brazil target those women who have problems participating in typical adult education programs (Stromquist, 1994). This program in Bezerros is an example of what Stromquist discussed. The women who enroll in alternative literacy programs tend to be poor women who work in domestic tasks and the care of small children. According to six women I interviewed who were eligible for participation in the culture circles but were not program participants at the time the interview took place, they became domestic workers because they didn’t know how to read or write.

There is limited research into a few women’s literacy programs in Latin America (di Pierro, 2000; UNESCO, 1998; Gonçalves, 1996; Schmelkes, 1995; Rosemberg, 1992; Stromquist, 1992) but no recent literature exists on how the Circles of Education and Culture
program affects adult women of low SES who were born in rural areas, and may live in rural or urban areas today. “In Brazil...the unplanned effects of development forces rural women to leave the countryside for the large cities, but the limited options for work there intensifies their poverty. Many women are forced to work in...domestic work. Others are forced into prostitution” (Roy, Tisdell, & Blomqvist, 1996, p.10).

**Circles of Education and Culture**

This study critically investigates the Circles of Education and Culture, a working example of Paulo Freire's participatory approach to literacy education (Freire, 2000; Spener, 1990). I outline the methods used to promote literacies in this program and analyze the program as perceived by women students and conveyed by their schooling narratives. I am interested in whether the program secures agency enacted on a personal level, personal transformation, and meta-awareness of the constraints social structure enacts on one’s life for women not previously well-served by schools and society, such as my grandmother. Here, meta-awareness is defined as awareness that yours is not the only view; for each issue or theme there are a plethora of possible interpretations, a multitude of perspectives. Taking these different perspectives into consideration without measuring against your initial perspective as being the true or the best one allows for meta-awareness. This definition differs from reflection as it suggests an awareness of broader social issues beyond personal reflection.

In this study, I focus on personal agency, as defined above, and look at the implications for agency enacted on a societal level (Archer, 2000; 2003). This focus is due to my belief that systemic changes happen over many generations, and when coming from the margins (hooks, 1990), such change starts on a personal level, with personal agency.
In the culture circles, Freire (2000) emphasized that prior experiences and community concerns of students are the starting points in teaching reading and writing. Adult literacy programs based on Freire’s circles of culture are functioning throughout Brazil, from Pernambuco (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997) in Northeastern Brazil to Rio Grande do Sul (Brandão, 2001), the southern-most Brazilian state. The program I observed in Bezerros employed an emergent curriculum (Auerbach, 1992), in which learners identified their own problems and issues and looked for the answers to their problems (Peyton & Crandall, 1995).

The particular program investigated here provided classes that addressed literacy skills--reading the world and the word, as proposed by Freire (2000)--for adults who never went to school or dropped-out to work and sustain their families. Since children could start working as early as they could start school, going to school to learn reading and writing was not a priority, especially for girls. The work world and other everyday issues were systematized and became part of the circles. Its pedagogical intent was to democratize education and culture. Culture circles aimed to promote the social competence of adults of low Socio-Economic Status (SES) (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997). Participants attended meetings daily at a location of their choice.

In culture circles, studying was necessary not only to learn the letters of the alphabet, but also to know each person, the way they expressed themselves, how people are different, their different interests, and finding ways to approach a problem. Participants were not classified as illiterate, but as “literants” (literacy learners). Each one of them brought knowledge regarding themselves/their worlds. Teachers facilitated the entrance of learners into the literate world. Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, and Chennault (1998) indicated that the physical seating
arrangement in circles is essential to employ dialogue and problem-posing education (Freire and Macedo, 1995). According to Freire (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997), the beauty of education is that it does not do everything by itself, yet without it, many things cannot be done. He stressed the use of literacy development for personal transformation and personal action (Huerta-Macias, 1993). Circles of culture have contributed to the agency of thousands of people since its inception in the 1960s (Freire, 2000). Recent research (Cortina, 2000) into the effect of the program on women of low SES who were born in rural areas is lacking in the current literature. This dissertation begins to provide such information by investigating whether Circles of Education and Culture are promoting personal transformation (agency) for women of low SES in Bezerros, Brazil.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions are addressed in examining women’s schooling discourses, including the specific narratives of women who dropped-out of school as children and those who later joined culture circles, returning to schools as adults:

1. How did these women (who were not well-served by schools) talk about issues of agency and identity in their stories of dropping out of school as children? How were issues of agency and identity conveyed in form and content (what is said and how it is said) by dropping-out-of-school and returning-to-school narratives?

2. How do low SES women’s returning-to-school narratives align with or diverge from the goal of social action and justice proposed by Freirean culture circles? How do they
convey or stray from a view that Circles of Education and Culture promote personal agency for adult women who weren’t well-served by schools?

In analyzing the data, I combine both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and narrative analysis (NA) to establish what I call Critical Narrative Analysis. More than understanding, a necessary first step, this methodology brings me closer to the goal of analyzing discourse for social action sponsored by critical discourse analysts. Further details regarding data analysis, can be found in Chapter Three.

**Study Outline**

This study, entitled *Critical Narrative Analysis of Brazilian Women’s Schooling Discourses: Negotiating Agency and Identity through Participation in Freirean Culture Circles* consists of seven chapters that follow this introduction. They are outlined below.

**CHAPTER TWO** is entitled *Literacy as a means for re-imagining a woman’s identity.* The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures as seen by Elena, a maid in my mother’s house, and by me, an elementary school teacher whose students come largely from Latin American immigrant families. Further, this chapter looks at a model currently in practice in rural cities of Northeast Brazil that may help some of the parents with whom I work--the Freirean culture circles described in Chapter Three.

**CHAPTER THREE,** *The text and context of Freirean culture circles,* starts by going back in time, when forty years ago, democracy came to an end in Brazil. That was when Freire’s circles of culture were outlawed. In 1964, the year in which the new president would be elected in Brazil, the military took the government forcefully. The *coup d’etat* came as Freire’s circles of culture were yielding fast and amazing results. Peasants were questioning their location in
society and engaging in social action to change their conditions. These circles were so successful, that they were threatening the new military government. Within 14 days of the coup d’etat, Freire’s circles of culture were extinguished. Twenty years later, they again became a reality as a democratic government was re-established in Brazil. This chapter outlines the history of Freirean circles of culture within the context of the history and politics of Brazil over the last 40 years. Further, it looks at how identity and discourse relate to Freire’s conceptualization of literacy and explores a particular application of this program in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. Aligned with the very methodology used in the circles, I use Critical Narrative Analysis to examine the tales the women participants of this study told.

CHAPTER FOUR, Critical narrative analysis: The interplay of words and world, outlines the theoretical framework I use to understand the culture circles and to analyze the stories their participants told. It starts by exploring the many discourse analytic perspectives available, couched in the myriad definitions of discourse. In this chapter, I look at how two discourse analytic approaches can inform each other so as to reach a more complete analysis: narrative and critical discourse analyses. Narrative analysis focuses on how people make sense of their experiences in society through language. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with power and language within the context of society. I explore the concepts of discourse, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis before diving into the question of how one may inform the other. Aligning with critical or emancipatory pedagogical approach to education, as in Freire’s culture circles (as discussed in Chapter Three), this methodology aims at promoting critical meta-awareness, allowing common people to engage in social action to solve problems and address issues they identify in their own narratives. This meta-awareness (conscientization) allows people to have a relationship of appropriation (using language as a
resource) with language, as opposed to being colonized by language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2004). Further, it allows people to use discourse to change their social locations and situations while challenging the deterministic claim that “[w]e are stuck in the vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination” (Fraser, 1997, p. 33).

In **CHAPTER FIVE**, “Girls have to stay home and help their mothers”: Dropping out of school narratives. I use critical narrative analysis (as outlined in Chapter Four) to investigate the dropping out of school narratives of ten women who dropped out of school as children; two of the participants of this research never went to school as children. These women’s stories of leaving school as children were very similar in terms of the way they structure their narratives, the way they positioned themselves within a particular moral sphere, and in how they minimized the portrayal of their own agency within that sphere. In constructing their dropping-out narratives these women portrayed themselves as victims of other people’s actions. They oriented not to their own agency, but to socially constructed standards of goodness (Gee, in press; Taylor, 1989). They used narrative to locate themselves as good people, whose actions aligned with a socioculturally constructed definition of moral goodness in their dropping out narratives. They constructed morally oriented narratives (Rymes, 1995) situating schooling as an opportunity that was taken away from them (whether they dropped out of school or didn’t ever attend school). These narratives portrayed the narrator in terms of an absolute moral goodness, centered in patriarchal morality. Ten of the twelve women I interviewed dropped out of school as children, yet none constructed a dropping out narrative in which they portrayed themselves as agents of
that event. Their stories placed the agency with some other character or concatenation of events and societal perceptions and oriented to a prototypical morality that positioned them as unable to remain in school.

**CHAPTER SIX**, *Negotiating agency and identity through participation in Freirean culture circles*, explores the development of one’s role as agent in returning-to-school narratives of women who were participants of culture circles in Bezerros, Brazil, as represented by the detailed analysis of two women’s narratives. After constructing a narrative that situated the narrator, who dropped out, as the victim of other people’s actions and having a certain moral stance, these women narrators constructed an unstable narrative marked by shame and confusion. Two kinds of agency are explored in these narratives¹: framing agency (the narrator’s character alignment with normative and situated morals) and grammatical agency (agency portrayed linguistically by the use of subject plus active verb). In these first-days narratives, the narrators situated themselves grammatically as agents but did not situate their actions within a consistent moral framework, not fully enacting the role of framing agent. This kind of narrative construction may be the intermediary step between the construction of dropping-out of school narratives and returning-to-school narratives, and may facilitate those who have constructed dropping out of school narratives to transition toward the desired and morally certain return to school narrative. Ultimately, their narratives conveyed the first sense of morality to which these women oriented, which was based on generic (patriarchal) moral imperatives. After joining the culture circles, they constructed a situated, collective moral compass within which they had a sense of grammatical and framing agency.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**, *Mothers’ perspectives on the impact of their schooling history on their children’s experiences at school*, explores narratives of mothers who had limited schooling
opportunities in their childhood and how they perceived this impacting the schooling experiences of their children. One of these stories is Elena’s. Elena’s story is one of strength and persistence—fifteen years trying to continue her education. Although she repeated fourth grade, she has limited reading and writing skills and regrets not being able to help her son, who is in Kindergarten, with his homework. According to Elena,

...the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place. I pay for my son to go to school it is a very big sacrifice, but the teacher thinks I don’t care because I don’t help him. Then she decided to make him repeat the year. He is in Kindergarten again this year and I am paying it all again. I don’t know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can’t help him.

As I talked to each of these mothers, some feared the worst and felt powerless within such a prevailing structure (Archer, 2000). Others were starting to enact personal action and promote situated change (Chapter Eight), as they became meta-aware of their dissatisfaction with the system in place and shared their accounts of how they were taking action to make sure that their children would not follow their trails and drop out of school.

The implications and limitations of this study are addressed in **CHAPTER EIGHT**, *Shifting reflexivities and narratives: Praxis from the personal to social action*. As reflexivities (Archer, 2003) and narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Rymes, 2001) change, women gain a sense of agency and engage in personal action through shifting internal conversations (Archer, 2003) to changes in narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Rymes, 2001). This reflects the process of conscientization (Freire, 1970) or critical meta-awareness of their condition leading to personal
change as reported by participants in narrative analysis and analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Literacy is proposed as a tool for social change (Freire, 1998) as participants engaged in critical analysis of their own narratives and of institutional narratives, appropriating language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2004).

**Situating the Study**

Reflecting on my upbringing and the costs of my personal and professional locations to my ancestors, I take action by investigating alternative ways to break the cycle of oppression of low SES women from rural areas who are pre-destined to become maids. Even though my biological grandmother, whom here I refer to simply as my grandmother, was never part my childhood home, I feel indebted to make public her struggles and other similar struggles here in this dissertation. Domestic workers, whether or not connected by blood ties, were always part of my life as a child.

Here, I try to de-romanticize the image of domestic workers as having a real choice in the work market and expose the underlying cycle of oppression that makes such women seek domestic employment. After all, when I was growing up, my immediate family consisted of myself, my parents, two younger brothers and at least one domestic worker. When I was a young child, there was at least a nanny and a maid responsible for cooking and cleaning. After my brothers and I grew old enough, we no longer had nannies. Maids changed from time to time.

For the last ten years or so, the woman responsible for all the cooking and cleaning in my mother’s house has been Elena. Even though I am the granddaughter of a former maid, I never knew my grandmother as such. I cannot pretend to know her situation, her conditions as a domestic worker. When I came to know her, she had already retired. The personification of the condition of a woman who was not well served by the schools in the rural area of Pernambuco,
and who migrated to Recife in search of furthering her education while having her dreams fade as she washed clothes and dishes in someone’s kitchen, came to me through Elena. In the following chapter, I explore Elena’s story, and locate myself in this study. Further, I investigate the relationship between power, discourses, literacies and cultures as seen by Elena and by me, an elementary school teacher whose students come largely from Latin American immigrant families.
CHAPTER 2
LITERACY AS A MEANS FOR RE-IMAGINING A WOMAN’S IDENTITY

If we are to go beyond first world representations of third world women as passive, subservient, and lacking in creativity, then clearly one important task for feminist ethnographers alert to and respectful of the differences between women is to listen well to the stories that other women have to tell, capturing the key images and offering interpretations that mirror the narrative forms they themselves use to tell their life stories.

(Behar, 2003, p.272)

Awakening

Growing up in Brazil, I never thought about questioning the system in place. I had a nanny, there was a maid who cooked my meals and cleaned my room. I didn’t even have to make my own bed! It never occurred to me as a child that these women had their own lives outside my home. I thought life was good. I thought their lives were good. What I didn’t realize at that point was that being a maid or a nanny was just one of their identities, and most importantly, I didn’t realize it was not a self-selected or chosen identity, but an identity imposed on them by social, economic and political conditions (hooks, 1994). The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures as seen by Elena, a maid in my mother’s house, and by me, an elementary school teacher whose students come largely from
Latin American immigrant families. Further, this chapter looks at a model currently in practice in rural cities of Northeast Brazil that may help some of the parents with whom I work.

My early impressions remained largely unblemished until I decided to get to know Elena better. I first became aware of the disparity between my life and the life of a domestic worker in my world history classes when I was a teenager. Reading about the United States as the First World power-house and the oppressor of countries such as Brazil, I wondered if the oppressed could also be oppressors. I certainly couldn’t articulate this idea then as clearly as I can now, but I had a feeling that there were inequalities everywhere, starting in my own house. I started to be aware of the larger political situation, but wasn’t quite sure at that time how to address this issue. It was a very relevant issue, an issue with which I was uncomfortable, but I just didn’t know how to get started trying to address it. At that time, I decided to ignore it and move forward with my life. Although I say I ignored it, there wasn’t one day I wouldn’t think about Elena’s situation. Elena was a permanent fixture in my mother’s house—or at least, it seemed like she was. She worked standing on her feet most of the time; you could see this by her dirty and rough feet. Her bare feet walked the ceramic floor of the kitchen and the rest of the house. Wearing a t-shirt that was often wet from washing dishes, scrubbing the floors and washing clothes by hand, she went about performing her job. She arrived at work a little before eight o’clock in the morning and didn’t leave until five, sometimes six o’clock. This routine repeated itself six days per week. She worked and worked, often quietly, with her eyes wandering off toward the window at times. She had worked in my family home for almost ten years. During this time she bore two children—a boy and a girl. She made less than 2,000 U.S. dollars a year, well above the minimum wage, but hardly enough to provide food and shelter for her family. She seemed happy, but could she be satisfied with the life she was leading? How had she gotten there? When these questions arose,
we started talking. Those were topics I could no longer ignore, as I try to find answers to the social oppression present in Northeast Georgia; the oppression that affects so many of my students’ parents in the United States.

**Engagement as the Answer**

“We talked. We listened to each other. We knew that the answers were in the engagement. We knew that the engagement was the answer. We talked.” (Fecho, 2003, p. 92)

As Elena served my breakfast one morning during the summer of 2003, I hesitantly asked her to sit and talk. While we had had a few episodes of small talk (since 2000) in which some of these topics had been mentioned, now I wanted to understand the issues involved—not only the issues of class, but the issues regarding opportunity and access to sites of knowledge and to literacy. Overcoming some awkwardness and reluctance at first, our talking sessions became routine. I’d listen to what she had to say. I’d listen whenever she was willing to talk. I wanted to understand who she was, how she had gotten there, and what her plans for the future were, in her own terms. Eventually, I began tape-recording our conversations with her permission. At first, because of our class difference, Elena expressed concern as to whether or not her experience would be relevant to someone who held more knowledge than she did,

“I don’t know...you know so much, and I don’t know nothing. You are always reading and writing. I don’t know how to do none of these things. That’s why I work as a maid. You can have the job you want. You know? You already know everything I know and more.”

The class differences were not couched in terms of money, in terms of have-s and have-nots, but in terms of literacy as a tool for personal and professional growth.
During that summer, I stood by the ironing board as Elena ironed several hundred pieces of clothing; I sat at the kitchen table as she cut vegetables and cooked. I felt uncomfortable many times and offered to help. She would not accept my help for a while. It was not my place to do housework. With time, though, Elena started letting me serve my own food and even cook at times. While there was sameness in that we were both from the same geographic area, there was also much otherness in that sameness. Besides getting to change the division of labor a little bit, I got to know Elena better, and as rapport developed, Elena told me her life story. She told of the Discourse she learned, the role of the multiple identities she took and the importance of the piece that wasn’t there—literacy, as couched in terms of learning a secondary Discourse (Gee, 1996), more specifically the Discourse of power. James Paul Gee defines Discourse(s) as “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes” (1996, p.127). Elena couldn’t, therefore, use a particular Discourse to critique other ones. Delpit (1995) suggests that familiarity and comfort with the Discourse of power can be the base for resistance to oppression and inequality.

Elena told me that when she was a child she had gone to school. She lived in a city named Pombos.

Where I lived there was only one school...only one really...and it was only until fourth grade...So, I went to school until the fourth grade. When I finished fourth grade my teacher wanted me to go to Vitória to the 5th grade (looks at me). I cried much but my mother didn’t let me. Girls didn’t go to Vitória. Only boys really (continues stirring). Then, my teacher let me repeat the fourth grade two times. I couldn’t do anything,
anything really. My brothers went to the 5th grade and I couldn’t. Can you imagine?
(stops looking at the pan she’s been stirring and looks at me).

As she told me her story, I thought about the private school I had attended, the uniform I wore and the brand new books I used. I thought about when, in fifth grade, I decided I’d quit school to become a politician. I had never thought about my own experience and how privileged I was. I always thought that in many situations I was the one who was oppressed--by the rules, by school, by my parents, by society. I never thought at that age that I might also be the oppressor, as I exerted power on the maid who was working in our home at the time.

**In Search of New Possibilities**

Elena proceeded to tell me about the reason she had come to Recife, the capital of the state and the city where she had lived for the last 15 years or so. Her motivation lay in the prospect of having the opportunity to further her education. Elena recounts:

When I had sufficient age [was old enough], I came to Recife. I was happy, [you] know. I thought I was going to school again, but working in people’s houses, I never got out early to go to school (stops ironing and looks up).

She had been told there were schools everywhere. She had been told she could walk to school. What she had not been told is that she would probably have no chance to attend school, not even in the evenings. To maintain herself, as arranged before she had left her childhood home, she would work as a maid in a family house. She was told she would have her own room and she wouldn’t have to pay rent or utilities. What she hadn’t been told was that as long as she was in the house, she was on duty. There was no start time or finish time for her day. It depended on how early the first person wanted breakfast and how late the last person arrived for dinner. She had not been told the low salary she’d make. In the first house she worked, she didn’t even make
1,000 U.S. dollars per year. She said she tried; she enrolled in classes several times, but she
could never keep her attendance up, complete her homework assignments and keep her eyes
open when she accomplished the nearly impossible task of going to school.

I had never thought about the role that education had played in her life as she became a
maid. I always thought women became maids because they didn’t go to school, but I never
thought about them being denied the opportunity to go to school and ending up in Recife (the
large urban center) looking for a way to further their educations. I decided to talk to some other
maids. I talked to six maids who had come from rural areas, a common practice. I learned that all
of them had come searching for more education; all of them had difficulty reading and
functioning in the power Discourse. None of them ever learned to read printed text or furthered
their education by even one grade level.

The social structure in place was working to maintain the status quo—a readily available
supply of maids who would work for very little, and at times only for their food and shelter in a
slave-like system. For these women, structure was limiting their agency and working to keep the
current social order (Archer, 2000; 2003). There was no motivation for those benefiting from the
structure in place to promote social change. The people who use the power Discourse don’t want
to lose the convenience of maids. Elena said that nothing had changed any from the time she
got to the big city, about 15 years ago. “Girls stay at home and help their mothers, and cook
and clean, wash and iron. Then they come to Recife and work in other people’s kitchens’ for
very little.” She goes on to say that “…when I go to Pombos to visit my brother and my nephews,
I still hear of girls coming to Recife…It’s the same thing.”

A similar kind of structure to the one currently in place in Brazil, maintaining this cycle
of oppression, is developing in the United States, as “we are experiencing a rapid ‘Third-
Worldization’ of North America, where inner cities more and more come to resemble the
States, we have plenty of illegal immigrants who are being oppressed by the structure in place
that favors documented workers, yet depends on the cheap labor of the undocumented.

**Pernambuco’s and Elena’s Realities**

In Pernambuco, there are very few literacy or basic education programs specifically
designed for women (Ballara, 1995). According to Elena, “there weren’t any special classes, like
today, in some places. I heard today if you don’t get out [of work] in time and miss class you
don’t have to repeat the year...you don’t have to see it all again.” Elena thinks if she had stayed
longer in school she would not be a maid today and she would certainly be making more money.

Until the point when we last talked, Elena had not yet enrolled in an adult literacy
program satisfactory to her. Themes that came out frequently in our conversations regarding the
deficiencies of programs she had previously attended were: classes having too many youngsters
(teenagers), which made her feel inappropriate; lack of child care, since her husband works until
11:00 p.m. as a security person; and the lack of a program that is close to her home. These were
common obstacles she would have to overcome in order to finish her education and change her
life situation.

Women-focused literacy programs target those women who have problems participating
in typical adult education programs. They tend to be low-SES (socio economic status) women
who work in domestic tasks and the care of small children. These women’s literacy groups
establish more flexible classroom schedules, but their participation still requires support and
cooperation of all family members. When women do manage to accommodate domestic labor
and child care with their studies, those with family responsibilities and reduced autonomy choose to attend programs close to home (Stromquist, 1994).

In the Zona da Mata (Mata zone) of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, where both Elena and I are from, programs to promote literacy that aim to overcome gender subordination and focus on sex education, generation of income, legal support, and defense of rights are an exception rather than the rule (di Pierro, 2000).

**Lack of Success in Schools and in Literacy Programs**

Elena still hasn’t given up hope that one day she can go back to school, which is admirable. Her story is one of strength and persistence—15 years trying to continue her education. Although she repeated fourth grade, she has limited reading and writing skills and regrets not being able to help her son, who is in Kindergarten, with his homework.

I think the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place. I pay for my son to go to school it is a very big sacrifice, but the teacher thinks I don’t care because I don’t help him. Then she decided to make him repeat the year. He is in Kindergarten again this year and I am paying it all again. I don’t know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can’t help him. (Elena, 2003)

After Elena’s comments, I reflected on my own practice as a teacher. I started being more meta-aware and tried to respect each child’s culture to the point that I challenged my own view of parental involvement, and came to define it broadly as any involvement that affects the present or the future of the child (Urdavinia-English, 2003). Many educators are blaming parents for the failing of their children, not taking into account the existing differences between home cultures and school cultures. In the current social, political, and economic structure, success in schools is a socially constructed concept in which children such as Elena’s son are not successful
if they don’t assimilate the power Discourse. According to Au, “when children learn to read, or fail to learn to read, they do so in a particular social, cultural, and historical environment. Their success or failure in reading cannot be understood apart from the environment” (1997, p. 184).

Considering the multitude of Discourses, cultures, and environments, a balance of acquisition and learning should be the goal of strong literacy programs (Gee, 1996) in schools everywhere. To understand what Gee is proposing when he defines a strong literacy program, it is important to look at his definitions of acquisition and learning, first conceived by Stephen Krashen (1985a; 1985b), and employed by Gee in Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in Discourses (1996):

*Acquisition* is a process of acquiring something (usually, subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functioning in the sense that acquirers know they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function...

*Learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter. (Gee, 1996, p. 138)

Often, schools focus on learning and assume that acquisition of schooling discourse and other skills esteemed in school settings happens at home. Yes, this does happen in the homes of middle class families, but this is not the case with Elena’s son. She regrets not having read to
him, but she doesn’t know how to read. Besides, by the time she got home, she had to wash her family’s clothes, cook and clean. She had to bathe her children and put them to bed. Then, she had to go to bed herself, to wake up early next morning. Assuming that acquisition of those skills valued at school and within the power Discourse was happening at home was contributing to the failure of Elena’s son within the current school structure.

To reach a diverse student body, including those students who come from households such as Elena’s, literacy needs to explore social and cultural differences as resources and analyze the impact of these differences on school success as “readers and practices of reading are situated within histories of locality...and class. Literacy learning is part of these histories, not something that children do as a cognitive task divorced from their lives” (Hicks, 2002, p.37). Ignoring these only means benefiting those children whose home culture is the culture of power, the culture reflected at school. For children whose home culture is not that of those in power, home and school cultures often require different discourses. That’s what was happening in Pernambuco. Elena’s story was coloring my take on what literacy is and what it ought to be for the region—Northeastern Brazil. According to Laubscher and Powell, “richer learning is possible through attention to such politics of difference” (2003, p. 221), through valuing diversity and employing it as a resource in the classroom.

Along with acquisition, learning is an essential part of a successful literacy program, as there can be no critique of a Discourse without learning; for it is through the process of learning that meta-knowledge can be developed. Learning is part of teaching for social justice. Elena talked about the fact that her son was starting to disrespect her, “because I don’t know what’s important [at school].” When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person's cultural identity and in the learning situation, the
individual is faced with a choice: to either adopt the perspective of the school and risk undermining their cultural identity, or to resist the externally imposed activities at the risk of becoming alienated from the school (Nieto, 2002). Elena’s son, as she reported above, was clearly conflicted as to whether he should choose the school culture or the home culture.

For children to be forced to choose between their home culture and their school culture puts them at an educational disadvantage. Freirean pedagogy makes this conflict explicit. If students choose the school culture, they will be outsiders in their own cultures. If they choose the home culture, they will likely not fare well enough at school. Freirean literacy curriculum builds on multiple discourses present in the classroom while not taking for granted that students should be familiar with the school discourse and structure as they enter the classroom. Teaching the power Discourse to enable students to critique it is the goal teachers should embrace to promote cultural and linguistic equity in the classroom (Delpit, 1995).

**Literacies**

In any culturally diverse society, there will be different conceptions of what it is to be literate; that is, there are multiple literacies (Gee, 1996). By conversing with Elena, I realize that one of the problems she was experiencing is related to the restricted definition of literacy that many teachers have. We must, as Gee (1996) highlights, promote multiple literacies.

Elena defines herself as illiterate; that is one of her identities—besides her identity as a maid and mother. I asked her why, and she said that although she attended school until fourth grade, she can't read or write. Yet, she functions quite well in her community and is quite intelligent and astute. She can calculate her budget and plan a meal for the family plus guests. She can carry on a long conversation and she demonstrates an understanding of political issues,
the politicians only think about us when it is time to vote, but you can’t learn like that, it takes longer than their campaign, you know, and once they are elected, they don’t care about us anymore...all we have to give them is our vote...they always promise but don’t always do what they promise. (Elena, 2003)

**Literacy as a Possible Tool for Social Change**

According to Paulo Freire (1985) literacy should be a tool for personal transformation and social change, and it can only be so if what the students are learning is directly related to their lives. If the idea is that education and knowledge have value only if they help people free themselves from oppressive social conditions (Freire, 2000), this is a situation in which education would have much value—by providing the tools for social change. As Freire advocated, Elena is reading the world before reading the word; but how can she make the transition to actually reading words?

*Círculos de Educação e Cultura* (Circles of Education and Culture) is a current program that takes place in the rural area of my state, Pernambuco, where Paulo Freire started his journey as an educator who believed in literacy as a means of social change. As a self-identified “illiterate person”, Elena would qualify to participate in this program. The program educates adults who are generally workers in the rural sugar cane farms in the state of Pernambuco. Many of them had to drop out of school to work in the fields to sustain their families--many never even went to school. Girls, as in Elena’s case, were not allowed to continue their education, as middle schools and high schools were scarce and required students to travel a long distance to get to school, something only boys could (or should) do. Since children could start working as early as they could start school, attending school, learning how to read and write were not priorities as
working was essential for their survival. Circles of culture have made it possible for thousands of rural workers to open their minds to a new world.

The areas in which Paulo Freire developed participatory literacy programs have been supported by government-sponsored programs and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world. The program discussed here is supported by both the government of the state of Pernambuco and many NGOs.

Before the culture circles were implemented, the rural workers would complain that they would work the whole day in the field, and could not cope with going to school to learn things that were not important in the field. School was regarded as a luxury, or as something that gave people something to do until they could find a job. The underlying thought was that if one already had a job, he/she did not need to go to school, because you go to school so that you can find a job. In 1996, at the implementation of these circles by the state government with the support of some NGOs, 34% of the population of the state was illiterate. Even worse, 59% of the population in Pernambuco’s rural areas was illiterate (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, 1997).

Something had to be done to counter the effect of secular socio-political-economic conditions that did not work for the benefit of the people in the Northeast of Brazil. Fortunately, even though people had lived under such harsh conditions, and worked so much and for so long, they still had hopes of better days. They really stand behind the saying “nunca é tarde pra aprender,” which translates into “it is never too late to learn.” That is exactly what the Círculos de Educação e Cultura (Circles of Education and Culture) have been designed to ensure: it is never too late to learn.
Students’ interests and issues determine the curriculum taught. Teachers facilitate. While in Pernambuco, during the months of June, July and August, 2003, I observed the teaching of very practical skills such as learning how to sign names and calculate salaries based on the number of hours worked, among other skills. A few of the very functional skills that many students were particularly proud of included being able to read the signs that indicate where the bus is going, where a car is from (by reading the license), and the ability to read and write the name of the surrounding communities. The first things taught were very practical and functional aspects of reading and writing. I can understand how these skills are important to the students--using public transportation and knowing where they are--but I cannot imagine how a teacher would include those skills in the curriculum if the students weren’t the ones to dictate the curriculum. Starting from themes inherent in the participants’ lives is a very positive aspect of this program. Its pedagogical intent is still the same: to democratize education and culture. More than formation, it tries to promote the social competence of people of low Socio-Economic Status (SES), and improve the quality of life. These circles take place in many locations. Primarily, they take place wherever it is convenient for most of the members. Some of them take place in schools, clubs, syndicates/unions, and even in churches. They take place whenever and wherever it is convenient for the community.

More specific technical skills are also taught. The workers in the sugar cane fields discuss their techniques and practices as well as the purpose of their techniques and practices. They come to truly understand what they are doing and become specialists in their area. The technical words learned in the field are reviewed in class, making the literacy learning in the circles directly related to their lives.
The rich experience of each of the individuals is respected in the circle. There isn’t a member who doesn’t know anything; every person has important life experiences to share. These experiences become the themes for the meetings. The people are not classified as illiterate, but as learners. Each one of them brings knowledge, explanations, ideas regarding themselves and their worlds. They bring and share their dreams, wishes, fears, questions, doubts, and frustrations; these are starting points for educational and social action. The curricula must be common to the community--the prayers, the syndicates, the social behavior of the group--nothing should escape the attention of educators.

Teachers must know and believe that dialogue is the essential condition of their work--the teacher’s job is to coordinate and to facilitate, and never to influence or impose. The teacher’s role is to facilitate the entrance of men and women into the world of knowledge and literacy, a world in which there is no absolute knowledge (Harding, 1986), but a world in which situated knowledge (Hill Collins, 1990) is celebrated.

Negotiating Identities

While Elena is eligible to participate in the culture circles, this program is not yet in place in Recife, the city where Elena lives. When told about this program and asked if she’d be interested in participating, she said, “If I can take my children with me, if I won’t feel “burra” and if there are people of my age there, I want to go. When can I start going? W-where is it?” Unfortunately, this program has not entered big cities yet. It is taking place in rural areas, areas such as the one from which Elena originally came.

Women like Elena, who have been excluded from sites of knowledge, also suffer from the stereotypes associated with third world women. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991),

2 Burra is a slang term for stupid, unintelligent in Portuguese. Literally, it means a female jackass.
the texts of non-Western women’s lives written by feminists in the West tend to present portraits of the third-world woman as ... being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)...while subliminally portraying themselves as “educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (p.56).

Elena’s story is one of great determination and strength, as on the personal level she fights to erase stereotypes commonly associated with low socioeconomic status women in Northeastern Brazil. The culture circles, as we will see in the following chapter, allow women to develop tools to engage in change through political literacy and problem-solving-based critical education. These circles promote different “culture[s] and [their] relationship[s] to literacy learning...that examine how the social organization of learning influences learning outcomes...in how children learn to read and become literate” (Gutierrez, Asato, Pacheco, Moll, Olson, Horno, Ruiz, Garcia, & McCarthy, 2002, p. 342). Throughout this study, I continue questioning and interrogating relationships between power, discourses, literacies and cultures, and how the women participants in this study narrate the negotiation of these relationships in their everyday lives. In doing so, I listen closely (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004) to what the women have to say and investigate ways in which women such as Elena can have alternatives to negotiate their identities, ultimately being able to re-imagine who they are (Holland, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).
CHAPTER 3
READING THE WORD AND READING THE WORLD:
THE TEXT AND CONTEXT OF FREIRE’S CIRCLES OF CULTURE IN BRAZIL

“...no educational experience takes place in a vacuum,
only in a real context—historical, economic, political,
and not necessarily identical to any other context.”

(Freire, 1985, p. 12)

Introduction
Forty years ago, democracy came to an end in Brazil and Freire’s circles of culture were outlawed. In 1964, the year in which the new president would be elected in Brazil, the military took the government forcefully. The coup d’etat came as Freire’s circles of culture were yielding fast and amazing results. Peasants were questioning their location in society and engaging in social action to change their conditions. These circles were so successful that they were threatening the new military government. Within 14 days of the coup d’etat, Freire’s circles of culture were extinguished. Twenty years later, they again became a reality as a democratic government was re-established in Brazil. This chapter outlines the history of Freirean circles of culture within the context of the history and politics of Brazil over the last 40 years.
Context and Historicity: Circles of Culture as a Political Threat

My grandmother was born in 1924. During her lifetime, she has seen the Brazilian government move from a democracy to a military dictatorship and back to democracy. She has also witnessed or participated in various literacy campaigns and, like Elena, is still unable to read and write in her native language. Historically, illiteracy has been a reality for Brazilians. In 1890, 67.2% of Brazilians were illiterate (Haddad & Freitas, 1991), a result of the monarchy hegemony that precluded literacy for most people in the country. In 1920, even though a republic had been established, 60.1% of Brazilians were still illiterate. In Brazil, the first large adult literacy campaign happened in 1947 (Yamasaki & Santos, 1999), after the end of the Vargas dictatorship. This campaign sought to develop a literacy program that would integrate and train workers in the market. This specific program was designed to occur in three steps. The first phase lasted three months and sought to transform illiterates into literates. The second phase was the post-literacy phase, which lasted seven months. Then in the third phase, seven more months, the adults would learn the equivalent of all the elementary school years. In addition to the literacy component, there was also a work training component of the program, designed to train workers for specific positions (similar to vocational training in the United States). While successful in urban areas, this program yielded very poor results in rural areas (Yamasaki & Santos, 1999). It lead to the development of graduation equivalency tests called supletivos (similar to the GED in the United States), which continued past the end of the campaign and were dismantled near the end of the 1950s.

During the 1950s, there was no specific method to teach adult literacy. According to Yamasaki and Santos (1999), “the illiterate adult was made responsible for his/her condition, being considered incapable of taking on responsibilities; society was not given...any historical
responsibility for this social exclusion” (p.7). Psychologically, the illiterate adult was classified as having serious learning problems, and treated as a child. This contributed to the marginalization of these adults as well as to prejudice, limiting the social and political effectiveness of the illiterate adult in the world in which he/she lived (Ribeiro, 1997).

With emancipatory theories in the 1950s, these adults started being recognized as “victims of an exclusionary historical-social process” (Yamasaki & Santos, 1999, p.8). Contrary to beliefs up to that point, these adults were considered “socially productive, culturally and cognitively capable to think and solve problems” (p.8). Haddad and Freitas (1991) blamed the still extremely high Brazilian illiteracy rate of 46.7% at the end of the 1950s on the lack of a specific pedagogical approach to teach adult literacy that involved the situated contexts of the learners and that engaged them in purposeful or meaningful learning. My grandmother was in her early to mid-thirties when Paulo Freire first developed his method, the circles of culture, initially applied to two students and then with the Popular Culture Movement (PCM) in Recife and in Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte. Freire developed a new vision for the pedagogical process of an adult literacy program that involved not only learning how to read the word, but how to read the world. He sought to respect the culture of the students and lead them to question the status quo -- to rethink how much of that culture was truly theirs, and how much had been imposed by dominant discourses (Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1996). Freire’s method invited students to learn and value their own culture while questioning the system in place, contrary to the common misconception that his method consisted of a white middle-class man making decisions and judgments regarding the lives of others (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Peasants analyzed their own situations as they started to mobilize against the system in place, a system in which they had
been subject to very poor living conditions and very few opportunities for change. They wanted people like them in power. They wanted more equal opportunities (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c).

China had undergone a revolution in 1949 and Cuba in 1959, both with strong peasant involvement and engagement (“Pernambuco no olho do furacão,” 2004). The scene in Brazil, where there was misery and revolt, worried the American government. Freire’s circles of culture enabled the peasants to become meta-aware of the oppressive conditions in which they lived, which was similar to the literacy campaign that Cuba had sponsored in the recent past. On November 1st, 1960, the New York Times (NYT) warned Americans of this situation, especially in Northeastern Brazil (“Pernambuco no olho do furacão,” 2004). This NYT issue claimed Marxists were organizing peasants in Brazil; Freire was identified as one of the Marxists. The day before, with such importance that it appeared on the front page of this influential paper, there was an article on the uprising of a revolution in the Northeast of Brazil. The article affirmed that Fidel Castro and Mao Tse-Tung were being celebrated as heroes and introduced to the peasants in circles of culture and in social action organizations (“Pernambuco no olho do furacão,” 2004), such as the peasant leagues (ligas camponesas). These two were also becoming heroes among students and urban workers. At that time, my father was a university medical student and remembered admiring Cuba and Fidel along with his colleagues. He reported that they believed the only way to end misery was to cut ties with the United States and the capitalist system that exploited the weak to benefit the strong. My grandmother was working as a maid during this time. She had already had children and no formal schooling. Instead of thinking of Fidel, Freire or others, she was concerned with her children’s survival. While my mother was in medical school and still unaware of having been adopted, my grandmother had given up her educational
dreams at least temporarily, as she had three other children to raise and no husband. She said she didn’t have time to think about anything else.

At this time, American politicians, including Edward Kennedy, the President’s brother, and the writer Arthur Schlesinger, went to see the situation in Northeastern Brazil with their own eyes. More specifically, they visited my home state of Pernambuco. Arthur Schlesinger reports (“Pernambuco no olho do furacão,” 2004) being impressed with the magnitude of the situation and affirmed that, if ignored, Brazil would become another communist country. After all, peasants were engaged in analyzing their world critically, problem-posing, engaging in critical dialog and problem-solving. Freire’s circles were doing just that in Northeastern Brazil.

Figure 1

Peasant League in Northeastern Brazil (Azevedo et al, 2004\(^3\))

\(^3\) (Azevedo, Domeneci, Amaral, Tendler, Viana, Arbex Jr., et al., 2004)
In the 1950s, the socio-political-economical context in Brazil was similar to that of Cuba in terms of dependency and domination (Feitosa, 1999a). In the late ‘50s, Cuba fought against American imperialism. One of the main tools employed was a mass literacy campaign which was revolutionary. The Brazilian literacy program was a response to the oppressive situation in which the great part of its population lived. Instead of focusing on political revolution, as the Cuban literacy campaign did, the Brazilian literacy campaign focused on the students’ interests, needs, and possibilities for change. It addressed themes relevant to the realm of its students, such as shelter, food, voting, and conscientização (or critical meta-awareness) of the conditions in which they lived.

From 1960 to 1963, Freire was involved with the Popular Culture Movement (Movimento de Cultural Popular-MCP) in Recife. Gerhard (1993) reported that Freire’s literacy method, the circles of culture, were first implemented and developed in an MCP culture circle which Freire coordinated in one of the suburbs of Recife. Paulo Freire was invited by the mayor of Recife at the time, Miguel Arraes, to construct and implement a literacy program on behalf of the city council under the umbrella of the MCP (Taylor, 1993). “The sponsorship by Miguel Arraes of an adult literacy program in Recife in 1962 provided Freire with the platform to launch his now-famous ‘culture circles’” (Roberts, 2000, p.75). Taking a critical perspective, this program was to transform the socioeconomic situation of the Northeast (de Castro, 1969).

Having achieved success in Recife, Freire was invited by the governor of Rio Grande do Norte, another Northeastern state, to head a pilot project in the city of Angicos. Angicos happened to be the governor’s hometown; he wanted to do something significant for his town, especially considering elections would occur in the following year, 1964. Freire agreed to work
in Angicos, but made it clear to the governor that it could not be a petty project. Freire was not going to campaign in the classroom to convince voters to vote for the incumbent. Freire then recruited the help of members of the leadership team of UNE (União Nacional dos Estudantes—National Student’s Union), which both my father and I were part of along the years, to conduct these circles of culture and promote liberation through education.

According to Mashayekh (1974), Freire taught 300 people how to read and write in three months. Elias (1994) says that the people of Angicos became literate in 45 days. Cynthia Brown recounted that Freire’s literacy method took place in 30 hours (Brown, 1975). More recently, Nilcea Lemos Pelandré (2002), in a book published by the Paulo Freire Institute, listed forty hours as the requisite time. Despite the inconsistencies of these accounts, it is clear that the program worked extremely well, yet it is uncertain as to the exact amount of time it took.

The success of the Angicos project was such that Freire was invited by his friend, Paulo de Tarso, newly appointed minister of education in the populist government of President João Goulart (1961-4), to become the director of the Brazilian National Literacy Program... In that capacity Freire drew plans for 20,000 circles of culture to involve two million people by 1964, extending the pattern of literacy work throughout the country... In a period of three or four months, Freire and his team worked with thousands of illiterate workers. By his own account, they organized ‘three hundred culture circles, around Brasilia in the satellite towns, with excellent results.’ (Freire in de Figueiredo-Cowen & Gestaldo, 1995, p.65)
As mentioned previously, Freire’s literacy program somewhat resembled the Cuban literacy campaign, and some even say it was modeled after Cuba (Coben, 1998). Gerhardt (1993) reported that the Brazilian National Literacy Program was an important element of João Goulart’s pre-coup d’etat presidency, as he aimed to democratize the country through literacy. Challenging the banking system of education (Freire, 1970), Freire was “in favor of conscientization and both favored process over content, insofar as...content should come from learners” (Coben, 1998, p. 61).
Figure 3
March after Coup d'Etat (Azevedo et al, 2004)

Figure 4
Victory Walk: Against Communism (Azevedo et al, 2004)
In 1964, a year after the implementation of the circles of culture in Angicos, the military, assisted, organized, and funded by the United States government (Azevedo, Domeneci, Amaral, Tendler, Viana, Arbex Jr., et al., 2004; Coben, 1998) forcefully overtook the elected Brazilian government. A military dictatorship was established and initially supported by the Kennedy government. In 1964, Freire’s program was extinguished within 14 days of the coup d’etat. Considered an anti-American and a communist (as part of the Brazilian Communist Party, PCB), Freire was arrested and put in prison for seventy days in Recife (Gadotti, 1994). Freire was then exiled to Bolivia, where he went without his wife Elza and their five children. The following year, Freire went to Chile, where he re-joined his family and resumed his critical literacy programs. At this time however; circles of culture were not a reality in Brazil. From Chile to the United States to Europe to various countries in Africa, Freire continued to develop his work, as reported in *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (1978). In Chile, “Freire’s system became an official program of the government, and Chile was recognized by UNESCO as one of the five nations most effective in overcoming illiteracy” (Roberts, 2000, p. 83).

Following a two-year transition, democracy was finally re-established in Brazil in 1986. In that same year, Miguel Arraes, who had been exiled for his revolutionary ideas and for sponsoring circles of culture, was elected the governor of Pernambuco in an emotionally charged campaign (Araújo, 1991). He represented the return to a time before the dictatorship. Anti-American feelings were widespread. Arraes was elected and re-established circles of culture in Pernambuco, making them the model for adult literacy programs in the state.
Figure 5
Circles of Culture in Chile (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.a)

Figure 6
Freire Returns from Exile (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.a)
According to Maria Clara di Pierro (2000), in the last transition from dictatorship to democracy, one of the greatest achievements was the legal recognition of youth and adult education rights within the 1988 Constitution. The new constitution guaranteed access to public and free basic education for all... The new constitutional text led to expectations of a substantial expansion of the youth and adult education programs. Hopes for this expansion were nourished by the United Nations, which declared 1990 the International Year of Literacy during the World Conference on Education for All held in Thailand, of which Brazil is a signatory. (p.50)

Initially shocking, the great number of adults with limited literacy skills in Brazil must be analyzed within its context and this requires that we take into consideration the reality that universal education in Brazil was established only a little over 15 years ago (“A batalha,” 2003). Because of the lack of universal rights in education and the implementation of a nationalist literacy program called MOBRAL during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), a program which I further explain later in this chapter, the problem of limited literacy is worse with the adult population (Patai, 1988).

Today, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, a former factory worker with a fifth grade education and another native of my home state, is the President of Brazil. He is the first member of the worker’s party (the party Freire helped found) to be President. Part of his governing platform includes a program called Zero Illiteracy (Analfabetismo Zero). Something simple to say yet difficult to achieve, this program has taken the first step and funded circles of culture in many locations, including those I studied in Bezerros, Brazil. This national program addresses the great number of adults with limited literacy skills in Brazil, especially in the Northeast. As mentioned previously, circles of culture are widespread in Brazil now. “Paulo Freire[‘s]...success in the
national adult literacy campaign in Brazil in the 1960s influenced literacy campaigns around the world... Freire believed that literacy was one means to democracy, and felt that being able to ‘read the word’ was intimately tied to being able to ‘read the world’—that is, to analyze the political and social conditions that circumscribe people’s lives, in order to envision how these conditions should be changed.” (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000, p.208). “Freire’s aim was never to make people function better within any given system. Instead, he wanted them to become aware of injustices and to act in order to change them” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p.86).

**An Introduction to Circles of Culture**

![Circle of Culture in Kenya](Instituto Paulo Freire, 2001)

![Circle of Culture in Brazil](Instituto Paulo Freire, 2001)

**Figure 7**

Circle of Culture in Kenya

*(Instituto Paulo Freire, 2001)*

**Figure 8**

Circle of Culture in Brazil

*(Instituto Paulo Freire, 2001)*

**Literacy**

The concept of illiteracy is conveyed very differently in English and Portuguese. The Portuguese term, *analfabetismo*, refers specifically to the inability to read and write language generated by the alphabet. I believe that: (1) there are multiple literacies, and (2) each may be
viewed as a continuum depending on individual experience and competency. Freire’s philosophy supports these two concepts (Freire & Macedo, 1989). However, when Freire’s work is translated into English, the fixed terms literate and illiterate are used for alfabetismo and analfabetismo, and may generate some misunderstandings. Throughout this chapter, literacy and related terms refer to competency with written language as in alfabetismo and analfabetismo. For example, as mentioned in Chapter One, Elena, a maid who works in my mother’s house, considers herself analfabeta, or unable to read and write. Yet, orally she is able to construct linearly organized narratives that are highly tellable (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In her daily work, her literacy is portrayed by her prime aptitude to plan meals, from purchasing ingredients to budgeting and organizing intricate menus for my family and guests. While Elena is highly literate and able to function with high competency within her environment, according to the definition of literacy outlined above, she would be classified as illiterate.

**Generative Themes: Freirean Curriculum**

Circles of culture are a liberatory adult-literacy education program first described in Freire’s doctoral dissertation, *Educação e Atualidade Brasileira* (1959). In these circles, students learned how to read letters and the world, as well as to write words and their own histories (Feitosa, 1999a). These circles of culture take real life or relevant relationships provided by the students to create generative themes. The participants provide their own experiences which are presented as problems to the culture circle (Brown, 1978). Angela Antunes (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c) highlighted the importance of problematizing the gendered and raced experiences of the participants in the circles of culture. Freire (1997) used this problematization or the technique of problem-posing and problem-solving to initiate dialogue. According to Moacir Gadotti (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c), we only learn what is meaningful, otherwise we forget.
Taking the students’ experiences as central to the literacy process respects their discourses and cultures while at the same time making learning memorable and relevant. The student is therefore the protagonist in the circles of culture, in the literacy process. Further, Gadotti (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c) affirmed that knowledge is not only historical, epistemological, and logical, but it is dialogical. Through dialogue, we build and change the world. For example, participants of a culture circle I observed in Bezerros were questioning their own location in society, in terms of gender. The women were sharing their experiences of not being able to go to school past the elementary years. While this is a historical reality in Bezerros, it is based on a set of patriarchal beliefs, and was explained in terms of community morals; one of them said that “girls have to stay home and help their mothers.” Through dialogue they challenged this set of beliefs, they challenged gendered education as a pre-determined fact and seeing the issue as a barrier to the advancement of women, posed it as a problem, dialogued and derived some possible solutions and responses to the society at large. They plotted ways they could implement on a personal level to make sure their own daughters would not be victims of the structure in place. One of the solutions was to organize groups of girls who would walk together to the schools that were farther from where they lived, so that they would not become “badly spoken of,” for walking alone as one of them articulated. As can be seen from this example, knowledge is not only based on what we believe and what has happened in the past, but it is co-constructed in conversations (Ochs & Capps, 2001), in dialogue (Freire, 1970), by challenging the sociocultural assumptions we may have.

In the circles of culture, initially the generative themes are codified into generative words which are broken down into syllabic parts and used to build or generate new words (Heaney, 1989). These generative themes are "codifications of complex experiences which are charged
with political significance and are likely to generate considerable discussion and analysis" (Heaney, 1989). Codification is the representation of a meaningful aspect of the learner’s relevant life and may possibly include a photograph or a drawing, a single word or an entire story. The benefit of this representation is that it allows the students to analyze the situation from a non-threatening theoretical viewpoint while still making connections with the situation of their own lives (Heaney, 1989). For example, in one of the circles I observed, one of its participants brought up the issue of being a good mother. This seemingly simple issue was very charged with complex experiences, such as her children not doing well in school and their teacher blaming it on her inability to be a good mother. I discuss this issue later in Chapter Five.

"The task of the dialogical teacher in an interdisciplinary team working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to ‘re-present’ that universe to the people from who she or he first received it - and ‘re-present’ it not as a lecture, but as a problem" (Freire, 1997, p. 90). Hence, problem-posing or problematization that is relative to each learner’s experience is the key to this educational method. The Freirean curriculum (Heaney, 1989) or method (Feitosa, 1999a) is based on the experience and enacted elements of curriculum design (Marsh & Willis, 1999). The curriculum of study comes directly from the learners who are participants in their own learning (Freire, 1997). There are no textbooks adopted in these circles, but culture notebooks instead--books created by the students themselves (Freire, 1973; 1990). The process of constructing and working with these culture notebooks is complex as they are “literally handmade from the social fabrics of the students’ lives” (Salvio, 1998, p.69). Culture notebooks are made by the students and may include photos, drawings, word lists, and eventually stories generated and discussed in the culture circles. Such aspects of the curriculum in the culture circles and the seamless engagement of theory and practice, as proposed by Freire, serve to
dispel the criticism that critical pedagogy theorists such as Freire could do more to recognize the realities of educational contexts instead of remaining at the theoretical level (Gore, 1993).

Prior to implementing the circles of culture, teachers and/or coordinators learn from the community in which the circle will be implemented. Engaging in what Freire referred to as field vocabulary research, they collect words, phrases and observe and record common situations in that particular community. From what could be called corpus analysis (Stubbs, 1996), these teachers come up with a word list according to occurrence and relevance. A thematic list is also generated using the same process. These words and themes relevant to the community become the core of the circles. These lists are then codified into pictures or other visual representations. Consequently, the adult participants are able to engage in deeper dialogue, as the method focuses on their strengths, on their knowledge regarding those words and themes that emerged from their own universe, as opposed to accentuating their limited literacy skills with unfamiliar terms.

“Through debate and detailed analysis of linguistic features, the members of the popular culture circle begin to discuss culture as a result of the human labor and the creative acquisition of human experience” (p.69). This is done as students “begin to read and write, ...[and] come to understand that reading and writing are not neutral acts; rather, they are linked to cultural practices that make political, epistemic, and moral claims on our lives” (p.69).

In culture circles, participants question the practices that are taken for granted within the community where they live, allowing participants to become critically aware of the origin and meaning of the values they call their own. For example, as mentioned previously in this chapter, the definition of a “good mother” or of what girls ought to do (drop-out to help their mothers versus continuing their formal education) are problematized. “Why is it that girls are not staying in school?” and “what is a “good mother”?” were questions that emerged from participants’
tellings. Through dialoguing, participants arrived at the understanding that there are no absolute answers to these questions, but socially constructed values. For example, the question of what a good mother is developed into what a good teacher is, since the context in which this issue initially appeared was when an elementary school teacher told one of the participants that her child was not succeeding because she was not being a good mother. Through sharing the issues plaguing their lives, the participants are problematizing socially constructed definitions and values that had previously been conceived as absolute truths. Becoming meta-aware of how the social structure influenced their realities, these women were able to deconstruct these definitions and re-work them in an agentic way. The woman who was told she needed to be a good mother, as we will see later in this study, went back to her son’s classroom. She told the teacher that she was trying to be a good mother and now she wanted for her to be a good teacher, enacting personal agency, even within the structure in place.

*A Culture Circle in Action*

On a Monday evening in June, 2003, as darkness began to settle and the heat gave some signs of weakening, women and men started entering the room in which they routinely met for their culture circle. Some of them came right from work, which could be noted by their clothes and hands dusted with soil, signaling their agricultural employment. Some of them talked about the work in the tomato farms in the region, as many of them were engaged in this kind of work. Others looked tired, as if ready to go to bed. It was almost seven o’clock. The facilitator was there, but could hardly be identified apart from the participants, as she sat and talked with some of them. There wasn’t an official start routine. Conversations about everyday themes and issues that started small developed to a point in which they involved all, as they engaged in dialogue and problem solving; two inherent parts of the culture circles.
From the beginning, work was clearly the topic of the night. Whether in the tomato fields or in someone’s kitchen, they all kept hard work schedules; many led double journeys, double lives, working harshly inside and out of their homes. As they started talking about their work, money and salary emerged naturally as the conversion point, as a theme to which they could all relate. Josi expressed her frustration by saying:

It doesn’t matter how much I work, I am always owing something to someone; I am always late with my bills. I live with fear. Fear that one day I will get home and not have enough money to pay the rent, or to give food to my children.

Participants, men and women nodded. Another woman, Solange, asked Josi, “But don’t you make a minimum [wage] salary?” Josi answered positively. “What does that mean?” asked Sandra, the facilitator. Solange immediately answered, “That means she should have enough to live.” They continued in the following dialogue:

Josi: I work hard, but the salary is not enough. I don’t know what I am doing wrong--

Jose: --Wrong?

Josi: Yes, because I work, earn a minimum [wage] salary, but it’s never enough to pay the bills and put food on the table.

Solang: But the minimum [wage] salary is enough. Isn’t it? ((looks around seeking approval))

Miriam: I don’t have enough money for all my bills either. Do you have--
Solange: --What?

Enough money?

Josefa: Yes—

Solange: —No. I am not the owner of my own house. I pay rent every month. I can’t buy everything that my family needs. Some days all we eat is [manioc] flour. A handful of flour to fill the belly. We don’t have meat on the table.

((Many nod, showing agreement and empathy))

The group started talking about the minimum wage salary and how most of them could identify with Josi’s situation. They all made minimum wage salaries, which according to governmental definition, should allow for a decent living, but they arrived at the conclusion that it didn’t, at least in their experiences. They worked hard, but the minimum wage established by federal law, was what most of them earned. Some earned even less. After arriving at the understanding that the minimum wage salary wasn’t allowing most of them to lead a decent life—to have food on the table and to pay utility bills and housing expenses—they started problematizing the definition of a minimum wage salary.

José: So who decided how much is enough?

Marina: I don’t know. It wasn’t me.

((laughter))

Sandra: The government is who approves the minimum [wage] salary—
Josi —That’s not fair. They don’t earn a minimum salary. I just saw Lula [the Brazilian president] in a big car on a store’s television. I can’t buy a car like that. I can’t even pay to go to work by bus. I go walking.

Miriam: Me too.

Solang: Who earns a minimum [wage] salary?

((most raise their hands))

Solang: Who earns less than a minimum [wage] salary?

((four women raise their hands))

José: Do you work the entire day?

Laurinda: I work—

Neto: —the entire week?

((women who earn less than the minimum wage nod))

Laurinda: Who earns more than the minimum [wage] salary?

((five of the eight men in the room raise their hands))

Sandra: What do you perceive?

Luís: That we earn more than they [do].

Solang: Men earn more money—

Neto: —but it’s not enough to live.

The women and men in the culture circle realized that there was economical injustice, but also gender discrimination in terms of salaries. The gender issue erupted through the problematizing of salaries as a theme of discussion. Even though the minimum wage salary was
clearly not enough to lead a decent life in the experience of this culture circle’s participants, the women had a clear disadvantage as they made less money than the men, even if they worked at the same place and performed the same kind of job, as was the case with two circle participants, Neto and Miriam.

After much discussion, dialogue, and reflection on the issue of economic and gender-based discrimination and injustice, these people decided to calculate what would be a decent, livable, minimum wage. After adding rent, utility, and transportation to and from work, clothing, and food (not restricted to manioc flour and water) for a family of three, they arrived at 650 reais (Brazilian currency), which amounted to around three minimum wage salaries at the time or approximately 230 U.S. dollars. They concluded that session by coursing two plans for action—one at the personal and one at the societal level. On the personal level, they were going to further their studies so as to be better qualified to take on better-paying jobs. Both men and women also decided to ask their employers why the women were making less money than men for the same job. Bridging the personal and the institutional realms, they were determined to attempt to dialogue with their employers about the importance of equal pay across genders for the same kind of work. Finally, on the institutional level, they decided to write a letter to their representative that read, “Three salaries is what allows [us] to live. [We] have to study very much...” The letter ends by calling for action on the institutional level. The participants’ non-uniform lettering and limited literacy did not stop them from taking action, from attempting to promote change. As Freire (n.d.) wrote (see the figure below), “It is as impossible to negate the political nature of the educational process as [it is] to negate the educational character of the political act...” (trans. by author).
Political Nature of the Educational Process

In the circle described here, the participants, women and men, engaged in problematizing salaries, something that they believed they could do nothing to change. Through problematizing and dialoguing about some of the issues involved, such as gender disparity in earnings, they dialogued and designed a plan of action. Participants, therefore, were becoming aware of tools they could use (problem posing, dialogue, and problem solving) to question the status quo, and to start believing in and even negotiating change.

As subjects of their own learning, participants bring authentic issues to the circles and engage in meaningful learning experiences, applicable to their everyday lives, gaining ownership of their learning (Rainer & Matthews, 2002). Further, they are subjects of their own learning.
Culture circles I observed discussed salary, working conditions, job skills and ethics, parenting, children, education, elections and politics as it related to the participants’ lives, among other themes. Through the exploration of relevant issues and themes, the participants engaged in inquiry, questioning, and charting a course of action. As they problematized themes and issues, old knowledge and assumptions collided with new knowledge. Participants could then construct their own knowledge in a critical manner. This happened as they shared their experiences, their perspectives, and listened to other perspectives as alternatives, as a multiplicity of angles, as explanations. The teacher-facilitator, Sandra, in the meeting reported above, took advantage of certain moments to further the participants’ queries and inquiries; she provided information, but did not necessarily dictate what went on in the circles, nor did she take the stance of teacher as the holder of knowledge.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) wrote that the kind of pedagogy proposed by Freire is a “repressive myth[s] that perpetuate[s] relations of domination,” and masks “the actual political agendas … namely antiracism, antisexism, anti-elitism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, anticlassism, and anti-neoconservatism” (p. 93). She wrote that theorists such as Freire “…have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself” (p. 98). The circle example above addressed gender and class issues in a very authentic way, with issues and themes emanating from the students’ lives. It did not promote change on the societal level disturbing institutional power imbalances, but it exposed alternative perspectives and understandings of an issue, and allowed participants to start developing tools to engage in meta-awareness at their own personal level, to challenge the status quo. Change on the institutional level takes time and must start from those involved. If Freire
proposed a program to end all kinds of injustice, imposing his own solutions, he would only be adding one more layer of institutional oppression, imposing his proposed solutions on the lives of others, as Ellsworth implies in her critique. Many critics have considered that the concern with class issues that are common in Marxist discourses often results in diminishing other issues (such as gender and race), and these are in turn blatantly ignored (McLaren, 2000) by Freire. Here, as the participants explored underlying issues of class, such as gender, we see that these issues are addressed in Freirean pedagogy models, such as the culture circles. They are not, however, imposed by the teacher/facilitator, but rather arise from the students’ interests.

**Implementing Culture Circles: Freirean Methods**

Overall, as exemplified above, the circles of culture are based on two basic tenets, the political nature of education (Feitosa, 1999a; Freire, 1985) and dialogue in the process of educating. These tenets take place within the context in which the learners live, as their problems are analyzed critically and politically, and dialogue is used as a way to overcome and find solutions to those problems. Dialogue became such a central concept for Freire that in the 1980s, he began writing books in dialogue format as his method itself proposed (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c).

Circles of culture employ what is called Freirean methodology (Feitosa, 1999a; 1999b). There are five principles of the Freirean methodology, in alignment with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (1978) which proposed that social interaction mediates the learning process (Berk & Winsler, 1995) and works on the assumption that "action is mediated and cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 18). These principles are listed below:
* **First principle:** when the student arrives at school, he/she already has knowledge of his/her own language; already has a discourse applied in his/her everyday world;

* **Second principle:** the student is the subject of his/her own learning. In circles of culture, the student investigates and engages in inquiry employing problem-posing, critical dialogue and problem-solving;

* **Third principle:** conflict is the basis for learning. When old knowledge and new knowledge conflict, students ask questions and dialogue, constructing their own knowledges critically;

* **Fourth principle:** learning takes place collectively. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is directly linked to the collective experience. Along with Vygotsky, Freire emphasized that learning only happens collectively within a dialectical framework;

* **Fifth principle:** academic practice is not spontaneous; it requires continuous inquiry and research. There is much planning, yet the teacher must know how to critically take advantage of teachable moments (Feitosa, 1999b).

The circles of culture not only recognize the discourses of students, but allow students to learn from their own discourses, whether by employing themes present in the students’ realities or by teaching from words that already figure in their vocabularies. Learning a secondary discourse (or Discourse, according to James Paul Gee, 1996), is paramount to literacy. This is actually Gee’s definition of literacy, which I discuss later.

Circles of culture aim to promote *conscientização* (Freire, 1973; 1990). “In concrete terms, his methods of ‘conscientization’ with adults in literacy programmes was basically constituted by a process of coding/decoding linguistic and social meanings, organized through a
number of steps” (Apple, Gandin, & Hypolito, 2001, p.131). Although there are a number of steps, as I mentioned previously, there is no simple formula for the implementation of circles of culture. According to Apple, Ganding and Hypolito (2001), the first step is to generate themes from the community in which students live. These words are “socially and culturally relevant to those communities” (p.132). After the generation of words, they are employed in dialogues in the circles. A list of seventeen to eighteen words is made. The words have to be meaningful, phonetically rich and organized in order of difficulty, from easiest to hardest. “[S]pecific steps are taken to achieve the process of reading...consist[ing] of a process of decoding written words...from a coded existential situation. This connection to the real existential situation is...crucial...to enabling students...to use...knowledge to reconstruct their lives” (p.132). Circles of culture intend to eliminate the dichotomy between theory and practice often present in the traditional schooling environment as the practice depends on the theory and the theory depends on the practice in the implementation and maintenance of circles of culture.

There are also three steps in the circles of culture. These are not prescriptive, and need to be re-created as new instances occur and circles of culture are implemented in different contexts. They are:

1. **Thematic investigation** (investigation of the social and linguistic context of the learner)
2. **Thematization** (selection of generative themes and words)
3. **Problematization** (seeks to do away with our innocent and simplistic views of the world or any specific situation, leading us to look critically at, and transform, the situation in place)
Within the third step, problematization, there are five phases, outlined by Freire in his book *Education: The practice of freedom* (1974/1976), a reworking of his dissertation. To reach the problematization level, Freire emphasizes the following:

1. Learning/Knowing the linguistic universe of learners;
2. Choosing the words from the linguistic universe learned—this selection is based on phonemic richness, rising level of difficulty, and pragmatics;
3. Creation of existential situations (situations typical of the ones present in the lives of the learners);
4. Elaboration of the curricular proposal (not a set curriculum); and
5. Deconstruction of phonetic families present in generative words (see example below).

For example, from the word *tijolo* (brick), you would have three syllables, *ti-jo-lo* (see photo above). Then you could generate new syllables by alternating vowels (*ta, te, ti, to, tu, ja, je, ji, jo, ju, and la, le, li, lo, lu*). By combining these syllables generated from the word *tijolo*, new words
could be put together, such as teto (ceiling), tatu (armadillo), juta (a kind of plant), tijela (container), and many others.

In establishing a democratic culture circle, Shor (1990) asserted “that the initial challenge of the critical educator is to deconstruct authoritarian modes of discourse in traditional classrooms” (Steiner, Krank, McLaren, & Bahruth, 2000, p.121). In circles of culture, students’ experiences are invited, valued, and central to the construction of meaning. According to Freire (1987), “a progressive position requires democratic practice where authority never becomes authoritarianism, and where authority is never so reduced that it disappears in a climate of irresponsibility and license” (p. 212). There is no simple definition of circles of culture, nor a formula for implementing them. One of the “most empowering [aspects of circles of culture] was the way...Freire expanded the notion of literacy to include reading the world and writing the world as cultural agents and subjects rather than as objects of history...establishing a culture circle as a pedagogical space” (Steiner, Krank, McLaren, & Bahruth, 2000, p.122).

Figure 11

Teachers in Angicos Engage in Dialogue and Research - 1963 (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.a)
The role of the teacher in the circles of culture is extremely demanding, as he/she is constantly engaging in research as part of his/her teaching. It “requires constant reflection and criticity of one’s own pedagogy” (p.122). She/he is both a student and a teacher, concurrently. Conversely to what Ellsworth (1992) suggests, that “a relation between teacher/student becomes voyeuristic when the voice of the pedagogue himself goes unexamined” (p. 104), in the circles, teachers reflect on their own practice and voice collectively. Each teacher participates in practice that promotes inclusion, engagement and empowerment of learners (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Teachers use the same Freirean framework for staff development, as they problematize, dialogue, problem solve and prepare to engage in action in their own classrooms. In the circles, I perceived the seating arrangement to break hierarchies set in traditional classrooms in which the teacher is the holder of knowledge, standing in front of the classroom while students face the teacher, from whom they are to learn, and not facing one another. According to Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, and Chennault (1998), the physical seating arrangement in circles is essential to employ dialogue and problem-posing education (Freire and Macedo, 1995; 1996). In the sessions I observed, participants all sat in circles.

Looking back at my field notes, I realize how important the atmosphere of the classroom was—conducive to dialogue. The seating arrangement in circles goes against the traditional definition and banking system of education, in which knowledge is deposited in students’ heads. It allowed for students to look at each other, see everyone, and value everyone’s voices. There is a need to redefine discourses, knowledge, curriculum and learning for circles of culture to be implemented. The teacher does not know where the circle is headed, according to the very premise of critical pedagogy. Circles are “space[s] in which all views can be voiced freely and
safely. Only when all views are heard can we claim that the heterogeneous nature of our culture is most widely represented in the circle” (Steiner, Krank, McLaren, & Bahruth, 2000, p.123).

Circles of culture are grounded in problem-posing, critical dialogue and problem-solving. The aim is conscientization, or critical meta-awareness, of each participant’s condition. For example, in one of the sessions, I observed a woman who was concerned because contrary to the popular belief that every hard worker will succeed, she was failing. She was selling sandwiches, but was losing money. After she posed her problem, the group discussed it, and came up with solutions for her problem. The group concluded that calculating expenses and earnings were necessities, in addition to hard work, required to make a profit and succeed. The importance of the three components that ground this program was conveyed by A. Darder (2002),

It is virtually impossible to speak of a revolutionary practice of problem-posing education outside the dialogical process, since dialogue is truly the cornerstone of the pedagogy.

Central to Freire’s concept of education is an understanding of dialogue as the pedagogical practice of critical reflection and action...This process of problem-posing serves to [promote]...the emergence of critical consciousness in the learning process...

(p.102)

But there were challenges, too, as Bee (1980) reported, “motivating...Brazilian[s] was difficult...Freire and his team needed to convince the people of their own worth,...[and] that no matter how denuded of dignity...they were in fact makers of culture, of history, and subjects in life, not merely objects of manipulation” (p.40). To deal with this, Freire transformed the generative themes into pictures, which he projected using state-of-the-art slide projectors, to allow the students to discuss situations relevant to them without exposing themselves or making themselves vulnerable. The pictures, commissioned and painted by famous Recife artist
Francisco Brennand, captured the generative themes expressed by students. They allowed students to start engaging in critical dialogue and problem-solving, as the pictures posed problems that were part of their very own collective realities.

Figure 12

Brennand’s Picture Used in Circles of Culture (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.a)

*Origins and History of Circles of Culture: From Angicos to the Present*

Freire used the idea of circles of culture in Brazil in the early 1960s (Tennant, 1995) when developing his adult literacy method. Circles of culture were central to Freire’s doctoral dissertation on *Educação e Atualidade Brasileira* (Education and the Brazilian Present) at the Escola de Belas Artes de Pernambuco, Universidade de Recife in 1959, currently the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (Freire, 1995). There are conflicting remarks as to whether or not his dissertation was approved, with Mackie (1980) and Elias (1994) assuming it was approved, since he was offered a position as a professor at that institution. Gerhardt (1993)
suggested the doctorate was not approved as it criticized the government at the time. Freire never actually stated his dissertation was approved, and Taylor (1993) suggested it may have been awarded later on because of his successful literacy program.

During the time in which Freire developed the idea behind the circles, he first worked with two students who learned how to read in a period of between two and three months, as he himself reported in the videotape *Paulo Freire* (Intituto Paulo Freire, n.d.c). He had never properly implemented the circles, as he had conceived them. The opportunity to do so came with the Movimento de Cultura Popular or MCP (Eng: Popular Culture Movement or PCM). Freire also took advantage of a great offer from the city of Angicos to implement the literacy method he proposed in his dissertation.

![Angicos, Brazil](image)

*Figure 13*

Angicos, Brazil (Instituto Paulo Freire, 2001)
After the military coup of April 1964, the Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually forced into exile. Government authorities were reacting to Freire’s successes in mounting massive literacy campaigns among illiterate adults. Freire’s Popular Culture Movement (PCM) had been expanding to include 20,000 “Culture Circles,” each serving 25 to 30 rural and urban slum residents who were working to build both their literacy skills and an awareness of their collective ability to generate change in their community. (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p.336)

The circles didn’t return to being a reality until the 1980s. Today, there are circles all over the country, from Pernambuco (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997) in Northeastern Brazil to Rio Grande do Sul (Brandão, 2001), the southernmost Brazilian state.
MOBRAL: Literacy as Learning to Draw One’s Name

My grandmother is a prime example of someone who is perceived as literate because she can draw her name. She mentioned this clearly when she signed the consent form to participate in this study. Despite not being able to understand what was written on the form, she was proud to sign it with a pencil. She told me that “people who didn’t know how to sign their names have to use their fingers (thumbs), and everyone knew that they were illiterate because you could see the ink or see them hiding their finger.” This skill she so proudly portrayed was acquired during the military dictatorship under a program known by the acronym MOBRAL. This program emerged during the military dictatorship in Brazil, from 1964 to 1985. Freirean methods and circles of culture were extinguished during this period.

While Freire went to countries such as Chile and Guinea-Bissau and implemented circles of culture, in Brazil a literacy program named MOBRAL was implemented. MOBRAL stands for Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização (Brazilian Literacy Movement). Such “a campaign of mass literacy could presumably contribute to the integration of the great mass of illiterates into the global project of social modernization” (Silva & McLaren, 1993, p.37). I am not convinced that MOBRAL can be called a literacy program as much as it can be regarded as a propaganda tool the government used to tame people and to cause the institutional discourse to become part of the popular discourse. MOBRAL focused on duty to the country and nationalism, and in the end, it taught adults to draw their names. Signing their names on their ID cards instead of thumb-printing was the test as to whether or not a person was literate. My grandmother went through MOBRAL and today, as a successful student, at age 80, she can only draw her name. Official governmental literacy did not change her location as a domestic worker and single mother. She still does not have meta-awareness of the oppressive conditions in her life. She claims life is
deterministic. The difference between Freire’s circles of culture and the MOBRAL (which professed a deterministic view) was articulated below by Peter Roberts (2000):

Freire stresses that no one comes to read the word without first having read the world (1994, pp.77-79). Not all readings of reality, though, are especially critical. Freire argues that many participants in his literacy programs tended to view or interpret—that is “read”—their world “magically,” attributing the overtly oppressive conditions they endure to fate or God’s will. Introducing the written word in unison with critical discussion via the spoken word allowed this reading to be reread—that is to say, transformed. (p.91)

The MOBRAL failed so miserably that it became regarded as a taunting label given to the uneducated. When I was in elementary school, one of the ways to bully, tease, or curse, was to call someone a MOBRAL, which meant stupid, illiterate and unintelligent. Within everyday narratives, MOBRAL became a synonym for illiterate, even before the program was retired.

In 1967, three years after the coup d’etat, the military government established the MOBRAL to be an extensive adult-literacy program. This program spread throughout the country and was in place until 1985 (Yamasaki & Santos, 1999). In reality, this program was a nationalist campaign intended to generate support for the military government that had forcefully taken the democratic presidency and the country. It sought to legitimize the dictatorship in place. Further, Yamasaki and Santos (1999) suggested that the MOBRAL wanted to both silence the academy and other liberals in society who advocated for an adult literacy program, while at the same time providing workers with the bare minimum qualifications for poorly-paid positions (Ribeiro, 1997). There was no critical component in this program, it was a traditional program,
based on the banking system of education (Freire, 1970) and fit within traditional education. It deceived people, as they came to believe that by replacing their thumb-printed ID cards with signed ones they were, in fact, literate.

The methodology initially employed by this program included some aspects of Freire’s circles, such as generative words, but it did away with problem-posing, critical dialogue and problem-solving. The program was assistencialist (deceptively providing mere assistance rather than promoting meta-awareness), conservative, and sought to maintain the socio-economic structure in place. Freire referred to MOBRAL as having been conceived to negate his method and to silence his discourse (Yamasaki & Santos, 1999).

Using a different date for the establishment of the MOBRAL, Maria Clara di Pierro (2000) accounted that:

The military government’s adult education policies did not take shape until 1971 with the Brazilian Literacy Movement, MOBRAL..., and with the passage of Law No. 5692, the National Education Law...MOBRAL worked throughout Brazil until 1985. It remained linked in the nation’s memory to the authoritarian government’s ideological propaganda, to poor educational outcomes, pedagogical authoritarianism, waste of resources, and inefficient and poor teacher training... [It] also tried to respond to demands to train the labor force for the exclusionary economic development model introduced by the military regime... (p.49)

MOBRAL was built on top of ideological propaganda, not only in the country, but internationally. There was even plagiarism, as Roberts (2000) reported:

The attitude of the Brazilian government toward Freire after his forced exile is clearly...revealed in an article published in the Journal of Reading in the mid-1970s. In
this piece, Arlindo Lopes-Correa (1976), the then-president of MOBRAL...outlines the methods used by the Brazilian government to overcome functional adult illiteracy. In a remarkable act of plagiarism, Lopes-Correa runs through a literacy process involving generative words, syllabic families, discovery tables, and pictorial codifications without once mentioning Freire’s name. (The author of the article even uses Freire’s classic example of the breakdown of the generative word *tijolo*.) Freire’s work is not listed in the bibliography. References to conscientization and praxis have been removed, and Freire’s call for literacy to be a means...for political awareness is replaced by the expressed hope...[in] “...continued self-learning through reading” (p.534). The “technical” aspects of Freire’s literacy method...[were] appropriated almost to the letter (with their source of origin left unacknowledged). (p.82)

This propaganda fabricated by the military government has been recycled in the work of many scholars (such as Cairns, 1994; and Merriam, 1997) who mentioned the MOBRAL as a successful program. Cairns (1994) referred to MOBRAL as a program “[i]n an atmosphere neither revolutionary nor noticeably ideological...[and] show[ing] significant diversity and creativity” (p.110). Cairns further referred to MOBRAL as “ensur[ing] that literacy is both acquired and retained” (p.111).

Those who know my grandmother and the many others who were part of this program, though, know that MOBRAL was, at best, a drawing workshop in which participants learned how to draw the letters of their names without even acquiring letter-sound correspondence skills. Even she is now aware of this. She cannot even identify the letters of her name, as she draws it. If she stops in the middle of writing her name, she has to start over from the beginning. This was evident as she signed the consent form to participate in this study. As she started to write her
name, I continued to tell her that at any time she could change her mind about participating in my study. She looked up and said “you are getting in my way...now I did it wrong.” She was referring to her name. She had stopped and didn’t know how to continue. I tried to help, but she said very pointedly “...give me another one and stay still.” I handed back another consent form and sat quietly as she concentrated on writing (or drawing?) her signature.

Circles of Culture, Literacies, Identities, and Discourses

As mentioned early in this chapter, Freire’s circles of culture, which were conceived in the 1950s, already employed a definition of literacy different from the traditional one Gee (1996) outlines in which the “traditional meaning of the word ‘literacy’—the ability to read and write—appears innocent and obvious. But it is no such thing. Literacy as ‘the ability to write and read’ situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in society” (p. 22). Applying socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Barton & Hamilton, 2000) to the definition of literacy, Freire wrote that “[l]iteracy is best understood as a myriad of [communication] forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relations and experiences that exist between learners and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1989, p.10). David Barton and Mary Hamilton (2000) stated that:

Literacy is...a set of social practices;...different literacies [are] associated with different domains of life...Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships,...[and] are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices...; Literacy is historically situated...; Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p.80)

In the context of circles of culture, literacy is best described as reading the word and reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; 1989). Paulo Freire’s conceptualization of literacy in
the culture circles was crafted in terms of identities and discourses. He integrated oral and written styles of communication in his adult literacy programs. “Learning to read the word, for...adults...emerged from purposeful discussion of generative words and codifications through the medium of the spoken word. Dialogue provides the bridge between oral and literate forms of interpreting, understanding, and transforming the world” (Roberts, 2000, p.91).

An alternative definition of literacy is presented by James Gee (1996), who defines literacy in terms of learning a secondary Discourse (with capital D). To him, Discourses are “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes” (Gee, 1996, p.127). “A Freirean notion of critical literacy is....concerned with the development of a particular mode of being and acting” (Roberts, 2000, p.94). Gee (1996) stated that there can be no critique of a Discourse without learning, for it is in the process of learning that meta-knowledge can be developed. Further, Gee (1996) argued that is it a balance of acquisition and learning that should be the goal of a strong literacy program. This balance is part of what takes place in Freire’s circles of culture. However, Freire’s definition of literacy has a more critical aim and goes further, in my view, than what Gee proposed. Freire’s literacy includes rewriting the world, or engaging in social action.

“Word and world become dynamically intertwined in Freirean critical literacy. Critical reading involves a constant interplay between text and context...[t]he text to be read and written or rewritten in speaking a true word is social reality itself” (Roberts, 2000, p.94). We can’t teach people new discourses merely by teaching them the rules, but rather by making them members of the group—by allowing them to be apprentices (Gee, 1996). Referring to a particular situated context, we find that “[l]iteracy in the case of Nicaragua started to take place as soon as the
people took their history into their own hands. Taking history into their own hands precedes taking up the alphabet. Anyone who takes history into his or her own hands can easily take up the alphabet” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.106). Gee (1996) argued that there can be no critique of a Discourse without learning for it is in the process of learning that meta-knowledge can be developed. Assumptions and socially constructed knowledge are deconstructed. As one discourse is used to critique other ones, the assumption of a right and a wrong, a standard and a non-standard discourse are hopefully challenged and subdued. Discourses are then couched in situated terms. The use of a particular discourse to critique others is the base for resistance to oppression and inequality (Delpit, 1995).

As Freire suggested, the world is in the making, the world isn’t fixed (as a permanent and unchangeable reality), but is becoming, continuously being configured and constructed (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.b). Identity is one way of naming the dense interconnections between the intimate and public venues of social practice. In Freire’s circles of culture “a fundamental starting point is respect for the learner’s cultural identity and the aspects of class that mark this identity: the learner’s language, syntax, prosody, semantics, and informal knowledge, realized through the experiences the learner brings to school” (Freire, 1996, p.127).

Practiced identities are constructs that can be defined by reference to several contexts of activity. The identity contexts proposed by Holland, Skinner, & Cain (2001) closely align with the steps taken in circles of culture. In circles of culture, from reading the world, one critically analyzes one’s position in society, engages in problem solving through dialogue and engages in social action, or re-writing the world. In this way, literacy as defined in Freire is similar to Holland, Skinner, & Cain’s (2001) definition of identity, which goes from embodying one’s fixed social location to negotiating one’s way into multiple cultural worlds as a knowledgeable
and committed participant. Identity, therefore, surpasses the boundaries of cultural traditions, improvising and redescribing selves, constructing novel cultural worlds (Holland, Skinner, & Cain, 2001).

Freire’s definition of literacy includes dialogue, which addresses “[o]ne of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings...communicating meaning across our individual differences, a task confounded immeasurably when we attempt to communicate across social lines, racial lines, cultural lines, or lines of unequal power” (Delpit, 1995, p. 66). “[C]ritical literacy implies a conscious, practical, dialogical attempt to understand, challenge, and change oppressive social structures” (Roberts, 2000, p.94).

Central to Freire’s approach to literacy is a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency on the other. Within this perspective, literacy is not approached as merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent. Most importantly, literacy for Freire is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right, a responsibility not only to read, understand and transform their own experiences, but also to reconfigure their relationship with wider society. (Giroux, 1987, p.7)

As Möller (2001) wrote, “[t]eachers who teach from a culturally relevant perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1994) can foster this communication of meaning by acknowledging both their own and students’ responsibilities for learning” (p.28). Freire’s definition of literacy “help[s] students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 25) and view knowledge as socially-constructed, as “continuously re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike” (p. 25).
Possible Implications

Finally, the prospects of circles of culture in the United States are exciting, but we must remember what Freire himself said when talking to Donaldo Macedo: “I don’t want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and rewrite my ideas” (Freire, 1998, p. xi). Many times, when educators speak of Freire and literacy, they reduce the complex concept of literacy to a set of pre-scripted skills (Roberts, 2000) linked to learning how to read and write.

Literacy education is an act of knowing,...of creating, and not the act of mechanically memorizing letters and syllables...[it] must originate from research about the vocabulary universe of the learners,...to understand culture as a human creation, an extension of the world by men and women through their work, helps to overcome the politically tragic experience of immobility caused by fatalism...Literacy education must be characterized by dialogue as a path to knowledge...[and] must codify and ‘read’ generative words... [It] must be premised on remembering what it means for...adults, used to the weight of work instruments, to manipulate pencils...Literacy education must...be premised on remembering the insecurity of illiterate adults, who will become upset if they feel they are being treated like children. There is no more effective way to respect them than to accept their experiential knowledge for the purpose of going beyond it. (Freire, 1996, pp.128-9)

To fully implement Freire’s ideas, it may be helpful to remember that he defined literacy in terms of culture (Gadotti & Romão, 2002), that students “look at themselves as persons living and producing in a given society” (Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, p.xi). As a result, “[w]hen men
and women realize that they themselves are the makers of culture, they have accomplished...the first step toward feeling the importance, the necessity, and the possibility of owning reading and writing. They become literate, politically speaking” (p.xi).

Based on the definition of literacy in terms of culture and on the interplay between world and word, in the following chapter I describe how I analyze the stories told by the women participating in this study. In Chapter Four, I describe a methodology that aligns with a critical or emancipatory pedagogical approach to education, as in Freire’s culture circles (1959). As you will read, this new methodology allows me to assess culture circles through the tellings of women participants. By implication, it could be used by the very women whose narratives I analyze as it aims at promoting critical meta-awareness, allowing common people to engage in social action to solve problems and address issues they identify in their own narratives. This meta-awareness (conscientization) in turn allows people like Elena, my grandmother, and other women in similar situations to use discourse as a tool to change their social locations and situations while challenging the deterministic claim that “[w]e are stuck in the vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination” (Fraser, 1997, p. 33).
CHAPTER 4
CRITICAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS:
THE INTERPLAY OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE AND NARRATIVE ANALYSES

[A] good beginning for a good practice would be to evaluate the context within which the practice takes place, which means recognizing what is taking place in the context, as well as how and why it is taking place.

(Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, pp.7-8)

Linking practices and contexts, words and worlds, is central to Freire’s culture circles. Based on the definition of literacy discussed in Chapter Three, I now explain how I analyze the stories told by the women participating in this study. In this chapter, I question the micro-macro separation in discourse analysis, the separation of the personal and institutional discourses, and use a mostly macroanalytic perspective (Critical Discourse Analysis) to inform a predominantly microanalytic perspective (analysis of personal/conversational narratives) and vice-versa.

In the combination of these two analytic approaches to data analyses I explore the “link between macro-level power inequities and micro-level interactional positioning” (Rymes, 2003, p. 122). I also try to break away from the “resistance to micro-level analysis of discourse” (Rymes, 2003, p. 122) by combining it with a macro approach, Critical Discourses Analysis (CDA). I examine the focus of (CDA) on institutional discourses, question the definition of power discourses, suggest the intertextual recycling of institutional discourses in everyday
narratives, and the adoption of everyday narratives in institutional discourses. By no means will I exhaust here the ways in which these two perspectives inform one another, but I suggest that this can be a mutually beneficial union.

Wedding critical discourse analysis with narrative analysis brings CDA closer to its aim of dealing with real world issues and promoting changes in society. I employ Critical Narrative Analysis, the union of CDA and narrative analysis, because the schooling stories these Brazilian women tell cannot be understood apart from their contexts, apart from the institutional discourses. Narrative analysis is a discourse-analytic perspective that can be used to connect microevents to broader discourses and contexts with the intent of asserting the construction of social experiences through narratives (van Dijk, 1993). Also, if CDA “...is to remain true to its stated aim of dealing with real world issues of injustice, suffering, and inequality then it must not do so from the safe eyrie of increasingly abstract theory” (McKenna, 2004, p. 27).

In this chapter, discourse analysis is used to indicate four major analytic approaches to discourse, which are: conversation analysis, interactional discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and narrative analysis (Hung, 2004). Further, I look at how two of the four discourse-analytic approaches can inform each other as a means to seek a more complete analysis, i.e. narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. Narrative analysis focuses on how people make sense of their experiences in society through language. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with power and language within the context of society. I apply discourse analysis to the stories these women tell because discourse is the very means by which change starts taking place in the culture circles—through generative words/themes, problem posing, dialogue, and problem solving.
Discourse and Society

Traditionally, discourse may simply be defined as language units that are larger than a sentence (Brownell & Martino, 1998) or as general oral and written language practices, limiting it to linguistic features (Wodilla, 1998). However, I will be using the term to delineate more complex relationships between language and society, as in the case of the participants of this study. This relationship is so complex that Teun van Dijk dedicated two volumes to the task of defining discourse (1997a; 1997b). Most tangibly, discourses represent particular cases of verbal interaction (Fairclough, Graham, Lemke, & Wodak, 2004).

Aligning with the quote that opens this chapter, discourse is here seen “as an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Discourse is an inherent and inseparable part of the social world, of the broader social context. As we saw in the previous chapter, discourse shapes society and is shaped by society; it is personally and politically committed (Swain & Cameron, 1999). Combining the personal and political nature of discourse, the definition of discourse encompasses ways of being in the world (Gee, 1996), therefore including semiotic acts other than linguistic symbols. Along with words, discourse encompasses values, beliefs, moral orientations, social identities and attitudes (Gee, 1996; Rymes, 1995). Discourse is therefore not limited to its linguistic aspects; it is a site in which meaning is socially constructed through language and other semiotic means such as dress and posture (Gee, in press; Fairclough, Graham, Lemke, & Wodak, 2004). Further, discourses establish and maintain power relations in society (Foucault, 1978).
Discourse “operates...in the context of meaning-laden architectures...It deploys not only acoustic and orthographic signs, but interacts with our meaningful ways of deploying... material artifacts within complex cultural contexts” (Fairclough, Graham, Lemke, & Wodak, 2004, p. 5). Discourse is therefore not only what is said, but how it is said within a certain structure (Archer, 2000). According to this definition of discourse, women who cannot read or write such as my grandmother and Elena may be fluent in some discourses and unskilled in others. Their location in society determines the discourses that are part of their repertoire which, as we will see, often include recycled parts of the power discourse used by those who are working to maintain the social structure in place.

Since social actions become realities through discourses, we cannot ignore discourse in trying to understand social interactions and conversational narratives, such as those the women in this study co-construct. Discourses are produced within a certain context and cannot be understood apart from that context (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). It is exactly the connection between discourses and social contexts and situations that makes discourse analysis a valuable and powerful tool for investigating and studying social phenomena (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As we read the stories the women participants of this study told, we can see that discourse not only serves to maintain the stability in place, a cycle in which women from low SES areas are denied access to formal schooling and end up entering the cycle of maidhood, but also a way “of representing where they constitute nodal points in the dialectical relationship between language and other elements of the social” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 126). Discourse also serves as a tool for critical meta-awareness when used in culture circles, described in Chapter Three.
**Discourse Analysis**

Albeit a very relevant method to analyze the schooling stories of the participants of this study, the analysis of discourses originated half a century ago in the field of linguistics seeking to study language structures above sentence levels (Schiffrin, 1994). Today, discourse analysis is increasingly considered and applied as a tool in the social sciences (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Discourse analysis attempts to explore the construction of socially created ideas and things in the world as well as their maintenance over time. Cycles or systems maintained over generations are explored in this study, which investigates the situation of girls from rural areas in Northeastern Brazil being denied the opportunity to receive formal schooling and ending up in big cities working as maids.

Discourse analysis is a theory and a method for studying how language gets recruited on site and enacts particular social actions and identities (Gee, in press). It seeks to investigate the association between discourse and the reality in place (Wood & Kroger, 2000) through the analysis of texts and the many meanings this text can take as it interacts with different contexts. In the following chapter we will look at how language influences the reality of girls dropping out of school or never enrolling in school. The meanings of texts being analyzed often relate to the power relationships between participants since texts are a limited history of the language and the social system, a limitation due to the structure of those power relationships (Kress, 1995).

In analyzing discourse it is important to take many contexts into consideration, including social, political, historical and linguistic contexts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). “The social hierarchy is linguistically sustained and activated by the ability of certain social actors to define themselves as willful and responsible agents whose actions or feelings matter for the rest of the
community” (Duranti, 1994, p. 136). This kind of analysis is interdisciplinary, wedding the fields of linguistics, sociology and anthropology. As a result, by employing such a method, I here bring the fields of linguistics and the social sciences together for a more complete research method.

Discourse analysts have particular orientations to the nature of language and how they relate to societal issues. In studying globalization, for example, researchers may learn how other discourses formed the globalization discourse, and then relate the globalization texts to a broader context to show how it portrays a particular point of view. Specific questions that can be asked from a critical discourse analytic perspective include: How do those in power control discourse? How does such discourse control the minds and actions of those who are not in power, and what are the social consequences of such control? (van Dijk, 2001, p. 355).

Considering there are different discourse-analytic perspectives, I delimit myself to defining discourse in terms of everyday narratives (conversational narratives) and institutional discourses. As a result of my definition, which in turn defines which discourse-analytic perspective(s) I employ, in the following sections I engage in a brief exploration of both narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis before diving into the question of how one informs the other.

Narrative as Institutionalized and Institution as Narratized

Narratives & Narrative Analysis

There is no such thing psychologically as ‘life itself.’ At the very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat. (Bruner 1987, p. 13)

Stories can be told in a vast multiplicity of ways. In the same way that there are different ways to report or retell an event determined by factors such as teller, listener, and context, there
are many definitions of narrative, and therefore, also many ways to analyze narratives. “Telling stories is the most universal means human beings have for conveying to others who we are, what we believe, how we feel, what we value, and how we see the world” (Rymes, 2001, p. 163) as well as the society of which we are members.

Narrative is one of the most broadly employed ways of systematizing human experience. It is through narrative that experiences are permeated with meaning and are ordered (Bruner 1990). This happens by connecting events, arranging them temporally and depicting these events from a particular perspective (Bruner, 1985, 1986, 1990; Labov & Waletzky, 1968; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988). We experience our worlds and live our lives by telling stories. We make sense of our worlds by telling stories and by listening to stories told by others. These stories, which we will henceforth call narratives, are not to be taken at face value (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Narratives are how we make sense of what we know, what we feel and experience in the world in which we live. Narrative is an interpretive feat. Personal identities are constructed and reconceptualized as we share our narratives. Narrative is "the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11). Narrative allows us to interpret new experiences as narrative and life imitate and emulate one another (Bruner 1987). Narratives also allow beliefs to be shared in the form of stories and handed down from generation to generation. “Stories are at the center of narrative analysis...How to interpret stories, and more specifically, the texts that tell the stories, is at the heart of narrative analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 118).

The stories the participants in this study told, their schooling narratives, are their perspectives of particular happenings; texts thematically organized in terms of temporal units and plots (Polkinghorne, 1995). Labov’s model (Labov, 1972; 1982; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996)
provides a familiar reference to an analytical method based on the structure of narrative data. In this study, I employ the model proposed by Ochs and Capps (2001), which analyzes the dimensions of narrative tellings, and is a fine elaboration of Polkinghorne’s (1995) loosely defined analysis of narrative—moving from stories to common elements.

Ochs and Capps (2001) wrote that narratives orient to five dimensions: 1) Tellership, or who is telling the story; 2) Tellability, or how interesting the story is; 3) Embeddedness, or how the narrative is situated within other stretches of text or talk; 4) Linearity, the sequential and/or temporal ordering of events; and 5) Moral Stance, the moral values being conveyed through the telling. All narratives vary in degree along continua within each of these dimensions. One or all of these dimensions may be analyzed in a narrative. In terms of the dimension of tellership, a conversational narrative is often co-told by a narrator’s listeners. As an audience gives feedback and interacts (whether verbally or non-verbally), narrators engaged in conversations orient their stories accordingly. For example, as I interviewed participants in Portuguese and could relate to their particular regional vernacular, I may have been perceived as a more sympathetic, perceptive audience than an interviewer with a different linguistic repertoire.

Although narratives vary along the five dimensions described by Ochs & Capps, all narratives function as “a vernacular, interactional forum for ordering, explaining, and otherwise taking a position on experience” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57). It is through the use of language that we enter an interactional location that has already been shaped, a location in which every decision is dependent on what occurred in the past and contributes to the definition of what will occur in the future (Duranti, 1997). Narratives are a critical means to understanding not only the nature of narrative more broadly, but also society, and the relationship of everyday talk to the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses (Ochs & Capps, 2001).
I employ narrative analysis to look at the story of these women as they negotiated a tension between two human impulses. On one side of this tension, narrative is a way to provide order to our experiences, to make sense of our lives, to understand what has happened. On the other side, we resist shaping our stories to fit in organized narrative sequences. This was displayed by the similarities of these women’s stories of leaving school as children in terms of the way they structure their narratives. There is resistance catering only to our audience’s (or society’s) expectations, yet a clear influence can be noted, as patriarchal values permeate their tellings. My grandmother, for example, voiced “I didn’t go to school either. I was a girl. Girls helped at home.” This critical tension is present across all the dimensions of narrative, and varies depending on the context of the telling. In constructing and telling narratives these women navigated the frontier between “the desire to share life experience and the desire to shield those experiences from public scrutiny” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 129). As a result, not everything was clearly told in their narratives. What was left untold was grounded in morality, as they negotiated the production of a coherent story based on a moral framework (Taylor, 1989; Rymes, 1995). This concept of narratives being interpreted beyond what is actually said, critically, is particularly important as later in this chapter CDA is coupled with narrative analysis for a more complete analytical approach, in which institutional discourse is analyzed for its presence in everyday narratives. Here, the importance of telling and analyzing narratives is not to get at the true narrative, what actually happened from the perspective of the narrator, but to get at and analyze the meaning-making process that goes on as narrative is crafted.

Some of the moral agency (or the moral dimension of a narrative) displayed by one of the participants in this study was constructed through life narratives and through the agent positioning and use of linguistic devices. For example, when telling about dropping out of school
as a child, Neide said “I was held back” (Eu fui reprovada). The passive verb usage here constructed this woman’s identity as being an object as opposed to subject in the sentence. In this case, Neide could have said “I repeated the year,” a more common construction in Northeastern Brazilian Portuguese (“Eu repeti o ano”) as opposed to “Eu fui reprovada.” By being the object of the sentence, Neide portrayed herself as being the object of the teacher’s actions, freeing her from any responsibility for having dropped out of school. Further examples follow in the coming chapters. As illustrated here, language provides a place in the social world for those students who had dropped out of school. Neide constructed herself, according to narrative logic (Bruner, 1991), as the victim of someone else’s actions, making the listener feel sympathetic. Narratives are consequently one of the only stable aspects in these students’ lives. Our sense of who we are depends on our view/evaluation of where we stand to the good and this positioning can be recreated through narrative and through the positioning of the agent (Rymes, 1995). Goodness, or moral stance, is therefore based on new understandings of agency and selfhood (Taylor, 1989).

It is important to take into consideration that there is no clear distinction between what one says and what one doesn’t say in a personal narrative, as not everything is taken at face value (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Silences permeate and underline narratives and are couched in terms of their historical contexts and what is acceptable in society (Foucault, 1978). What is unsaid is nevertheless taken into consideration—for example, when my grandmother said “I was a girl. Girls helped at home” I immediately considered who may have said that to her and if the two clauses were linked in a causal manner, among other things. While there may have been many
reasons for these women to remain silent, as many of them portrayed a sense of shame regarding their past, as illustrated by Josi when she said “I felt ashamed and with fear,” they nevertheless constructed and told their stories/narratives.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the other analytic approach I employ in this study. CDA centers on a social issue with a semiotic characteristic. It looks at a social problem as opposed to posing a research question (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003), investigates discourse within a particular context both socially and linguistically (structural and textual analysis), and recognizes difficulties needing to be examined to address the social issue being investigated. Critical discourse analysis is a discourse-analytic approach which seeks to employ the analysis of discourses to promote social action and changes.

CDA is an interdisciplinary approach (Fairclough, 2003) to study “language as a form of social practice” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 20). CDA employs linguistic and social theories to investigate the interplay of ideologies and power in discourses. “[L]anguage connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 15). This discourse analytic perspective aims to take apart, question, and investigate the ideological foundations of discourse naturalized (adopted as common, accepted, natural) over a period of time (Teo, 2000). This naturalized discourse becomes a routine or a habit (based on Bourdieu’s definition of habitus, 1977) and is accepted by society. It addresses some of the very considerations I write about a few paragraphs above such as what was unsaid in my grandmother’s “I was a girl. Girls helped at home.”
In more general terms, “CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language in use (or in discourse)” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). Three concepts inherently present in CDA are power, history, and ideology. It critically analyzes texts and social situations. According to McKenna (2004), “a critical discourse approach is characterized by its consideration of the relationship between language and society in order to understand ‘the relations between discourse, power, dominance, [and] social inequality’” (p. 10). It is because CDA therefore operates on the juncture of language, discourse, and social structure (McKenna, 2004) that I employ it here combined with narrative analysis.

An assumption of critical discourse analysis is that language gains power as a result of being used. Traditional patriarchal values would not be relevant for this study, for example, if they were not part of the narrative tellings of each of the interviewed women. CDA chooses to make clear the social construction of language and how language can be used as a colonization tool or be appropriated by users to subvert colonization (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). One of the central goals of culture circles, discussed in Chapter Three, is to allow its participants to appropriate language, to be critically meta-aware, and not be colonized into believing that anything and everything that is said is true. Taking language as having situated meanings allows participants to use the form and content of what has been said without being colonized by what has been said. “Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and long term” (Wodak, 2001, p. 11).

CDA recognizes that every “discourse is structured by dominance...[and] is historically produced and interpreted...and that dominance structures are legitimized by ideologies of powerful groups.” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). CDA sponsors the belief that power structures dominate
people by establishing conventions and normalizing them. Resistance is then conceived as the infringement of rules and principles in place, of established and stable discursive practices, in creative ways. Culture circles aim at being a creative way to resist the normalization of poverty and women’s exclusion from sites of knowledge in Northeastern Brazil.

In this study, I take into consideration that when asserting the normative parameters (Chourliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) of social practices, it is necessary to engage in the analysis of discourse to avoid claiming that power discourses are such merely according to my own situated meaning or understanding. “Without detailed analysis, one cannot really show that language is doing the work one may theoretically ascribe to it” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 204). Analyzing the discourse of members of a given society for the infiltration of institutional discourses can serve this purpose, as I will discuss a little later in this chapter. CDA looks at discourses that are recycled within other discourses and gives particular attention to issues of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986) as it analyzes the influence of previous discourses on the formation of a particular discourse and social reality. It often refers to the context of interactions and uses this information to support its argument that every social interaction is embedded in a power structure (Gwyn, 2002).

CDA seeks to “map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). This means that instead of merely analyzing the text and the context, it engages in a more complex form of analysis of discourse, society (including social practices) and power structures and how these three interact. As a result, CDA is a form of
critical social research, which aims at developing a better understanding of how society functions and creates positive and negative effects, and how the negative effects might be mitigated or obliterated (Fairclough, 2003).

This form of discourse analysis presupposes that social transformation cannot be conceived and carried out aside from language. This is a result of the “language element [which] has...become more salient, more important than it used to be, and in fact a crucial aspect of the social transformations which are going on” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 203). This analytic perspective closely aligns with the critical emancipatory literacy programs proposed and carried out by Freire (1959).

In this study, I employ CDA to comprehend the roots of a social problem—the maidhood cycle in Brazil and women’s exclusion from sites of knowledge more globally (which I discuss in further detail in Chapter Five). As other critical discourse analysts, I seek to understand the conditions of women, who, like my own grandmother, suffered and continue to suffer from gender, economic and social discrimination (Meyer, 2001).

CDA is associated with critical theory work, as are Freirean culture circles. It analyzes not only language events, but ideological and institutional powers. It investigates the relationships between discourses and power (van Dijk, 2001). This analytic perspective questions who the ones benefiting from the social practices and processes (Birch, 1989) in place are, to what degree they are beneficial, and drafts ways to overcome the social problem(s) being analyzed, thereby engaging in social change. Finally, it reflects critically on the analytic process from the researcher’s location(s) in society. CDA assumes that discourses need to be located within their contexts to be understood. “Analyzing text or discourse therefore means analyzing discursive formations that are essentially political in character and ideological in content”
(Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 460). So, from a critical stance, I employ CDA to better situate the stories these women told in terms of power relationships and social practices and structures. I employ it because it would be impossible to look at the agency and moral stance in these women’s narratives without considering how structure enacts and further, how it curtails agency, be it enacted on the personal or on the societal level.

Finally, aligning with the goal of conscientização sponsored by the culture circles described in the previous chapter, CDA defends many understandings of an issue but not multiple explanations (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), therefore making social actors aware of the social construction of discourse and the discursive construction of the social reality. CDA works with the assumption that texts are political because of the political nature of discourse (Bourdieu, 1985). Discourses are political due to their relationship to the establishment and maintenance of power, as “power is immanent in discourse” (Foucault, 1972, p. 95). Aligned with Freirean pedagogy, critical discourse analysis aims at challenging the strong link between discourse and power, critically analyzing issues of access to and control of discourses. It sponsors the belief that those who control influential discourses have more chances to oppress others (van Dijk, 2001).

CDA seeks to reveal veiled ways that language interacts with the relationships of power, domination, and ideology (Fairclough, 2001). It aims “to make transparent the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities. CDA...takes the part of the underprivileged and tries to show up the linguistic means used by the privileged to stabilize or even to intensify inequities in society” (Meyer, 2001, p. 30). In this study I combine CDA and narrative analysis. In the following section, I discuss ways in which one informs the other.
Critical Narrative Analysis as a Way to Critical Meta-Awareness

Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) unites CDA and narrative analysis in a very beneficial partnership. This is partly because CDA offers a very important contribution to narrative analysis as it deals with institutional and societal differences in power as they relate to language, an issue largely overlooked in the analysis of everyday narratives. This is also due to the fact that everyday narratives, as a genre, offer institutional discourse an effective way to assert itself as a power discourse. These are the issues I explore in this section, in learning how people create their selves in constant social interactions (Forgas, 2002) at both a personal level and at an institutional level.

In social interactions, the role of conflict is paramount (Briggs, 1996). These conflicts are routinely represented through language at the personal as well as at the institutional level. At the personal level, narratives represent conflicts that are situated within many social areas, within many institutional levels. As such they link the micro (personal) analysis to the macro (social or institutional) situation in place. Works by Cazden (1988) and Hymes (1996) have questioned and argued against the presence of a dividing line between the particular (personal) and the general (social or institutional), the parts (micro) and the whole (macro) in research since the 1980s and through the 1990s. Here, I challenge this dividing line by wedding narrative and critical discourse analyses.

Critical discourse analysis focuses on institutional discourse. As such, it has been criticized for its high level of abstractness. It claims to examine the relationship between language, power and social structures. Critical narrative analysis, which combines CDA and narrative analysis, allows us to assert the powerfulness of institutional discourses through the analysis of conversational narratives and verifying the presence of recycled institutional
discourse intertextually is woven into their very fabric. We incorporate pieces of institutional discourses into our own narratives. By uncritically recycling these pieces and therefore buying into the ideologies they convey, we become subjects to language colonization (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

I propose that we critically analyze conversational narratives, a form of discourse--more concrete because it is closer to a person’s experiences and it is temporally organized. In analyzing conversational narratives and deconstructing the different discourses present in the particular narrative, we will deal with real world issues and develop critical meta-awareness (Freire, 1970) in demystifying the social constructions of reality, with the intent of changing the way interactions work, making place for them to be challenged and changed. "[W]hen the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active responsive attitude towards it" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68). The critical meta-awareness of how institutional discourses are recycled in conversational narratives allows narrators to understand the social construction of the reality in which they live. It also invites them to comprehend that there are indeed multiple understandings of a certain issue (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

It is through conversational narratives, through storytelling, that narrators commence questioning their realities and problem solve, as “[s]torytelling is a site for problem solving. Every day, many problem solving narratives happen and delineate roles, relationships, values, and worldviews” (Ochs, Smith & Taylor, 1996, p. 95). Finally, narrators will engage in social action as a result of identifying the social construction of their situations in the presence of institutional discourse recycled within their narratives (intertextuality), challenging them and engaging in social action. This is the sequence present in culture circles (Freire, 1959), for
example, an adult literacy program which illustrates critical discourse analysis in action informed by conversational narratives leading to social action and change (Souto Manning, 2004). Participants in the culture circles engage in critical narrative analysis of their own tellings, as can be noted by the example provided in Chapter Three, in which the institutional discourse of the minimum wage providing enough to live on was problematized and deconstructed. Participants’ experiences of not being able to make ends meet were disassociated from the institutional discourse that affirmed that the minimum wage was enough to meet basic needs. Participants considered alternative perspectives, and charted a course of action after engaging in critical narrative analysis of their own stories collectively, in the context of culture circles. Grumet (1987, 1990) and Pinar (1975) were early advocates of written and oral biographies and autobiographies for the critical study of experiences of teachers in educational contexts. In the educational context being studied here, participants of culture circles (who would be defined as students according to a more traditional educational framework) critically analyzed their own experiences as they retold them in the context of the circles.

Critical discourse analysis views institutional discourses as colonizing. It assumes that institutional discourse has power to transform social relations. Narrative analysis and CDA can productively inform each other. “Narrative analysis without CDA can remain at an uncritical level. If we only look at macro level power discourse without looking at narrative construction at the level of conversation, we don’t know if it really is a power discourse” (Rymes & Souto Manning, 2004, p. 1). A discourse is powerful when it is recycled in stories everyday people tell. While there is a call for a joint and balanced focus on social issues as well as linguistic (textual) analysis in discourse studies, much is needed to unveil the complex ways in which language and the social world are intertwined. I argue that narrative analysis can be a resource to assess the
power of a discourse emanating from institutions in place. Here I propose a new discourse analytic approach, a hybrid of narrative and critical discourse analyses, critical narrative analysis.

From a critical discourse analytic perspective, Norman Fairclough (2003) looked at globalization from the institutional level through a speech in which Tony Blair declared “the issue is not how to stop globalization. The issue is how we use the power of community to combine it with justice. If globalization works only for the benefit of a few, then it will fail and will deserve to fail...the alternative to globalization is isolation” (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 237-238). Combined with critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis could look at whether the ideas conveyed by Blair’s speech are recycled in conversational narratives to assess its influence and potential for change, yielding a more complete analysis. If the globalization or isolation idea was internalized by everyday people and appropriated by being recycled uncritically in people’s narratives, then Blair’s speech was powerful and effective. Here I propose that critical narrative analysis (CNA) is one way to investigate a mechanism for institutional power to enter into everyday lives.

Another example is George W. Bush’s assertion at the end of a speech on the Iraq war that one is either with him or against him. His statement had power if it was recycled in everyday narratives, and I perceive that it was. Some people took Bush’s assertion at face value and were colonized by language. For example, following his statement you are with us or against us, people started using this phrase to question and intimidate those positioning themselves against the war. Others, such as Senator Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign, critically questioned/deconstructed his statement and used the statement by appropriating language. Of course, one is both subject to language colonization and appropriation, as they are not dichotomous, as explored earlier in this chapter. CNA is a mechanism to understand the
processes of language colonization and appropriation, by promoting critical meta-awareness, which allows one to be less colonized and have the tools to use language for appropriation purposes.

Just as institutional discourse can inform and influence everyday narratives, everyday narratives, or conversational narratives, can inform and influence institutional discourse. Again, here, Bush provides an example. In the first 2000 presidential debate, the moderator asked about strategies to deal with catastrophic situations. “Can you point to a decision, an action you have taken, that illustrates your ability to handle the unexpected, the crisis under fire?” Then Texas governor, Bush responded with a narrative:

Bush: It broke my heart to go to the flood scene in Del Rio where a fellow and his family got completely uprooted. The only thing I knew was they got aid as quickly as possible with state and federal help, and to put my arms around the man and his family and cry with them (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2000).

No strategies were listed; he resorted to a narrative. He didn’t really delineate any actions he would take, except for putting his arms around the people and crying with them. Because it was shaped as a narrative, it was harder to deconstruct. I believe we experienced the answer to this question on September 11, 2001, when the first plane hit the World Trade Center and President Bush remained reading a book about a goat to an elementary school classroom instead of taking action. According to the answer above, the victims would get help (from someone else, as he mitigated agency in his narrative), and later he would put his arms around them and cry with them. Albeit he visited the site later that day, much could have been done if he had a plan. Had
he told his steps to American voters in a less affective and narratized manner, more voters might not have cast their ballots in his favor.

It is important to consider that narrators base their story protagonists in known types/stereotypes and their experiences in familiar scenarios which have cultural and historical significance. Narratives can be used as rhetorical strategies to disguise our genuine selves while insuring our capacities to understand what has occurred. “Every narrative is a version or view of what happened” (Cortazzi, 2001, p. 384). This is an important concept as everyday people listen to institutional discourses formatted as narratives. There are multiple versions, or understandings (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) of events.

Recalling both of Bush’s presidential campaigns (2000 and 2004), we are reminded that he used real people telling everyday narratives to pass on his ideas, his platform, for governing the United States. Everyday stories told by everyday people were creating a compassionate candidate, with whom people started identifying. For example, in the closing remarks of the third 2004 presidential debate, Bush used a painting and a West Texas painter, Tom Lee, as a motif for a narrative to illustrate America’s depressing economic situation, as can be noted below.

Bush: In the Oval Office, there's a painting by a friend of Laura and mine named -- by Tom Lee. And it's a West Texas painting, a painting of a mountain scene. And he said this about it. He said, "Sara and I live on the east side of the mountain. It's the sunrise side, not the sunset side. It's the side to see the day that is coming, not to see the day that is gone." I love the optimism in that painting, because that's how I feel about America (The Washington Post Company, 2004).

Nevertheless, people did not question the economic tragedy that plagues America, multiple job losses, or how he was addressing the U.S. economy in his platform. The bleak economic
situation that plagues us was conveyed through narratives, a much more difficult genre to challenge as it is told as a complete unit and not as fragmented ideas. The majority of Americans who cast their votes in 2004 voted for George W. Bush and he won.

When a story is being told by someone, it is harder for one to dialogue with the narrator; it is harder to disagree because it isn’t an explicit position. Narrative tellings have a deeper meaning than what is conveyed explicitly by what is said. What is left unsaid can say as much. As a result, it is harder to challenge ideology disguised in narrative formats. In addition to what is said beyond face value, we have the five dimensions to which stories orient (Ochs & Capps, 2001): tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. For example, narrators seek to shape their stories interestingly while orienting to goodness (Taylor, 1989). Shaping stories according to such dimensions, narrators seek not only to get attention, but to draw empathy.

As a result, disseminating political views through narratives, through storytelling, gives the false impression of the absence of political views and ideological concepts. The political materials and views get past the critical eye because they are framed within a narrative in the story world (Chafe, 1980). These political narratives have been shown to carry great power as they are often recycled in personal stories. Some of the issues conveyed employing the narrative genre would generate conflict if they were framed in the interactional world (Chafe, 1980). As a result, these political issues framed as everyday stories don’t get broken down into parts and bypass rationality, as they are accepted on the level of emotion. “A detailed narrative...would imply that the issues are already settled” (Duranti, 1994, p. 120). Storied worlds are harder to break out; they are impenetrable in terms of critical questioning as long as the moral stances line up (Hill & Zepeda, 1992; Ochs & Capps, 2001).
Stories (as a genre) serve as means for language to be used for colonization, to be espoused without critical questioning of its components or parts. Taking advantage of stories as a colonizing device, politicians such as the president of the United States (Bush) and the president of Brazil (Lula) have been using everyday narratives via television embedded in their speeches or even completely separate in the form of advertisements. These everyday stories are told through mass media by what should be everyday people. One additional advantage of using television, besides its wide penetration into homes, is that it makes use of “quasi-interactions” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 43), which are monological and make questioning much less likely. Mass-mediated symbolic resources, such as “television allow systems to penetrate the wide and indeterminate variety of local contexts of the lifeworld, and to reproduce their order throughout social life” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 43).

Bush’s use of narrative to transmit campaign platforms during both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections was already mentioned in this chapter. The use of narratives by the Brazilian government serves the same colonizing purpose, but serves to give people the impression that the government is meeting its promises and goals set during campaigning. There is “at least a certain colonisation of conversation by mediated quasi-interaction” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 45). While listening to and watching TV, spectators are unable to engage in dialogue, and are therefore oppressed by being exposed to monologue, an oppressive power dynamic (Boal, 1979). An example follows.

In the first semester of 2004, a minimum wage increase was approved in Brazil. This would have been reason for happiness, except that the president had promised a bigger increase during his campaigning days. To avoid protests, the government put out TV ads. These ads used everyday narratives to explain to people that the government could not give a bigger raise
because there were other items the budget needed to cover. Instead of giving this message in a detached and abstract way and making it open to questioning and vulnerable to protests, the government’s ad was framed within a conversational narrative. In it, a couple is talking. The husband is telling the wife that it is taking longer and will be more expensive to build their house than he had initially thought because he is putting a lot of effort into building a strong foundation, but when it is ready, it will be very strong, long-lasting, and better than they had expected in the beginning. Then, the husband tells the wife that this is exactly what the federal government is doing, building a strong foundation for their house (the country) and this is why they could not raise the minimum wage further.

During the time in which this ad was running, I asked Elena, my mother’s maid, if she was happy with the raise in minimum wage. She responded that she was not, but the government was “building a strong foundation for the country and that later it will be much better because of this strong foundation.” The government discourse was being recycled in everyday conversations throughout the populace. I would like to suggest that had the government used the interactional world as opposed to the story world (Chafe, 1980) to convey the small raise in the minimum wage, many more people would have questioned what other items the budget had to cover and if these were as important as the minimum wage, the means by which many Brazilians meet basic needs such as food and shelter.

Narrative in this case informed the dissemination of the institutional discourse, allowing it to use language as a colonizing device (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). This is one of those instances in which people are obligated to be receivers of discourse (van Dijk, 2001). In this case, participants are denied access to multiple understandings of the issue (Chouliaraki &
Fairclough, 1999), and as a result denied critical meta-awareness. This adheres to what Paulo Freire (1970) labeled the banking system of education, in which information is deposited into the recipients’ brains and accepted without questioning, without a critical meta-awareness.

Here we verify that institutional discourse, which is typically analyzed by critical discourse analysts, and stories, typically analyzed by narrative analysts, merge to become a hybrid genre—critical narrative analysis. “[D]iscourse in contemporary society has its own particular hybridising tendencies” (Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999, p. 59). We need to use both CDA and narrative analysis to inform each other in order to address the hybrids of a story with institutional discourse intertwined in its fabric and of an institutional discourse formatted as a personal narrative. In the same way we use context to inform the interpretation of a text, we need to use CDA to analyze socially-constructed personal and conversational narratives, and use narrative analysis to analyze institutional discourses in addition to the analyses typically employed. More than understanding, this will allow us to get closer to the goal of analyzing discourse for social action sponsored by critical discourse analysts.

**Practical Applications and Possible Implications**

A critical or emancipatory pedagogical approach to education, as in Freire’s culture circles (1959) aims at promoting critical meta-awareness. This critical meta-awareness allows common people to engage in social action to solve problems and address issues they identify in their own narratives. This meta-awareness, named conscientization by Freire (1970), allows them to have a relationship of appropriation with language as opposed to colonization (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), and use discourse to engage in change both at the personal and societal level.
From the premise that change ought to start from people’s own locations in society, starting with their awareness that change can take place from the margins of society, as the margin is a vital part of the whole (hooks, 1990).

One must choose only one explanation, take a stand, when analyzing one’s own stories with regard to institutional discourses intertextually woven in their own narratives. Further, given that texts interact with contexts, an issue conveyed by a particular institutional discourse may have many “understandings” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 67); different people see the same issue differently. As exemplified in Chapter Three, the women participating in the culture circles constantly engaged in the analysis of their own narratives. They considered multiple perspectives (both personal and institutional) and became researchers of their own situations as they analyzed narratives of livable wages, work ethics and skills, being good mothers, among others. In the case of the analysis of the minimum wage narrative, they found that the minimum wage as defined by the government was not a livable wage for a family of three, dispelling the common discourse of minimum wage salary providing for the basic needs of a family. Together, they subsequently planned two courses of action, one on the personal realm and another in the societal sphere. The societal plan was to make the politicians in office aware of the disparity and of the need to approve a minimum wage that equaled a living wage. On the personal realm, they realized that by further developing schooling skills such as literacy and problem solving they would be better prepared to take a higher paying job, therefore addressing the situated issue. This exemplifies a first step toward engaging in the concrete critical research which CDA seeks to accomplish.
While the theoretical discussion of institutional discourses that often takes place in the field of CDA is important, if we are to engage in social change, we must start by listening to and analyzing the stories common people tell, and help them to engage in critical narrative analysis themselves, with the goal of fostering critically meta-aware individuals.

Being able to create distance from a story and see how it is being crafted is a metalinguistic skill that requires insight into the power of language to mislead and deceive (Parmentier, 1994). Such meta-awareness is an important life-skill...listening critically and considering life’s challenges from multiple perspectives... Through reframing...narrative portrayals...[comes] awareness of how the perceptions of others challenge or support their own views. (Rymes, 2001, p. 168)

In the following chapter, I use critical narrative analysis to investigate the dropping out of school (or not going to school) narratives of the women participants of this study. These stories are strongly couched in traditional patriarchal ideas that girls should stay at home and help their mothers. I use critical narrative analysis to analyze their portrayal of selves as good people, whose actions align with a socioculturally constructed definition of moral goodness in their dropping out narratives. Further, I look at how institutional discourses are recycled in their tellings.
CHAPTER 5

“GIRLS HAVE TO STAY HOME AND HELP THEIR MOTHERS”:
DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL NARRATIVES

“And the old ladies would nod and smile at me and say,
‘Yes, yes, but you should stay home and be a nice girl’...”

(McBride, 1996, p. 134)

Growing up, I remember being reminded over and over how a nice girl was supposed to behave. I went to my aunt’s house to learn how to bake cakes and cook other things. My mother had escaped the norm. She didn’t know even how to fry an egg—a common expression used to depict complete lack of cooking skills in Northeastern Brazil, as frying an egg is considered the easiest of all kitchen tasks. She had become a medical doctor and didn’t have time for such things...that’s what I thought until now. Today, reflecting on the history of women in my blood family, I realize that not knowing how to perform domestic tasks may have been something strategic. After all, if she didn’t know how to perform the traditional female household chores, she would not be employed to perform them.

I stop writing, analyzing data, and call my grandmother. I ask her why my mother doesn’t know how to fry an egg. I expect, in my mind, that she will say that she doesn’t know, after all she wasn’t the one who raised my mother. She immediately answers “She has more important things to do, girl.” A simple answer, yet I pause for a few seconds and ponder over what is
unsaid. I ask again, and my grandmother changes her tone of voice and answers. A little anger can be noted. She answers, “Did you want her to go work in someone else’s kitchen?” Her answer hits the very issue discussed here—the apprenticeship of domestic tasks as an alternative, or substitute for schooling. As we continue our conversation, which feels for a few seconds like an interrogation, I mention an issue depicted by her and the other women participants of this study—“but she is a girl.” Without hesitation, she answers with a loud and simple “exactly,” and goes on to say, “If she knew how to fry an egg, she wouldn’t be where she is; she wouldn’t be a doctor. She would be working in someone else’s kitchen.”

This short interaction with my grandmother exemplifies an issue present in conversations with each one of the twelve participants in this study. As one of them put it, “girls have to stay home and help their mothers.” While this issue of women’s exclusion from formal schooling (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2002) and apprenticeship into a realm of domestic tasks could be local to Northeastern Brazil; further readings show it is a world-wide issue.

**Domestic Work and Gender Worldwide**

Throughout the world, women traditionally and primarily are the ones who perform household tasks. In many places, though, this comes at the expense of schooling. This at first appalling issue came to my attention when listening to each one of the twelve women I interviewed. Later, I found out that it is a widespread issue that crosses generational and geographical boundaries.

The connection between domestic work and exclusion from schooling, or dropping-out practices is very clear in Tanzania, Africa. There, drop-out rates are higher for girls, as they “were often held back by their parents who insisted that girls should...stay at home and prepare themselves for the role of wives and mothers” (Puja & Kassimoto, 1994, p. 62).
Girls drop-out-of-school from elementary school age, as in the cases of the women I interviewed, through the middle school years. In Gaza, Haas (1999) reports her anger at the situation.

Another neighbor has a nineteen-year-old daughter who has been helping in the house since sixth grade. Her other girl stays home when she should be in junior high. I’m angry at these people. When I sit with them, I always talk about these things, education and marriage, but they say that a twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl is only going to be a housewife anyway, so she might as well start early. (p. 197)

The belief that women are fit primarily for housework and that they (we) should be apprenticed from an early age is long-held. In Europe, from the 1700s, women were subordinated to their families as servants, and “girls worked in a household until marriage...They then set up their own production unit, which replicated the family setting” (Simonton, 1998, p. 47). What is not depicted in many history books is that lower SES women who did not marry and became servants in their own houses, often became employed “in someone else’s kitchen”, as my grandmother likes to say.

This traditional patriarchal idea is so ingrained that it is recycled in the narratives of women themselves. In the book *The Americano dream: how Latinos can achieve success in business and in life*, Angela, a Latina immigrant argues that their girl should not go off to a research university, but should stay close to home and take care of the home in a “traditional Latina fashion” (Sosa, 1998, p. 53). This socially constructed concept is employed in women’s narratives everywhere, as if being a woman came with a deterministic destiny of being apprenticed in housework.
In Europe, as in many other parts of the world we see a certainty that “the duties required to run a household have been ... a normal part of women’s tasks... and frequently the primary part of, women’s work...Paid employment for women often was simply an extension of domestic tasks” (Simonton, 1998, p. 18). While there is little doubt about the division of labor which associates women and household chores along with childcare, it is much less obvious that there is a clear causal link between women’s subordination and gender-specific labor, such as cooking and cleaning (Simonton, 1998). “Similarly, an assumption that women became housekeepers because they bore children can be challenged. Indeed, Middleton argues that household tasks as women’s work is the result of the underlying principle that women keep house for men” (Simonton, 1998, p.19). From the 1700 to the present, in Europe, girls are to abet with housework. It started, many times, with the care of younger ones, but included, as was the case in the tellings of the participants of this study, a training or apprenticeship in domestic tasks. It had no such labels, but it was a normalized practice—if you were a girl you were primarily expected to learn how to perform domestic tasks (Simonton, 1998).

In Brazil, domestic tasks such as watching siblings and helping their mothers were common in the Northeastern region according to the women I interviewed. When asked about her childhood, my grandmother said “I helped taking care of the house. My older sister took care of my brothers and sisters. I didn’t work when I was a child.” As can be noted, my grandmother mentioned household tasks her sister and herself performed, but goes on to say that she did not work when she was a child. This is such a normalized practice that it is no longer seen as work, but just as something you do when you are a girl. Women were socially constructed to perform housework over intellectual, school work. Gender, across time and space has been enough to
draw women’s deterministic future, as if a pre-drafted life course. Still throughout this century, in Europe, the domestic work sector “was the largest employer of women” (Simonton, 1998, p. 24). This is also the case in Brazil (Diário de Pernambuco, 2004b).

My grandmother was so strongly opposed to my mother following in her footsteps as a domestic worker in the big urban center, that she completely avoided the same history/cycle of oppression by giving my mother up for adoption. Similarly, in Europe, “...women who had been domestic servants did not send their daughters into domestic service; they wanted something ‘better’ for them” (Roberts, 1988, p.21).

Today, my grandmother is around eighty years old, yet the story of girls being apprenticed into domestic work in rural areas and migrating to big cities as children is still a gendered reality. Within the last ten years, in Latin America, girls were still much more likely to be responsible for domestic work (Post, 2001). While many may argue that this determinism is not a result of gender, there remain many differences between boys and girls, as a very small number of boys perform domestic work, either exclusively or in combination with school obligations and/or formal employment. (Post, 2001, p.42). Against the argument that things are changing and gendered work is part of the past, “global and economic trends have proved insufficient to eliminate child labor to universalize education to the official obligatory levels in Latin America” (Post, 2001, p.44). In addition, several research studies show that, as a result of not having to perform domestic work, boys are awarded greater schooling opportunities than girls (Post, 2001; King & Hill, 1993; Salazar, 1991). Just south of the U.S. border, in Mexico, girls are much more likely to become domestic workers than boys; 22% versus 4% are the official numbers divided by gender (Post, 2001).
The relevance of the situation analyzed in this chapter is vast. According to Radcliffe (1990), in tropical and sub-tropical colonial areas, young women from rural areas were sent to the big urban centers by their families and were expected to support themselves as domestic servants. Domestic apprenticeship or training was considered the morally acceptable education women should receive according to many institutional discourses. Governments in Mexico and Argentina, for example, “were known to place ‘vagrant’ women arbitrarily in positions as domestic servants, in order to protect their morals and provide them with an education” (Kuznesof 1989: 28). In China, the Mui Tsai System forced young women from rural areas into domestic servitude. “Under this system young girls, sometimes under 10 years old, from impoverished families, were sold or adopted for their domestic services. Wages were rarely paid, but food and shelter were provided.” (Momsen, 1999, p. 3). Duarte (1989) argued that by employing someone as a domestic worker, to perform housework and/or childcare, the traditional household patriarchal system is preserved, as in most houses the migrant domestic worker is merely substituting the labor traditionally performed by the wife, who works out of the home, but uses her salary to pay for what could be labeled a surrogate housewife.

Some change on the personal level does not contribute to immediate systemic change. A number of women, such as my mother, have experienced individual emancipation, as opposed to systemic emancipation. In my mother’s case, she herself employs a maid and therefore perpetrates the traditional household patriarchal system. Her agency is negotiated within the system, the structure in place, and has not considerably contributed to systemic change. The structure in place acts as a restraint for the advancement of many women of low socio-economic status who were born and raised in rural areas. These women’s sense of agency is curtailed by the system set up to perpetrate the patriarchal system, even as women go out of the house to
work. The structures into which they are born and the cultures which they inherited mean that they are involuntarily situated beings. As a result, the structure in place breeds domestic workers to serve as surrogate housewives.

In the following sections, I investigate the recycling of traditional patriarchal institutional discourse in the narratives of each of four women I interviewed in Northeastern Brazil. I explain how, as the women fail to secure the social role of good student or academically prepared person who is regarded as important in society, they shape their identities accordingly in the narratives they tell (Archer, 2000). I use critical narrative analysis to investigate the dropping out of school narratives of four women. These narratives are representative of the tellings of ten women who dropped out of school as children; two of the participants of this research never went to school as children. I start with my grandmother, who didn’t go to school as a child, and go on to analyze other women’s stories.

**Dropping-Out Narratives: Mara, Josi, Neide, and Elena**

In this section, I look at how four women—my grandmother Mara, Josi, Neide, and Elena—shaped their narratives. On a societal level, I explore their recycling of institutional narratives as they tell their stories. On a more situated level, I examine how they portrayed themselves regarding agency. I look at two displays of agency: grammatical agency and framing agency. Grammatical agency is agency portrayed linguistically by the use of subject plus active verb. When a person portrays her/himself as actor in the sentence (subject) as opposed to passive recipient of the action (object), grammatical agency is displayed. When a person is the object of a sentence, such as in “my teacher gave me bad grades” instead of the possible construction “I got bad grades,” grammatical agency is mitigated. Framing agency is the narrator’s character alignment with normative and situated morals. Even though a person might be responsible for a
certain action, he/she shapes it in a way so as to portray her/him as a person orienting to morality. For example, when we explore Josi’s dropping-out narrative, you will see she employed framing agency, as she shaped her narrative so as to draw empathy from the listener and to portray herself in terms of goodness. Instead of saying “I dropped out of school,” she listed many actions by other people who led her to leave school. She ended her narrative with “So I couldn’t. I wanted to go but I couldn’t.” Josi, therefore, displayed framing agency (framing herself in a positive light) while acting as an object (no grammatical agency). You will see other examples of agency (both grammatical and framing) being mitigated and displayed as we analyze the narratives of the women participants in this study.

Mara reported being 77 at the time of the interview in 2003, but I recently learned she is 80 (2004). In Chapter One, I explored her childhood, and her never having gone to school as a child. She currently lives in Recife, in one of her daughter’s homes. She does not own a house. She is single; despite the fact that she has four adult children, half a dozen grandchildren and one great grandson, she never married or shared her life with a partner. She is retired as a maid, and currently draws state retirement funds.

Josi, a full-time trash dump worker, went through trash bags looking for recyclable items to sell to the city recycling facility. Her day started very early. She was the single mother of two elementary school boys. She dropped out of school after second grade, and didn’t return until 2003, when she was 24 years old. She lived in the city of Bezerros in a simple but very clean house with her two sons. She participated in the city’s Freirean culture circles in the evenings.

Neide is the proud mother of an adoptive daughter. A 34-year-old woman, she lived with her husband and daughter in Bezerros. She participated in a different culture circle than the one Josi did, but both were in the city of Bezerros, Brazil. She dropped out of school after third
grade. Her husband also dropped out of school as a child, and she looks forward to the time in which he can join her in the culture circle. Even though children are welcome, the culture circle she attended took place at their daughter’s bedtime.

Elena was 33 at the time I interviewed her. She grew up in the rural area of Pombos, Pernambuco. She had two children in primary school—a boy and a girl. She worked as a domestic worker in the city of Recife. She had been married to a man, who was employed as a security guard, for nearly ten years. She worked from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. and lived in her own rented house. As you will see from her narrative, she repeated fourth grade two times before dropping-out of school.

In choosing the tellings analyzed below, I selected narrative episodes from four interviews that display how the narrators had portrayed themselves in dropping out of school as children or telling about not going to school during childhood years. I decided to employ critical narrative analysis to look at their narrative construction in terms of moral stance and in terms of agents or subjects in their narratives. Moral stance is determined in terms of linguistic positioning of narrator in the story and elicitation of feelings of empathy. Together, these narratives are representative of the dropping-out (or exclusion from schooling) narratives the twelve interviewed women relayed to me.

**Close to Home: My Grandmother’s Exclusion from Formal Education**

Mara:  My childhood was no childhood. I never went to school. I don’t know this kind of animal...school. I helped my mother. My father left my mother with a bunch of children. That’s what their [men’s] business is. She had to work. I helped taking care of the house. My older sister took care of my brothers and sisters. I didn’t
work when I was a child. I didn’t go to school either. I was a girl. Girls helped at home. I did that until I was nine or ten. Then my mother died and my sister gave me to a lady. She gave me to work at her house. Then I was going to have food to eat and a place to sleep.

My grandmother’s depiction of her childhood conveyed her exclusion from formal education. She took a critical stance by classifying her childhood as a time in which she did not do what children should do—play, go to school. She used an idiomatic expression to refer to school as an unknown animal, which indicates complete lack of contact with schools. She then went on to tell that she engaged in a domestic apprenticeship by helping her mother since early on. She implicitly criticized the traditional patriarchal system by saying that her father left her mother with many offspring and generalizing this act by saying “That’s what their business is,” as if to say that’s what men do.

She mentioned her mother’s death in passing, which propeled her work as a maid, even as a child, in exchange for food. The commonality of women’s deaths was portrayed by her later narratization of her godmother, who died of tuberculosis. Her childhood was clearly scarred by the death of her mother and her being given away as someone who would work as a domestic worker for food and shelter. Again, even though she said she did not work as a child, her narrative conveyed many kinds of domestic work performed by her and her sister. In a very deterministic way, she said that she was a girl, therefore she helped at home until she was nine or ten. Then, she went on to work in someone else’s house in a slave-like system of full-time child work, in which all she received in exchange for her work was food and shelter.
Later on in this same narrative, she went on to say that “the boys had gone to school. The girls had learned to clean and take care of the house. For what? To take care of the men or to become domésticas [domestic workers].” The concept of gendered childhoods is clearly articulated in this passage. Deterministic prophecies are self-fulfilled as girls continue being denied access to schooling and formal education to be apprenticed into household chores.

Traditional patriarchal discourse is clearly embedded in her childhood narrative. Gender was portrayed as a deterministic factor. If you are a boy, you go to school. If you are a girl, you learn to clean and take care of the house. Evaluating this system, she portrayed discontentment by saying that girls only learn domestic tasks to take care of their husbands or to end up working in someone else’s kitchen. Her evaluation of the system allowed her to challenge it her own way by giving her own daughter up for adoption so that she would not be part of this cycle. In the process, however, she undermined her own agency.

**Geography or Gender?: Josi’s Dropping-Out Narrative**

Mariana: Until what grade [did you go to school as a child]?

Josi: Until the third grade, and then I wasn’t given an opportunity to study anymore. My parents moved to a farm to work there...and there was no school there. My brothers could ride the horse to the city to go to school, but my father didn’t let me. I asked to go. My father said that women wore skirts and didn’t ride horses and he said that women who went away from home without their father and mother became badly spoken of. So I couldn’t go. I wanted to go but I couldn’t.
Her narrative depicts the socially reproduced role of women. As is the case worldwide, as a girl, Josi dropped out of school during the elementary years. In her specific case, geographical limitations were cited as she recounted her parents moving to a farm, another situation beyond her control, placing her far from schools. In the following sentence, however, gender was unveiled as the major issue, as her brothers were allowed to go to school, but she wasn’t. The explanation for such rested on situated morals couched in traditional patriarchal ideas of what a woman is supposed to be and how she is to behave. In her narrative, women were constructed as subjugated by societal norms and expectations, orienting to morals, not becoming “badly spoken of”. She constructed herself as an object of someone else’s actions—her father’s. She constructed her father as the subject, playing a major role in her dropping out of school.

For example, in “My father didn’t let me [go to school],” the pronoun me is an object of someone else’s actions. She constructed herself as someone who could not do anything but be a victim of others’ actions. By starting her narrative with “I wasn’t given an opportunity to study” Josi was constructing herself as passive, and mitigating her agency, her ability to change her situation, her story. When Josi said that she “wasn’t given an opportunity to study anymore,” she portrayed her situation with orientation to a moral stance. Education was portrayed as an “opportunity,” but she was not given that opportunity by some other person. Therefore, she portrayed this person who did not give her the opportunity to study anymore as the person responsible for her dropping out of school. She ended her narrative with “I wanted to go but I couldn’t,” which portrayed her inability to do anything, to go to school.

In saying “My father said that women wore skirts and didn’t ride horses,” Josi oriented to external norms, which were not questioned but accepted in absolute and deterministic terms. She constructed her narrative to show that because she is a woman (something she has no control
over), she could not ride horses, and therefore, she could not go to school. Riding a horse would position her against the definition of goodness. She therefore, didn’t ride a horse, dropped out of school, and oriented to societal morals. Finally, she portrayed herself as wanting to go to school, but not being able to (I couldn’t), again orienting her narrative in terms of morals. This is a common description as perceived by the women in this community, as strengthened by the analysis of other transcripts.

Even today, about two decades having passed since the incident Josi narrated above, the perception of the role of women as creatures of the domestic realm still remains, as it is portrayed by her narrative of people’s perceptions when she went back to school. When I asked about people’s reactions to her re-entrance to school, she responded by constructing the narrative as follows: “Oh, people criticized a lot. One of my [male] neighbors said ‘Ah, because a married woman shouldn’t leave the children at home for her husband to take care just to go and study.’”

There are societal expectations and norms in place for girls and women locally, in Northeastern Brazil, and also globally. This structure in place tends to maintain the status quo, of subordinated and exploited women, whose agency is greatly limited by the structure in place (Archer, 2000).

**Retention and Dropping-Out: Neide’s Narrative**

In constructing her dropping out narrative (below), Neide portrayed herself as a victim of other people’s actions, decisions, and perceptions:

Mariana: Have you repeated the year anytime?

Neide: I was one time in second grade. I liked going to school. My father and my mother let me go, but then when I was held back it was different. I didn’t
want to go back to school. That was not a good year for me. All my
triends were in third grade. My mother said girls helped at home. It was
better to learn how to take care of the house than to go to school. The last
year I went to school my teacher gave me bad grades and...then my father
said I should stop going to school. He said to help my mother. She needed
help. Then I didn’t go anymore.

The narrative started by portraying Neide as an active subject of her actions and enjoying
school when she was in second grade. Dropping out of school was attributed to being held back
by someone else (not the narrator), indicated by “I was held back” as opposed to “I repeated the
year.” Her use of “I was,” a passive construction, further strengthened her point of being an
object of someone else’s actions. She constructed her story in a linear narrative, in a progression
of events. She further supported her stance as object of others’ actions by saying “...my teacher
gave me bad grades,” and using me as object, portrayed herself as victim of her teachers’ actions.
She portrayed herself as incapable of doing anything that would change the course of her
dropping-out story. Much differently from I got bad grades, for example, she portrayed herself as
someone good who aligned with the situated morals in her community. The dropping out action
followed her father’s plea for help and her teacher giving her bad grades—she did not portray
herself as having grammatical individual agency in either situation. The teacher gave her bad
grades, again portraying herself as a victim of what happened.

The combination of statements such as, “My father said I should stop going to school.
He said to help my mother. She needed help,” created a rapport with the listener, an orientation
to morals. She constructed her narrative in a way that anyone in her place would be prone to do
as she did, acting the same way. This passage clearly illustrates how structure enacts on and curtails agency. This narrative, in accord with others these women told, oriented to societal assumptions of the traditional patriarchal system discourse. So, while they display framing agency within their narratives, orienting to such institutional discourses, they do not change or challenge social conditions. This institutional discourse was taken at face value (Ochs & Capps, 2001), and colonized these women’s narrative tellings and their way of life.

In the specific passage above, Neide’s logic of helping her mother because she needed help used the widely accepted practice of girls being apprenticed into household chores instead of furthering their formal schooling, as was the case with Josi, and as we explored earlier in the chapter, and observed worldwide. Neide recycled widely used institutional discourses in her narrative. Respect and obedience for elders is a discourse typically used in the Catholic Church, Brazil’s official religion. Broadly accepted patriarchal discourses, of girls helping at home, and being excluded from formal schooling were also forefronted in the above telling.

Neide did not cast herself as responsible for dropping out, but emphasized that she could do nothing to prevent it—she was held back, she was given bad grades, and her father advised her to drop out because her mother needed help. She oriented her story not to her own agency, but to what a good girl in her situation had to do. Who would challenge a father’s plea to help the mother? The narrator in this case used narrative to locate herself as a good person, whose actions aligned with an assumed definition of moral goodness by displaying framing agency while portraying herself as an object of societal positioning and not as a subject capable of deciding her own future and enacting change on either a personal or systemic level.
Elena’s Story: Until Fourth Grade

Elena: I went to school until the fourth grade. When I finished fourth grade my teacher wanted me to go to Vitória to the 5th grade. I cried much but my mother didn’t let me. Girls didn’t go to Vitória. Only boys really. Then, my teacher let me repeat the fourth grade two times. I could do nothing, nothing really. My brothers went to the 5th grade and I couldn’t. Can you imagine? I had to help her at home. My mother taught me how to cook and do all this stuff. The men of the house all left early in the morning. My mother and I stayed cooking, washing, ironing...

In the beginning of her narrative, Elena placed herself as active subject of an agentive verb in “I went to school...” However, some tension was portrayed in Elena’s narrative, as she said that her teacher wanted her to go to school, but her mother didn’t let her. At this point, Elena started positioning herself as an object of others’ actions. Her action of crying created an affective stance, in which she sought to secure an empathetic listener (“Can you imagine?”). She displayed framing agency (for me, the listener), but through mitigated grammatical agency--portraying herself as an object, as a victim of other people’s actions. She was not the agent in wanting to continue her education—her teacher was the one who wanted her to go to the city of Vitória. By saying “my mother didn’t let me,” Elena was conveying a sense of inability, portraying herself as an object to her mother’s actions. What was unsaid here is that Elena’s mother also did not have an opportunity to go to school. She married and started taking care of
her own house. Being a member of that community, Elena’s mother started aligning her actions with the gendered morals of the community, such as girls stay at home and are apprenticed into domestic work while boys go to school.

In social interactions such as the one retold here by Elena, the role of conflict is paramount (Briggs, 1996). These conflicts were routinely represented in narratives through language and portray the interconnectedness of the personal and the institutional level. In terms of personal agency, Elena portrayed herself as having none—all she could do was to cry. Her narrative represents a conflict that demonstrates the patriarchal-sponsored beliefs of boys’ independence and girls’ dependence. Boys could travel; girls could not. To ensure this, these values are couched in societal values. She portrayed herself as someone good, who liked going to school, and even who stayed in school for as long as she was allowed—“my teacher let me repeat the fourth grade two times.” While aligning with the morals in place and portraying herself in a positive light, Elena still portrayed her teacher as the agent, and herself as the object of her teacher’s actions. She followed this sentence with a complete flaunt of inability, by saying “I could do nothing, nothing really.” She framed herself agentically while indicating her complete mitigation of grammatical agency by repeating the word “nothing” followed by the intensifier “really.”

Aligned with the dimensions of a narrative telling (Ochs & Capps, 2001), Elena’s tale is highly tellable—and she sought to secure the audience’s attention by placing a question which is two-pronged: “Can you imagine?” First, the question confirmed that the listener was engaged and paying attention to her story. Second and most importantly, she sought to create common
ground in terms of moral stance, and critique the practice in place at the time of the narrative. “Can you imagine?” was therefore not only interactional, but value-laden. It referred to her, in the present, questioning such gender imageries.

She went on to tell that she had no choice but to help her mother at home. That’s when the last piece of her dropping out narrative came in. While her brothers continued their formal schooling, aligning with the other narratives analyzed above and those here represented, Elena was apprenticed into house work by her mother. She again conveyed herself as the object of the action—she was being taught by her mother. In the very end of this narrative episode, Elena contrasted again the activities of the members of her family, segregated by gender: “The men of the house all left early in the morning. My mother and I stayed cooking, washing, ironing...” Again, here, Elena’s story ended with the traditional patriarchal idea of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers. Elena’s narrative, therefore, oriented to a broader traditional institutional discourse that has been propagated throughout the ages. Elena used narrative to locate herself as a good person, as a member of the community in which she grew up, and whose actions aligned with situated morals.

**Semblances of Dropping-Out Narratives**

All the stories of leaving school as children are similar in terms of the way the women structured their narratives, the way they positioned themselves within a particular moral sphere, and in how they minimized their own agency as portrayed in their narratives of leaving school. Therefore, these women’s tellings illustrate that narratives are a critical means to understanding the nature of society and the relationship of everyday talk to the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses, as Ochs and Capps (2001) argued.
As discussed in Chapter Four, these women’s narrative tellings orient to five dimensions (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In terms of tellership, they were co-constructed by the narrator and the co-teller (me), who asked the question, nodded and interacted with each of them as they constructed their narratives. They are all highly tellable, very interesting and involving tales. They all portray the embeddedness of traditional patriarchal ideas. They were linearly constructed, either by ordering the events sequentially or temporally.

Morally, each narrative oriented to situated moral values of the communities in which these women lived at the time these events took place. This is made explicit above, as I analyze each of these four women’s stories as well as by the fact that by and large, women didn’t go to school, and they were apprenticed into house work. All of these women either dropped out of school as children after the second, third, or fourth grade (Neide, Josi, and Elena) or never attended school (Mara). Moral stance was clearly conveyed by each telling. Perceptibly all narratives vary in degree along continua within each of these dimensions.

In all four above narratives, the narrators portrayed themselves in terms of moral goodness—but as defined within normative patriarchal morality. They all dropped out of school as children or didn’t ever go to school, but none of them constructed a dropping out narrative in which they portrayed themselves as agents of that change. Their stories place the agency with some other character or concatenation of events and societal perceptions (e.g., Josi portrayed herself as not challenging the societal rule that women didn’t ride horses, which resulted in her dropping out of school). All four stories orient to a normative morality that positioned the tellers as unable to enter or to remain in school.
In addition to the dimensions present in narratives, Ochs and Capps (2001) present components that aid understanding of the logic of events in a narrative. These components are of paramount importance for the composition of storylines by narrators. They include: setting, unexpected event, psychological/physiological response, object state change (change in the state of an entity in the physical world), unplanned action (a behavior that is not directed by a goal or is unintended), attempt (behavior aimed at solving problems or unexpected events) and consequence (psychological/physiological response consequence). Not all components are in every narrative. These components play a double role in the construction of narrative, because both tellers and protagonists interact and respond to or recount situations. In developing logics temporally, the linearity of a narrative establishes a coherent framework for interpreting past and future experiences, as “the past provides a blueprint for the time to come” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 192). In terms of narrative components, I will look at the resemblance of the narratives of Josi and Neide in terms of narrative components. This similarity is also conveyed throughout the twelve narratives.

As you will see, both narratives are sequenced in a similar manner—very logically arranged. This indicates the enactment of a tension between two human impulses. On one side of this tension, they sought out narrative as a way to provide some order for their experiences, to their sense of the puzzling and chaotic unfolding of our lives. This can be noted by the moral underpinnings present in each and every narrative here analyzed. On the other side, their stories fit in somewhat predictable and ordered narrative sequences, catering to their listener’s and to society’s expectations of what a narrative is supposed to look like and which components it should have.
Table 1: Dropping-Out Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEIDE – DROPPING OUT NARRATIVE</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
<th>JOSI – DROPPING OUT NARRATIVE</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mariana: Have you repeated the year anytime?</td>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td>Mariana: Until what grade?</td>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neide: I was one time in second grade. I liked going to school. My father and my mother let me go, but then when I was held back it was different.</td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event</strong></td>
<td>Josi: Until the third grade, and then I wasn’t given an opportunity to study anymore.</td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t want to go back to school. That was not a good year for me. All my friends were in third grade. My mother said girls helped at home. It was better to learn how to take care of the house than to go to school. The last year I went to school my teacher gave me bad grades and then my father said I should stop going to school. He said to help my mother. She needed help. Then I didn’t go anymore.</td>
<td><strong>Psychological response</strong></td>
<td>My parents moved to a farm to work there and there was no school there. My brothers could ride the horse to the city to go to school, but my father didn’t let me. I asked to go. My father said that women wore skirts and didn’t ride horses and he said that women who went away from home without their father and mother became badly spoken of. So I couldn’t go. I wanted to go but I couldn’t.</td>
<td><strong>Psychological/physiological response</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Object state change</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Object state change</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Attempt</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Attempt</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Unexpected event</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Psychological response</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Psychological/physiological response</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Consequence</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neide’s and Josi’s narratives are similar in terms of structure. They both started with a setting (in terms of grade level), which was propelled by the questions I asked. Then, an unexpected event followed in both narratives followed by a psychological/physical response and an object state change. They both set up their narratives in very similar manners. There are some differences in terms of structure, but there are many more similarities. Probably, being from the same location (geographical area), both Josi and Neide were familiar with the preferred way to tell a highly tellable tale (one of narrative’s dimensions according to Ochs & Capps, 2001), by securing the attention of the listener. Both narratives are highly tellable, having one active teller (as an entire episode is narrated before I speak again). They are organized in a linear manner—both temporal and causal. They have some characteristics of stand alone episodes, detached and not embedded (although not purely).

In the narratives analyzed above, Mara, Josi, Neide, and Elena portrayed themselves in terms of moral goodness. Three of them dropped out of school as children, but neither of them constructed a dropping out narrative in which they portrayed themselves as agents of that change as willfully leaving school and being “bad” by doing so. Mara never went to school; she also doesn’t cast herself as the agent in this happening. Their stories place the agency with some other character. They constructed their narratives in a way that a reader cannot help but understand their situations, and empathize with them. As mentioned previously, they are both certain and constant in terms of moral stance.

These women’s stories of leaving school as children are very similar in terms of the way they structured their narratives. The most canonical (and necessarily hypothetical) narrative artifact we can imagine would be: 1) told by a single author; 2) highly tellable (exciting); 3) minimally embedded (as a stand-alone storybook on the shelf); 4) highly linear; and 5) explicit in
its moral stance (the moral of the story is x). Their narratives orient to the narrative dimensions listed above. Their tellings are also akin in the way they positioned themselves within a particular moral sphere, and in how they minimized the portrayal of their own agency within that sphere. In constructing their dropping-out narratives these women portrayed themselves as victims of other people’s actions. They oriented not to their own agency, but to socially constructed standards of goodness (Gee, in press; Taylor, 1989). They used narrative to locate themselves as good people, whose actions aligned with a socioculturally constructed definition of moral goodness in their dropping out narratives. They constructed morally oriented narratives (Rymes, 1995) situating schooling as an opportunity that was taken away from them (whether they dropped out of school or didn’t ever attend school). These narratives portrayed the narrator in terms of a normative sense of the “good,” centered in patriarchal morality.

For example, Josi portrayed herself as good, as not challenging the societal rule that women didn’t ride horses, which resulted in her dropping out of school. Contradictory actions would position her as not being good, and she chose to orient herself to goodness. Whether or not that actually happened, I cannot report merely based on the analysis of this interview. I can report, though, that in this dropping out narrative, she constructed her storyline so as to position herself as a good person, a person with constant and certain moral stance.

The figure below is a composite of many dropping-out narratives the women I interviewed constructed, including those analyzed above. It was crafted according to the predominant components utilized (Ochs & Capps, 2001) and contains many of the reasons given by the women interviewed for dropping-out. In general terms, the women portrayed themselves as objects of others’ actions and portrayed their orientation to situated morals.
It is important to shed light on the issue of grade level retention as it relates to these dropping-out narratives. An alarmingly high number of the interviewed women were retained in school as children and subsequently dropped-out of school. Eight out of the twelve women
interviewed reported being retained. One of them didn’t remember, two never went to school and
the last one dropped out before the completion of her first year of schooling. According to
Kronick & Hargis (1998), “retention in one or more grades is a commonly noted characteristic of
many students who eventually drop out” (p.20). In fact, retention has been repeatedly reported as
being the single most important predictor of dropping out of school (Cipollone, 1990; Fine &
Zane, 1989; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). While in these cases, there are clear ties to patriarchal
discourse and such aligned morals, the high retention rate is one more factor that serves to
complicate these women’s situations and stories of dropping-out of school.

Implications

While the actions and episodes the women narratized may reflect a particular and situated
framing agency, their orientation to goodness as situated within a particular moral framework is
portrayed in their narratives. The content of their stories as well as the way the women told their
stories indicate the moral stance of the women narrators. These women made sense of their own
lives aligning with what was morally defined as good. To recall, “social roles, social identity and
moral agency are reconstituted collaboratively through narrative and in turn construct narrative”
(Rymes, 1995, p.497); therefore, it is important to remember the role of narrative in making
sense of or stabilizing chaotic lives. The women’s narratives are meaning-making sites, in which
they made sense of their previous experiences, allowing them to negotiate being able to return to
education after portraying themselves in their dropping-out of school narratives as objects who
had no choice regarding their schooling lives as children. Stories or narratives, after all, account
for past, present and anticipate future experiences (Ochs, 1994). For these women, Mara, Josi,
Neide and Elena, “Telling their stories reveals their moral resources and gives them a chance to
grow narratively. In their struggle to articulate their stories, they formulate a strong sense of their
own moral good,” (Rymes, 1995, p. 513) which may serve to propel them into using their moral resources to their advantage in school and in society. The key issue is not to access the true narrative, fact-by-fact memories, as there are many true narratives, many ways to make sense of and process an event. The important point is to get at the women’s meaning-making process—how they negotiated identities and agency as they made sense of what happened, and as they interpreted events through their personal lenses, orienting to their own image of good.

In the following chapter, I look at how Josi and Neide accounted for the present and anticipated future experiences, how they negotiated agency and identity as they joined and became active participants of Freirean culture circles. More specifically, I explore how these two women negotiated their agency in their first-days and returning-to-school narratives.
CHAPTER 6
NEGOTIATING AGENCY AND IDENTITY THROUGH
PARTICIPATION IN FREIREAN CULTURE CIRCLES

The school is full of other grown-ups... You’re not alone.

You shouldn’t feel like an outsider. What you are doing here is
realistically working towards your...goals and...dreams.

(Bruno, 2001, p.3)

Com medo, assustada, desorientada, burra, como uma criança, confusa, não me

senti bem, com um terror, apavorada, ansiosa. How do you feel if you are not able to read
these words? What if, besides not being able to read them, you are in a completely unfamiliar
setting, or a setting that triggers bad memories or psychological reactions? These words were
taken out of the narratives of six women I interviewed, the stories they told about their first days
back at school. These translate into English as afraid, scared, disoriented, jackass, as a child
(childish), confused, didn’t feel well, with a terror, frightened, and anxious. These ten terms were
used by the six Brazilian women I interviewed in mid-2003 who were going back to school after
having dropped out as children.

For a variety of reasons, these women displayed a sense of inappropriateness upon
stepping onto school grounds as students again. Even though many of the Freirean culture circles
took place in buildings other than those officially allocated and designated as schools, the feeling
of not belonging in that environment was still there. They were afraid they were “too old,”
“didn’t know anything,” “didn’t know how to read and write.” The women participants “didn’t
know what other people would say,” and feared what “they were going to think.” As I listened to
these women craft their first days narratives, I got a glimpse at how terrifying it must be to dare
to go back to a formal learning setting after so many years. I couldn’t relate to what they were
feeling, as schools have been part of my life incessantly since I was 18 months old. Their stories
were different. They had been out of school for periods of time ranging from ten to forty years;
yet, they were going back.

I asked my grandmother about it. She had gone to school as an adult—she had not
continued in school, but she had managed to put her courage together to step into a classroom.
She said, “It is not easy, no. School is a place for young people. When an old person like me
goes to school to learn how to read and write, it is very hard.” I did understand it must be hard, as
I grew up quite familiar with the largely propagated institutional discourse that children belong
in schools. This popular belief was made a policy, a law when the new Brazilian constitution was
drafted in 1988, and mandatory education was established for children up to age 14 (for more
information on this matter, see Chapter Three). The discourse that my grandmother and these
women heard and the law that governed the place they lived outlined an appropriate age to go to
school and learn basic literacy skills, 7 to 14 years. The women I interviewed were all out of this
narrow window of opportunity, of this institutionalized magic age for learning. Yet, in telling
their narratives, they were internalizing the institutional discourse that children are the ones who
ought to be in school and this institutional discourse propagated their fears of going back, their
anxiety towards returning to school.
These first-days narratives convey very vulnerable and private fears and will be analyzed as part of their schooling narratives, which include dropping-out of school as children, first days and returning to school narratives. In this chapter, I analyze how two of these six women in Northeastern Brazil, Neide and Josi, narrated their experiences of returning to a participatory education adult literacy program, the culture circles (Freire, 1959) years after they dropped out of school as children as a result of the socio-economic-political context in place.

In analyzing their narratives, I employ critical narrative analysis (see Chapter Four for more information about this methodology) to show how linguistic resources are used to convey a change of agency and moral stance (Rymes, 1995) in these women’s narratives and how their acquisition of agency is enacted through linguistic resources used in their stories. Their narratives changed from portraying themselves as helpless victims in which they oriented to an external and abstract sense of goodness due to someone else’s action (see dropping-out narratives in Chapter Five) to perceiving themselves as active (hooks, 1990) agents, following collectively generated moral sources after they joined circles of culture and engaged in problem-posing, dialogue and problem-solving (Freire and Macedo, 1996).

Specifically, I explore the craftsmanship employed to convey the development of one’s role as agent in returning-to-school narratives of women who were participants of culture circles in Bezerros, Brazil, at the time data was collected. After constructing a narrative that situated the narrator, who dropped out, as the victim of other people’s actions and having a certain moral stance (see Chapter Five, dropping-out narratives), these women narrators constructed an unstable narrative marked by shame and confusion. In these first-days narratives, the narrators situated themselves as agents but did not situate their actions within a consistent moral framework, not fully enacting the role of ergative agent. Here, I suggest that this kind of
narrative construction may be the intermediary step between the construction of dropping-out of school narratives and returning-to-school narratives, and may facilitate those who have constructed dropping out of school narratives to transition toward the desired and morally certain return to school narrative.

On a general level, I investigate how these women use language to project and negotiate new and old identities, as they made sense of their dropping-out experiences by crafting them into narrative stories and constructed their future as part of the Freirean culture circles. On a more local level, I consider how critical narrative analyses of these narratives can aid the understanding of the process those who dropped out of school go through when returning to schools and how they are positioned in terms of institutional discourses. I look at how these women use intertextual resources, which can involve but are not limited to institutional discourses, in negotiating their identities as they put their stories together.

These Brazilian women’s dropping-in (Rymes, 2003) or returning-to-school narratives show change in discourse as each woman discursively constructs herself in between literate and illiterate, agent and object, past and future. These women traveled in between multiple identities as they told their stories. When negotiating their identities in narratives, there are three major influences: the speaker, who self-constructs her identity; the institution, which channels structural definitions of identity; and the groups of which these women were members, which interactionally offered these women norms they oriented to, leading to a morally-oriented identity construction (Souto Manning, Rymes, Weninger, & Brown, 2004). These influences, which act upon the crafting of each identity in narrative is useful here because it gets beyond simply indexing certain identities, and allows a description of a speaker whose identity in talk is fluid.
Ultimately, as we will see throughout this chapter, the women’s narratives conveyed the first sense of morality to which they oriented, which was based on generic (patriarchal) moral imperatives. After joining the culture circles, the women constructed a situated, collective moral compass within which they had a sense of agency. Bowers (1987) argued that the kind of thinking employed in dialogue “shifts the locus of authority from that of community and tradition to the individual who unifies thought and action in a new praxis” (p. 129). The narratives of the women initially aligned to Bowers’s criticism of Freire’s method, as women portrayed an initial individual agency in terms of framing and grammatical agency. Later, though, their narratives progressed to a collective agency, couched on collective morals developed by the participants together, displacing Bowers’s argument.

Josí’s and Neide’s episodes are representative of the six women who engaged in Freirean culture circles as adults and whom I interviewed in mid-2003. From Chapter Five, in which my analysis displays how the narrators had portrayed themselves in dropping out of school, we evolve to analyzing their narratives in returning to school, dropping-in as adults.

Narratives: From Dropping Out to First Days to Returning to School

In Chapter Five, I analyzed Neide’s and Josí’s dropping-out narratives by looking at the narrative components used, the structure of their narrative stories, and by taking a close look at how linguistic devices were employed to convey agency and moral stance. I also relate the closer analysis of their narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) to a wider context, to institutional discourses (Fairclough, 2003). Findings indicate that both stories of leaving school as children are analogous in terms of the way their narratives are structured as well as in the way each woman positioned herself within a particular situated and moral sphere, and in how the institutional discourse contributed to curtailing their depictions of agency.
In telling the stories of their first day as they returned to school, both Josi and Neide narrated feelings of reluctance, shame, or fear that they would not fit in and orient to moral stances. These narratives are therefore more uncertain in terms of moral stance (Ochs & Capps, 2001) than their dropping out narratives. Such ambivalence about taking agentive roles dissolved in the returning-to-school narratives, and a collective and situated moral orientation seemed to develop that is distinct from the societal moral imperatives evident most clearly in the dropping out narratives. In both narratives, the women portrayed themselves as having social agency and which, in Josi’s case, leads to social action.

**First-Days Narratives**

**Neide’s First-Days Narrative**

Mariana: Well, when you started coming to the Circle [of Culture], during the first days, how did you feel?

Neide: I don’t know...I felt like...so childish...with fear. You know, to go to school after so many years. I didn’t know what I was going to see. I felt like I shouldn’t be in school...because I thought that I should have learned to read and write when I was young. I felt ashamed and with fear.

In her narrative, Neide portrayed herself initially as unsure, feeling childish, afraid and ashamed. She indicated by the use of these words, her feelings of inappropriateness in going to school. In addition to portraying herself as inappropriate, Neide’s story brought attention to the timing of her educational experience. The expression, “after so many years,” conveyed her
presence at school after the right time, reflecting a fluid moral stance (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In attempting to secure high tellability, Neide used “you know” in her narrative and achieved both the purpose of engaging the listener (and also co-teller) and indicating a commonly known unwritten rule (context) that adulthood is late to go to school. As she related that she shouldn’t be in school, she should have learned how to read and write when younger, Neide portrayed society’s expectations and the uncertain moral stance in her narrative. Even though she portrayed herself as unsure and possibly inappropriate, Neide positioned herself grammatically as an agent (Duranti, 1997), while conveying ambivalence illustrated by her repeated use of “I felt”.

*Josi’s First-Days Narrative*

Mariana: During the first days [of Culture Circle], how did you feel?

Josi: A little ashamed. I didn’t know what other people were going to say. A mother who doesn’t know how to read nor write, with two sons, no husband, working at the dump, no husband. I didn’t know what people would think. But they didn’t judge me. They supported me and helped me solve my problems. They made me feel well. Now I know that even my sons want to come every day.

Like Neide, Josi reported feeling ashamed of how other people would see her. “I didn’t know what other people were going to say.” However, in contrast to Josi’s more grammatically agentive telling, Neide provided a mixture of agency in her narrative—at times she was in the agent position, and at times others were, portraying a feeling of unsureness.
This narrative illustrates an ambivalent agency—ambivalence as to which moral standards she oriented herself. Josi portrayed herself as agent at times, but a generic *they* also took the agent role at times. She portrayed herself as being afraid that she wouldn’t be seen as “good” or as orienting to a moral stance as she held dispreferred labels, such as single mother, illiterate, and trash dump worker. Her feelings of inappropriateness were replaced by the portrayal of agency exerted by *they*—the positive support provided by the group. She ended by portraying that *even* her sons wanted to attend daily (which implies she did too, by her use of *even*). In “no husband, working at the dump, no husband,” her repetition that she had no husband may have provided a warrant for her initial forays into individual agency. This suggests the generic imperative that the importance of having a husband still provided moral compass for her, even as she began down a path that might not receive approval from “other people”—this was indicated by her use of “I didn’t know what other people were going to say.”

*Components in First-Days Narratives*

Discourse flows traversely through time as both Neide and Josi constructed their present and future identities in opposition to the past. Narrative construction of identity also flows from these women initially posing as the objects of others’ actions and subjugated by societal moral norms to expectations of becoming agents who are guided by culture circle norms and morality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative interview excerpt - Neide</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mariana: Well, when you started coming to the Circle</td>
<td>Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[culture circle], during the first days, how did you feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neide’s narrative was shaped by the setting provided by my question. This illustrates the co-construction of narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Neide portrayed herself as unsure of how she felt during the first days of her return to school. “I don’t know.” She portrays herself as feeling “childish,” “afraid,” and “ashamed,” portraying her feelings of inappropriateness in going to school “after so many years.” This reference to time used with the intensifier so indicates her presence in school after the appropriate time (as defined by moral stance—what’s expected by society).

In using “you know,” she indicated a commonly known rule (context) that it is late (not normal) to go to school. The use of “you know,” also got the listener’s attention, and aimed at
securing tellership. “I felt like I shouldn’t be in school because I felt I should have learned to read and write when I was young.” This previous sentence indicates that Neide portrayed society’s expectations and orientation to moral stance. Even though she portrayed herself as unsure and possibly inappropriate, Neide positioned herself in the ergative agentic position (Duranti, 1997), which is indicated by the use of the pronoun I plus an active verb.

Table 3: Josi’s First-Days’ Narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative interview excerpts - Josi</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mariana:</strong> During the first days [of the adult literacy program Circles of Culture], how did you feel?</td>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Josi:</strong> A little ashamed. I didn’t know what other people were going to say. A mother who doesn’t know how to read nor write, with two sons, no husband, working at the dump, no husband.</td>
<td><strong>Psychological/ physiological events</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t know what people would think. But they didn’t judge me.</td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They supported me and helped me solve my problems. They made me feel well.</td>
<td><strong>Attempt</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now I know that even my sons want to come every day.</td>
<td><strong>Consequence</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Josi’s narrative was shaped by the setting provided by my question, again illuminating the co-construction of narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001). She portrayed herself as agent at times, but *they* takes the agent role a couple of times. This mix of active agents portrayed unsureness. She reported feeling ashamed of how other people would see her. “I didn’t know what other people were going to say.” She portrayed herself as being scared that she won’t be seen as “good” or as orienting to a moral stance as she held dispreferred labels, such as single mother, illiterate, and trash dump worker. Her feelings of inappropriateness were nevertheless replaced by the portrayal of agency exerted by *they*.

**Returning-to-School Narratives**

*Neide’s Returning-to-School Narrative*

Mariana: And now?

Neide: Now I like to come. I like to talk with my group. Even when I have problems at home...we solve them together. One day...Maria said...she was very sad because ...she was selling sandwiches that she made but she was losing money. We helped her to solve this. She learned how to sell the sandwiches ...and started earning money. That’s what we learn. Real stuff. It is not like, this letter is A. We learn that the letter is A...but the teacher doesn’t make us feel dumb. I want to come every night. I only missed class once when I was sick. I felt so sad. It’s a group of friends, really. A group of people who don’t judge me. I know they understand me and help me grow and learn.
Neide’s return-to-school narratives are marked by the pronounced positioning of herself in the subject position in agentive clauses (c.f., Duranti, 1997), therefore indicating agency being enacted by the narrator. In this narrative, Neide portrayed herself as protagonist in her story, helping others and solving problems together with others—orienting to goodness (Taylor, 1989) and a collective and situated moral stance (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Rymes, 1995).

She portrayed herself as an agent indicated by the use of the pronoun “I” plus active verb and as part of a collective agency by using the pronoun “we” plus active verb. The teacher as authority figure and active agent is used merely as an example in negation. This is illustrated in “but the teacher doesn’t make us feel dumb”. Neide used intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003) to illustrate someone else’s story as the “attempt” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p.173) of her primary narrative, when solving each other’s problems in the group (see chart below). She refrained, though, from telling her own story, and instead described helping others with their problems. Furthermore, Neide portrayed herself as having an affective tie to the circles or to the group (she liked them) and this is one of the reasons she gave for returning day after day. She mentioned that she only missed class once—differently from when she dropped out—when she was sick (morally oriented explanation). She portrayed a desire to come to class (good) over feeling sad when she missed classes (bad). Even when portraying the actions of others as helping her, she positioned herself as an agent in “I know they understand me and help me grow and learn.”

She made use of intertextual narrative (when telling the story about Maria) to illustrate how members of the group (“a woman”) got help from others, yet not exposing herself as needing help and continuing to display a certain and constant moral stance. This way, she constructed herself as oriented to doing good and helping others—but on terms quite different than the moral imperatives she oriented to in the dropping-out stories.
### Table 4: Components of Neide’s Returning-to-School Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative interview excerpts - Neide</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mariana:</strong> And now?</td>
<td><strong>Setting 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neide:</strong> Now I like to come. I like to talk with my group.</td>
<td><strong>Psychological/ physiological response 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even when I have problems at home</td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event (hypothetical) 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we solve them together.</td>
<td><strong>Attempt 1 (illustrated by narrative about Maria)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One day</strong></td>
<td><strong>Setting 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maria said... she was very sad because she was selling sandwiches that she made but she was losing money.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychological/ physiological response 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative interview excerpts - Neide</td>
<td>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>We helped her to solve this.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attempt 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>She learned how to sell the sandwiches and</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consequence 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>started earning money.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>That’s what we learn. Real stuff. It is not like,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consequence 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>this letter is A.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>We learn that the letter is A</strong></td>
<td><strong>Setting 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>but the teacher doesn’t make us feel dumb.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Unexpected event 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I want to come every night. I only missed class</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychological/ physiological event 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>once when I was sick. I felt so sad.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attempt 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It’s a group of friends, really. A group of people</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consequence 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>who don’t judge me.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I know they understand me and help me grow and learn.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neide’s narrative is shaped by the setting provided by my question, once again illustrating the co-construction of narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001). This also indicated my tendency to linearity in the construction of narrative as I provided temporally organized settings. She portrayed people as working together as a group and being non-judgemental—the very fear reflected in her unsure narrative of returning to school and feeling ashamed, afraid and childish. The narrative about Maria is linear, but as she inserted a narrative as an example, she added some non-linearity to her first narrative (a less preferred dimension of narrative).

Josi’s Returning-to-School Narrative

Mariana: Do you remember anything in the beginning that made you feel scared?

[The word scared had been used by Josi previously in the interview]

Josi: When I didn’t know things. But here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time. It is not like in school. Who is best? Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us. We decide the important things for us to work. It is good. People talk, help each other and learn. Just now, there was a woman who didn’t know something, then another woman was helping her...with helping her son with his homework. I like helping with homework, but I am not their teacher. The teacher said I needed to be a good mother. I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all. Now she needed to try to be a good teacher. I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. I told her that if she
got them studying things that they do every day they might do better at school. Now I know it doesn’t depend on me or on them only. It depends on the teacher. They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.

In Josi’s narrative, she progressed from “I didn’t know things” to the confidence to take action, to enact agency on a personal level. Rather than asserting her own individual agency exclusively, she portrayed the collaborative nature of this program and how the program instilled a collective ethic and a collective call to action.

Josi stated “here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time... Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us”. Her use of “everybody” as agents helping others and learning together conveyed her perception of the collaborative nature of this program. By mentioning that “even the teacher learns with us,” she portrayed, by the use of *even*, that this is not a normal situation, but an exception.

One of the very reasons she entered the program was now being seen more critically; she constructed herself questioning what a good mother is (which does not include being a teacher), and becoming more agentic as she challenged the teacher to become a good teacher. As part of this learning community, and belonging to it as indicated above, Josi oriented herself to the *situated* morality within this new community and invited the teacher to do so as well. While she portrayed herself as agent in attempting to change her children’s situation at school, she did so by talking to the teacher, making suggestions and inviting her to be a good teacher, and not by
teaching her children in lieu of the teacher, as she said she is not a teacher. The responsibility for the success of her children was then defined in her narrative as a joint effort between the teacher, the children and herself.

Table 5: Components of Josi’s Returning-to-School Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative interview excerpts Josi</th>
<th>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mariana: Do you remember anything in the beginning that made you feel scared?</td>
<td>Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Josi: When I didn’t know things.</strong></td>
<td>Psychological response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time. It is not like in school. Who is best? Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us.</td>
<td>Unexpected event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We decide the important things for us to work.</td>
<td>Attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is good.</td>
<td>Psychological/ physiological response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People talk, help each other and learn.</td>
<td>Consequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative interview excerpts Josi</td>
<td>Components (Ochs &amp; Capps, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just now,</td>
<td>Setting A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there was a woman who didn’t know something,</td>
<td>Unexpected event A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then another woman was helping her</td>
<td>Attempt A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with helping her son with his homework.</td>
<td>Consequence A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like helping with homework, but I am not their teacher.</td>
<td>Psychological/ physiological response A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher said I needed to be a good mother. I went there another day and</td>
<td>Setting B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>said that I was trying to be a good mother,</td>
<td>Psychological/ physiological responses B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going to school and all.</td>
<td>Unexpected event B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now she needed to try to be a good teacher.</td>
<td>Attempt B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narrative interview excerpts Josi

| I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. | Psychological/ physiological responses B |
| I told her that if she got them studying things that they do every day they might do better at school. Now I know it doesn’t depend on me or on them only. It depends on the teacher. | Attempt B |
| They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother. | (Expected) Consequence B (posed as challenge) |

Josi’s narrative as well is shaped by the setting provided by my question (co-construction of narrative—Ochs & Capps, 2001). Again, we can note that in her narrative, she progressed from the indecision portrayed by “I didn’t know things” to embodied agency (constructed and enacted on a personal level) when she told the teacher she needed to be a good teacher and teach her children with appropriate methods. She portrayed the collaborative nature of this program, the culture circles, in her narrative by voicing “here everybody helps everybody... Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us.” Her use of everybody as subjects combined
with active verbs in the present tense convey collective agency (Duranti, 1997), linguistically conveying her perception of the collaborative nature of this program that can be noted by the content of her narrative. Here we note a consistency between grammatical and framing agency, as agency is conveyed collectively on both levels.

Josi constructed her individual agency as she reacts to the statement “The teacher said I needed to be a good mother.” This was conveyed as one of the very reasons as to why she entered the program. Here she reconsidered what the definition of a good mother is and challenged, at least in narrative, the teacher’s definition and concept of a good mother. She, therefore, engaged in critical meta-awareness of socially constructed concepts and situations, as she took the definition of a good mother to be different for different people. In alignment with the conscientization goal of Freirean culture circles, Josi used language as an appropriation tool (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), as she challenged the teacher’s definition of a good mother and refused to be colonized by it. Further, she invited the teacher to engage in a meta-understanding of situated understandings, of socioculturally constructed concepts, such as the identity kit of a good mother. Josi did this by using the same tool the teacher used in attempting to colonize Josi with her language and coerce Josi into doing what she (the teacher) wanted. In turn, though, Josi turned the table and offered the teacher her own socially constructed and situated understanding of what a good teacher ought to be. The responsibility for the success of her children was then defined in her narrative as a joint effort between the teacher, the children, and herself, as I mentioned previously.

Josi and Neide

There is a collective and individual agency crafted through time as the narratives progressed from dropping-out narratives to first-days stories to returning-to-school tellings. In
general, this can be noted by their indication of taking agentive responsibility and control. As the narratives progressed, the positive agency of they, the people in the culture circle, replaced societal imperatives to conform (staying home). Both women portrayed themselves as agents in the returning-to-school narratives. The use of I plus active verb in their narratives shows individual agency, as the use of we plus active verb shows responsibility and collective agency.

Here are some examples (underlined) of how Josi and Neide linguistically constructed a collective (we + active verb) as well as an individual agency (I + active verb) as present and future in their narratives:

“Even when I have problems at home... we solve them together.”

“I want to come every night.”

“...everybody helps everybody... We decide... People talk, help each other and learn.”

“I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well.”

These illustrate how solidarity arose in a group setting for these women, as they became part of the culture circles. Implications of this study point towards a progression from distinction to solidarity, as drop-outs go back to a democratic and participatory literacy program.

**Implications & Conclusions**

This study contributes to the understanding of the development of one’s role as agent in returning-to-school narratives (or dropping-in narratives). After constructing a narrative that situates the narrator, who dropped out of school as the victim of other people’s actions and having a certain moral stance, narrators construct an unstable narrative marked by shame and confusion—portrayed here by the first-days narratives of Neide and Josi. In these narratives, the narrators (Neide and Josi) placed themselves as agents but did not orient to goodness or did not even fully enact the role of agent. This kind of narrative construction can be the intermediary
step in between the construction of a dropping-out of school narrative and returning-to-school narratives and may facilitate those who have constructed dropping out of school narratives to transition toward the desired and morally certain return to school narrative.

The implications resulting from these findings relate to whether women who dropped out of school as children portrayed others in an agentic position, and how their positioning in terms of moral goodness affected their return to school as adults. Further, we affirm that these women returning to school portrayed themselves as morally fluid (Ochs & Capps, 2001) as represented.
by the first-days of school narratives of Neide and Josi and that upon entering the culture circles, these women who then were in adult literacy classrooms based on Freire’s participatory pedagogical tenets (Chapter Three) linguistically placed themselves as agents and oriented to a constant and certain moral stance.

In Chapter Seven, I analyze six women’s perceptions of their educational history on their children’s experiences at school, including those of Josi and Neide. Within this context, I continue employing critical narrative analysis to reflect on a variety of conceptions and definitions, both on the personal and on the institutional level, that are present in their narratives as they talk about being mothers and about their children’s educational experiences. Further, I explore the social construction of academic success couched in specific discourses.
CHAPTER 7

MOTHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF THEIR SCHOOLING
HISTORIES ON THEIR CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

Many of the [mothers]...are caring and loving, and concerned for their children.
They want more for their kids than they’ve had. They just don’t know how
to go about it... Many of them are single, working parents. Their priorities
are earning power and money to provide the basics for their kids.

(Vopat, 1994, p.8)

Good mothers. This is how I define the majority of the women participants of this study.
Such a morally charged term, yet it is a term used by many in describing society’s expectations
of them. The women’s schooling stories were largely influenced by institutional discourses in
place, such as traditional patriarchal discourse, Catholic Church discourse, and Brazilian
constitutional discourse, as we explored in Chapters Five and Six. The women told their
conversational narratives in a temporal progression, from past to present. As the women
projected their futures, they introduced their children into their story tellings; after all, three-
fourths of them were mothers. They wanted their children “to get a chance at better education”
(Kozol, 1991, p. 35). They are mothers of toddlers; they are mothers of grandmothers, as is the
case with my grandmother who now has a great-grandson. Despite their differences in age,
motherhood is one more aspect that connects them to this thread of failing school experiences.
In this chapter, I explore the tellings of some of the mothers who had inadequate educational opportunities in their upbringing and how they perceived this impacting the schooling experiences of their children. As I talked to the mothers, some relayed their frustrations with the system in place, and shared their tales of courage about how they were taking action to ensure that their children would not follow their paths and drop out of school. Others feared the worst and felt powerless within such a prevailing structure (Archer, 2000).

They are not the good mothers in the sense of being the ones who teach their children how to complete their homework, as they themselves did not have successful schooling experiences. Nevertheless, they are the mothers who attempted to teach their children, based on their own situated experiences that one has to fight for equity and access in this world. They taught their children to consider a plethora of perspectives, of interpretations. As in the circles, they instilled tolerance and respect of other perspectives and understandings, challenged the system, and introduced their children to tools that can be used in enacting their agency onto the structure in place both on the personal level and in the societal realm in hopes of promoting equity and justice. By taking such a stance, they contributed to a new discourse on what a good mother is, and sought to secure an education for their children. Consequently, they drafted a different path for their children.

**Building Blocks of School Failure**

While many researchers and educators believe that children’s academic achievement can be correlated with a multitude of family characteristics, such as socio-economic status (SES), single-parenthood, parental involvement, and parents’ educational attainment (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). Low SES, being raised by a single mother, and having a mother who had limited schooling experiences have all been correlated with the failure of children in school.
Based on the family circumstances listed above, with no intervention, the women’s narratives could be interpreted as conveying the idea that the children’s chances of experiencing success in school were slim, and their chances of dropping out were quite high. Unfortunately, these children are likely to have a schooling history very similar to that of their mothers, and could be labeled “at-risk” (Swadner & Lubeck, 1995, p. 1). When a child is labeled at-risk, “locating pathology in the victim is the most objectionable tenet” (Swadner, 1995, p. 18). Situating “at-risk” children’s struggles in school, in their family, and/or community contexts, blinds educators and others to the constraining influences of societal and political structures that often limit poor children’s opportunities and support for learning. It mitigates the agency a teacher might have in contributing to the child’s success. While the odds are a little better for boys, girls would most likely be working in someone else’s kitchen or in the sex market by the time they have their first periods. Being aware of their situations and not completely happy with where they were in life, many of these mothers were trying to promote change in the personal realm, without depending on the system to promote justice and equity.

Every woman participant in this study worked full-time while raising her children. Eleven of them lead a ubiquitous common double journey, working in and outside of their homes. Beyond these struggles, in order to enhance their children’s chances to do well in school, the women had to challenge many traditional discourses that excluded them or that could contribute to their children’s failure. One of those discourses is the traditional parent involvement discourse. These women had to challenge the traditional assumption of parental involvement equaling school involvement, as parental involvement is positively associated with children’s achievement (Lam, 1997). According to studies, parental involvement in education is less frequent in families with low SES (Eagle, 1989; Lareau, 1987). In addition, half of the
twelve women I interviewed were single mothers. Lam (1997) reported that two-parent families display a higher level of parental monitoring, supportiveness, and psychological autonomy towards schooling than children from single-mother families.

These mothers would certainly be better able to ensure that their children would be successful in school if they had experienced supportive, developmentally appropriate, and sustaining educational environments themselves. They certainly would be better able to help their children with school assignments and take the traditional role of mother as teacher, as homework helper, if they had positive experiences with writing, reading, and learning (Vopat, 1994). This was not the case, however. As outlined in the two preceding chapters, these women dropped out of school as children. Their experiences in schooling environments were short. Many of them were retained, and a few of them went through this process repeatedly. Despite their schooling experiences as children, or perhaps because of it, these women were determined to provide their children with a better schooling experience.

Regardless of their thirst for promoting their children’s success within the social, economical and educational system in place, these mothers had found their agency curtailed by the institutional schooling discourse. According to Vopat (1994), parents “can best help their children succeed in school when they know how to foster and connect the learning in the home environment with the learning in school” (p. 8). Clearly, this was not the case with these women. Their lack of familiarity with the schooling discourse proved to be a major obstacle to their children’s success, as they could not socialize their children into a discourse which was foreign to them.

There’s a general concept that “[p]eople get used to what they have. They figure it’s the way it’s supposed to be and they don’t think it’s going to change” (Kozol, 1991, p. 222). This
was defined by Margaret Archer as contextual continuity (2003). People learn how to conform and live happily within the boundaries set, and some even have no aspirations to cross those boundaries. They learned to internalize the institutional discourse and believe it to be their own. Destiny is invoked and agency is otherized. Life courses are conceived as deterministic prophecies to be self-fulfilled. Basing one’s construction of identity within this framework, negotiating within the boundaries of the lot we are dealt, they conceive identification as prepositioned (Fairclough, 2003).

In the following sections, I continue employing critical narrative analysis (Chapter Four) to analyze the women’s perspectives, their talk about their children’s schooling. I take into account the concepts of contextual continuity and prepositioned identity as I look at institutional discourses infiltrating (language as colonization) or being recycled (language as appropriation) in the participants’ narrative tellings. As I analyze the women’s narratives, I shed light on my belief that “when children learn to read, or fail to learn to read, they do so in a particular social, cultural, and historical environment. Their success or failure in reading cannot be understood apart from the environment” (Au, 1997, p. 184).

The Six Women: Good Mothers

Mara, Elena, Josi, Neide, Rose, and Maria: six women, six stories of mothers who care deeply about their children, who wanted their children to do better than they had done. All these women had restricted or nonexistent schooling experiences in their childhoods. All of them had been or continue to be domestic workers. Their ages range over six decades, yet their lives overlapped as they all expressed the desire to be a “good mother” or a “better mother.”

Mara is my biological grandmother. She is a considerably short woman with wrinkled skin and a round nose. Thick, curly hair covers her head. Like me, she has enough hair to fill
several heads. Her hair color is a somewhat faded light brown coloring covering her obvious
gray, or as we say in Brazil, white hair. She likes wearing hats and flip-flops worn down at the
heel, a result of dragging her feet as she walks. She is 80 years old and lives in Recife. She never
went to school, worked as a maid since her childhood, and retired some ten or fifteen years
ago—she doesn’t quite remember. She has four children who are now adults; one of those is my
mother, a physician and professor. My mother was given up for adoption so that she would not
follow Mara’s footsteps and become a maid. Nowadays Mara shares her time between two of her
daughters’ houses; one of them being my mother’s. She revealed herself as my mother’s
biological mother after my mother’s adoptive mother passed away; subsequently their
relationship started developing. She currently spends at least three days each week in my
mother’s house, and they each enjoy one another’s company. Mara also has six grandchildren,
three of whom she just recently met, and one great-grandson, who is my son. She continues to
struggle to learn how to read and write. Currently, she has a tutor who is giving her private
reading and language arts lessons.

Elena is a 33-year-old large-boned, black-haired woman. She works as a maid in my
mother’s home. Her workday ranges from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. from Monday through
Saturday, washing dishes, cooking, cleaning the house, washing and ironing clothes, and caring
for the household pets. She shares her home with her similar-aged husband who works as a
security guard in a local pharmacy building and their two children—Hugo and Mana
(pseudonyms for a boy and girl). Both children attend a private primary school. Elena dropped-
out of school as a child after repeating fourth grade twice. She cited mobility as the major cause,
but it was not a problem for her brothers, who went to school and today work in much better
positions than hers. Despite her desire and efforts to return to school, she hasn’t stepped into a
classroom since the time in which she was a fourth grade student in the small city of Pombos. Elena’s story is one of vigor and diligence. She has spent more than fifteen years attempting to return to school. Even though she repeated fourth grade, she has limited reading and writing skills and regrets not being capable of helping her son, who is in Kindergarten, with his homework.

Josi is a lively 24-year-old. Compared to the other participants, she has lived few years, but had a very loaded life. She made her home in Bezerros, and worked in a trash dump at the time of the interview. She is short with abundant curly dark hair. Her skin is tanned by the sun under which she works day after day. Before she became a (single) mother, Josi worked as a maid, but, she says the women bosses (patroas), “don’t want maids with sons. They prefer maids without children. They say it’s fewer problem.” Since then, she has been working in the city trash dump. She wakes up early, and goes to the dump, opening people’s trash bags looking for recyclable stuff she can sell to the recycling facility in town. Her hands are visibly rough, and she complains about the strong smell. Displaying much determination, she dares she will not let her children work in the trash dump. She has two sons who are students in a local elementary school, and wants to grant them a better life than she has had. Josi dropped out of school after being retained in second grade, and is now a participant in a culture circle in the city of Bezerros.

Neide was a proud mother. She had an adoptive daughter and lived with her daughter and husband in the city of Bezerros. She put on a wonderful smile when talking of her little one—Neide’s skin, hair, and eyes are also brown. Even though only a decade separates her from Josi, who lived in the same city, each had taken somewhat different life courses. They were similar because they both worked as maids in Bezerros and they both dropped out of school after being retained in second or third grade. Both of them were back in school as part of the culture circles,
although they didn’t belong to the same circle. Differently from Josi, Neide was the only person whom I interviewed who did not work outside of her home. She was the full-time mother of a beautiful toddler girl and spent her days working in her home, performing unpaid house work and child care.

Maria had a seven year old son when I interviewed her. She got pregnant during her teenage years, and was merely 22 years old in mid-2003, yet her wrinkled face and rough hands depict some of the harsh aspects of her life. She was tall, skinny, and had spare straight brown hair dropping over her shoulders, complementing her brown skin. She worked in a brick factory, and financially supported her household. Even though the money was good—better than the money she made as a maid—she reported many respiratory problems due to her work conditions. Bricks are made manually, and she said that in shaping the bricks, much of the red dust went up her nose. She dropped out of school after third grade. She was retained, but also moved around a lot. She wanted her son to travel a different path and stay in school. Her son is very smart, according to her, and was in school at the time of the interview. Below we will see her describe some of the clashes between her unschooled self and her schooled son. As a result of these clashes, she was now part of a culture circle. She shared her home in Bezerros with her son Antônio and her mother, who cared for him while Maria was working.

Rose was a small, skinny woman with long dark hair and a bent posture. She continuously displayed bags under her eyes—at least that was the case each time I saw her in the almost three month period in which I was in Bezerros. She worked as a nanny. She had previously been a do-it-all maid, but at that time took care of a young boy. Her forty-six years were easily noticeable, and it was hard to imagine that she had a young son. She was single, and lived in Bezerros with her son and mother. Her mother cared for her son all day while Rose was
at work. Even though her son was of school age, he had been denied access to schooling, due to having an alleged intellectual disability, which was not ever professionally diagnosed. Rose dropped out of school after first grade when she was retained. When I interviewed Rose, she was part of a culture circle. She was determined to not only learn how to read and write, but to become a teacher to her son, who had been denied access to one. His ticket to schooling lays in her success teaching him how to read and write and disproving the teachers and the system in place.

All of these women had quite a few things in common. One of these converging points was their lack of successful schooling experiences throughout their childhoods. As mothers, the women narrated how they had negotiated or how they were negotiating the success of their children in school; how they were trying to recraft, to reinvent their identities, to rewrite their stories. In the following section, I will analyze narrative episodes in which each of these women talked about the impact of their schooling history on their children’s education, and tried to challenge, in different ways, their exclusion from formal schooling. The women talk about how they challenged their own exclusion from schooling by attempting to intervene and modify the structure in place for the sake of their children, through their children’s lives.

**Many Tellings, One Story: When Gender, SES, and Education Intersect**

Throughout this study, I have noted the many ways in which gender, socioeconomic class, and education intersected and lead to a cycle of oppression in which girls from rural areas dropped out of schools, were apprenticed into household work, and ultimately migrated to larger urban centers becoming maids. Here, I analyze the narratives in which these women tell about their attempts to enact their agency onto the structure in place, on a personal level, and change the socioculturally-constructed self-fulfilling life courses of their children. They creatively
attempt to construct new options for their children, to imagine different ways. They navigate between their personal narratives and institutional discourses, so as to align with socially-constructed norms, situated morals, and larger historically constructed structures. In their own way, the women negotiated this personal-institutional tension by using framing and grammatical resources to portray themselves as subjects or objects, as victims or perpetrators in their tellings.

Mara: Enacting Agency as Alternative to Structure in Place

Mariana: So, you gave her—

Mara: —I gave her to my, this wonderful woman, my comadre [godmother]. She knew how to read, write. She was an educated woman. She was a good mother to your mother. I was no one. I worked in other people’s kitchen and washed clothes to make a little extra money. If I hadn’t given her, she wouldn’t be where she is today. I couldn’t give her an education. See your mother, she makes money to travel, to go out, to have fun. And the other ones. None of them could get where she is. They are all poor little ones, poor, with no profession, struggling. None of them were given any diplomas. I don’t know how to read or write. I couldn’t help them. And I worked much. I couldn’t help them with school stuff.

Mara started off by portraying herself agentically, as in, “I gave her to my, this wonderful woman, my comadre.” She positioned herself so as to indicate that she made the choice to give her daughter, my mother, up for adoption, and she did a good thing. By using the term comadre,
she is indicating a family-like relationship officially recognized by the Catholic Church; the relationship between a mother and a godmother under the blessings of God. This institutional discourse was employed here to indicate the morally situated rule that if the mother is not able to raise a child, due to death or difficulty, the child should be raised by his/her godmother, who is the second mother in accord with God’s decree. Even though officially this was not their relationship, as my mother’s godmother was a woman named Dona Alzira and not her adoptive mother, describing this relationship in this way was Mara’s way of portraying herself in terms of situated morals, and constructing herself as someone good. She perceived herself as someone who acted as any other person in her place would have, providing a better opportunity for her daughter while locating herself within a structure created by the divine discourse of the Catholic Church. She employed framing agency in alignment with grammatical agency, when she used the pronoun I plus an active verb (even though it’s in the past tense).

It is quite likely that an internal conversation (Archer, 2000; 2003) of how to frame herself as an agent orienting to morals and to the divine discourse of God, who in Brazil is officially Catholic, precluded and shaped the way the narrative was put together, linearly. Mara portrayed herself as a doer, rather than a victim. Had Mara said something like “I was forced to give my daughter up for adoption due to the conditions in which I lived” or “due to the structure in place,” she would have been framing herself as an object. Rather, here, she framed herself as the subject of an action that worked out, as my mother is a medical doctor living within comfortable financial boundaries. This was made clear in her later statement that “If I hadn’t given her, she wouldn’t be where she is today.” Here, Mara clearly articulated how she enacted her agency on a personal level, and beat the system in the case of my mother, who didn’t follow
her footsteps of maidhood and financial constraints, due to my grandmother’s action of finding a “good mother” for my mother.

In terms of identity, Mara didn’t view my mother’s identity as pre-determined, as a nature-identity (Gee, 2001), a state developed from forces in nature over which one “had no control” (Gee, 2001, p. 101). In fact, she disputed the determining factor of my mother’s identity, challenging identity’s definition as a state over which development unfolds outside the control of a person and/or society. In spite of a deterministic nature-identity, in which “we are what we are primarily because of our ‘natures’” (Gee, 2001, p. 101), Mara saw the possibility of my mother getting out of the generational cycle of domestic work. By being born Mara’s daughter, my mother was positioned within the structure in such a way that had nothing been done, the status quo would have been maintained, securing her institution-identity, “we are what we are primarily because of the positions we occupy in society” (Gee, 2001, p. 101). My mother’s situation identity would therefore have led her to work in someone else’s kitchen as a domestic worker. But Mara saw a possibility for my mother’s identity to be changed, for her to have a better future resting in affinity-identities (Gee, 2001). By changing her affinity group, and giving her up for adoption to a wealthier family, Mara provided my mother with the experiences leading to the change of her institutional-identity. These experiences did, in turn, allow my mother to discursively negotiate and construct her identity in society, as my mother’s accomplishments were interactionally recognized by others in her affinity group.

Mara described my mother’s adoptive mother, the woman to whom she gave my mother for adoption, as “an educated woman,” “a good mother.” Placing the sentence, “She was a good mother to your mother” following the passage “She knew how to read, write. She was an educated woman” drew a causal relationship. Mara, therefore, constructed the definition of a
good mother, of a “wonderful woman” in terms of this woman’s educational level. The adoptive mother as the good mother rationale justified Mara’s action of giving my mother up for adoption, as according to her own definition, she herself could not be a good mother; she didn’t know how to read and write. While Mara portrayed herself as a subject in finding a good Mother for my mother, she also displayed her inability to do it herself when she said, “I couldn’t give her an education.”

Mara’s claim, “I was no one,” to define herself, is twofold. First, she had not received formal education, so she portrayed herself as someone with zero knowledge and little money. She was someone who “worked in other people’s kitchen and washed clothes to make a little extra money.” Mara used this self-description to indicate her low socioeconomic status, despite the fact that she led a double journey, a double life. Second, she displayed her internalization of another institutional discourse, the discourse of the invisibility (Freedman, 2002) of traditionally defined women’s chores such as house work and child care. She devalued such work, because it is largely unpaid when performed by the wife or the woman in the house and underpaid and undervalued when it is performed by a domestic worker. The internalization of this institutional discourse contrasted and set apart her location from her comadre’s. Mara and her comadre had different identities, whether identity is defined in terms of nature, institution, discourse, or affinity groups (Gee, 2001). Mara didn’t restrict my mother’s future to the generational, to the nature identity; seeing beyond the lot which she had been dealt, Mara was able to promote change.

Situating herself as a person doing invisible work also served to justify Mara’s action of giving her firstborn up for adoption. While her use of the verb in the past tense when referring to her comadre indicated that the events took place in the past and that her comadre was no longer
living, her use of “was” in the past tense hints at Mara’s belief that her *comadre* ultimately was someone of higher status. Mara acted in a meta-aware manner when she challenged the cycle of oppression and gave my mother up for adoption so that she would be spared being part of that oppressive maidhood cycle. She used economic status to gauge her success in enacting her agency on the structure in place that kept reproducing the cycle of domestic work. She also assessed her success through my mother’s material accomplishments and possessions. Mara’s statement, “See your mother, she makes money to travel, to go out, to have fun” is the evidence Mara provides of the success of her alternative approach to provide at least one of her children a way out of the cycle of oppression into which she was born. Further, Mara compared my mother’s status favorably against the lower status of her other children.

Mara imprinted grammatical agency onto my mother by using “she” plus an active verb to portray my mother as a subject of her actions in “*she makes* money to travel, to go out, to have fun.” When referring to her other children, she portrayed them grammatically as unable in “None of them could get where she is.” Further, she constructed them as “poor little ones, poor, with no profession, struggling,” affectively engaging the listener and subsequently justifying her action of giving her firstborn up for adoption. Here, Mara also linked education to economics, suggesting that those who did not receive any diplomas were poor, and my mother, who has a diploma, “makes money.” The discourse of one’s worth and success being gauged financially was clearly embraced here by Mara.

In saying, “None of them were given any diplomas,” Mara used the passive voice so as to portray her other children as failing to receive diplomas and achieving success due to other people’s actions. Immediately following this sentence, though, she excused herself from being the one who caused her other children not to receive diplomas. She portrayed herself as unable in
this case, differently from her portrayal of self as agent when giving my mother up for adoption. Clearly illustrating her framing agency when talking about the failure of her other children, Mara constructed her narrative to portray herself as a victim of the structure, as opposed to portraying herself as someone misaligned with community situated morals and standards of goodness (Taylor, 1989). Her framing agency here was likely precluded by internal conversations (Archer, 2000; 2003), in which she followed her statement that none of her other children received diplomas with, “I don’t know how to read or write. I couldn’t help them. And I worked much. I couldn’t help them with school stuff.” Here, her use of, “I don’t know”, “I couldn’t help...[because]...I worked much” and the repetition of, “I couldn’t help” clearly illustrates her construction of self as unable. This illustrates a framing agency which is inconsistent with Mara’s grammatical agency. Here, her narrative illustrates the structure acting upon and curtailing Mara’s other children’s paths and futures (Archer, 2003).

Mara therefore crafted a narrative in which she was successful finding an alternative for her firstborn, my mother, so that her agency would not be constrained by the system in place. With the other children, Mara constructed her narrative to portray her inability to do anything to change their paths. So, Mara’s success in enacting her agency on the system is exemplified by my mother’s story, which as we discussed earlier, is more commonplace than I myself had initially imagined.

_Elena: Does Paying for Private Education Make for a “Good Mother”?_

_Mariana: And your children?_
Elena: Hugo is in school. He started in a public school, but I saw that the education was not very good. I put him in a private school. I want for him to learn how to read and write and make more money than me and his father when he grows up. I tried to be a good mother, paying for his studies. But he was held back in Kindergarten. The teacher thinks he’s not going to pass and this is his second time in Kindergarten. She says he is lazy. She says he doesn’t want to read. I think it’s because of the teacher.

Mariana: Umm, the teacher?

Elena: I think the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place. I pay for my son to go to school it is a very big sacrifice, but the teacher thinks I don’t care because I don’t help him. Then she decided to make him repeat the year. He is in Kindergarten again this year and I am paying it all again. I don’t know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can’t help him.

When asked about her children, Elena commenced by situating her son as “in school.” Having dropped-out of school and unable to set her foot into a classroom for over a decade likely drove her account of Hugo, her son. Elena embraced the institutional discourse of the superiority of private schools over public schools. We can note how this discourse infiltrated her narrative in “He started in a public school, but I saw that the education was not very good. I put him in a private school.” Elena portrayed herself as a grammatical agent, although couched in the institutional discourse of the superiority of private schools, as she took her son from a flawed
system (public schools) to a better educational setting (private schools). Elena was likely influenced by the larger institutional discourse of private schools having better quality and resources, by seeing richer mothers choosing private schools over public ones, as well as by my mother having chosen private schools for each of her children, including myself. Elena acted according to the expectations set up by this very discourse, as someone who sponsors the superiority of private schools, seeing them as one of the only alternatives to a flawed public education system. Though a grammatical agent and a framing agent situated within the discourse of the superiority of private schools, Elena’s agency was certainly a forged one, as it was molded by the structure, the institutional discourse.

Elena continued to portray herself as an agent in her desire to make sure her son learn how to read and write, a skill which she linked to the ability to make more money. Again, she accepted without questioning, was colonized by another institutional discourse, that education will land you better socioeconomic status. Here, the discourse of money as a measure of success or as determining someone’s worth, the institutional discourse of capitalism, also drove her narratives. This is illustrated by, “I want for him to learn how to read and write and make more money than me and his father when he grows up.” This displays her alignment with the morals that children belong in schools (as discussed at length in Chapter Six, Brazilian constitution and morals) and that she wanted the best for her child. The way that she was working to make this desire become a reality is described in the following sentence, in which she said, “I tried to be a good mother, paying for his studies.” So, money was portrayed as the way in which she was attempting to buy what she did not have; to buy him a ticket to a better future. Her use of the past tense in “I tried” displays an unfulfilled effort, an unrealized dream. It indicates her transition from grammatical agent, from subject to object, subject to other people’s actions.
Elena mentioned “good mother.” Directly or indirectly, all other women participants in this study who were mothers, mentioned this concept, yet defined it differently. For Elena, the key to being a good mother was providing monetary support, paying for Hugo’s studies. She located herself in terms of situated moral goodness (Taylor, 1989), as she constructed herself providing an alternative to her child’s “not very good” educational experience in public schooling. As any other mother, she struggles to provide her son with good schooling.

This effort, though, backfired, when Hugo “was held back in Kindergarten.” Even though Elena was paying for private schooling, she was failing to secure his educational success. Hugo was not portrayed as the agent, as the subject in this sentence. The use of “he” plus “was held back” (past tense) depicted him as the object of someone else’s actions. Grammatically, his agency was mitigated, and he was subject to the teacher. Further, Elena clearly voiced her concerns towards the future, which was constructed in a bleak light, completely depending on the actions of “the teacher” and what she says and thinks about Elena’s son. The teacher was here constructed as the other. “The teacher thinks he’s not going to pass...She says he’s lazy. She says he doesn’t want to read.” Here Hugo was portrayed as not responsible for any of these actions. Elena constructed the teacher as deciding what Hugo was capable of, what Hugo was doing. Grammatically, the teacher is the agent, as portrayed by subject plus active verb as in “The teacher thinks” and the twice voiced “She says.” As recounted by Elena, the teacher used the word “lazy” to describe Hugo, a word which might have been used to mitigate the teacher’s responsibility and ability to do anything to change Hugo’s situation in school, his reported lack of success. According to this narrative, Hugo’s failure was constructed by the teacher. Elena went as far as to say, “I think it’s because of the teacher.” She completely mitigated her agency, and she constructed her narrative as if there was nothing that she could do. This can be
contrasted with her initial portrayal of self as agent in moving Hugo from a public school to a private school; but later with the private school, Elena displayed herself as having no agency.

When questioned about the teacher, Elena said that “…the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place.” The teacher was here portrayed by Elena as not recognizing and acknowledging the multitude of home cultures the children bring into the classroom. Elena attempted to draw attention to her specific home situation and to recruit the empathy of the listener by saying, “I pay for my son to go to school it is a very big sacrifice.” She tried to construct herself as someone orienting to situated standards of goodness; making a “big sacrifice” to assure her son would have a better life than the one she lead. Her caring was portrayed as working to provide money for his school. She portrayed the teacher in a negative light in saying “the teacher thinks I don’t care because I don’t help him.” Elena here refered to the institutional discourse of parental involvement, defined in terms of parental help with school work or parental assistance with school undertakings. Elena’s own definition of parental involvement is obviously different. She worked hard to pay for her child to have access to what she believed was a better education. She was very involved in her child’s life as she sought to challenge the identity he had been attributed. This identity Elena sought to dispel was formed solely by pre-determined aspects, on the lot he had been given, a deterministic identity.

By saying “Then she decided to make him repeat the year,” Elena was portraying the teacher as the agent in her son’s retention. Not only did she decide that Hugo would be in Kindergarten again, but she enforced her decision. By using “made him,” Elena implied that her son really didn’t deserve, or should really not have been retained. This leads the listener to side with Elena, and condemn the teacher’s judgments, as she appealed to affective devices, portraying herself and her son as victims of the teacher’s actions by saying, “He is in
Kindergarten again this year and **I am paying it all again.**” This last bold passage conveys a feeling of punishment. Elena portrayed herself as being punished for not complying with the institutional discourse of parental involvement.

Elena ended with a feeling of uncertainty, inability, and helplessness as she said, “I don’t know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can’t help him.” Even in the midst of raising many concerns, Elena did not once mention moving her child back to a public school. She did not report any major incidents in the public school which Hugo attended before she transferred him to this private school. The institutional discourse of the superiority of private schools was still guiding her decisions, and as a result curtailing her agency. While she enacted her agency on the system by moving her child out of a public school that was not providing him with a very good education overall, Elena portrayed herself as unable to change the course of things in this new setting. Her schooling history was impeding her help with her son’s homework. She could not explain concepts taught in that Kindergarten class, and therefore she was failing him. It seemed there was nothing she could do to ensure he’d go to first grade; nothing in her realm of possibilities would ensure Elena’s son success in school.

*Josi: Good Teacher Needed!*

Mariana: Do you remember anything in the beginning that made you feel scared? (*The word scared had been used by Josi previously in the interview*)

**Josi:** When I didn’t know things. But here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time. It is not like in school. Who is best? Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us. We decide the important
things for us to work [on]. It is good. People talk, help each other and learn.

Just now, there was a woman who didn’t know something, then another woman
was helping her...with helping her son with his homework. I like helping with
homework, but I am not their teacher. The teacher said I needed to be a good
mother. I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good
mother, going to school and all. Now she needed to try to be a good teacher. I
told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. I told her
that if she got them studying things that they do every day they might do better
at school. Now I know it doesn’t depend on me or on them only. It depends on
the teacher. They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach
them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I
am trying to be a good mother.

Mariana: You said that you she needed to learn how your boys do well⁴. What—

Josi: —she said

the boys were not doing well in school; that I needed to help them at home or
she was going to retain them. She said that I needed to be a good mother and
help them with the homework. But they were not learning in school. She
wanted me to be the one teaching them. I can’t teach them. I work in the dump,
I take care of the house, I go to the circle.

Mariana: Uh-huh.

⁴ Refer to Appendix B for Portuguese excerpt. Ungrammaticality conveys Josi’s original construction.
Josi: I tell them that education is important. But it is her responsibility to teach them. Some children get there and already know everything. Not my boys. But now in the circles, we are helping my boys to understand the subject they have to learn to go to the next year. I am being a good mother. We are helping them. Now, they need help at their school, from their teacher.

Josi exemplified the process of problem posing, dialogue, problem solving, and action inherent to the culture circles by using an intertextual narrative, constructed in general terms “Just now, there was a woman who didn’t know something, then another woman was helping her...with helping her son with his homework.” With, “Just now,” she transitioned to a more personal sphere, a shift to a narrative about her own situation as a mother of two sons in school at the time of the interview. This is where her narrative about her schooling history and the impact on her sons’ academics initiated. She responded to the large parent involvement discourse, in which mothers are expected to help children with their school work at home. She questioned this big discourse of parental involvement as involvement in academic and schooling tasks when she said “I like helping with homework, but I am not their teacher.” School homework was posed as a problem, not only for her, but for other women, as illustrated by the narrative above. The institutional discourse of the necessity of homework for children in elementary school and the burden that it may pose for parents, though, was not questioned.

Josi employed reported speech in saying, “The teacher said I needed to be a good mother.” In constructing this sentence, Josi portrayed the teacher as the agent, prescribing the remedy needed for her sons’ lack of success in school. The term “good mother” here means a mother who aligns with the larger institutional discourse of parental involvement, of involvement
in academic assistance outside of school and participation in schooling events. While it aligns with the needs of teachers, it hardly depicts the multitude of possibilities in which a parent, or in this case a mother, may be involved in her children’s lives.

Following her report of her son’s teacher’s attempt (Ochs & Capps, 2001), Josi explained that “I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all.” Temporally organizing her story, and providing a setting, “another day,” Josi portrayed herself as subject of this sentence. She was framing herself as an agent as well as utilizing grammar, positioning herself as grammatical agent. Here Josi presented her own definition of a “good mother,” which is one who is going to school. Yet, she incorporated the institutional discourse of a good mother as someone who received formal education, as did Mara in her narrative earlier. Good mother is then defined in alignment with traditional definitions of parental involvement, as homework helper and teacher’s aid.

In a display of critical meta-awareness, Josi questioned the teacher’s assertion that the success of Josi’s sons rested on her ability to embrace and impersonate a “good mother.” In this unexpected event, Josi mitigated her sole responsibility for her own children’s schooling success. She focused on the co-responsibility of parents and teachers in children’s education, on a true partnership, as she articulated “Now she needed to try to be a good teacher.” In “I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well” Josi clearly referenced the culture circles as an alternative to what the teacher was doing in class. She reported telling the teacher how the culture circles worked, positioning herself as the expert, and followed with an evaluation of the program when she declared “my boys do well.”

Josi challenged the institutional discourse of cultural and linguistic disconnect between home and school environments when she said, “I told her that if she got them studying things
that they do every day they might do better at school.” In her narrative, Josi empowered her sons and valued them in “They know a lot.” She portrayed them as capable individuals. In the following sentence, though, she again challenged the disconnect between the classroom culture and their home culture. She suggested the teacher employ the knowledge they already possessed, the background knowledge they bring to the classroom, as a bridge to teach novel concepts and ideas in “The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better.” She challenged the teacher by framing her following sentence as an attempt (Ochs & Capps, 2001) in “Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.” She here employed her own definition of a “good teacher,” which is one who connects children’s home and school lives, offering them a meaningful learning experience leading to academic success.

Challenging the teacher’s portrayed views that homework help from Josi (their mother) would assure the boys’ success in school, Josi disagreed with the teacher, saying, “But they were not learning in school.” By using “but,” Josi showed the difference in her beliefs and what she reported as being the teacher’s beliefs. Josi saw the problem resting in the teacher’s responsibility, and not on homework completion. Contrary to what the teacher had been reported as saying, Josi framed the teacher as the agent, the person responsible for failing to provide her children with an opportunity to succeed by teaching in a relevant manner, aligned with their background knowledge and home culture, as “they are not learning in school.” Josi went on to express her belief that the teacher was the one mitigating her responsibility and agency in assuring that the boys succeed in school, positioning Josi as the only one who could do something to change the situation, being a “good mother.”

Josi clearly embraced the institutional discourse of education being essential, especially for children. She recycled this belief in her own words, as she reported telling her sons “that
education is important.” However, she did not see herself as the one responsible for teaching them. “She wanted me to be the one teaching them. I can’t teach them.” Josi assigned the responsibility of teaching to her son’s teacher. She recognized the diverse ability levels and backgrounds present in her children’s classroom when she mentioned that some of them already came to school knowing everything. This is especially true if, as Gee (1996) highlighted, some of the children have previously been schooled in the educational discourse used in the classroom. This was not the case with Josi’s boys, as with many other boys and girls from lower socioeconomic levels who struggle not only to learn what is being taught in school, but to acquire the school discourse.

Josi concluded her narrative (as seen above) by portraying the culture circles as a viable alternative for her sons. Despite her strong belief that the teacher was the one who could take action and change things, she was enacting agency on the personal level, and changing her sons’ situation at school. Through this participatory Freirean adult literacy program, her boys had been continuously helped by the collective agents (we are helping), and this collective agency allowed her sons to understand the concepts being taught in school and to ready themselves for the next grade level. The culture circle of which she was part, through the action of its participants, was providing a solution to the problem of her sons failing in school and being threatened with retention. The results of collective agency were being displayed on an individual level, in which Josi’s agency was shown by “I am being a good mother” and on a collective level, as in “We are helping them.” Finally, Josi called for change, in an attempt (Ochs & Capps, 2001) that placed the teacher as the one who needed to take action immediately. With “Now, they need help at their school, from their teacher,” Josi turned the tables, as in the beginning of
this narrative episode (as seen above), the teacher was reported as the one calling for action, for Josi to become a “good mother.”

In the episode discussed above, Josi changed from wanting to comply with the teacher’s definition of a “good mother,” accepting it without question, to challenging this definition and coming to see it as a socially situated and constructed concept. Enacting agency on the personal level and challenging the teacher to comply with Josi’s definition of a good teacher, Josi challenged the claim that she was the subject of her son’s failure. She attributed the responsibility to the teacher, and attempted to promote change in the teacher’s practice so as to promote a positive effect on her son’s schooling experience. Differently from Elena, who placed all responsibility in the hands of Hugo’s teacher, Josi saw her role as one of action. Josi challenged the teacher’s sociocultural construction of parental involvement as school involvement and of children’s success resting on their parents’ ability to tutor them after school hours by explaining the concepts they should have learned in school. Josi was therefore able to use language as an appropriation tool, and not be colonized by it (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). This allowed her to come up with her own definition of what a good mother is, and with the requirement for a good teacher.

*Neide’s Step Into the Future: Better than Me*

Mariana: Better [Neide had just said “I want my daughter to do better”]? Neide: Better. I will help my [daughter] at home and I will read with her. I will explain things to her. I will go and talk to her teacher too because it’s important the teacher knows I want to help my daughter, isn’t it? I am seeing that school is
something very important and it can be fun too. I prefer to be here in class than many other places. Because we talk and learn and laugh together almost every day.

Mariana: Uh-huh.

Neide: When I was a child I couldn’t learn how to read and write, know. Now I am learning. It is from now forward. I am changing my life. I want my daughter to have things I didn’t. I want to be a good mother.

Mariana: How?

Neide: She is starting to see me reading and writing. She is starting to want to read and write too. In the future she can have better success, but, [some]thing I didn’t have. I was raised in conditions, like, like, harder, on a farm. There were no schools. I hope she will have it better. She will do well in schools and have success in life.

Stories or narratives, such as the one told by Neide, can account for past, present and “step into the future” experiences (Ochs, 1994). Neide’s narrative about her daughter’s schooling falls into the last of these three categories, as she projected what would happen in the future as her daughter grew and entered schools. In the above excerpt, Neide started her narrative with the
word “better.” In doing so, she compared her daughter to herself. Better in this case was co-
constructed as having a better life, not being object of other’s actions; not being excluded from
sites of knowledge; not being part of the cycle of domestic work of which Neide once belonged.

Complying with the socially accepted traditional discourse of parental involvement,
Neide stated that she would ready her daughter for school. “I will help my [daughter] at home
and I will read with her. I will explain things to her.” She foresaw, or projected herself taking an
agentic role in her daughter’s early literacy development. Her use of “I” plus “will” repeatedly
attested to her agentic positioning. Grammatically, she positioned herself as agent in “I will go
and talk to her teacher.” While grammatically positioning herself as agent, she aligned with the
traditionally framed institutional discourse that defines parental involvement as academic
assistance. In “it’s important the teacher knows I want to help my daughter,” Neide projected
herself letting the teacher know that she was willing to shape her identity accordingly, and fit
into the “good mother” mold. Because being a “good mother” is such a morally charged concept,
Neide sought approval and empathy from the listener employing the commonly used “isn’t it?”
(né?) that ends many sentences in Northeastern Brazilian Portuguese.

Embodying the institutional discourse of the goodness of schools while portraying herself
as an agent both grammatically and in terms of framing as the one who conceived this concept,
Neide stated, “I am seeing that school is something very important.” Her affective ties to the
culture circles came into play as she constructed her narrative when she defined school as also
being “fun.” In fact, she referred directly to her experience in the culture circle when she
responded psychologically (Ochs & Capps, 2001) to it as “it can be fun too.” Posed as an
unexpected event, she articulated that she’d “rather be here in class than many other places.”
This is justified by a sentence in which agency was conceived in the collective realm, “Because
we talk and learn and laugh together almost every day.” This statement also refers to the supportive environment fostered in culture circles, such as the one in which she participated.

From talking about the future, Neide took a step back into the past. She talked about her schooling experience in childhood. She portrayed herself as unable to learn how to read and write, and as object of others’ actions, previously discussed in Chapter Five. This is illustrated by “When I was a child I couldn’t learn how to read and write.” Here, again, she seemed to secure the listener’s attention and empathy, as she used “know” in lieu of “you know?” Linearly constructing her story, Neide talked about the present in a very agentic manner. She asserted her individual agency in “Now I am learning.” She further projected hopes into the future, again, temporally drafting her storyline, in “It is from now forward.” She continued asserting stronger individual agency by her use of the first person singular pronoun “I” plus the verb “am” in “I am changing my life.” She also framed herself as someone who was already engaged in changing her schooling history, her past, in order to secure her daughter’s schooling success in the future. She followed this with hopes she has, for “my daughter to have things I didn’t.” This hopeful expression indicates that Neide wanted her daughter to stay in school and have a successful experience, different from her case; not to follow her footsteps of dropping-out of school and becoming a domestic worker, even if for a short time. Again, as we have verified in all the narratives previously analyzed in this chapter, Neide wanted “to be a good mother.” She did not, however, question the definition of a good mother. For Neide, being a good mother was still a projection, a step into the future (Ochs, 1994).

Neide emphasized the importance for her to model the desired behavior—reading and writing—for her daughter to be successful, in “She is starting to see me reading and writing. She is starting to want to read and write too.” She projected herself as a role model for her daughter.
Again, she reified her desire for her daughter to have a better life, different from hers. Her failure, though, was here again portrayed in terms of being the object of other people’s actions, of being a victim of geographic limitations. Patriarchal discourses and socio-construction of the role of women was not questioned when Neide said, “I was raised in conditions, like, like, harder, in a farm. There were no schools.” In the remainder of her narrative, Neide was taking action; which she saw as an attempt to assure her daughter would have better chances than she herself did. She linked schooling to success in life, again accepting a common institutional discourse at face value without question (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Her hopes were that “she will have it better. She will go well in schools and have success in life.”

Neide and many other women who dropped out of school, not only in this study, but throughout the world, want their children to do better. Education is seen as the key to a better future. To assure her daughter would be educationally accomplished, Neide herself went back to school, so as to be a role model for her daughter and not to let her “dark past” influence her daughter’s future.

_Maria: A Gift of Respect_

Mariana: Tell me about your son.

Maria: My son is seven years [old.] He goes to school. He already knows how to read and write. He knew before I started.

Mariana: Before you started?
Maria: Yes. I came to the circle because Antônio already knew how to read and write and I didn’t. He is very intelligent. He was starting to be ashamed of me. I didn’t know how to read and write.

Mariana: Um-huh.

Maria: And when his teacher sent notes, he was writing my answers, but after a little time, he started not showing me the notes anymore. He thought that I was burra [a jackass], and he didn’t want to be like me. This hurt much.

Mariana: I know.

Maria: I also didn’t want him to be like me. I wanted him to be better. But I wanted him to know that I loved him, that I worked hard. I wanted him to respect his mother, to know I want to be a good mother.

Mariana: Yes!

Maria: I wanted him to respect my mother too, you know? He was starting to behave badly. Say things he shouldn’t say. He thought because he knew more he was better than me; better than my mother.

Mariana: Uh- huh.
Maria: In reality, he didn’t really know that much, but he was still ashamed of me.

Now that I am here, we are closer again. I think that if I hadn’t come back to school, I’d lose him, his respect. He’d end up like one of those boys who don’t respect their mothers. I didn’t want that. So, I came.

Mariana: And—

Maria: —Now he is starting to understand. I couldn’t go to school when I was his age. We talk like in the circles. We have a problem, we talk about it.

Maria portrayed her son as agentic. This can be seen by her grammatical use of her son as subject combined with active verbs. Just in the first couple sentences of the transcript excerpt, we have several examples: “My son is...,” “He goes...,” “He already knows...,” and “He knew before we started.” She also constructed him in terms of cognitive precocity (“He already knows”). She began constructing her narrative linearly (Ochs & Capps, 2001), and within this frame, the onset of her son’s reading and writing took place prior to hers.

“I came to the circle because Antônio already knew how to read and write and I didn’t.” This statement was constructed in such a way that Maria was the grammatical agent in joining a culture circle (I + came). In terms of framing, though, her son Antônio was the agent, as she went to the circle due to his learning how to read and write. In this case, we can see an inconsistency between grammatical agency and framing agency, between who was cast as subject in terms of the sentence form, and who was portrayed as the subject in terms of sentence contents. This
reflects the power struggle happening at the time in which she started participating in culture circles. She went on to describe this conflicting situation later in her narrative.

In saying, “He is very intelligent,” Maria, one more time focused on his cognitive ability, and illustrated how such a gift was actually causing problems within her family. The apparent cognitive disconnect results in an affective conflict, and Antônio became “ashamed” of his mother. She, therefore, had affective motives to reenter the schooling world, as learning how to read and write became a bridge she needed to build to reach her seven-year-old son.

Maria illustrated how her son mitigated her agency and embodied some of her powers in “when his teacher sent notes, he was writing my answers, but after a little time, he started not showing me the notes anymore.” There are two issues that can be analyzed in this narrative. One is the common practice of teachers sending notes home assuming that the parents are capable of reading and responding. The institutional discourse of associating adults with literacy is embodied by teachers in embracing such an assumption. The second is Antônio denying his mother access to some of her rights (knowing what is going on in his classroom) by not sharing the notes with her. His agency evolved from being a resource for his mother to the extent that it completely overtook any agency she had in such situations.

Antônio’s actions were influenced by a bigger discourse; the discourse of knowledge. Those who know more are worth more. As he perceived himself knowing more than his mother, Antônio valued himself more highly, therefore not needing to consult his mother when notes were sent home. His mother, Maria, interpreted his actions in light of his perceived affective stance and psychological response to differing educational levels, when she said that her son “thought that I was burra, and he didn’t want to be like me.” The consequence of this is reported in affective terms, “This hurt much.” Here, she also sought and gained empathy from me, the
listener. In response to such a compelling story, I voiced, “I know,” even without having much of an idea of how she felt.

Following her report of her son not wanting to be like her, Maria articulated that she too didn’t want him to be like her and, consistent with the discourse of so many other women, she “wanted to be better.” However, being better meant having a better life, and not a position of superiority and disrespect. Maria wanted her son to know her affective stance toward him, and its independence from her reading level or writing ability. She also wanted to be seen in terms of her professional standing, as a hard worker, which morally aligned her with standards of goodness (Taylor, 1989). Further, she sought to attain the overused term and ever sought-after status “good mother.”

Maria conveyed her desire for her son to respect his grandmother (her mother), who lived with them. This desire reflects the unvoiced discourse of the Catholic Church and the Ten Commandments, of respecting others. According to situated community norms, elders are especially worthy of respect and deference. She seeks to secure my attention and my empathy in using “you know?” Antônio’s actions, here reported as “He was starting to behave badly. Say things he shouldn’t say,” were misaligned with community morals, and while he was cognitively and academically “intelligent,” he was also morally “bad.” Antônio’s behavior was clearly aligned with the discourse that those who know more are better. This widely used institutional discourse has been used by many of the mothers whose narratives I analyze here in asserting that providing their children with better schooling experiences will make them better; it will provide them with better opportunities. This discourse is reported by Maria as having colonized Antônio who, fiercely believing it, employed it in negotiating his identity as someone who now knew how to read and write.
In her following narrative, Maria, focused on her son’s limitations and mitigates his agency. She, nevertheless, excused his actions and rendered him as object of her actions, of her schooling history. She took responsibility for Antônio’s shame of her. She conveyed her belief in the importance of the culture circles in bringing mother and son closer—“Now that I am here, we are closer again.” Hypothetically, Maria conjectured “if I hadn’t come back to school, I’d lose him.” Had she not taken action and joined the culture circles, he’d suffer. As an object of other people’s actions, or to her lack of action to mend her schooling history, Antônio would “end up like one of those boys,” who don’t align with morals and standards of goodness (Taylor, 1989), and don’t respect their mothers. Maria cast herself and her schooling history as responsible for her son’s behavior and affective stance, which diverged from the situated expectations of how a “good” boy was to behave. Because she didn’t want for him to be a “bad” boy and she positioned herself as agent in this situation, Maria took action, joined the culture circles, and resolved the situation.

Change in Antônio’s behavior was reported as commencing—“Now he is starting to understand.” First, his understanding of his mother’s inability to attend school due to factors outside her control, as she portrayed, featured a previously unseen agency attributed to Antônio in terms of being able to change the problematic situation presented in the narrative. Even though she had indicated previously she was the only one who could enact change in the situation, later he was also capable of such. This understanding contributed to the conception of a collective agency. In “We talk like in the circles. We have a problem, we talk about it,” collective agency is grammatically portrayed by “we talk,” “we have,” repeated by “we talk,” which illustrates the recurring use of the collective pronoun “we” matched with active verbs. The dialogue aspect of
the culture circle process was emphasized by Maria’s repetition of “we talk,” and collective agency was reported as being enacted at home, as it is in the culture circles.

Before Maria joined a culture circle, her schooling history had risen as a great wall between her and her son. It had also interfered in her son’s relationship between him and her mother, his grandmother. Maria’s son was buying into the discourse that those who had not been properly schooled and acquired “an education,” are worth less than those who had. This can be referred to as the educational discourse of the haves and have-nots. Maria’s willingness to take responsibility for the situation and rewrite her schooling history by joining a culture circle allowed her to get closer to her son. Yet, the discourse of those who possess limited literacy skills as being “lesser than” still survived in this case.

In this narrative episode, Maria showed no critical meta-awareness of the situation, of the discourse that colonized both herself and her son, Antônio, as being a sociocultural construction, as being one schooling discourse, but certainly not the only one. For Maria, the circles, including their components of problem posing, dialogue, and problem solving, provided a framework of respect and an alternative to displays of so-called inappropriate or “bad” behaviors by her son Antônio. The next step would be to appropriate such institutional discourses as opposed to being colonized by them. As part of a culture circle, hopefully Maria and her son can both achieve this goal of language appropriation, of questioning institutional discourses.

Rose: Challenging Deficiency as the Lot You’re Dealt

Mariana: He’s not at school [referring to her son]?
Rose: No. He’s deficient [word used for person with disability in Brazil].

Mariana: Uh-huh.

Rose: Some mothers complain that their sons have a bad teacher. My son has no teacher. That’s why I came. I [am the one who]...who has to teach him.

Mariana: So, there are no schools for him?

Rose: No. I have to leave him with my mother when I go to work. I take care of another boy. He has to stay there with no other children. I want for him to learn. They say he’s deficient, but I know he can learn. No one will teach him, so I will.

Mariana: And this other boy?

Rose: He’s rich. If he was deficient, his mother would pay a teacher to teach him. But we are poor. I have no money to pay someone. I am alone, for me, for Alex, for my parents. I have to do better.

Mariana: You are—

Rose: —They said when he learns how to read, he could go to school. Certainly, when he goes to school, I will never take him out of there. Poor people like us; we don’t have much to give our sons. Above all are the studies.
Mariana: When he goes to school?

Rose: Since I started in the circle I am being better. A better teacher, a better mother for him. He already knows how to make the letter J. He wrote it on the table. I want for him to go to school. To have more opportunity. I am going to learn and then he is going to learn. We are going to learn together. Then we two will go to school.

Deficiente. This is what someone with a disability is often called in Brazil. This term refers to a person who is lacking something, someone lesser than, someone deficient, incomplete. A person with a disability is often defined in such a manner in Northeastern Brazilian popular discourse. This disability discourse is prominent in Rose’s narrative.

Rose constructed her son’s schooling situation in contrast to one of the worse case scenarios for a mother of a school-aged child, when “their sons have a bad teacher.” She constructed her situation as the worst of all as her “son has no teacher.” The lack of an agent in her son’s education was presented by Rose as a motive for her to step up and assume the responsibility, to take action. Additionally, Rose presented herself as the only one who could be agentic in this situation, not being able to mitigate agency, in “I [am the one who]...who has to teach him.” The “has to” implies her lack of choice, her obligation, to teach her son.

I co-constructed the narrative by asking her if there were no schools “for him,” further reifying his unofficial diagnosis, and leading Rose to talk about her son’s lack of educational opportunity in light of other children who had the option of going to school. Again, she portrayed herself with no other option but to leave her son with her mother in order to go to work. This
lack of options was indicated by Rose’s use of “I have to leave him.” She could have simply said that she leaves him, but the “have to” indicates a situation beyond her control, into which she was forced. This can be interpreted as a response to a larger institutional discourse, the traditional patriarchal discourse, in which mothers are constructed as women who should stay home and care for their children, especially when they are sick or deficient—which is the case with Rose’s son. Due to financial constraints, Rose was not able to act in compend with this discourse, so she morally justified her going to work, posing it as an obligation, as something she had to do, and not something she chose to do.

Paradoxically, due to her socioeconomic status, her work entailed taking care of another boy, as a nanny. While she cared for this boy, her son was left with his grandmother, forced into (“has to”) isolation, being denied any interaction with other children, contrary to what would be happening had he been admitted to school. This other little boy was defined as “rich,” in terms of what he has, as opposed to what he’s lacking, which was how she defined her son in the very beginning of this narrative excerpt. This boy’s SES triggered Rose to hypothesize that “If he was deficient, his mother would pay a teacher to teach him.” Rose followed this sentence with the contrasting (“But”) reality that she and her family “are poor,” therefore not having any money to pay for a teacher or a private tutor. Her desires and dreams for her son’s future were indicated by the attempt (Ochs & Capps, 2001) “I want for him to learn,” so to achieve her dreams she positioned herself as someone who had no choice (“have to”) but “to do better.”

Rose placed herself as agent in saying, “No one will teach him, so I will,” while recognizing the challenge this newly assumed aspiration would bring when added to her already existing responsibilities by saying, “I am alone, for me, for Alex, for my parents.” By employing reported speech, “They say he’s deficient,” she appropriated (Choulilaraki & Fairclough, 1999)
the institutional speech of deficiency. Others had made the judgment call that Alex, her son, didn’t belong in school and could not learn due to his disability; a disability which was never professionally diagnosed. Not sponsoring the subtractive definition of her son, she substituted the sociocultural construction of her son’s identity as someone deficient with “but I know he can learn.”

“They said when he learns how to read, he could go to school.” In this sentence, a generalized “They” was employed to represent the structure in place. This structure was reported by Rose to be curtailing her son’s agency, denying him access to school due to his identity as someone with a deficiency. Access to the system will nevertheless be granted, upon a display of agency, which entails Alex learning how to read. Once he gains access, in “Certainly, when he goes to school, I will never take him out of there,” Rose indicated that she would not let him drop-out due to someone else’s actions (especially her own), as she herself did.

Socioeconomic status was again foregrounded in “Poor people like us; we don’t have much to give our sons. Above all are the studies.” Education is conceived as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), and the only inheritance parents of low SES can leave to their children. Rose incorporated the institutional discourse of schooling as allowing for a better future, better prospects. School was equated with better opportunities in life for Alex, therefore she wanted him in school. She saw access to school as allowing Alex “To have more opportunity.” She positioned herself as individual agent alongside Alex as an individual agent in this endeavor. In “I am going to learn and then he is going to learn,” Rose put the sentence together in such a way so as to convey her responsibility alongside Alex’s capacity. She was “going to learn and then he is going to learn.” Then, she departed from individual agency to a more collective agency, in which, again mother and son are equal partners. In “We are going to learn together,” grammatical agency (we + are
going to) is aligned with framing agency. As a consequence (Ochs & Capps, 2001), a projection into the future, “Then we two will go to school.” This last statement reflects Rose’s vision of enacting their collective agency onto the structure and gaining access to schools.

Change was conveyed upon her participation in the culture circles. She defined herself as better both in the maternal and teaching realms. Here again, the discourse of a “good mother” was employed when Rose reported becoming a “better mother” as a result of returning to school. She offered proof of this change, constructing Alex in an agentic manner, in saying, “He already knows how to make the letter J.” Here, Rose indicated change and academic accomplishment, and portrayed Alex as an agent, being capable of learning quickly, divergent from the system’s definition of someone who is “deficient.”

In Rose’s narrative, I find that when the system/structure in place curtails agency (Archer, 2000; 2003), there are alternative ways to enact agency on the system. Since Alex was not going to be granted free access to schooling, she sought to earn this access through her own actions. Placing herself as an agent in the inclusion of her child’s acceptance into the educational system by teaching him how to read conveyed her appropriation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) of the deficiency discourse being used to exclude Alex. As it became clear, Rose would not comply with sociocultural constructions of her son as lesser than. She problem-solved, and engaged in action. She challenged this systemic deficiency discourse by being a proponent of the concept that believing is seeing instead of the more traditional seeing is believing (Taylor, 2004). Rose believed that her son could succeed and was attempting to make, or see it happen.

**Redrafting Oppression Stories for a New Generation: Looking Beyond the Horizon**

These women’s narratives were told in the past, present, and future. They span generations, yet these narratives all reflect how the mothers perceive their own schooling history
affecting their children’s education. The participants brought many institutional discourses that infiltrated (used by colonized narrators) and were recycled (appropriated and re-used) within their narrative tellings.

In crafting these narratives, these six mothers oriented to the five narrative dimensions proposed by Ochs & Capps (2001). These narratives are situated within continua, but were mostly told by single authors (tellership). Some degree of co-construction was present, as I nodded and interjected, contributing to reshaping the course of their stories. They were interesting and exciting, conveying a high level of tellability. The excerpts above are somewhat embedded in the whole conversation, yet they can be conceived as stand alone pieces, as episodes, as I analyzed here. They are mostly linear, and oriented to a certain moral stance; the ever-present moral values are conveyed though the telling. The women’s narratives serve as a critical means to understand not only the nature of narrative more broadly, but also the relationship of everyday talk to human growth and the (de)construction of cultural norms. Their narratives function as “a vernacular, interactional forum for ordering, explaining, and otherwise taking a position on experience” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57).

In ordering and reflecting on their children’s educational experiences or futures in light of their own schooling history, these women were mostly determined to be agents in promoting change, in assuring that their children will have a better life than they themselves are leading. Of the six women whose narratives I analyzed in this chapter, two did not go back to school, were not participants of culture circles. These two were Mara and Elena. Here I want to draw attention to their creative efforts to assure their children’s education—through adoption and private schooling. They, nevertheless, see themselves as responsible for the failure of their children in school. Elena took action and moved her son to a private school, but saw nothing else she could
do to continue fighting for him to have a different and more complete schooling experience than she herself did. While she portrayed herself as agent in the very beginning of her narrative, by the end there was little she could see herself doing. Mara, my grandmother, mitigated her own agency by giving my mother up for adoption, and perceived that she shares my mother’s educational and professional success as a result of her own actions (Mara’s). With her other children, though, she was not able to enact her agency on the system, and they were described as “poor little ones,” as victims of the system in place.

Conversely, the four other women, who were part of culture circles, saw themselves needing to establish collective agency, whether with the teachers or with their children. None of their narratives ended with unsolvable problems, with complete mitigation of agency (as was the case with Mara and Elena). They ended their narratives with a planned action, with an attempt (Ochs & Capps, 2001) to change their children’s schooling situation for the better. They constructed their stories in a structure similar to that of culture circles. They posed their problems, talked about their origins and possible causes, attempted to come up with solutions, and drafted (or carried out) their plans of action. Even though these women often employed institutional narratives in a colonizing way, they still managed to find a way to successfully navigate within the larger societal system while promoting change on a personal level. As we have discussed before, systemic changes happen over many generations, and when coming from the margins (hooks, 1990), change starts on a personal level, with personal agency. This is exactly the course these women were taking.

Despite the agentic differences in the narratives of Mara and Elena as opposed to the narratives of the four women participants in culture circles, throughout all six narrative episodes, three important themes recurred throughout the narratives. These themes were: (1) the “good
mother,” (2) that education is cultural capital and a key to unlock the door to a better future, and (3) there is a disconnect between school and home cultures. The first theme, that of a good mother, is obviously socioculturally constructed, as it is defined differently in different situations. Although all women aspired to be “good mothers,” aligning with situated moral expectations, exactly what being a good mother is, remains unclear, even after the analysis undertaken in this chapter.

Table 6: Themes Impacting the Schooling Histories of Their Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Good Mother</td>
<td>Education as Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Disconnect between School and Home Cultures</td>
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**MARA**

“...this wonderful woman, my *comadre*. She knew how to read, write. She was an educated woman. She was a good mother...”

Mara defined good mother in terms of formal schooling

“I hadn’t given her, she wouldn’t be where she is today. I couldn’t give her an education. See your mother, she makes money to travel, to go out, to have fun.”

“I was no one... I couldn’t give her an education.”

Education allowed my mother to be at a comfortable financial situation today.

Even though Mara does not directly refer to this disconnect, she sheds light on the necessity of being familiar with the school discourse in order to succeed in school. My mother succeeded because her adoptive mother could socialize her into such a discourse. Her siblings failed because my biological grandmother couldn’t help them with school work.

**ELENA**

“I tried to be a good mother, paying for his studies.”

Good mother is defined in monetary terms.

“I want for him to learn how to read and write and make more money than me and his father when he grows up.”

Education is equaled with a successful financial future.

“I think the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place.”

Disconnect with diverse home situations and their relevance in the children’s schooling.
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<td>Josi talks about the importance of education, and in another excerpt, she mentions that they (her sons) need to go to school, because she doesn’t want for them to end up working in the trash dump, like her.</td>
<td>“But it is her responsibility to teach them. Some children get there and already know everything. Not my boys.” Emphasizes the different home experiences of the students in her sons’ classroom; pinpoints the non-acknowledgement of the students’ diversity.</td>
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<td>“I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all…” 1st: good mother according to institutional discourse, as formal education. Later: challenged the teacher to be a good teacher, acknowledged self as good mother. “Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.”</td>
<td>Josi talks about the importance of education, and in another excerpt, she mentions that they (her sons) need to go to school, because she doesn’t want for them to end up working in the trash dump, like her.</td>
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<td><strong>Good mother: Being able to communicate with teacher and not being devalued/disrespected by her son. This would be accomplished by her joining the culture circles and learning how to read and write.</strong></td>
<td>The importance of education is displayed by her voicing that she was not earning her son’s respect because of her limited schooling experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Good mother: Being able to communicate with teacher and not being devalued/disrespected by her son. This would be accomplished by her joining the culture circles and learning how to read and write.</strong></td>
<td>Lack of respect reflects the incompatibility between home &amp; school cultures. In school, those who knew more were valued; related to son starting to disrespect her mother/ herself.</td>
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<td>“I will help my [daughter] at home and I will read with her. I will explain things to her. I will go and talk to her teacher too because it’s important the teacher knows I want to help my daughter... I want to be a good mother” Neide’s definition of a good mother is compatible with the institutional discourse of helping the child at home and the teacher at school.</td>
<td>“When I was a child I couldn’t learn how to read and write, know. Now I am learning. It is from now forward. I am changing my life. I want my daughter to have things I didn’t.” “She is starting to want to read and write too. In the future she can have better success, but, [some]thing I didn’t have.” Neide emphasizes the necessity of education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neide’s definition of a good mother is compatible with the institutional discourse of helping the child at home and the teacher at school.</td>
<td>As Neide is projecting the future of her daughter, she anticipates possible incompatibilities, as she voices going to talk to the teacher, and tries to emulate the school environment and discourse in her own home. In Neide’s case, though, this incompatibility is not quite clear, as her daughter has not yet started schooling.</td>
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<td>Rose is trying to be a good mother by joining the circles, learning how to read and write, and teaching her son how to read and write. This has made her a good mother because it will grant him access to schools.</td>
<td>Rose wants for her son to learn how to read and write to have a better life than she did. The incompatibility is voiced: son succeeding at home, while at school she was told that he was “deficient.” Culture of success (home) versus a culture of failure (school).</td>
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There are many situated definitions of good mothers, which are based on community knowledge and locale morals. The prominent definition is couched in the traditional discourse of parental involvement as school assistance and academic tutoring. According to this definition, a good mother has to be familiar with the school discourse, and be able to help her children with school work at home. This definition of good mother coupled with the desire to be a good mother took Maria, Josi, Rose, and Neide back to school; it was the catalyst for their joining the culture circles of which they were part at the time of the interviews. Some of them, such as Josi, have started deconstructing the concept of good mother and challenging it. Differently from the four women who participate in the culture circles, Mara and Elena defined good mothers in terms of removing their children from the problematic situation, from the cycle of oppression, instead of enacting their agency to change the system. Mara removed my mother from her low SES by giving her up for adoption to a high SES family; she further assured that my mother would not follow in her footsteps by making sure she would not be apprenticed into domestic tasks. By not informing her daughter of her adoptive status until she was an adult with children of her own, Mara ensured her daughter would not be tainted by any association with her own birth mother’s lack of education and low socioeconomic status as a domestic worker. Elena removed Hugo from the public school environment, the very one from which she dropped-out. Providing him a private school education was therefore Elena’s means of removing Hugo from the cycle of exclusion from schooling and oppression in which she grew up. A collage of the multiple definitions of a good mother is provided below:
Crafting Portraits of a Good Mother

“A Good Mother... is a combo of teacher’s helper and homework aid (Institutional Discourse—developed from women’s narratives)

“I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all...”  (at first)

“Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother... But it is her responsibility to teach them. Some children get there and already know everything. Not my boys.”  (later)

(Josi)

“Since I started in the circle I am being better. A better teacher, a better mother for him...I want for him to go to school. To have more opportunity. I am going to learn and then he is going to learn. We are going to learn together.”

(Rose)

Now that I am [in the circle], we are closer again...he is starting to understand. I couldn’t go to school when I was his age. We talk like in the circles. We have a problem, we talk about it.”  (later)

(Maria)

“But I wanted him to know... I worked hard. I wanted him to respect his mother, to know I want to be a good mother...He thought because he knew more he was better than me.”  (at first)

“...the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place...the teacher thinks I don’t care because I don’t help him.”

(Elena)

“I tried to be a good mother, paying for his studies.”

(Elena)

“I will help my [daughter] at home and I will read with her. I will explain things to her. I will go and talk to her teacher too because it’s important the teacher knows I want to help my daughter... I want to be a good mother”

(Neide)

“...this wonderful woman, my comadre. She knew how to read, write. She was an educated woman. She was a good mother...”

(Mara)

“...to be the one teaching them [the children].”

“...a good mother... going to school and all.”

“(Josi’s sons’ teacher)“...help them [the children] with the homework.”

Crafting Portraits of a Good Mother
The second theme, education as cultural capital—as a key to unlock the door leading to a plethora of opportunities—was endorsed by each and every woman I interviewed. It was the only thing they could provide their children, the only way out. This institutional discourse was continually recycled by these women, and became their hope for promoting change in the lives of their children. The belief in the redemptive value of schooling was a reaction to their belief that they arrived at their current socioeconomic status and professional situations due to incomplete schooling histories.

Figure 18

Education: Opening the Door to a Better Future
The way the mothers saw themselves redrafting their children’s stories, was by offering them a successful educational experience. According to the mothers’ narratives, the ability to provide the coveted education rested in their abilities to be good mothers. This belief is reflected in their narratives, in which the mothers mostly saw the responsibility to do something to assure their children a way out of the cycle of oppression resting in their own actions. Josi was the only one who called for action from the teacher, and voiced that her sons needed a “good teacher.” Elena experienced the impossibility of assuring that her son would get out of the cycle, as she herself did not have enough cultural capital to promote change. These women sought to become part of the system in order to challenge the system. Culture circles may therefore be seen as a tool in the quest to challenge the system, as well as being seen as a support group, countering the feelings of isolation so many of these mothers reported.

The third theme is the reported practice of teachers not bridging home and school cultures in the classroom. Mothers saw their practice as sending mixed messages to the children, particularly when school culture is promoted as more important than home culture. A particularly problematic consequence of this discourse that values school culture above home cultures can be seen in Maria’s narrative, when her seven-year-old started to disregard the home culture, and disrespect those who were part of what he saw as a lesser culture. When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person's cultural identity and in the learning situation, in the classroom setting, the individual is faced with a choice: either adopt the perspective of the school and risk undermining her or his cultural identity, or resist the externally imposed activities at the risk of becoming alienated from the school (Nieto, 2002). The children who were main characters in the above narratives continued to have difficulty in achieving school success because the dominant pedagogical approaches
were based on a limited definition and understanding of knowledge (what one should know) and literacy (how one should know it) required to succeed in schooling and life (Willis, 2000). This banking system of education (Freire, 1970) has been proven not to be the most efficient one, and mostly benefits those whose home cultures had introduced the school discourse as part of their primary discourse (Gee, 1996). In the United States, many studies have looked at the failure of minority groups (especially African-Americans) in schools due to the differences between their home and school cultures, and now there is a need to look at their academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2002).

Bridging home and school culture, the culture circles’ curricula are based on the very issues foregrounded in the lives of its participants. As discussed in Chapter Three, the curriculum starts from generative themes and words that arise from the student community. In doing so, culture circles allow the students to analyze their own situations and problems from a non-threatening theoretical viewpoint while still making connections with the situation of their own lives (Heaney, 1989). There is a clear connection between the home and school culture, and that might be one of the reasons why Josi’s sons were constructed as successful in the culture circle setting but failing in the traditional school setting. It’s essential to consider the importance of each child’s culture in their schooling experiences, as they are likely to fail in a classroom environment that ignores social, cultural, and historical influences (Au, 1997). Even in a school classroom, those students whose home culture differs from the school culture and discourse are excluded from learning experiences that don’t relate to their background knowledge. This practice differs from the belief “that a joint culture creation between teacher and child in classrooms is essential for learning” (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004, p. 8).
Instead of occupying the marginal position of being “outsiders within” (Hill Collins, 2000), the circles of culture in which the mothers were members form a system that fosters solidarity. Contrary to the situation reported by Howard-Hamilton (2003), in which women who “have been invited into places where the dominant group is assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences” (p. 21), the circles
are a place in which women’s voices are heard, in which not only individual agency is fostered, but furthermore, collective agency is sought. In the culture circles, they are able to pose problems, dialogue and critically engage in the meta-aware deconstruction of institutional discourses, problem solve, and plot out their course of action. It all starts small, but again, systemic change takes time, and starts in the personal realm. For the women participants in this study who have gone back to school as adults, the participation in culture circles provided them a turning point. This turning point is often indicated by an agentic positioning of the narrator, both in terms of grammatical and framing agency. It is signaled with words that indicated change, such as “since I started” and “now.” Narratively, these shifts in agency take place as exemplified below in the narratives of Maria, Josi, and Rose by figures 20, 21, and 22.

In contrast to Maria, Rose, and Josi (whose narrative turning points are illustrated below), Mara and Elena seemed to have no clear solution to becoming good mothers and helping their children. They relinquished agency, and saw no clear path to becoming a good mother or redefining this morally charged term. Their narratives provide no such agentic turning points. The turning points illustrated above, and constructed in the narratives of the women who returned to school as adults, corresponded to the women’s entries into culture circles. Even though there is a clear turning point in their narratives, the redrafting of these stories is only the beginning in the quest to change an oppressive system, providing a quick yet hopeful glance at what’s beyond the horizon. Positioning themselves as agents, Josi, Neide, Maria, and Rose saw change because they believed it would happen (Taylor, 2004).
Maria: Yes. I came to the circle because Antônio already knew how to read and write and I didn’t. He is very intelligent. He was starting to be ashamed of me. I didn’t know didn’t know how to read and write...I also didn’t want him to be like me. I wanted him to be better. But I wanted him to know that I loved him, that I worked hard. I wanted him to respect his mother, to know I want to be a good mother.

Mariana: Yes!

Maria: I wanted him to respect my mother too, you know? He was starting to behave badly. Say things he shouldn’t say. He thought because he knew more he was better than me; better than my mother.

Mariana: Uh- huh.

Maria: In reality, he didn’t really know that much, but he was still ashamed of me.

Now that I am here, we are closer again. I think that if I hadn’t come back to school, I’d lose him, his respect. He’d end up like one of those boys who don’t respect their mothers. I didn’t want that. So, I came...Now he is starting to understand. I couldn’t go to school when I was his age. We talk like in the circles. We have a problem, we talk about it.
Mariana: Do you remember anything in the beginning that made you feel scared?

Josi: When I didn’t know things. But here everybody helps everybody. People help each other all the time. It is not like in school. Who is best? Everybody is learning together. Even the teacher learns with us. We decide the important things for us to work. It is good. People talk, help each other and learn. Just now, there was a woman who didn’t know something, then another woman was helping her...with helping her son with his homework. I like helping with homework, but I am not their teacher. The teacher said I needed to be a good mother. I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all.

Now she needed to try to be a good teacher. I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. I told her that if she got them studying things that they do every day they might do better at school. Now I know it doesn’t depend on me or on them only. It depends on the teacher. They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.

Figure 21

Josi’s Turning Point
Mariana: So, there are no schools for him?

Rose: No. I have to leave him with my mother when I go to work. I take care of another boy. He has to stay there with no other children. I want for him to learn. They say he’s deficient, but I know he can learn. No one will teach him, so I will...They said when he learns how to read, he could go to school. Certainly, when he goes to school, I will never take him out of there. Poor people like us; we don’t have much to give our sons. Above all are the studies.

Mariana: When he goes to school?

Rose:

Since I started in the circle I am being better. A better teacher, a better mother for him. He already knows how to make the letter J. He wrote it on the table. I want for him to go to school. To have more opportunity. I am going to learn and then he is going to learn. We are going to learn together. Then we two will go to school.

Figure 22
Rose’s Turning Point
...and through participation in consciousness-raising groups, women began to politicize women’s personal lives...women’s lives must no longer be understood as an individual private experience; instead, it is a systemic problem that is institutionalized throughout the society.

(Russo, 2001, p. 7)

“I was thinking after all of this you were going to offer a solution, girl.” Discussing this study with my grandmother and attempting to recruit her assistance in drawing the implications and conclusions of this study, this is what I heard. She wanted me to be agentive and to offer a solution to this cycle of oppression. While unable to offer a systemic solution of my own, in the personal realm, many women participants of the Freirean culture circles were starting to improvise and reinvent their own identities. These women were acquiring some tools to articulate solutions, and coming up with possible solutions to their personal challenges through dialogue and problem solving. The women didn’t necessarily find solutions to each problem, but worked towards breaking the monological oppressive discourses (Boal, 1979) by considering alternative perspectives, exploring multiple issues through dialogue. They became aware of some of the issues that constructed their nature and institutional identities (Gee, 2001). As some of the
women narrated, a number of them were starting to re-construct themselves, exploring the implementation of discursively-constructed solutions in their lives and engaging in change enacted on the personal level. This personal action can contribute to social change over time.

Being part of culture circles allowed the women who returned to school to take a more agentive role, to have tools with which they might be able to promote personal change. This is signaled by their returning-to-school narratives as contrasted to the stories narrated by the women who dropped-out of school as children and never returned to school. As illustrated by Elena’s and Mara’s stories, they perceived the structure in place mitigating their agency (Archer, 2000), especially as they talked about their work choices upon migration to a large urban center and about the educational stories their children had written or were writing. In culture circles, the participants “experience interpersonal processes with others who share their predicament of exclusion that can provide a most powerful potential for personal, interpersonal, and social change” (Shapiro, 2003, p.19). Together, they began negotiating a new set of collective morals, which can serve to illuminate the start of personal change processes. In the circles, these women had a chance to lay a foundation for better understanding of the process of questioning the status quo, their own locations in society, to get a glimpse and imagine the potential for action and change on a broader scope. Such was the case of the example described in Chapter Three, in which the participants of the culture circle questioned the minimum wage salary and re-imagined themselves, coming up with actions on the personal and societal levels, hints of a better future. The participants started developing an analysis process as one tool that helps to bring to life the initial personal reflection leading to personal change narrated by the women in this study.

The women who were participants in culture circles displayed a clear change in their narrative tellings (turning points, Chapter Seven). As these changes were articulated in narrative
form, gradually, they appeared to gain a sense of agency. The sense of agency can be seen by looking at grammatical agency (use of pronoun plus active verb; placement of teller as protagonist and subject in the sentence) as well as framing agency, as discussed in the three previous chapters. The women reported engaging in action in the personal realm. An example of this reported action was portrayed by Josi, who narrated entering the school her children attended and speaking to her children’s teacher inviting her to be a good teacher. Another example of proposed action was portrayed by Rose, who projected teaching her son reading and writing skills in spite of his disability. Many other narratives display actions that the women took or planned, indicating changes in the personal realm, a precursor to social change which happens throughout generations.

In the following sections, I share with you what I learned from these women about their situations. First, on a more localized level, I discuss what I learned regarding how their narratives changed, in terms of the process and implications of this change. Second, I discuss the tension between structure and agency narratized by each of them as personal narratives interacted with institutional discourses. Third, from my observations, interviews and readings, I attempt to state the purposes of culture circles. Fourth, I delineate how these women were starting to use critical narrative analysis in their everyday lives as a tool to reach critical meta-awareness and to deconstruct institutional discourses that infiltrated their narratives. Fifth, I share the advice of the women participants in culture circles. They made suggestions for those who were forced to drop out of school as children and didn’t go back to school as adults, or to those who did go back to school as adults, but were not successful in the schooling situations they entered. Finally, I explore the personal change some of the participants of this study were already engaged in and consider their visions for engaging in action on a more general level, the so-called social action.
Internal Conversations & Shifting Reflexivities

The women who were participants in culture circles told progressively organized narratives. Previously constructing themselves as victims in their dropping-out narratives, they were now portraying themselves as agents, both grammatically and in terms of framing in their returning to school narratives. The women’s narrative tellings changed, as analyzed in the three previous chapters. This change signals a possible shift in internal conversation (Archer, 2000; 2003), which can be a precursor to narrative tellings (Ochs, 2004).

According to Margaret Archer (2000; 2003), internal conversations are evaluative conversations that take place inside our heads; different people may experience differing degrees of internal conversation. Archer proposed that the internal conversation process entails a “dialogical reflexivity” (2003, p. 32), in which, though our inner conversations, we reflexively redefine ourselves, integrating ourselves with the people and the things about whom and which we care the most within the world in which we live. The internal conversation process, as discussed by Archer (2000; 2003) has much in common with the process of conscientization (Freire, 1970) or critical meta-awareness of individual conditions providing individuals with tools to start negotiating, thinking about, and promoting personal change. Conceptually, internal, personal and group processes can be associated with action and change. In a more situated realm, in their narratives, the women expressed the beginning of the transformational process indicated by their shifting framing and grammatical agency.

The women developed a way of reflecting on the world in which they lived couched in the appropriation of language and discourses. Concepts were therefore seen as one concept, one framing (Gee, in press) of a certain issue. The women could conceive concepts as framed by others, the way they understood, made sense of, and framed concepts. Their placement and
location in society, however involuntary, determined what kind of reflexivity they might have had. Reflexivity is the ability to know oneself, and one’s placement in and relationship with the world (Archer, 2003). While some might believe that their placement in the world is set, others challenge it fiercely. While some are happy to be where they are, others question the world’s injustices and are unsettled about the situations they see themselves needing to change.

The women certainly learned to engage in reflexivity after the model provided by the culture circles. The circles allowed them to see what took place inside their minds as they tried to construct their narratives or to arrive at a solution. From problem posing to dialogue, problem solving and action, the circles model the process of internal conversation. Aware of their conversations and aware of the institutional discourses as discourses of power, these women started questioning their location in society, ceased dovetailing their concerns, and progressed to a form of reflexivity to reflect about themselves in the world, employing a much higher level of conscientization (Freire, 1970).

According to Margaret Archer (2003), changing reflexivities in the way these women were is a process related to contextual discontinuity, to change. So, according to this construct, by engaging in a more critical meta-aware reflexivity mode, these women engaged in internal conversations which possibly led to a break in contextual continuity. Archer suggested “subjects' original and involuntary social placement appeared to be far more important than social origins per se for fostering and sustaining different modes of reflexivity” (2003, p. 163). The specific stances the women embodied may be correlated to the internal consequences of applying their personal powers, which were different from one another, and correlated to differing modes of reflexivity. In adopting or negotiating reflexivity that aligns with a critical meta-awareness, they sought and aspired to have a “distinctive course of practical action in society” (Archer, 2003, p.
Reflexivity and questioning of their own locations in society made it possible for these women to chart courses of action together, as “the failure to master a new mode of reflexivity creates passive agents who surrender control over their own lives, but cannot suspend the play of circumstances upon them” (p. 333). By questioning the status quo, they were able to problematize themes and issues common in their lives, dialogue, problem solve, and chart a plan to promote change, either on the personal or on the societal level, as exemplified by the description of a circle in Chapter Three.

As discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, the women who participated in the circles were learning to read, starting to actively participate in society by considering differing perspectives, seeking to challenge the status quo, and ultimately hoping to have an influence in the schooling success of their children. These projections indicate an agentic positioning in their narratives. So, in order to transition and progress in the spectrum in which they sought to change their agency from mitigated to more fully enabled, these women started engaging in shifting their own reflexivities. As indicated by the data in this study, these women began problematizing many things that had been previously credited as the truth and considering multiple perspectives through the employment of dialogue in the circles and internal conversations on the individual level. Their changing narratives indicate shifting reflexivities and a larger awareness of and engagement in internal conversations.

Before narratives are verbalized, many tensions are resolved inside our minds (Ochs, 2004). According to Archer (2003), some people (communicative reflexives) verbalize their internal conversation and need someone else’s approval to go ahead with an endeavor. These people evade constraints and enablements. The process that goes on in the culture circles externalizes and serves as a rehearsal for a process that can be internalized, a process that
initiates the use of language as appropriation rather than colonization, a process that has the potential to foster critical meta-awareness. The culture circles, although not the only path to developing reflexivities, may serve as a bridge to other kinds of reflexivity (Archer, 2003) and encourages participants to act strategically towards constraints and enablements (autonomous reflexives) or to act subversively while absorbing the structural costs of the actions taken (meta-reflexives). These last two kinds of reflexivity are associated with taking active stances towards society and engaging in personal change.

In the culture circles, when faced with an issue, participants engage in dialogue to try to solve it. An implicit process is made explicit, and therefore more accessible (Mills, O’Keefe, and Jennings, 2004). According to the narrative tellings of the women who were part of this study, this process is starting to be internalized by some, as they initiated it in their daily realms to enact personal agency and change. As indicated by their narratives, the women reported questioning institutional discourses and redefining existing normative morals or negotiating a new set of collectively defined morals. As I discuss in more detail in the following section, dialogue and internal conversations can serve as a tool in the interplay between structure and agency.

**Structure and Agency: The Enactment on One Another**

It is quite easy to voice actions without taking into consideration the system or structure in place, especially when these are voiced without recognizing the institutional constraints disabling agency. While institutional constraints have been created by people throughout time, here we take them as structures as we look at a temporal cross-section rather than an historical approach to oppressive discourses and systems. The situation of these women, while historically constructed, was disabling to their development and trapped them in a cycle of oppression. They were denied the right to basic schooling, apprenticed into housework, and when the need to
survive and sustain oneself arose, they employed those very skills to survive. They went to work in someone else’s kitchen. The structure in place has traditional patriarchal and Roman Catholic discourses ingrained in it. If these women take the structure and its discourses to be objective and deterministic, they will continue contributing to the development and maintenance of the very cycle of oppression of which they were part. A viable alternative is to question institutional discourses and take them as one explanation of a phenomenon (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), but not the only one. In this section, I explore what I learned from the narratives of these women, as they commenced engaging in change on a personal level.

As the culture circle participants started to internalize the very process present in the circles, personal change appeared to be eminent. This was indicated by their projections for future endeavors and by their framing of past events. Josi, for example, engaged in problematizing (problem posing) her son’s teacher’s discourse of a “good mother.” She verbalized her internal conversation, at least in part, as she narrated:

Josi: ... The teacher said I needed to be a good mother. I went there another day...and said that I was trying to be a good mother, going to school and all. Now she needed to try to be a good teacher. I told her how we learned in this program and how my boys do well. I told her that if she got them studying things that they do every day they might do better at school. Now I know it doesn’t depend on me or on them only. It depends on the teacher. They know a lot. The teacher needs to use what they know to teach them better. Now I want to see if she is going to try to be a good teacher like I am trying to be a good mother.
To enact her agency on the structure in place, that very structure that contributed to her dropping-out of school, Josi questioned what the teacher had said. She did not take it at face valued, but attributed a situated meaning to it. It was the teacher’s opinion or understanding. This was mediated by internal conversation, as can be verified by the passage below:

Mariana: It depends on the teacher?

Josi: Yes, after she told me to be a good mother, I was thinking. She is not even a mother. It’s not being a good mother that will help. She doesn’t want to be the one responsible if my boys don’t learn. I thought about what she had said. It is not the truth. It is her truth. My truth is that my boys need a good teacher. They need a teacher who will teach them. I thought a lot on what she had said. I didn’t believe what she said. I thought and arrived at a solution. Then I went there and told her. I want her to be a good teacher.

Mariana: Did you talk about this in the circle?

Josi: More inside my head, inside my head.

Josi, as many others, clearly displayed the use of internal conversation as a mediatory tool between agency and structure. In the excerpt above, Josi took the concept of “good mother,” offered by her son’s teacher as a generative theme. Then, she problematized it, engaged in internal conversation by questioning it and bringing in her own perspectives. Finally, her internal conversation lead to a solution to the problem she had posed regarding the definition of and need
for a good mother. After arriving at a solution, Josi took action. Surely this only influenced her personal realm, but personal actions are building blocks for social actions, as illustrated by the figure below. This process happens over generations; personal actions or changes are more immediately applied and feasible, whereas social action and change happen over generations as compilations of similar actions enacted on the personal realm. Structural or systematic change happens over time.

“Personal growth is never just personal in impact” (Moyse-Steinberg, 2003, p. 98). As indicated by the narrative tellings of the women who participated in this study, circles have promoted their awareness of internal conversation to question the structure in place, the institutional discourses, and their futures as self-fulfilling prophecies. Knowing that language can either colonize or be appropriated and used as a resource, as a tool, these women were problematizing discourses they previously considered to be universal.

If they are to promote change in their situations, and in many cases, in the lives of their children, language must be appropriated and understood as one explanation of a phenomenon. It is important to clarify the women’s romanticizing of their children’s educational futures as a continuation of colonization; this stance, to believe that education is going to open the door to a better future as discussed in Chapter Seven, may not be realistic and is not critical. So, while the women were engaging in appropriation and questioning of some discourses, they could still be seen as colonized, as they believed education to be the sole key to open the door to a better future for their children. There is therefore, a continuum, an area for improvisation and negotiation of agency and identity, in between language as colonization and language as appropriation.

This study shows how a small group of women were beginning the process of conscientization through participation in culture circles, and does not yield direct results pointing
to a grand scheme of solutions to the socioeconomic and gender oppressions my grandmother and the women in the study experienced. However, by beginning to engage in critical meta-awareness of aspects of the structure in place, these women engaged in internal conversation and problematized many aspects of the structure. Having internal conversations about how agency could, in turn, affect the structure, either on a personal or societal level, and charting plans for action in a number of situations, is a promising beginning. However, without internal conversation or dialogue and with the continuing blatant acceptance of the status quo as a deterministic factor, the cycle of oppression continues as institutional discourses, which emanate from the structure/system in place, are taken and accepted at face value, therefore having the potential to colonize these women. This process is illustrated by Figure 23, the questioning and de-construction of specific institutional discourses and the acceptance of face value of others.

This process happened not only externally, in the circle setting, but also inside participants’ minds, as they engaged in internal conversations. In the circles, they developed collective agency and solidarity, as asserted in previous chapters. By employing internal conversation, they were instigating the process of critical meta-awareness, by questioning oppressive systems, sociocultural constructions, and seeing how the teller’s framing influenced the discourse instead of taking what was said at face value (Ochs & Capps, 2001), as if it were absolute and objective. Through engagement and awareness of this process, and internalizing it, these women participants in circles learned to understand the structural and cultural properties of discourses and started appropriating discourses that previously had trapped them in their locations of oppression. Taking into consideration the individuality of each person, ultimately change does not happen as the result of a clearly outlined process, but it is harnessed through dialogue. Burbules and Rice (1991, p. 415) discussed interpretations of dialogue across
difference and concluded that, far from promoting practices to establish and maintain positive dialogical relations, “certain postmodern, and particularly antimodern, tendencies in educational theory have worked against the goal of trying to achieve understanding across difference.” The Freirean culture circle would not fit within the framework offered by Burbules and Rice, as it allows its participants to consider multiple perspectives, and not seek one simple solution to issues being problematized.

Figure 23

Internal Conversation, Structure and Agency
Further, culture circles make the process of questioning discourses and considering alternative perspectives explicit and accessible to their participants. While internal conversations and the critical questioning of discourses and/or concepts is present aside from the culture circles, the circles serve as a rehearsal (Boal, 1979), so that participants will question their own assumptions and not simply take what they hear at face value (Ochs & Capps, 2001). By no means are culture circles the only way to start questioning societal locations, nor do they offer a solution to the issues analyzed. Multiple possible solutions are considered, as circle members consider a multitude of perspectives and refuse accepting everything they hear without further inquiry. Internal conversations (Archer, 2000; 2003) are present in our everyday lives as we question what we hear and engage in a dialogic deconstruction of initially monological discourses.

The process of questioning structural discourses, whether it be mediated by internal conversations or dialogues, is not as clear as illustrated by the figure above, but it does seek to challenge colonization as the maintenance of the status quo. Culture circles allow participants to engage in a process in which they understand the ideologies surrounding them, and in which they are immersed, and do not necessarily do away with discursive colonization. Even though these women were questioning, and trying to challenge some of the status quo discourses, they were still being subjected to colonization, as they live and function as part of a structure.

There are many underlying issues informing these women’s locations in society which I don’t explore here. Culture circles are not a blanket solution, but a tool through which multiple perspectives or understandings to an issue may be articulated. The process already exists, and culture circles provide wider access to such a process. Culture circles make the implicit process in which we engage in internal conversations explicit through the framework of problem posing,
dialogue, and problem solving. By becoming an explicit process, the women are more likely to understand it and appropriate it, to start using it in their own situated contexts. Circles are not absolute solutions nor do they provide all the answers; they provide tools that can be used to engage in meta-awareness and questioning of the status quo and of individually specific situations. Many “critics often decry Freire’s educational approach for its idealistic vision of social transformation” (McLaren, 2000, p. 12). Here, I present Freire’s approach not as the cure to all social issues, but as a portfolio of authentic alternatives to issues entrenched in society, as a place in which different perspectives are genuinely considered and where the hope for transformation and challenging the status quo is kept alive through the words of its participants. The criticism that other voices, diverse perspectives, and concerns are not addressed (Burbules & Berk, 1999) becomes irrelevant as participants contribute their own perspectives and engage in dialogue.

**Envisioning the Purposes of Culture Circles**

The purpose of culture circles is to provide bridges to the promotion of change in oppressive situations. In the circles, literacy is proposed as a tool for social change (Freire, 1998) as participants engage in critical analysis of their own narratives of institutional narratives, appropriating language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2004). More than traditionally conceived literacy, the method used (composed of the steps delineated by the figure below) allowed participants to engage in an externalization and practice of a process that leads to conscientization (Freire, 1970), to critical meta-awareness. By being “conscientized,” participants question the traditional discourses and question socially and culturally constructed concepts. Participants engage in the practice of deconstructing discourses, and learning how multiple framings can provide multiple understandings of the same issue.
As discussed at length in Chapter Three, the process in culture circles starts with generative words and themes that emerge from its participants and the situations in which they live. This is important because often, prior to enrolling in culture circles, participants took their respective situations as their personal fate, as if there was nothing that could be done to enact change. So, the roots of the culture circles are revealed through the combination of interviews,
participant observation, data collection, thematic coding (for generative themes) or corpus analysis (for generative words) and word lists generated by the teachers/enablers. From this collecting effort, commonly cited themes and commonly used words are contextualized in a larger context. This is accomplished by questioning the thematic discourses and word usage (in terms of collocation, for example).

When questions are proposed, participants engage in problem posing. Posing problems about a situation previously deemed deterministic is a big step towards critical meta-awareness. By questioning the status quo, participants became aware that their lives are not completely a result of others’ actions and that they may choose to adopt the institutional discourse and recycle it in their narratives, living according to it. They become aware of the importance of framing (Gee, in press) in understanding discourses. After posing a problem, they engage in dialogue. This dialogue is intended to break the monological definition of their situation, the deterministic vein in their lives. Dialogue is intended to bring multiple perspectives to an issue, to empower participants, and to break down the monological parameters of what they should be and how they should live their lives. Dialogue also encompasses the very methodology I employ to analyze the narrative tellings of the women I study. During dialogue, participants break down institutional discourse and the narratization of events. They therefore engage in critical narrative analysis, a concept I further explore in the following section.

Problem solving emerges from dialogue, and is geared toward action. After talking about the problem posed, participants plot a plan for action during the problem solving stage. This is followed by action, which can take place at the personal and/or societal level, as indicated by the figure above. The process is not as linear or simple as described here, as processes are hybridized and repeated according to the situation/theme being problematized.
This very sequence plays out in culture circles and leads to collective agency according to the narrative tellings of six women participants in this study (those who returned to school as adults). It includes “…four components necessary for personal and group empowerment: belief in self-efficacy, validation through collective experience, knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action, and reflective action” (McNicoll, 2003, p. 46). Internalizing this process is a way to foster the development of individual agency and action, and for these women to start reinvisioning, reinventing their lives within the system or enacting change upon the structure. After all, personal and social change are dialectically related, and as such they are interactive and inseparable (Breton, 1995; Getzel, 2003).

**Critical Narrative Analysis as Praxis for Change**

Critical narrative analysis, as explained at length in Chapter Four, is an essential part of what goes on in three of the phases of culture circles—problem posing, dialogue, and problem solving. Problem posing can only take place when a person or a group sees the situation as problematic as opposed to accepting it as is and dovetailing concerns (Archer, 2003) regarding his/her/their situation. Often, people are not aware of the problems that need to be posed as they construct their own narratives.

There is a process through which narrative tellings are shaped and how they come into existence. Personal events and institutional discourses blend together in narrative tellings. Without being aware of the distinct ingredients of this mix, narrators perceive the wedding of these two to be personal beliefs shaped according to their own ideas. Instead, institutional discourse infiltrates their narratives without being questioned. Adopting institutional discourse as one’s own set of beliefs and espousing them in one’s narratives is one easy way to accepting their locations in society.
With the very intention of separating these perceived personal beliefs into two constituents, culture circles invite students to engage in problem posing. The process seeks to investigate which parts of the narrative tellings are portraying institutional discourses, which parts are constructed to fit normative morals, and which parts are geared at understanding what happened (personal events). Dialogue is of paramount importance as participants try to break the seemingly monological narration of events. In circles, participants seek to recognize the infiltration of institutional discourse, and challenge its absolute voice. They come to view institutional discourse as one understanding of an issue, an understanding that might actually be curtailing their agency and trapping them in a cycle of low SES and poor working conditions. As for the participants in this study, when they dropped-out of school (see Chapter Five for further discussion) they believed such things as “women stayed home and helped their mothers” to be the truth. Ultimately, many of them recognized traditional patriarchal discourse framing in many issues. Culture circles encourage the problematization of its participants’ situations.

Communities cannot preserve their unique social identities and worldviews if they are not aware of them. Promoting social justice, therefore, often starts at the cultural awareness level or with conscientization efforts (Freire, 1995; Marsiglia, 2003). Fostering the appropriation of discourse, the understanding of discourses as framed a particular way, circles seek to counter the all too common colonization--the maintenance of oppressive structures, such as the ones keeping low SES women in rural areas from being formally schooled. The process seeks to promote dialogue aimed at deconstructing narrative tellings. This process, a therapeutic process, is aligned with the group and family therapy proposed by Pichon-Riviere (1995; 1997), as illustrated by the figure below.
Replacing perceived personal beliefs with internal conversation (individually) or dialogue (collectively) allows participants to deconstruct narrative tellings into their basic components identifying the institutional discourses infiltrating their narratives; to question some previously conceived universal truths, facts. This process explicitly outlined in circles settings models the
process of internal conversation. Seeking to teach adults how to read, circles also provide
participants with tools to engage in critical narrative analysis of their own situations, therefore
giving them tools to enact agency at an individual level. As we’ve seen in previous chapters,
circles foster not only the teaching of reading and writing, but higher order skills, such as
problem solving. This process goes from deconstruction to constructivism. From this
perspective, language is not representational, or even relevantly systematic, and therefore it is
potentially colonizing. Even the structural, grammatical regularities of language are infinitely
manipulated so that their ability to represent is reduced to mere play at best or, ideological
confusion at worst. The role of circles and the process it fosters, then, is to uncover this
ideological component—so that people will not be taken in by it. The constructivist, building his
or her own resistant analysis, rises from the deconstructed ashes generated by the process of
problem posing and dialogue.

While the traditional critical discourse analysis (CDA) social agenda focuses on the
power of discourse to shape a person, thereby potentially negating the individual’s reflective
deliberations and physical presence that inform any position (i.e., individual agency), we cannot
simply affirm that we are on the right side. Critical Discourse Analysts would then be left
holding the only agency available to anyone—a sort of epistemic repression (Luke, 2004).
Adopting this stance would answer the question my grandmother voiced—the very one that
starts this chapter, yet I would embody the role of a dictator in making judgments and offering
solutions to others’ lives.

Archer (2000; 2003) has proposed that many of our concerns are generated within the
social field; but our practices within society are always mediated by our physical concerns
(avoiding pain or seeking pleasure) and our practical abilities (our skills with concrete tasks, our
relationships with objects). Our struggle to negotiate between these multiple fields of concern leads to our secondary emotions—that is, to our inner deliberations that lead to our sense of value. This process focuses on understanding the person-centered nature of these deliberations. It aims at recognizing not only how the system colonizes this lifeworld, but also, how the lifeworld can appropriate the system to the infinitely varied concerns of individuals (Habermas, 1987; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

One way to understand the relationship between the system and the lifeworld is the analysis of narrative tellings—a complex weave of individuals’ unique concerns and recycled institutional discourse. In accord with the components that make up culture circles, individuals commence questioning their realities and problem solving through narratives. “Every day, many problem solving narratives happen and delineate roles, relationships, values, and worldviews” (Ochs, Smith & Taylor, 1996, p. 95). And, narrators potentially engage in social action as a result of identifying the social construction of their situations in the presence of institutional discourse recycled within their narratives.

In the circles, analyzing narratives in the lifeworld—the everyday stories people tell—and deconstructing the different discourses present in these narratives allows participants to deal with real world issues and develop critical meta-awareness (Freire, 1970), demystifying the social construction of reality, making social interaction a place for norms to be challenged and changed, and bringing the individually situated deliberations and the person into focus within the context of critical discourse analysis. In terms of praxis, beyond incorporating a focus on narrative in our own investigative and communicative practices, culture circles have immediate lifeworld implications, built within the lifeworld of its participants and based on an understanding of their unique agency—both individual and collective. This is consistent with an
empowering agenda centered in theory and research that is always tied to praxis—an engaged praxis that accounts for the deliberative capacity of all individuals.

One way of envisioning this sort of praxis is the culture circles—in which individuals engage simultaneously with the word and the world. Again, Freire (1970) proposed the development of a critical meta-awareness, which allows common people to engage in social action to solve problems and address issues they identify in their own narratives. This meta-awareness allows them to have a relationship of appropriation (as opposed to colonization) with language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) and to use critical discourse analysis to identify, problematize, take a stand, and engage in social action to change their situations while challenging the deterministic claim that “[w]e are stuck in the vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination” (Fraser, 1997, p.33). This approach emphasizes that my research is about people who can be encouraged to read and write, making sense of their own world, instead of living in the world that someone else is making sense of on their behalf. Participation in these circles, as explored earlier in the chapter and exemplified by excerpts from Josi’s and Rose’s narratives, is also internalized, and allows participants to engage in critical meta-awareness, to become individually “conscientized.”

Dispensing Advice as Recommending Possible Solutions

In the interviews I conducted, more fairly defined as informal conversations about the participants’ lives, I learned much about the schooling history of these women. They narratized their past, related their perceptions of the present and projected their futures. Further, aligning themselves with normative moral parameters, they relayed advice to those who had dropped-out of school early and were also victims of the cycle of maidhood as well as to those future generations prone to it. Advisors’ identities are developed based on legitimate experience
(Rymes, 1996). Some of them gave advice based on their legitimate experiences, returning to educational settings (culture circles). Others, such as my grandmother, gave advice based on their expertise (read age), also a legitimate experience—in this case of lack of success. In the “Rights to Advise,” Rymes (1996) points out that advice and standpoints emerge from interaction, conversation. The fact that in the discussions about jail, the students in her study ended up reaching the morally aligned verdict that jail is bad as talking with the other students shows the dynamic force of interaction in a group setting as well as the power of language.

As in Rymes’s article (1996), the women in this study support morally aligned conclusions that to succeed in life, one must learn how to read and write. Within the context of an interview about one’s schooling history, the participants establish temporary alignments in interaction. Meaning is contingent on context (Rymes, 1996). In the context of culture circles, the use of the pronoun we to refer to both students and teachers indicates a fluid line, without boundaries. Circle participants’ advice aligns with the idea of becoming a member of the successful “we.” In the context of a life of domestic work, as you will see, my grandmother suggests the contraceptive pill as a solution to those deemed future participants of the cycle of oppression being studied here. Mara portrays a clear boundary, especially between men and women, as exemplified in the first chapter of this study. The solution, or advice given, therefore, involves women avoiding any kind of oppression or more permanent link with men. As you read the following pieces of advice, keep in mind the context of their narrators as well as the de-contextualization of them here, as I extracted them from much longer conversational narratives.
Josi’s Advice

Mariana: And to other people? [Following Josi’s narrative of telling her sons about the importance of schooling, she finished with “I tell to them and other people too”].

Josi: To those people who for some reason did not have a chance to learn how to read and write, I say that they need to go back to school, to the circle, because this is what they have of good [value], this is what can help them change their lives. But it’s not only them. I’d tell the government to provide incentives to those who don’t have [money] because then they will come and see how it is important.

Maria’s Advice

Mariana: Tell me more about the circle that you go.

Maria: I already learned many things. It is very good. If couldn’t learn how to read and write, I’d tell them to come immediately and enroll. It’s their only chance to feel they are someone. That they have value.
Lucia’s Advice

Mariana: How [following Lucia’s “it’s very bad not to know how to read and write”]? 

Lucia: People who don’t know how to read and write...people make fun of them. Tell them the wrong bus and other things too. If they learn how to read and write they don’t need to be humiliated. They are seen as better people.

Both Josi’s and Maria’s advice to adult non-readers/writers, based on their legitimate expertise, was to join groups similar to those of which they were part, the culture circles. Rose related joining the circle to a boost in self-esteem (“their only chance to feel they are someone. That they have value.”). Josi’s experience in the culture circles also lead her to think of the role of social structure (namely, the government) in supporting adults to return to educational settings such as the culture circles. Personal action and societal action were therefore intertwined in Josi’s advising narrative. Lucia’s narrative also aligned with Rose’s, in terms of the idea of returning to school being directly related to an increase in self-esteem and empowerment. Lucia conveyed the need to learn how to read and write by illustrating the alternative within an almost caricaturesque framing. She suggested that those who don’t know how to read and write go through humiliating situations such as being fooled into riding the wrong bus. This caricaturesque framing was used so as to intensify and affectively convey the need to return to school, learn how to read and write, and ultimately become a better person. Based on their collective expertise, these three women conveyed a unified view for the future, as they imagined
others sharing a similar predicament to the one they shared prior to joining the culture circles of which they were part. Their empathetic standpoint was conveyed by their pieces of advice listed below.

_The Birth Control Pill_

Mara’s Advice

Mariana: What is the solution?

Mara: The pill

Mariana: The pill?

Mara: Yes, but only secretly. If these women don’t want to end up as prostitutes or working in other people’s kitchens, they need an education. They can have children after they complete their education. They shouldn’t do it, but if they’re going to they need to use the pill. Then they can change their lives before the children [arrive].

Mara’s solution emanated from her personal experience. She was not proposing that the birth control pill be handed out and used by every woman. Rather, she was proposing that women be given access to birth control pills and have the choice of using them in a similar fashion to many U. S. women in academia who use birth control pills to delay mothering to first
reach their educational and professional goals. Further, Mara saw the traditional patriarchal discourse as impersonated by every common man, as her personal experiences with men were not positive. Therefore, being free from men—not having such permanent ties to men such as children—might be the answer to escape the constraints and socioculturally constructed patriarchal discourse.

*Everyone Can Learn Regardless of Age or Ability Level*

**Rose’s Advice**

Mariana: You are going to teach him to read?

Rose: Yes, everyone can learn how to read and write. Even for adults. I tell them there exists an opportunity for everyone of them to learn how to read and write. To change their lives. To be someone. They only need to be part of the circle. There, we are smart. It’s not like in school when the teacher tells everything and the students know nothing. We talk, we learn together.

**Susana’s Advice**

Mariana: You said your neighbor came because you said—

Susana: —Come now. I told her that in the circle no one was going to make fun of her. That she was
going to learn. That she didn’t need to have fear. That we learn talking and everyone has things to contribute.

Rose’s advice was couched in the belief that people with different abilities can learn how to read. Her legitimate experience/expertise was conveyed by the narrative analyzed in Chapter Seven, in which her son, in spite of being labeled “deficient,” already knew how to make letter J: “He already knows how to make the letter J. He wrote it on the table.” The narrative of her son’s story granted Rose rights to advise regarding the ability of anyone to learn regardless of ability. A contingency, however, was placed, as she said, “They only need to be part of the circle.” She further asserted the value of experiences in the circles and the development of a collective agency by concluding her narrative with “We talk, we learn together.” Rose’s repeated use of the plural pronoun “we,” combined with the active verbs “talk” and “learn” highlights the collective agency developed in culture circles. She reiterated the collective sense with the use of the word “together.”

The collective aspect of the circles was also highlighted by Susana, another one of the study participants, who portrayed the circle as a safe environment in which “everyone has things to contribute.” Susana’s narrative not only portrayed the collective agency established and developed in group settings, it also portrayed the feeling of solidarity present—“in the circle no one was going to make fun of her.” Susana’s authority to hand out advice is based on relating the episode of convincing her neighbor to join the circle of which she herself was part.

By constructing themselves as legitimate experts, the women participants of this study granted themselves rights to advise (Rymes, 1996) others on how to avoid being trapped in this cycle of oppression (Mara specifically addressed this issue). The women advised others on how
to see beyond the existent possibilities and took action to change their lives. Overall, they advised going back to school, using the birth control pill, enrolling in a culture circle, and everyone being able to learn how to read and write regardless of ability or age. Mara, my grandmother, did not suggest giving an offspring up for adoption because, as she put it herself “that just resolved her life, not mine.” While this solution allowed for my mother to escape the cycle of oppression, Mara worked as a maid for upwards of fifty years. While all pieces of advice are not present in this chapter, four basic and recurrent themes in the advice handed out by the participants of this study are summarized in the figure below.

[Diagram of pieces of advice: back to school, birth control pills, enroll in culture circle, everyone can learn to read & write]
Listening to these women and their advisement may prove valuable to other women in similar situations and to society as a whole, as the women offered the very solutions that are projected to provide, are providing, or have provided change, at least in the personal realm. While the context of this study is the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, Brazil, as clarified in Chapter Five, the issue of women being subjected to traditional patriarchal norms and becoming domestic workers is worldwide. In the Southern region of the United States, aspects of domestic work are historicized as far back as the aftermath of the civil war. Women of low SES and women living in rural areas are some of the most commonly employed as domestic workers in the Deep South (Tucker, 1988).

The following figure illustrates the caricature of a maid; the voices are the monological representation and justification of women becoming “happy” maids. These monological institutional and normative discourses portray a moral acceptance of domestic workers and portray them as contented with their situations.

Within a similar context, Freire (1998) wrote that:

We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior. We start from the belief that our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us. This is intolerance. It is the irresistible preference to reject differences...The dominant class, then, because it has the power to distinguish itself from the dominated class, first, rejects the differences between them but, second does not pretend to be equal to those who are different; third, it does not intend that those who are different shall be equal. What it wants is to maintain the differences and keep its distance and to recognize and emphasize in practice the inferiority of those who are dominated. (p. 71)
Considering Freire’s words, not only do those who are in this cycle of oppression need to employ critical narrative analysis to challenge the status quo, but those perpetrating the patriarchal system by employing domestic workers, referred to by Freire as the “dominant class” (1998, p. 71) and oppressed by the system, would also benefit from engaging in such analysis.
Weiler (1991) contended that Freire did not acknowledge the possibility of a contradictory experience of oppression and argued for “a more situated theory of oppression and subjectivity, and for the need to consider the contradictions of such universal claims of truth or process” (p. 456). As illustrated above through Freire’s own words in 1998, we find that he did address the interplay and fluidity of the roles of oppressed and oppressor.

Attempting to analyze their own assumptions, and challenge the institutional discourse might be a tool for those who employ domestic workers to see themselves both embodying the roles of oppressed and oppressor. Through the use of critical narrative analysis as they make sense of everyday experiences, individuals have an enhanced possibility to engage in a “transformative critique of their everyday lives” (Simon, 1992, p. 60). After all “[c]laiming neutrality does not constitute neutrality; quite the contrary, it helps maintain the status quo” (Freire, 1995, p. 141).

**Promoting Transformation: From Personal to Social Action**

Promoting transformation is not reserved for those special groups interested in social change. It is, rather, within the realm of possibilities for all groups engaging in conscientization, in critical meta-awareness (Getzel, 2003). The problem-posing, dialogue, problem solving paradigm, has in this case, lead to change, even if localized within the personal realm. Personal change is nevertheless a step closer to the ideal of social change, of social justice. As Eleanor Roosevelt, a contemporary of Freire, put it:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they can’t be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of individual peoples; the neighborhood [s/]he lives in. The school...[s/he] attends;
the factory, farm...such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. (Lash, 1972, p.81)

Culture circles feature a consciousness-raising focus, challenging stereotypic roles and notions, personal and collective vision development, action plan development and implementation, and community building. These theoretical underpinnings are the concepts shared by empowerment, social learning, adult learning, feminism, and community development. The teacher’s role commences as a hybrid of facilitator, educator, active resource, learner, enabler, partner, challenger and modeler. With time though, all culture circle participants embody many of these roles. As we saw in some narratives, they ultimately employ these skills in their lives to promote change. Maria, for example, employed some of these resources to solve the situation of her son’s disrespect towards her and her mother, as we explored in the previous chapter.

The collective nature of the culture circles allows its participants to find the strength needed for self-empowerment as well as to “attain actualised, unique personhood (and) personal responsibility” (Lee, 1994, p. 24). As we’ve seen through the analysis of the narratives the women participants of this study told, the problem solving component of culture circles lead to an increased confidence in their own ability to embody an agentic stance, feel better about themselves, project more hope into the future, and to become more empowered. Problem solving, after all, lead to both personal and social change (Mannik, 2003).

Through participation in the community of circles, women who had been alienated from their culture were encouraged to recognize, scrutinize, and take action regarding their location in society and their oppression (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1998). This happened through the steady and recurring action-reflection-action chain of group behaviors, praxis (Freire, 1970), involving
dialogue and action (Freire, 1995). Praxis encompasses the action of participants who recognize issues, describe or label them, and explore ordinary solutions.

In the culture circles, the role of the teacher is the role of facilitator. He/She helps the group become conscious of its potential and power to act upon and to transform situations. According to Marsiglia (2003):

The group becomes a laboratory for democracy where all opinions count...In becoming a transformative force, the group initially decides on small action steps, develops plans, and implements them. Once the course of action is implemented, the group reflects on its accomplishments and shortcomings, relates the outcome to the larger societal phenomena they are concerned about, and starts planning the next action step. Group members are more capable of challenging and rejecting messages from the larger society that says that nothing can be changed. (p. 84)

Participants link personal problems and political issues (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1998). As a group, they start to envision their capacity for change, projecting future endeavors and seeking to promote social justice (Marsiglia and Zorita, 1996). Pinar et al. (1996) posited that more inclusive pedagogy which addresses some postmodern concerns may be developed to more effectively address the issues of human suffering, domination and oppression, which extend beyond just those linked to class and the capitalist state. In his later years, Freire did just that. Freire supported what he called progressive postmodernism, attempting to overcome modern tendencies in his thinking and working.

By considering different perspectives, Freire himself engagaged in the appropriation of language and discourses, as can be noted by the difference in his earlier books, published in the 1970s and the books he published within the last ten years. Collins suggested that “postmodernist
critical discourse is about the struggles for power ‘to be heard’ – about the empowerment of ‘other voices’” (1998, p.76). Freire’s focus was on “…textuality, on the text and text analogues for understanding the world; his emphasis upon subjectivity, experience and culture; and, to some extent, his understanding of oppression and the exercise of power.” (Peters, 1999, p. 117).

This can be noted by his use of generative words and themes, discussed in Chapter Three. This is what Freire proposed: that people themselves actively engage in listening to and considering other understandings, other perspectives, respecting diversity, questioning the status quo in hopes of change.

**Hopes for the Future**

The education of rural workers in the Northeast of Brazil and the education of English Language Learners living primarily in urban cities here in the United States may at first seem completely unrelated matters. In reality, both are lost in a strange world. When a Brazilian who is illiterate enters a big city, it is as Rosa Soares, a 61-year-old member of a culture circle said: “it is like I am blind and mute at the same time, not being able to understand what’s around me” (trans. by author, Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, 1997). That is the feeling of many adult English Language Learners with whom I have come in contact, and who have had only limited education in their mother language.

I propose that local public schools look at Paulo Freire’s theory in practice in Northeast Brazil, and come up with a better way to address a similar problem that can no longer be ignored--the illiteracy of adults (citizens or not) living in Northeast Georgia. “It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them” (Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, p.xi). Freire invited American educators “to re-create and rewrite [his] ideas” (Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, p.xi). Developing a pilot program with the characteristics described in this chapter by
offering those adults who are English Language Learners an education that is drawn from their 
real-life experiences would empower them as learners. Creating programs similar to the Circles 
of Education and Culture in Northeast Georgia would serve as a way for English Language 
Learners to make their lives better, and to promote social change.

Statistics and demographics show a substantial and growing immigrant population who 
need language and culture orientation and literacy--today and even more so in the future. The 
methods mentioned earlier, proposed by Kathryn Au, Lisa Delpit, Paulo Freire, James Gee, Kris 
Gutierrez, bell hooks, and Sonia Nieto, have the potential to empower immigrant parents to take 
a more active role in their own children’s education. This would ultimately improve the overall 
education being offered to these children of non-native English speaking parents. According to 
Blackburn (2003):

[I]f our goal, as literacy educators..., is to work for social change, then our work is never 
done. We must continue to interrogate relationships between literacy performances and 
power dynamics...with the understanding that justice lies in the perpetual interrogation. 
(p.488)

My hope is that this study helps challenge the status quo, cycles of oppression, 
and the blatant acceptance of traditional patriarchal discourses worldwide. The critical narrative 
analysis of these women’s schooling stories and projections for their children’s educational 
future may help parents, teachers, school administrators and society as a whole meet the 
educational needs of adults who weren’t previously well served by schools and society in this 
country as well as in others and as a result lack functional literacy skills and of those children 
whose cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity is unwelcome or at least widely
unrecognized in classrooms. I have hope, as Freire urged educators in *Pedagogy of Hope* “to become more tolerant, open and forthright, critical, curious, and humble” (Roberts, 2000: 112).

According to Freire (1959; 1970; 1985; 1998; 2002), the challenge for education is to bridge personal and political issues and foster the understanding that personal problems are under the umbrella of larger societal and political issues, to foster conscientization and social inclusion through problem-solving, dialogue, and problem-posing. To implement literacy programs aimed at social action, at conscientization, it is necessary to address the relationship between the micro and the macro issues as discussed in this study. This is what circles seek to do; this is what I hope those who read this work feel empowered to do—by being a member of a group that problem-poses, dialogues, and problem solves to find the best way to promote action.

There is not only one way toward this end because each individual and each situation is different. The lack of a universal solution gives each of us room to improvise and to learn collectively. Knowledge is not a fixed construct, but constructed by the collectivity. Freire himself “refus[ed] to spell out alternative solutions that enable his work to be reinvented in the contexts in which his readers find themselves” (Steiner, Krank, McLaren, & Bahruth, 2000, p.13). In reinventing these circles of culture, it is important to remember their objectives and consider, as Freire and Macedo (1987) put it:

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* and *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work...[T]his dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (p.35)
“[A]s learners dialogue and transact with a wide range of texts and come to make meaning for themselves, that newly constructed meaning enters into dialogue with the mainstream and other cultures” (Fecho, 2004, p.47). They start conveying agency in their narratives as they start engaging in personal change. This is the hope. In the case of the women in this study, they learned not only how to read texts, but contexts. They not only learned how to write their names and stories, but they learned how to initiate the process of re-writing their own stories. The hope is that by rewriting their stories and engaging in action and change on the personal level, they will collectively promote social change. My hope is that after reading this work you feel inspired to question your own assumptions, engage in critical narrative analysis, and promote positive change in both personal and societal realms wherever you are.
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYMS</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>CITY OF BIRTH</th>
<th>CITY OF RESIDENCE</th>
<th>PLACE OF RESIDENCE</th>
<th>DROPPED OUT</th>
<th>RETAINED?</th>
<th>EARLY DAYS SCHOOL</th>
<th>CHILDREN</th>
<th>SINGLE/ MARRIED</th>
<th>PROFESSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Bonito</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Daughters’ houses—doesn’t own a house</td>
<td>Never went to school</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4 adult children; 6 grandkids; 1 great grandson</td>
<td>Single—had children but never married</td>
<td>Retired maid (drawing state retirement since age 65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zefa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Orobó</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Employer’s house—doesn’t have any place to go not even on Sundays</td>
<td>Never went to school</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Maid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Pombos</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Rents own house—works from 8AM to 4PM</td>
<td>After grade 4</td>
<td>Yes; repeated 4th grade twice—no 5th grade in town</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>2 (in primary school)</td>
<td>Married to security guard</td>
<td>Maid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Moreno (week) and Moreno (weekends)</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Employer’s house (week) and parents’ house (weekend)</td>
<td>After grade 4</td>
<td>Yes; repeated 4th grade—no 5th grade in town</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Maid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Ipojuca (during the week) and Ribeirão (weekends)</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Employer’s house (week) and own house (weekend)</td>
<td>Around age 5</td>
<td>No; dropped out before the end of the first year of schooling</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>5 children in school, living with grandma on weekdays</td>
<td>Married to construction worker</td>
<td>Maid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dete</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Limoeiro</td>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Employer’s house</td>
<td>After 1st or 2nd grade (doesn’t remember with precision)</td>
<td>Doesn’t remember</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>One adult daughter and one grandson (currently in school)</td>
<td>Single—had a child from boyfriend who disappeared</td>
<td>Maid—retired and draws state retirement; back at work because she had no place to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSEUDONYM CIRCLES' PARTICIPANTS</td>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>CITY OF BIRTH ***</td>
<td>CITY OF RESIDENCE ***</td>
<td>PLACE OF RESIDENCE</td>
<td>DROPPED OUT AFTER GRADE</td>
<td>RETAINED?</td>
<td>CHILDREN</td>
<td>SINGLE/ MARRIED</td>
<td>PROFESSION</td>
<td>EVER A MAID?</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susana**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Own house*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 sons in school</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Agriculture worker</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Parents' house*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 son with intellectual disability</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Nanny</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josi**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Own house*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 sons in elementary school</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Dump worker</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neide**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Own house*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 adoptive daughter</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Full-time mother</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Own house*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes—moved a lot</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Sales representative</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Bezerros</td>
<td>Mother’s house</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes—twice (moved a lot)</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Brick factory worker</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
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* own house does not mean that they own the house, but that they live in their own house as opposed to an employer’s house, as many domestic workers do.

** all these women attended public schools during their childhood years

*** includes surrounding rural areas
APPENDIX B

ORIGINAL NARRATIVE EXCERPTS: IN PORTUGUESE

Pages 3-4

Mariana: Me conta sobre sua infância. você trabalhou? Foi pra escola?

um namorado, e ela num queria criança na casa dela. Eu acho que eu tinha
doze quando eu voltei e procurei minha irmã. Ela num tava mais aonde a
gente vivia. Aí, depois de dormir no campo por umas duas noites, eu
achei meu pai. Sim, meu pai, o que deixou minha mãe. Eu disse pra ele
que eu num tinha um lugar pra ir. Ele me mandou pra casa da minha
madrinha e perguntou se eles podiam usar uma ajuda. Ele usou com
certeza. Eu comecei a plantar e colher café o dia inteiro. Do sol nascer ao
sol se por. Isso durou mais ou menos um ano. Isso foi quando minha
madrinha morreu. Ela morreu de tuberculose. Aí, eu não tinha nenhum
lugar pra ir. Eu não tinha nenhum trabalho. Eles num queria pessoas que
num sabia como ler e escrevê nas lojas. Só os meninos tinha ido pra
escola. As garotas aprenderam a limpar e tomar conta da casa. Pra quê?
Pra tomar conta dos homem ou se torna domésticas.

Mara: Quando eu vim pra cá minha filha, meu sonho era de estudar. De ir pr’uma
escola. Mas eu num tinha tempo não. Quando eu terminava de trabalhar
era muito tarde pra ir pra escola. Oito, nove hora às vezes. Quando eu
podia ir, eu tava tão cansada que caía no sono na aula mesmo. Se eu
soubesse lê e escrevê eu num tinha terminado trabalhando na cozinha dos
outros, não. Mas menina no interiô num ia pra escola. So mesmo os meninos. Meninas ajudava nos afazere domésticos.

Page 6

Mara: Quando eu fiquei grávida e tive tua mãe, eu num queria que ela fosse passá pelo que eu passei. Aí, eu dei ela pra minha comadre. Pr’ela tê uma vida melhor. Eu num queria que o futuro dela fosse trabalhá na cozinha dos outros como eu. Mas isso só resolveu a vida dela, não a minha.

Page 23

...a professora pensa que todas as crianças vem do mesmo lugar. Eu pago pro meu filho ir pra escola é um sacrifício muito grande, mas a professora pensa que eu não me importo porque eu não ajudo ele. Ela decidiu fazer ele repetir de ano. Ele esta no jardim de novamente esse ano e eu tô pagando tudo de novo. Eu não sei se ele vai pra primeira série, sabe, porque eu não posso ajudar ele.
“Eu não sei...você sabe tanto, e eu não sei de nada. você tá sempre lendo e escrevendo. Eu num sei nenhuma dessas coisas. É por isso que eu trabalho como uma empregada. Você pode ter o emprego que você quer. Sabe? Tu já sabe tudo que eu sei e mais.”

Aonde eu morava só tinha uma escola...só uma mesmo...e era só até quarta série...Então, eu fui pra escola até a quarta série. Quando eu acabei quarta série minha professora queria que eu fosse pra Vitória pra quinta série. Eu chorei muito mas minha mãe não me deixou ir. Meninas não iam pra Vitória. Só meninos mesmo. Aí, minha professora deixou eu repetir a quarta série duas vezes. Eu não pude fazer nada, nada mesmo. Meus irmãos foram pra quinta série e eu não pude. Tu pode imaginar?

Quando eu tinha idade suficiente, eu vim pro Recife. Eu era feliz, sabe. Eu pensava que eu ia pra escola de novo, mas trabalhando na casa dos outros, eu nunca saía cedo pra ir pra escola.
Eu acho que a professora pensa que todas as crianças vem do mesmo lugar. Eu pago pro meu filho ir pra escola e um sacrifício muito grande, mas a professora pensa que eu não me importo porque eu não ajudo ele. Ela decidiu fazer ele repetir de ano. Ele esta no jardim de novamente esse ano e eu tô pagando tudo de novo. Eu não sei se ele vai pra primeira série, sabe, porque eu não posso ajudar ele.

Os políticos só pensam na gente quando e hora de votar, mas você não pode aprender assim, leva mais tempo do que a campanha deles, sabe, e uma vez eles tejam eleitos, eles não se importam mais com a gente...tudo que a gente tem pra dar pra eles é nosso voto...eles sempre prometem mas nem sempre faz o que eles prometem.

Josi: Não importa o quanto eu trabalho, eu sempre tô devendo alguma coisa a alguém; eu sempre me atraso nas minhas contas. Eu vivo com medo.
Medo de que um dia eu vou chegá em casa e não tê dinheiro suficiente pra pagá o aluguel, ô pra dá comida pras minhas criança.

Pages 60-61

Josi: Eu trabalho duro, mas o salário não é suficiente. Eu não sei o que eu estou fazendo de errado—

José: —Errado?

Josi: Sim, porque eu trabalho, ganho um salário mínimo, mas nunca é o suficiente pra pagá as contas e botá comida na mesa.

Solange: Mas o salário mínimo é suficiente. Não é?

Miriam: Eu também não tenho dinheiro suficiente pra todas as minhas contas. Você tem—

Solange: —O quê? Dinheiro suficiente?

Josefa: Sim—

José: Então quem decidiu o quanto é suficiente?


((risos))

Solange: Quem foi?

((conversa enquanto eles tentam descobrir quem determina o salário mínimo))

Sandra: O governo é que determina o salário mínimo—


Miriam: Eu também.

Solange: Quem ganha um salario mínimo?

((a maioria levanta suas mãos))

Solange: Quem ganha menos que um salário mínimo?

((quarto mulheres levantam suas mãos))

Jose: Você trabalha o dia inteiro?

Laurinda: Eu trabalho—

Neto: —a semana inteira?

((mulheres que ganham menos que um salário mínimo balançam a cabeça))

Laurinda: Quem ganha mais do que um salário mínimo?

((cinco dos oito homens na sala levantam suas mãos))

Sandra: O que vocês percebem?
Luís: Que a gente ganha mais do que elas.

Solang: Homens ganham mais dinheiro—

Neto: —mas não é o suficiente pra viver.

Mariana: Até que série?

Josi: Até a terceira série, e aí eu não me deram mais nenhuma oportunidade d’eu estudar. Meus pais se mudaram pr’uma fazenda pra trabalhar lá...num tinha escola lá. Meus irmãos podia andar de cavalo até a cidade pra ir pra escola, mas meu pai num deixava eu. Eu pedi pra ir. Meu pai disse que mulher usava saia e ele disse que mulher que ia pra longe de casa sem seu pai e mãe ficava mal falada. Então, eu não podia ir. Eu queria ir mas não podia.

Mariana: Você repetiu de ano alguma vez?

Neide: Eu fui uma vez na segunda série. Eu gostava de ir pra escola. Meu pai e minha mãe me deixaram ir, mais aí quando eu fui reprovada foi diferente. Eu não queria ir de volta pra escola. Aquele num foi um ano bom pra mim. Todos os meus amigos tavam na terceira série. Minha mãe dizia que meninas ajudavam em casa. Era melhor aprender a tomar conta da casa do que ir pra escola. O ultimo ano que eu fui pra escola minha professora me
Elena: ...eu fui pra escola até a quarta série. Quando eu acabei quarta série minha professora queria que eu fosse pra Vitória pra quinta série. Eu chorei muito mas minha mãe não me deixou ir. Meninas não iam pra Vitória. Só meninos mesmo. Aí, minha professora deixou eu repetir a quarta série duas vezes. Eu não pude fazer nada, nada mesmo. Meus irmãos foram pra quinta série e eu não pude. Tu pode imaginar? Eu tinha que ajudar em casa. Minha mãe me ensinou como cozinhar e fazer todas essas coisas. Os homens da casa saíam cedo da manha. Eu e minha mãe ficava cozinhando, lavando, passando...
Mariana: Bom, quando você começou vindo pro círculo, nos primeiros dias, como foi que você se sentiu?

Neide: Eu num sei...Eu me senti como...tão criança...com medo. Sabe, ir pra escola depois de tantos anos. Eu num sabia o que eu ia vê. Eu senti que eu não devia tá na escola...porque eu pensei que eu devia ter aprendido a ler e escrever quando eu era nova. Eu me senti envergonhada e com medo.

Page 145

Mariana: Durante os primeiros dias, como você se sentiu?

Josi: Um pouco envergonhada. Eu num sabia o que as outras pessoa iam dizer.
Uma mãe que não sabe como ler ou escrever, com dois filhos, sem marido, trabalhando no lixão, sem marido. Eu num sabia o que as outras pessoa iam pensar. Mas eles num me julgaram não. Eles me apoiaram e me ajudaram a resolver meus problema. Eles me fizeram me sentir bem. Agora eu sei que até os meus filho querem vim todos os dias.
Mariana: E agora?

Neide: Agora eu gosto de vim. Eu gosto de conversar com a minha turma. Até quando eu tenho problemas em casa...a gente soluciona eles junto. Um dia...Maria disse...ela tava muito triste porque...ela tava vendendo sanduíche que ela fazia mas ela tava perdendo dinheiro. A gente ajudou ela a resolver iso. Ela aprendeu como vende os sanduíche...e começou a ganhar dinheiro. É isso o que nos aprende. Coisa verdadeira. Num é como, essa é a letra A. A gente aprende a letra A...mas a professora não faz a gente se sentir burro. Eu quero vim toda noite. Eu só perdí aula uma vez quando eu tava doente. Eu me senti tão triste. É uma turma de amigos, mesmo. Uma turma de gente que num me julga. Eu sei que eles me entende e me ajudam a crescer e aprender.

Pages 154-155

Mariana: Você se lembra de alguma coisa no começo que fez com que você se sentisse assustada?
Josi: Quando eu num sabia das coisa. Aqui todo mundo ajuda todo mundo. As pessoa ajuda uma outra o tempo todo. Não é como na escola. Quem é melhor? Todo mundo tá aprendendo junto. Até a professaora aprende com a gente. A gente decide as coisas importantes pra gente se atarefar. É bom. As pessoas falam, ajuda umas as outras e aprende. Agora mesmo, tinha uma mulher que num sabia uma coisa, aí outra mulher tava ajudando ela...com ajudando o filho dela com o dever de casa dele. Eu gosto de ajudar com dever de casa, mas eu não sou a professaora deles não. A professaora disse que eu precisava ser uma boa mãe. Eu fui Lá outro dia...e disse que eu tava tentado ser uma boa mãe, indo pra escola e tudo. Agora ela precisava tentar ser uma boa professaora. Eu disse pra ela que a gente aprendia nesse programa e como os meus meninos se saiam bem. Eu disse pra ela se colocasse eles pra estudar coisa que eles fazem todo dia eles podem se sair melhor na escola. Agora eu sei que não depende de mim ou deles só. Depende da professaora. Eles sabem muito. A professaora precisa usar o que eles sabem pra ensinar eles melhor. Agora eu quero ver se ela vai tentar ser uma boa professaora como eu que tô tentando ser uma boa mãe.
Mariana: Aí, você deu ela--


Elena: Hugo tá na escola. Ele começou numa escola publica, mas eu vi que a Educação não era muito boa. Eu coloquei ele numa escola particular. Eu quero que ele aprenda a ler e escrever e ganhe mais dinheiro do que eu e o pai dele
quando ele crescer. Eu tentei ser uma boa mãe, pagando pelos estudos dele.

Mas ele foi reprovado no jardim. A professora pensa que ele não vai passar e esse é o segundo ano dele no jardim. Ela diz que ele é preguiçoso. Ela diz que ele não quer ler. Eu acho que é por conta da professora.

Mariana: Umm, a professora?

Elena: Eu acho que a professora pensa que todas as crianças vem do mesmo lugar. Eu pago pro meu filho ir pra escola é um sacrifício muito grande, mas a professora pensa que eu não me importo porque eu não ajudo ele. Ela decidiu fazer ele repetir de ano. Ele esta no jardim de novamente esse ano e eu tô pagando tudo de novo. Eu não sei se ele vai pra primeira série, sabe, porque eu não posso ajudar ele.

Pages 182-184

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Mariana: Você disse que você ela precisava aprender como os seus meninos se saem bem. O que--

Josi: --ela disse que os meninos não estavam se saindo bem na escola; que eu precisava ajuda eles em casa ou ela ia reprova eles. Ela disse que eu precisava ser uma boa mãe e ajuda eles com o dever de casa. Mas eles não tão aprendendo na escola. Ela queria que eu fosse ensinar
ele. Eu não posso ensinar eles. Eu trabalho no lixão, eu tomo conta da casa, eu vou pro círculo.

Mariana: Um-hum.


Pages 189-190

Mariana: Melhor?

Neide: Melhor. Eu vou ajudar minha menina em casa e eu vou ler com ela. Eu vou explicar as coisas pra ela. Eu vou e falo com a professora dela porque é importante a professora saber que eu quero ajudar minha filha, ne? Eu tô vendo que escola é uma coisa muito importante e pode ser divertido também. Eu prefiro tá qui na sala do que muitos outro lugares. Porque a gente conversa e aprende junto quase todo dia.
Mariana: Um-hum.

Neide: Quando eu era criança eu não pude aprender a ler e escrever, sabe. Agora eu tô aprendendo. É daqui pra frente. Eu tô mudando minha vida. Eu quero que minha filha tenha coisa que eu num tive. Eu quero ser uma boa mãe.

Mariana: Como?

Neide: Ela tá começando a me ver lendo e escrevendo. Ela tá começando a querê ler e escrever também. No futuro ela pode ter mais sucesso, mas, coisa que eu não tive. Eu fui criada em condições, como, como, mais difícil, numa fazenda. Num tinha escolas. Eu espero que ela va ter melhor. Ela vai se sair bem nas escola e ter sucesso na vida.

Pages 193-194

Mariana: Me conta sobre seu filho.

Maria: Meu filho tem sete anos. Ele vai pra escola. Ele já sabe como ler e escrever. Ele sabia antes d’eu começar.
Mariana: Antes de você começar?

Maria: É. Eu vim pro círculo porque Antônio já sabia como ler e escrever e eu não. Ele é muito inteligente. Ele tava começando a ter vergonha de mim. Eu num sabia eu num sabia ler e escrever.

Mariana: Um-hum.

Maria: E a professora dele mandava bilhetes, e ele escrevia minhas respostas, mas depois de um tempinho, ele começou a não me mostrar mais os bilhetes. Ele achava que eu era burra, e ele não queria ser como eu. Isso dói muito.

Mariana: Eu sei.

Maria: Eu também num queria que ele fosse como eu. Eu queria que ele se desse melhor. Mas eu queria que ele soubesse que que eu amava ele, que eu trabalhava duro. Eu queria que ele respeitasse a mãe dele, pra saber que eu quero ser uma boa mãe.

Mariana: É!

Maria: Eu queria que ele fosse respeita a aminha mãe também, sabe? Ele tava começando a se portar mal. Dizer coisa que ele num devia dizer. Ele
pensava que porque ele sabia mais ele era melhor que eu; melhor que minha mãe

Mariana: Um- hum.

Maria: Na realidade, ele não sabia tanto, mas ele tinha vergonha de mim. Agora que eu tô aqui, a gente tá mais proximo de novo. Eu acho que se eu num tivesse voltado pra escola, eu ia perder ele, o respeito dele. Ele ia terminar como um desses meninos que num respeitam suas mães. Eu num queria isso. Aí, eu vim.

Mariana: E—

Maria: —Agora ele tá começando a entender. Eu num podia ir pra escola quando eu tinha a idade dele. A gente conversa como nos círculos. A gente tem problema, a gente conversa sobre ele.

Pages 199-200

Mariana: Ele não tá na escola?

Rose: Não. Ele é deficiente.
Mariana: Um-hum.

Rose: Algumas mães reclama que seus filho tem uma professora ruim. Meu filho num tem professora nenhuma. É por isso que eu vim. Eu é que tenho que ensinar ele.

Mariana: Então, não tem escolas pra ele?

Rose: Não. Eu tenho que deixar ele com minha mãe quando eu vou trabalhar. Eu tomo conta de outro menino. Ele tem que ficar sem outras criança. Eu quero que ele aprenda. Eles dizem que ele é deficiente, mas eu sei que ele pode aprender. Ninguém vai ensinar ele, então eu vou.

Mariana: E esse outro menino?

Rose: Ele é rico. Se ele fosse deficiente, a mãe dele pagava uma professora pra ensinar ele. Mas a gente é pobre. Eu sou sozinha, por mim, por Alex, por meus pais. Eu tenho que me sair melhor.

Mariana: Você tá—
Rose: —Eles dizem que quando ele aprender como se lê, ele pode ir pra escola. Com certeza, quando ele for pra escola, eu nunca vou tirar ele de lá. Gente pobre como a gente; a gente num tem muito pra dar pros filho da gente. Acima de tudo é os estudo.

Mariana: Quando ele fô pra escola?


Pages 228-229

Josi: ...A professora disse que eu precisava ser uma boa mãe. Eu fui Lá outro dia...e disse que eu tava tentado ser uma boa mãe, indo pra escola e tudo. Agora ela precisava tentar ser uma boa professora. Eu disse pra ela que a gente aprendia nesse programa e como os meus meninos se saiam bem. Eu disse pra ela se colocasse eles pra estudar coisa que eles fazem todo dia eles podem se sair melhor na escola. Agora eu sei que não depende de mim ou deles só. Depende da professora. Eles sabem muito. A professora
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(Italics: this part was excluded from the excerpt)

Mariana: E depende da professora?

Josi: É, depois que ela me disse pr’eu ser uma boa mãe, eu tava pensando. Ela nem é uma mãe. Num é sendo uma boa mãe que vai ajudar. Ela não quer ser a responsável se meus menino num aprenderem. Eu pensei no que ela me disse. Num é a verdade. É a verdade dela. A verdade é que meus meninos precisam de uma professora boa. Eles precisam de uma
professora que va ensinar eles. Eu pensei muito no que ela tinha dito. Eu num acreditei no que ela disse. Eu pensei e cheguei a uma solução. Ai eu fui lá e disse pra ela. Eu quero que ela seja uma professora boa.

Mariana: Você conversou sobre isso no círculo?

Josi: Mais dentro da minha cabeça, dentro da minha cabeça.

Pages 244-245

Mariana: E pra outras pessoa?

Josi: Pr’essas pessoas que por algum motivo num tiveram uma chance de aprender como se lê e escreve, eu digo pr’eles voltarem pra escola, pro círculo, porque é isso que eles tem de bom, isso é que pode ajudar eles a mudar suas vidas. Mas não é só eles. Eu ia dizer ao governo pra dar incentivos pr’aqueles que num tem porque aí eles iam vim e ver como é importante.

Mariana: Me conta mais sobre o círculo que você vai.
Maria: Eu já aprendi muitas coisas. É muito bom. Se eu pudesse aprender como ler e escrever, eu ia dizer pra eles pra vim imediatamente e se matricular. É a única chance deles se sentirem que são alguém. Que eles tem valor.

Mariana: Como?

Lucia: As pessoas que não sabem como ler e escrever...pessoas fazem graça deles. Dizem pra eles o ônibus errado e outras coisas também. Se eles aprenderem como se ler e escrever eles não precisam ser humilhados. Eles são visto como pessoas melhores.

Mariana: Qual é a solução?

Mara: A pílula

Mariana: A pílula?

Mara: É, mas só escondido. Se essas mulheres num quiserem terminar como putas ou trabalhando na cozinha dos outros, elas precisam de uma educação. Elas podem ter criança depois de completarem sua educação.
Eles não deviam fazer isso, mas se elas vão fazer elas precisam usar a pílula. Elas podem mudar suas vidas antes das crianças.

Mariana: Você vai ensiná ele a ler?


Mariana: Você disse que sua vizinha veio porque você disse—

Susana: —Venha agora. Eu disse pra ela que no círculo ninguém ia fazer graça dela. Que ela ia aprender. Que ela não precisava ter medo. Que a gente aprende conversando é todo mundo tem coisas pra contribuir.
Endnotes:

i Grammatical and framing agency were conceptualized by Betsy Rymes, Mariana Souto Manning, Csilla Weninger, and Cati Brown, the Athens Discourse Inquiry Group (ADIG).

ii Pictures used are xilogravura paintings by unknown Brazilian artists. These paintings are available at the Museu de Arte da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC). Such paintings are quite common in the Northeastern region of Brazil, and commonplace in the city of Bezerros, where six of the women participants of this study lived at the time. Each is made of a large hand-carved wood print which, used in conjunction with black paint, allows copies to be widely available. It was through xilogravuras that posters were first made in that region of the country (Bittencourt, 2004).