

LITERACY NARRATIVES TOWARD IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY
IN A FIRST-GRADE CLASSROOM

by

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(Under the Direction of Bob Fecho)

ABSTRACT

In this study, Andrea M. Pintaone-Hernandez discusses how notions of identity and community are intricately linked with the enactment of a critical literacy pedagogy in one first-grade classroom at a suburban elementary school in the Southeast. Building on the work of Bakhtin, Hermans and Kempen, Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Shannon, and Freire, Pintaone-Hernandez examines the ways in which notions of the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the polyphonic novel and polyphonic identity can be used as a lens for examining literacy events in a classroom learning community. Narrative vignettes are used to show the interconnectedness of this theory of community with student academic achievement, the role home and school codes play in literacy education, and the value of a student's life outside school on his/her literacy learning.

INDEX WORDS: Identity, Community, Literacy, Literacy Education, Critical Literacy, Vignette, Narrative Research

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B.S., The University of Central Florida, 1999

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2002

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DEDICATION

To my husband, George Elliott Hernandez...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee, Michelle Commeyras and Margaret Wilder for their enduring support.

Thank you to my Major Professor, Bob Fecho, for never letting me doubt myself as a writer and a scholar, and whose encouragement has meant more than I can say.

Thank you to Karen Hankins and her students for allowing me to be a part of their extraordinary classroom community.

And thank you to my family. They always believed I could do it – and they were right! ☺

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important lessons I've learned so far as a researcher/volunteer in Dr. Evans' first grade classroom is that first graders tattletale on each other constantly. So this morning, while I was helping some children write a story, I wasn't really taken aback when Ashley came up to me and said, "Miss Pintaone! Miss Pintaone! Robert just called me 'Kool-Aid Head'." Being the liberally-minded middle-class white teacher I am, I turned on my 'best-teacher-voice' and asked, "By tattling on Robert, are you being helpful or hurtful?" She stared blankly at me. I continued, "Telling the teacher if someone is hurting you or someone else is being helpful, but telling the teacher something just to watch someone else get into trouble is being hurtful." Still no response from Ashley. Finally I offered, "Ashley, you seem very upset that Robert called you 'Kool-Aid Head.' Why don't you use your words and tell him that it bothers you and not to do it again." Satisfied with that suggestion, Ashley went back to her table where Robert was sitting, and continued to work.

While the students were on the playground later that day, I had the opportunity to talk about the incident with the teacher, Dr. Evans. I remarked about how strange it seemed to call someone a "Kool-Aid Head." She agreed, and said she had heard the children say "Kool-Aid Head" quite a lot lately, and she wanted to find out what it all meant. When we came back inside, Dr. Evans called a class meeting on the floor in the front of the classroom. She began by asking, "If someone were to call you a 'Kool-Aid

Head' what does that mean?" Amanda, one of the white students in the class raised her hand and said, "That means you have Kool-Aid in your hair!" To me, this sounded perfectly reasonable, but Dr. Evans wasn't convinced. She said, "That could be it, but I think it might mean something else too because I have heard people in this class call their friends 'Kool-Aid Heads' a lot lately, and it doesn't sound like it is a nice thing to call someone." The children looked at one another, and it seemed as if they were waiting for someone to muster up the courage to tell the teachers what this saying really meant.

Finally Tambrika raised her hand and said, "It's like when someone tells you, 'You all up in the Kool-Aid, don't know the flava!'" The children proceeded to discuss probable meanings for this saying, their suggestions ranging from quite literal to abstract. Finally Tambrika enlightened us all by explaining that being "up in the Kool-Aid" simply meant that you needed to mind your own business...

This event, on an 'ordinary' day in a first grade classroom in a suburban community in the Southeast exemplifies the multitude of ways literacy events can take place in the classroom throughout the school day. Literacy, as illustrated by the preceding example, is far more than the mere decoding of written text. In fact, literacy events occur throughout the day – at school and at home – as we make meaning of the world (text) around us. Fecho (Fecho, 2002) explains: "Learners derive meaning from transactions with text. When text is defined as essentially anything that can be read for meaning through audio, linguistic, spatial, visual, gestural, and multimodal means, literacy serves as a key means of understanding our worlds" (p. 98).

In addition to illustrating this more holistic view of literacy, the vignette also speaks to the nature of specific classroom described. It is a space where the teacher

positions herself as a learner as well as a teacher/facilitator. Also, the children in this classroom seem at ease in discussing subjects, such as the then-popular slang term, not only in an open forum with the rest of the class, but also with the teacher. The children seem confident and at ease in discussing these issues not generally included in the first-grade curriculum. As described in the vignette, the teachers and children in this first classroom are all members of a supportive learning community.

Purpose of the Study

In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton introduced the America Reads campaign, an essential component of his “national crusade for education standards” (Knobel, 1999, p. 4). Though perhaps well-intentioned, this plan, as well as countless programs like it, reduces “literacy” to a discreet, apolitical skill set which can be attained by following prepackaged curricula. With this kind of political rhetoric, schools often rush to find the “best” methods for teaching reading, forgetting literacy’s power as a socially constructed meaning-making process. Peterson (Peterson, 1992) wrote that the most important discovery he ever made about teaching was that “community in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique” (p. 17). The fact is, little is known about the possibilities for the creation of community in classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of the following study is to describe, through the use of narrative vignettes, the ways in which literacy can create and foster community in one first-grade classroom at a suburban elementary school in the Southeast.

Exploratory Questions

To gain a better understanding of a learning community supported by literacy events, several important questions guided the research: (a) How is literacy defined in

this classroom? (b) What is the range and variation of literacy events in this classroom? (c) What structures or frameworks have been established by the teacher and paraprofessional and maintained by students that support these notions of literacy? (d) How is community defined in this classroom? (e) What is the range and variation of community relations in the classroom? (f) How does the teacher and paraprofessional, in conjunction with the students maintain the classroom community through literacy events?

Summary

The purpose of this study is to describe the ways in which literacy can create and foster community in one first-grade classroom at a suburban elementary school in the Southeast. Hopefully, the benefit of enacting this kind of pedagogical stance in a primary classroom can expand the possibilities of using literacy and discourse to reinvent oppressive institutions, “to critique and reform the rules for the conversion of cultural and textual capital in communities... and to explore the possibilities of heteroglossic social contracts and hybrid cultural actions” (Luke, 1997, p. 9).

Socially contextualized notions of literacy gained attention in the late 1990’s. These notions of literacy argue that the failures of literacy education programs are not based in individual, educational, family, or cultural deficiencies. Rather, they are innately connected with the changing demographics of communities surrounding schools, new and hybrid student bodies, and other large-scale social, cultural, and economic changes on institutions and society. As educators begin to enact critical literacies they are, in essence, asking themselves, “What kinds of literate practices, for whom, fitted for what kinds of social and economic formations can and should be constructed and sanctioned through teaching?” (Luke, 1997).

Despite the wide-ranging ideas about critical literacy pedagogy, it is certain that specific, certified, visibly displayed levels of literate practice become requisites for acquiring cultural capital necessary for entry into institutional and public life (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Simply, in order to survive economically, socially, and politically in capitalist American culture, individuals need to be fluent in speaking, reading, writing, and acting a certain way: “Students today are influenced, if not quite consumed, by greed and self-interest in a capitalist marketplace where brute competition and other Darwinian values combine with an ethic of consumption to set the terms of ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ in American life” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 49). Although access to critical literacies cannot guarantee one’s access into certain spheres of public life, without such opportunities those individuals can easily be systematically excluded from these social, cultural, and economic opportunities.

Although educators who choose to enact a critical stance on literacy in their classroom communities begin from the recognition of the inherent social and political character of literacy, their range of beliefs about the delivery and products of this pedagogy are far-reaching. In turn, little is known about the possibilities for the creation of community in classrooms through the enactment of a critical literacy pedagogy in primary classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe how community is created and maintained through a critical literacy pedagogy in one suburban first grade classroom in the Southeast. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework based upon the centripetal and centrifugal tensions of language development (Bahktin, 1981; Bakhtin, Holquist, & Emerson, 1986) and identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), and extends these notions to include how communities are formed and sustained in classrooms. Chapter 3

describes the method of how this observation-interview study was conducted, as well as why vignettes are used to present the data. Chapter 4 includes vignettes that illustrate themes that emerged from the data. Finally, Chapter 5 describes the educational importance of the study and its educational implications.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

My view of community, concerned with the roles that literacy as well as asymmetrical power relations play in its creation, stems from Bakhtinian notions of the centripetal and centrifugal tensions of language (Bakhtin, 1981). Considering Bakhtin's notions of these dynamic forces of language, in addition to the notion of polyphonic identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), this idea of community is an extension of these constructs.

In this chapter, first I will describe the Bakhtin's idea of the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the language of the novel, as well as how those ideas can be useful to describing characteristics of all languages. Next, I will show how Hermans and Kempen (1993) built upon those Bakhtinian theories to include how identity development shapes and is shaped by similar centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Based on the work of both Bakhtin and Hermans and Kempen, I argue that community is also subject to the same centripetal and centrifugal forces as language and identity, since community is necessarily dependent upon these. Finally, I propose that the enactment of a critical literacy in the classroom is what allows these centripetal and centrifugal forces to remain in a constant, yet balanced transaction – enabling the community to thrive.

Centripetal and Centrifugal Notions of Language

In theorizing the way in which language is formed and evolves, Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981; Bahktin, et al., 1986) proposes a polyphonic, dialogic notion of language. According to Bakhtin, languages, in order to survive, must have both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Centripetal qualities are those that unify a language. For example, English-speaking Americans from the Northeast are able to communicate with Mid-Westerners, though speakers from these regions may have distinct accents and dialects. The centripetal forces between these “voices” are what allow English-speaking Americans to communicate with others throughout the nation. In his work, Bakhtin is describing the language of the novel, though others have broadened his theories to describe language more holistically.

The primary author, if he expresses a direct word, cannot simply be a writer. One can tell nothing from the face of a writer (the writer is transformed into a commentator, a moralist, a scholar, and so forth). Therefore, the primary author clothes himself in *silence*. But this silence can assume various forms of expression, various forms of reduced laughter (irony), allegory, and so forth. (Bakhtin et al., 1986, p. 149)

The primary author ‘silences’ himself/herself, and begins to ‘speak the language’ of the commentator, moralist, or scholar through the novel. Here, Bakhtin is describing how authors use the language of the novel to give their writing a unique voice, one that gives the novel its own unique character, but which allows the author to recognize the work as his/her own.

Equally important to languages are centrifugal forces. A centrifuge, a device that separates components of a whole, is a useful metaphor to describe how languages maintain their vitality. As speakers of a language adapt that language to describe their lived experiences, those with varying experiences will adapt their language accordingly. As previously argued, these tendencies are what distinguish the voice of the primary author from that of the novel itself. They may use different expressions, pronounce words differently, or follow different mores of conversation.

Language, therefore, depends on continuous dialogic transactions between these centripetal and centrifugal qualities. A language must have certain constants in order for people to communicate with one another. Conversely, a language must be dynamic enough to adapt, in order to describe the thoughts and experiences of its speakers: “Quests for my own word are in fact quests for a word that is not my own, a word that is more than myself; this is a striving to depart from one’s own words, with which nothing essential can be said” (Bakhtin et al., 1986, p. 149). It is only through the dialogue between our own words and our departures from them that we can make meaning of the world.

Centripetal and Centrifugal Notions of Identity

If identity is associated with language development and usage, then it can be argued that notions of identity are similarly subject to centripetal and centrifugal forces in constant transaction. James (1892) describes this transactional notion of identity as the self as knower, or the “I,” and its relationship to the “me”:

The consciousness of Self involves a stream of thought, each part of which as 'I' can remember those which went before, know the things they knew, and care

paramountly for certain ones among them as 'Me,' and appropriate to these the rest. (p. 215)

In that theory, he makes a distinction between two aspects of self, the self as subject, or the "I," and the self as object, or the "Me." A hundred years later, Hermans and Kempen (1993) proposed an account of the self, which they call the "dialogical self." The dialogical self combines James' distinction between the "I" and "Me", with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of the polyphonic novel.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) build on the work of Bakhtin (Bakhtin et al., 1986) by arguing that our overall identity, the "I," depends upon the dialogic nature of our multiple, contextual identities, the "me". In proposing the notion of a dialogical self, Hermans and Kempen (1993) state that they are "approaching the self as a polyphonic novel; that is, a novel where different voices, often of a markedly different character and representing a multiplicity of relatively independent worlds, interact to create a self-narrative" (p. 208). This argument, centered in Bakhtin's (1981) theory of the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of the language of the novel, presupposes that the self (identity), is constituted in some fashion out of a multitude of voices (identities), each with its own quasi-independent perspective, and that these voices are in a dialogical relationship with each other. Bakhtin (Bakhtin et al., 1986) wrote that a text is simultaneously filled with "varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-ownness,' varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (p. 89).

In elaborating "voice" and its importance in the formation of identity, the authors state:

In order to become dialogical, personal meanings (e.g., an idea, a thought about something, a judgment) must be embodied. Once embodied, there is a 'voice', which creates utterances that can be meaningfully related to the utterances of another voice. It is only when an idea or thought is endowed with a voice and expressed as emanating from a personal position in relation to others that dialogical relations emerge. (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, pp. 212-3)

We use our language to express our thoughts, but these thoughts are only communicated as far as other individuals understand them. In turn, our identities are shaped by how we perceive others' understandings of ourselves: "*Voice* is the tool with which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives (Shannon, 1995). Therefore, to hear one's voice is to view it as shaped by its owners relationships to power, cultural history, and experiences (Giroux, 1992). Diversity, discomfort, conflict, risk, and even threat among individuals is inevitable as voice gives shape to identity as a function of race, class, and gendered experiences.

Voice is the subjective, or centripetal, element of one's own identity – what makes *my* identity, what *I* believe in, how *I* choose to live my life, and what particular values *I* choose to adhere to. Simultaneously voice can also act centrifugally to characterize one's social roles and actions. Individuals have a plethora of voices:

Individuals have as many voices as they have group memberships, and they use these multiple voices through immersion in the daily life of the socially significant groups which initiate them into approximate dress, values, and

behaviors as well as language the language of group membership. (Shannon, 1995, p. 7)

Hermans and Kempen cite an example by James (1890): “As a man I pity you, but as an official I must show you no mercy; as a politician I regard him as an ally, but as a moralist I loathe him” (as cited in Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 114). This utterance illustrates the concept of the dialogic, polyphonic transactions between identities that exist in every individual. First, there is the individual speaking in the literal sense. Second, although there is only one person speaking, “I,” he is relating the perspectives of entire groups, officials, politicians, and moralists. Third, these varying perspectives contradict one another. However, as Hermans and Kempen (1993) describe, the most noteworthy term in this example is ‘but,’ because it is this word that implies the dialogue between the contradictory perspectives: “This dialogical opposition implies that the two voices, in their disagreement, entertain mutual relationships having the quality of an exchange” (p. 114).

James explicitly states these identities discreetly, “...as a man...as an official...as a politician...” but all of us have these multiple identities which, when contextualized, compose our unique personality, our humanity. We all play different roles every day, throughout all our lives. Using my own life as an example, my identities include myself as a teacher, spouse, pet-owner, runner, and scholar (this list is in no way exhaustive). Here, it is the centripetal tendencies of identity that allow these multiple identities of mine to retain an essential and unique “me-ness.” So that for example, my spouse can still recognize me while I am with my students or out for a run, though I may have a different demeanor, gestures, or vocabulary.

Conversely, the centrifugal tendencies of identity are what enrich life, allowing individuals to adapt to new and different contexts. In my example, it would be absurd to imagine my scholar-identity being identical to my pet-owner identity. If they were exactly the same, I probably would not be very successful or fulfilled by either. But the centrifugal aspects of my identity allow me to relate to the specific contexts of my surroundings, and their many variations therein, enabling me to transact, make meaning, of the world around me.

Centripetal and Centrifugal Notions of Community

Language, as it has been argued here, is comprised of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in constant transaction (Bakhtin et al., 1986). In turn, our language shapes our identity by putting these tendencies in dialogue with one another (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Community, then, can also be argued to be subject to these same centripetal and centrifugal transactions. Just as with language and with identity, the centripetal qualities of community contribute a sense of unity and provide a common purpose. A community without centripetal tendencies deteriorates through anarchy. Concurrently, the centrifugal aspects of community prevent it from becoming a “melting pot,” where individuals lose their unique identity and language for the sake of the community. A community without these centrifugal forces becomes a fascist state.

A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct ... The structure, than, on which the self is built is this response which is common to all, for one has to be a member of a community to be a self. (Mead & Morris, 1934, p. 162)

Because community is subject to these dialogic centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, there is a variety of ways at getting at community. In fact, the term “community” is itself a paradox. Loosely defined, community is a “many turned into one without ceasing to be many (Rousseau, 1991). The notion of “many” here is the individual identities, which are comprised of individual languages, which characterize the centrifugal aspects of community. The “one,” as argued by Rousseau (1991), is the centripetal force of community that provides unity.

The idea of ‘community’ is rooted in sociological theories of social change (Levin, 1994). In attempting to get a sense of the range of its possibilities, it is helpful to investigate how communities differ from organizations. By extending the idea of the transactional nature of centripetal and centrifugal notions of communities, organizations represent the centrifugal forces. Using schools as a model of an organization, they are divided into departments and grade levels, each with their own job descriptions, curriculum plans, and instructional systems, and accountability measures (Sergiovanni, 1994). Rules and regulations define and monitor relationships, including those between administrators and teachers and between teachers and students. In an organization, contracts and external rewards define relationships between people, each person negotiates individually with others and with the organization to get their needs met. Although essentially, organizations are comprised of people, over time they begin to operate independently from those within it, creating their own goals and purposes.

If we perceive schools as communities, however, relationships become redefined and are shaped by their members, rather than by their structure as in an organization. No longer delineated by contracts and hierarchies, relationships in a community are based on

commitments to common ideas or values. Although, as in organizations, there is some need for control in communities, it is maintained through common norms, purposes, values, professional socialization, collegiality, and natural interdependence: “Community members connect with each other as a result of felt interdependencies, mutual obligations, and other ties” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 5).

Linear sociological theories of social change help us conceptualize how communities can exist in schools. A linear theory of social change sees change as proceeding in a uniform, recognizable direction. For example, societies have been thought to develop from simpler to more complex forms and from a concern with collective well-being to a concern with individual well-being (Levin, 1994). What all linear theories have in common is the belief that social change occurs along a straight line, as if some underlying force was directing the change. There are numerous linear theories of social change, developed by social analysts in their attempts to understand changes in cultures throughout the world. Émile Durkheim (1960) proposed that the nature of social cohesion was shifting from what he called a *mechanical* form (based on similarities among all societal members) to an *organic* form (based on interdependence among a highly differentiated population) (Levin, 1994). Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1967) is another societal analyst who adopts a linear theory of social change. He attributes the process of social change to economic forces, which would inevitably lead societies from feudal forms through capitalist, socialist, and ultimately, communist forms of organization.

The linear theory of social change described by *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tönnies & Loomis, 1964) illustrates the transition of values and orientations that has

occurred as humans have evolved first from a hunting and gathering society to an agricultural society, then to an industrial society, and then finally, to technocratic society. Translated from German, these terms mean “community” and “society,” respectively. *Gemeinschaft*, or community, exists in three forms - in kinship, of place, and of mind. *Gemeinschaft* of mind occurs when a group of people are bonded by a common set of goals, values, or ideas: “...this last type of *gemeinschaft* represents the truly human and supreme form of community” (p. 42). This third form, *gemeinschaft* of mind, is perhaps most essential for building community in classrooms.

Central to notions of community is the centripetal concept of collective conscience, defined as collective moral awareness, mutual obligation, and involvement in a collectivity (Rousseau, 1991). Members of a community participate in common practices, depend on one another, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another’s, and the group’s well-being. There are specific values that community members must be committed to such as trust, honesty, compassion, and respect (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

As humans have formed more modern societies, we have drifted farther away from *gemeinschaft* toward *gesellschaft*, thus taking on specific centrifugal tendencies. This shift is evidenced by relationships that are depersonalized and contractual: “everyone is thinking of himself and trying to bring to the fore his importance and advantages in competition with the others” (Tönnies & Loomis, 1964). Individual success is achieved through a mastery of skills that allow one to make transactions in an impersonal and competitive world. People relate to one another solely to reach a certain

goal, to benefit themselves in some way. Modern Western corporations illustrate *gesellschaft*, and sadly, so too do many schools and classrooms.

As with notions of language and of identity, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* represent ideals that cannot exist in their pure forms. That is why the transactional nature between these centripetal and centrifugal forces is essential. They are extremes on a long continuum (Weber & Shils, 1949). All institutions, all groups of people, have characteristics of both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Both are needed: *gemeinschaft* creates and fosters community; while *gesellschaft* encourages progress and initiative.

The Role of Critical Literacy in the Classroom Community

Critical literacy provides evidence of how both the centripetal and centrifugal powers of community exist in the classroom. Teachers who enact a critical stance on literacy recognize the centripetal nature of community in that they value a sense of unity in their classroom while at the same time they also appreciate the centrifugal importance of community in valuing and celebrating the uniqueness of every individual in the class.

Critical literacy emphasizes the importance of literacy as a social, cultural, and political practice. It involves “learning to see texts as problematic, to understand the political-ideological character of literacy as a social phenomenon, and to become more assertive in interacting with written texts” (Lankshear, 1997, p. 48). Founded on themes relevant to critical theory and critical pedagogy, literacy is no longer confined to the traditional decoding or encoding of text or society. Instead, it becomes a means for inquiring into one’s own history and culture - allowing us to discover connections between our lives and larger social structures (Shannon, 1995). Critical literacy allows teachers and students to tap into the dreams, experiences, histories, and languages that

they bring with them to the classroom, in fact, making them central to the classroom curriculum (Graves & Bird, 1999). Therefore by enacting critical literacy, teachers utilize both the centripetal and centrifugal natures of community by drawing on the individual perspectives, and sociocultural contexts of students in order to unite them in common purposes such as using literacy to take action on the world.

Literacy experiences in the primary grades - kindergarten through second grade - are particularly informative for appreciating how students come to understand the power of critical literacy in taking action on the world. Dyson (2001) documented children's use of "available symbolic, textual, and cultural resources for their own childhood pleasures" (p. 13). In her study of two African-American children she illustrates how they used cultural and media literacies to support the developmental pathways into school literacy. She states, "Children's illustrated potential to adapt to cultural resources in response to changing conditions – to be playful – seems key, not only to furthering literacy development, but also to furthering sociocultural lives on a fragile, ever-changing planet" (Dyson, 2001). Her portrait of these two children's literacy development is based on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory of literacy: "In such a theoretical vision, people interactively rotate within, and revolve through, social space by means of wandering words. As composers and readers, producers and consumers, they fix textual meaning only momentarily within the shifting social constellations" (Dyson, 2001, p. 15). The children Dyson describes illustrate the centripetal natures of language and literacy development as well as identity formation as they "rotate within, and revolve through," yet concurrently embody the centrifugal aspects by "shifting social constellations" in order to make meaning of the world – or the text - around them.

Students who are exposed to critical perspectives on literacy embody the centrifugal qualities of community and hopefully will begin to recognize its power in helping them understand themselves, their cultures, others, and the social structures which serve to empower some while oppressing others: “Critical literacy is not only a tool for understanding and change, it’s a mindset” (Shannon, 1995, p. 88). By using literacy as the springboard for creating community in the classroom, teachers use the centripetal force of community to empower students to think of themselves as readers and writers by participating in their unique classroom community norms.

As the centripetal and centrifugal qualities of the classroom community are in transaction, the focus is not only on learning to read, but also reading to learn (Heath, 1994). Although the term critical literacy cannot, in itself, encapsulate a singular philosophical frame, it does represent a coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that literacies offer for enacting social change, celebrating cultural diversity, creating economic equity, and political enfranchisement. The descriptions and possibilities for enacting a critical literacy stance in the classroom, however, “there are shared assumptions...that literacy involves malleable social practices, relations, and events that can be harnessed in the service of particular pedagogical projects and agendas for cultural action and that, indeed, literacy education can make a difference in students’ lives” (Luke, 1997). Critical literacies recognize the dynamic forces of schooling institutions, government, the media, and work in the social constructions of literacy. Critical literacy accepts the notion that the issue of literacy can never be separated from the issue of ideology: “Literacy’ is one of those mischievous

concepts, like ‘virtuousness’ or ‘craftsmanship,’ that appear to denote capacities but that actually convey value judgements” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 150).

Teachers enacting critical literacy pedagogy appreciate the differences in student voices yet still attempt to coordinate these voices toward specific curricular goals such as state Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) standards. These attempts are what comprise the centripetal nature of the classroom community. At the same time, they strive to provide spaces in their classrooms in which these diverse voices can be heard and celebrated, thus recognizing the community’s essential centrifugal nature. This unique sense of community is one which “allows and dignifies plurality as part of an ongoing effort to develop social relations in which all voices in their differences become unified in their efforts to identify and recall moments of human suffering and the need for the conditions that perpetuate such suffering to be overcome” (Giroux, 1992, p. 18).

Classroom communities recognize both students and teachers as active contributors to evolving systems that both draw on and influence larger social systems (Dyson, 1997). Peterson (1992) illustrates the importance of creating a sense of community in classrooms:

[Learning] has to do with our desire to make sense of our experience, to join with others, to become a part of a community. It has to do with developing our expressive abilities and participating in everything that interests us, with being able to benefit from the insight and experience of others . . . , with living and learning in a place outfitted with opportunities to learn, a place where we can fumble and make mistakes without being scorned or laughed at. (Shockley-Bisplinghoff, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 17)

This description of the nature and purpose of community in classrooms is the foundation of my study. As Shannon (Shannon, 1995) explains, a critical literacy “must enable those who have been silenced to tell their stories and those who have been privileged in school and society to tell theirs in different ways” (p. 131).

The literature on critical literacy and its enactment in actual classrooms, to this point, has been somewhat unsatisfying. Simply, “although critical literacy is trendy in some left-leaning academic circles, those who commend it also draw their wages from the capitalist economic system it’s designed to challenge” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 23). Finding teachers who have written about their experiences with taking critical literacy stances in their classrooms are rare. Even more rare are those occasions when teachers are willing to write about the difficulties – or outright failures - they faced in doing so. In his foreword to Searle (1998), Lankshear asks teachers,

How much of the world are we prepared to admit into our classrooms? How far are we prepared to extend our classroom learning out into the world beyond, and to allow the learners in our charge to locate and name the issues that properly concern active citizens in search of a just and peaceful world, citizens who understand that the one is a precondition of the other? (Searle, 1998, p. viii)

Indeed, teachers take measured risks when sharing their experiences with enacting critical literacies in their classroom.

Summary

In the context of this study, I looked at literacy events that served as centripetal and/or centrifugal forces in the community of the classroom. This perspective embodies what it means to take a critical stance on literacy in the classroom because it redefines

what are considered literacy. I propose that taking a critical literacy stance encompasses all the ways in which members of a group infuse various forms (e.g. sounds, actions, writings, and experiences) with meaning (Dyson, 1997), and more importantly, can be used as a tool for taking action in the world. During the study, I not only paid attention to what happened during “Reading Time,” in the classroom, but rather, I tried to take note of the ways literacy activities either served as a centripetal or unifying force in the classroom, or as a centrifugal force which served to preserve the uniqueness of individuals. As one first grade teacher explains to her students,

Reading and writing are things you do all the time - at home, on the bus, riding your bike, at the barber shop. You can read, and you do everyday before you come to school... School isn't much different except that here we work on techniques, and we practice a lot - under a coach. I'm the coach. (Heath, 1994, p. 53)

I looked for literacy events present in all aspects of the school day - including how the teacher, paraprofessional, and intern “coached” the students on reading and writing strategies, as well as more ‘informal’ literacy events such as what the children did and said to one another during recess. My goal as a researcher was to observe and describe how literacy events permeated the school day, working both centripetally and centrifugally, in the creation and sustenance this classroom community.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This qualitative, interpretivist, study contains many characteristics of ethnographic research. As an interpretivist approach to the study of how literacy shapes community in a first-grade classroom, it is based on the assumption that there is not one reality of community, but many. The study is concerned with a description of a cultural group or system, drawing from in-depth personal observations of customs, patterns of behavior, and activities of daily living (Creswell, 1998). As Wolcott (1996) describes, “They [researchers] establish what a stranger would have to know in order to understand what is going on here or, more challenging still, what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to participate in a meaningful way” (as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 60). According to Janesick (Janesick, 1998), in qualitative research, the aim is to look for the meaning and perspectives of the participants in the study.

Culture, as it relates to ethnographic research, includes behaviors, language, artifacts, and interactions of a particular group of people. It refers to values and belief systems shared by members of the group. However, it is generally accepted that a researcher conducting an ethnography will spend at least six months completely immersed in the lives of those being studied (Creswell, 1998). This length of time is needed in order to gain the emic, or insider, perspective. Therefore, what separates this

study from a traditional ethnography is the time I spent immersed in the classroom culture.

The main data gathering techniques used were participant observation and informal interviews with the teacher, and paraprofessional. The data reporting procedure used includes a detailed description of the cultural group that takes the form of a series of vignettes, and an analysis of the group by themes and by perspectives, and an interpretation of the social interactions within the group.

Role of the Researcher

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the role of the researcher in an interpretivist paradigm is that of a “passionate participant’ actively engaged in facilitating the ‘multivoice’ reconstruction of his or her own construction as well as those of all other participants” (p. 115). Similarly, my aim was to listen and to reconstruct the stories of the first-graders, their teacher, and paraprofessional as they participated in literacy activities. Through the use of qualitative techniques including narratives, participant observation, and interviews, I hoped to gain new insights and knowledge from the students, teacher, and paraprofessional. I intended to provide a rich description through the use of vignettes of the ways in which literacy activities shape and are shaped by the community of the classroom.

My Background and Beliefs

I must begin by setting forth my own agenda and biases. In stating these, it is important for me to note my relationship with the teacher. I volunteered in her classroom during the previous school year on a weekly basis. From my experiences working with her, I assumed that she was a teacher committed to creating a community in her

classroom that acknowledged, and even celebrated, the range of experience, cultures, and socioeconomic contexts her students brought with them into the classroom. I assumed that she believed literacy to be fundamentally embedded in social, political, cultural, and racial contexts, and not a neutral accomplishment.

I assumed that children who have had these opportunities to become members of a classroom community would have enriched literacy experiences. I assumed that taking a critical stance on literacy and literacy learning would help students begin to understand the social and political forces that empower some groups of people while oppressing others - even in the first grade. I assumed these critical perspectives would motivate students to inquire into their own backgrounds and cultures, which would enable them to form links with their fellow community members.

Finally, as the researcher conducting this study, I was biased by my lack of classroom teaching experience. My knowledge of students and pedagogy had largely come from my life in academia, not from actually teaching. Although I had spent countless hours serving as both intern and volunteer in many classrooms, I had yet to experience the profound responsibilities and rewards of having my own classroom.

Key Participants

The classroom described is located in a geographically suburban elementary school in the Southeast. The school is in a largely white, middle-class neighborhood, approximately five miles from a large state university. Although the school's surrounding neighborhoods are middle-class, more than sixty percent of students in the school are African-American and are bused in from subsidized housing projects in other parts of the city (see <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>). This disconnection between the student population

and the surrounding community of the school is the result of a decades-old desegregation scheme employed by the city.

In the class where the study took place, there were twenty-one children, one teacher, one full-time paraprofessional, and one intern in the class. Sixteen students were African-American, four were white, and one was South-American. The teacher was a white, middle-class female who has been teaching for more than twenty years. The paraprofessional was an African-American woman who has worked at the same school for ten years. This was the first year that the teacher and paraprofessional were working together, but the paraprofessional had known many of the students in the class from the previous school year, since she had worked in a kindergarten class the year before.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling allowed me to choose participants who could provide the most useful data for the study. The cultural group, or the classroom community, studied was selected because my research interests were ones explicitly addressed by the teacher. I chose this particular classroom because I knew, through personal communications with the teacher, that one of her highest pedagogical priorities was to create and foster a sense of community in her classroom. I knew that literacy activities including reading, writing, speaking, and listening permeated the first-grade curriculum. These criteria framed the purpose of my study, to describe how literacy activities were used to create and foster community in a first-grade classroom.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study over the course of six months, September through February, of a single school year. I spent approximately three days per week in the

classroom as a participant-observer. I nearly always stayed for the entire day, so that I could gain a sense of the class' literacy activities throughout the day.

Consistent with ethnographic research, my study relies heavily on participant observation for data collection, although some informal interviews were also conducted. Observation, in the context of this study, was a powerful data-gathering tool for understanding the culture of the children. Observation "takes the researcher on a personal voyage around her own perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions which can be both disturbing and liberating" (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 84). These data collection methods provided the best data for my study because they require me to be fully immersed in the daily activities and experiences of the people being studied and allowed me to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the culture of their classroom community. On my first day collecting data in the classroom, the teacher introduced me to the students as the class' "new teacher." This role gave me immediate credibility with the children, and they often relied on me for assistance in the classroom. I was able to take notes during my visits, but attempted to minimize my writing while in the presence of the children. In order to do this I used small "Sticky Notes," which I kept in my pocket. I also used large-group instruction times to step back from the class activities to take more detailed fieldnotes. While the students were eating lunch, as well as at the end of the day, I would piece-together and expand my "Sticky Notes" to assemble a more complete picture of the day's activities in the form of extensive fieldnotes.

My level of participation in the culture of the first-grade classroom might be characterized as either "moderate" or "active" (Spradley, 1980). As a moderate participant, my role was balanced between that of an observer and that of a participant. I

observed the students and teacher during large group activities, and watched student-teacher and student-student interactions. As an active participant, I took part in the class activities along with the rest of the class. The teacher sometimes asked me to be responsible for small group activities, administrative jobs, classroom management, or chaperoning children. As much as possible, I participated in daily class activities and was present during all aspects of the school day including faculty meetings, lunch, and special assemblies.

Ad-hoc interviews with the teacher, paraprofessional, and intern in this first-grade classroom served as another source of data for my study. The focus of the interviews was reflections on classroom literacy activities (both planned and not). I used research interviews as “conversations with a purpose” (Reeves, personal communication). For the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which were used for the purpose of obtaining the teacher’s and paraprofessionals explanations and confirming evidence for my observations. The interviews supplemented the data obtained from observations and helped me obtain a better understanding of the events I observed, as well as provided data about what could not be observed such as the teacher’s thoughts and feelings during teacher-student interactions.

Data Analysis and Representation

After the completion of data collection, I analyzed all the data sources including descriptive data from my fieldnotes and notes taken during the informal interviews. I reviewed the data numerous times in search of themes and/or patterns that emerged. As I analyzed the data, my fieldnotes evolved. I sensed that my notes, although detailed and complete, were not useful for communicating my experience in this extraordinary first

grade classroom to those outside the research context. Thus, my first priority in analyzing the data was to make it more accessible, vivid, and persuasive. This process took the form of transforming the fieldnotes and interview notes into vignettes.

Vignettes can be conceived of as snapshots of a setting, a person, or an event - a narrative storied format. Their power lies in their use of detailed descriptions that give readers the illusion of “being there.” Reading a vignette puts ideas in a concrete context, allowing us to see evidence of abstract constructs played out in lived experiences.

Erickson (1986) illustrates:

Thus the vignette does not represent the original event itself, for this is impossible. The vignette is an abstraction; an analytic caricature (of a friendly sort) in which some details are sketched in and others are left out; some features are sharpened and heightened in their portrayal (as in cartoonists’ emphasis on Richard Nixon’s nose and 5 o’clock shadow) and other features are softened, or left to merge with the background. (p. 150)

Writing vignettes not only allowed me to reflect on my experiences in the classroom, and add richness to the data set, but it also helped reveal my own analytical position within the research. Similarly, Ellis (1997) describes:

I moved away from trying to make my tale a mirror representation of chronologically ordered events and toward telling a story, where the events and feeling cohered, where questions of meaning and interpretation were emphasized, and where readers could grasp the main points and feel some of what I felt. (p. 128)

Graue & Walsh (1998) explain, “if you can’t write a vignette, there is something you do not understand” (p. 221). Far beyond simply telling a story, vignettes illustrate an interpretive theme: “So a good description is not enough – the description must take the reader to a new place, providing connections to theoretical ideas and interpretive insights” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 221). By presenting the data through vignettes, I argue that this form of narrative inquiry illuminates the complexities of literacy learning in a primary-aged classroom by representing lived experience in a way that is accessible, concrete, and alive with meaning. Laurel Richardson (1994) argues,

narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes, it humanizes time, and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions and to alter the direction of our lives. (p. 200)

Narrative research, as told through vignettes, challenges notions of what it means to know and what is allowed in telling by framing interpretation in literary as well as “scientific” terms (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The “validity” of narrative research is measured by the degree to which it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible (Ellis, 1997).

From the data, I composed thirty-one vignettes. The selection of vignettes to present in this work played an important role in my data analysis. I began by reading each of the vignettes and the fieldnotes from which it was written several times. I wanted to gain a holistic perspective of what was in the data. Reexamining the vignettes and fieldnotes forced me to reconsider not only the data itself, but also my analytical understandings of it. Reading the vignettes and fieldnotes in tandem was powerful in

illustrating how I had made meaning of certain events at particular times. During this part of the data analysis, I rewrote parts of vignettes in order to clarify details and emphasize certain themes. As I reread the vignettes and fieldnotes, I made analytic memos (via the “Sticky Notes” function included in the Reviewing Toolbar of Microsoft Word) noting patterns, questions for further exploration and connections to other vignettes and/or elements of the theoretical frame.

As I examined and reexamined my fieldnotes and vignettes, certain interpretive themes became clear: (1) Differing home and school codes of the students and teachers (Delpit, 1995); (2) An emphasis on the personal academic achievement of the students; and (3) Honoring the outside-school lives of the students. For the purposes of this work, six vignettes are presented. These vignettes were chosen because they illustrated the interpretive themes most clearly and poignantly. However the vignettes cannot be considered discreetly, nor do they stand alone. They must be considered as complementary extensions of my theoretical frame, which can only be understood in the context of the total discussion.

Validity and Reliability

Merriam (Merriam & Simpson, 1995) states that internal validity, or reliability, in qualitative research is concerned with “the question of the extent to which one’s findings will be found again” (p. 55). In order to ensure my study’s reliability, I used a variety of strategies including triangulation, member checks, and statements of my own biases, experiences, and assumptions. I used triangulation by employing multiple sources of data, e.g. observations, interviews to construct vignettes that illustrated emerging themes. I performed member checks by taking my data gathered during observations to the teacher

to make certain that my interpretations would “ring true” (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 54). I also sought the feedback of my committee on emerging findings. Finally, in order to ensure the reliability of my study, I have stated my own agendas, biases, experiences, and assumptions.

Because “the goal of qualitative research ... is to understand the particular in depth, rather than finding out what is generally true of many” (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 57), external validity in qualitative research is concerned mainly with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. In order to ensure external validity in my study, I relied on thickly descriptive data to construct vignettes that enable readers to compare the “fit” with other contexts. Merriam (Merriam & Simpson, 1995) explains, “This strategy involves describing how typical the program, event, or sample is compared with the majority of others in the same class” (p. 59). Because creating learning communities in classrooms is a current “hot topic” in the education research literature, my research question is one that may have applicability across the nation.

Study Limitations

My study’s limitations included one that is common among qualitative studies. This study’s small sample size limits its generalizability, in the statistical sense, to larger populations. Another limitation is the time I was in the field. I was not in the classroom every day, nor did I start collecting data at the very beginning of the school year. Although I collected data approximately six months, I visited the classroom only three or four days per week.

A variety of strategies were employed to combat the study's limitations. First, care was taken to gather adequate and appropriate data. Participants agreed to participate fully in the study. The data gathering through multiple sources, including participant observation and informal interviews, allowed for triangulation of the data. Outside readers reviewed fieldnotes and vignettes. The participants – mainly the teacher and paraprofessional – provided input on the narratives developed.

Summary of Method

This observation-interview qualitative study describes and explains the stories of a first-grade classroom community. The exploratory questions that guided the inquiry are: (a) How is literacy defined in this classroom? (b) What is the range and variation of literacy events in this classroom? (c) What structures or frameworks have been established by the teacher and paraprofessional and maintained by students that support these notions of literacy? (d) How is community defined in this classroom? (e) What is the range and variation of community relations in the classroom? (f) How does the teacher and paraprofessional, in conjunction with the students maintain the classroom community through literacy events? These exploratory questions were helpful in that they guided my entry into the field. The questions served as a purposeful springboard for my inquiry, but once emerged in the richness of this classroom community, my observations (vis-à-vis my fieldnotes) did not lend themselves to answering one or more of the exploratory questions – instead they led to more questions that helped to refocus, expand, refine, and rethink my inquiry process. Chapter 1 introduced the study and provided some sociohistorical context and a theoretical basis for the inquiry. Chapter 2 provided an in-depth theoretical framework for how centripetal and centrifugal forces relevant to

language and identity shape this study's argument for how similar forces transact to create community. This chapter described the observation-interview method that was used to conduct the study. Subsequent chapters will present the data in the form of vignettes, organized and analyzed thematically, and will argue the educational importance of the study for other educators.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

As the data were analyzed three themes emerged which permeated literacy activities and this first-grade classroom community. The themes that emerged were (1) the personal academic achievement of students; (2) the home and school codes of students; and (3) the honoring of the outside-school lives. Vignettes are presented which illustrate one or more of the themes. The vignettes do not necessarily fit discreetly into the themes, and may in fact fit into more than one. Choices were made based on interpretive perspective of the researcher.

Personal Academic Achievement

One theme that emerged from the data was an emphasis on the personal academic achievement of the students. Considering it within the context of the theoretical frame, the personal academic achievement of students is one theme that emerged from the transactional tensions between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the classroom community. Centripetal tensions are relevant here because one important goal of this community was the achievement of certain state-mandated Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) standards. Simply, the students in this class needed to accomplish certain academic objectives before the state would promote them to the next grade level. These mandated curriculum objectives served as centripetal forces in this classroom because they constituted specific goals that everyone needed to be working towards. Equally

important though are the centrifugal tensions that are evidenced by the recognition by the teacher, Dr. Evans, that each student would achieve his/her own personal academic potential in unique ways.

*This morning, Dr. Evans read aloud the story The Lonely Scarecrow (Preston, 1999). Before she began reading, she introduced her stuffed scarecrow, Patches, to the class and says they are all going to draw the scarecrow together. She emphasizes “when we draw **our eyes are as important as our hands.**” The activity reminds me of a discussion I had with Dr. Evans last week about how important it is for the children to learn to be attentive to the details about what is around them: “**to believe what they are seeing with their eyes,**” and “**to trust themselves.**”*

*Today’s whole-class literacy lesson is about the different kinds of writing we all do. The first type, Dr. Evans terms “observation.” After the children listen to The Lonely Scarecrow, they will draw a picture of the doll, Patches, with the goal being to make the drawing as realistic as possible. Regarding their drawings of Patches, Dr. Evans tells the class, “**When you observe, you not only learn to draw, you learn to be better readers and writers.**”*

Dr. Evans then explains to the class that each student will have the chance to read a story to her doll, Patches. She uses this as a lead in to the following: “Do you know that Patches likes to spend the night with people? He likes to sit quietly and be read to. Starting Monday, everyone will get a turn to take him home.”

Dr. Evans often refers to the childrens’ out-of-school lives during the day. She gives the students lots of opportunities to bring in objects, pictures, collections that are important to them and encourages them to explain their value to the rest of the class as

well as write about them in their stories. By the same token, Dr. Evans, too, shares many things about her out-of-school life with the class. She brought in some of the stuffed animal book characters she's collected, she has several photographs of her family members and present and past students around her room, and Dr. Evan's daughter, who is adopted and is Asian, also volunteers in her mother's class on a weekly basis.

*Dr. Evans then explains that the second kind of writing that people do is "descriptive." She refers to the Interactive Writing story they had recently completed about the "Peace Plant." She explains that what is important about descriptive writing is that "you use your memory...That's very important when we write. **All the experiences you have all your life help you to become better writers. See how Timothy is listening? He will always remember this. It goes somewhere deep inside your brain... even if you're not paying any attention.**"*

Although the state had charged Dr. Evans, the teacher of this class of first-graders, with the ultimate responsibility of making sure all of these students achieved the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) Standards, she also took upon herself the goal of giving every child in her class many opportunities to feel successful at school. All of the students in Dr. Evans' first grade classroom were treated as capable and successful individuals. Although not every student during the context of the study was performing academically on grade level, the expectation was that everyone do their "personal best" at whatever they worked on that day. Ladson-Billings (1994) effectively uses the metaphor of an orchestra conductor in describing these teachers:

Conductors believe that students are capable of excellence and they assume responsibility for ensuring that their students achieve that excellence. If we push

the metaphor we can visualize an orchestra conductor who approaches the orchestra stand; all members of the orchestra have their eyes fixed on the conductor. Nothing happens without the conductor's direction. So powerful can the personality of the conductor be that the audience and musical critics describe the quality of the performance in terms of the conductor's performance, even though the conductor did not play a single note. (p. 24)

Dr. Evans and her paraprofessional Mrs. Harris, were undoubtedly conductors. Their personal enthusiasm and relentless faith were the springboards that helped all of the students strive for academic excellence. Moreover, like the conductor of an orchestra of musicians, Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris undoubtedly believe that their students are capable of success, but also believe that the responsibility for academic achievement must be shared between parents, community members, and the students themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Equally important to the expectation of high academic achievement for every student, a centripetal tension, is the understanding that individual students have varying needs, and therefore require different kinds of support. These differing needs among students and teachers are parts of the centrifugal tensions of a classroom community. In the classroom, Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris know the students intimately and adjust the kinds of guidance and structures they give the students accordingly.

Today Dr. Evans explained to me a chart she had put on the wall. The chart had columns of boxes (a total of 100) on it, and every so often she would walk over to it and put a dot in one. She did not say anything to the children while doing this, and they did not seem to respond in any way. When the children went out on the playground I asked

her about it. She told me that it is a contract she and Timothy have agreed to. Every time he is listening and not disruptive during whole group instruction he gets a dot. When he gets 100 dots, Dr. Evans said she would buy him a big box of crayons.

This is Timothy's second year in the first grade, and in Dr. Evans' classroom. Last year, she told me that she was paying for Timothy to go to after-school care. Every evening last school year Dr. Evans would come back to school to pick Timothy up from after-school care, buy or cook him dinner, and drop him off at home. Timothy has an older brother and two younger siblings (not in school yet). He lives with his mother and siblings, and his grandmother lives on the same street. His grandmother looks after the younger siblings during the day, but does not watch Timothy and his brother after school. Normally, they are expected to do their homework, eat dinner, bathe, and put themselves to sleep because their mother does not get home from her job working at a food packaging plant until after midnight.

Dr. Evans tells him, "I feel the smart genes just floating out of your head. Now I'm not going to read any of these directions to you because I know you can do it by yourself. Make this your personal best." 'Personal Best' is part of the school pledge that the children are required to say every morning. "We're going to have to send you over to the college – you are working so hard all by yourself!" said Dr. Evans to Timothy. When he is finished with his test, she allows him to use the pattern blocks on the back table. Timothy has finished first and Andrew finished second. As they are playing, I overhear Andrew ask Timothy, "You know why I'm so smart?" Timothy: "Why?" Andrew: "Because I LOVE school!"

The preceding vignette illustrates that although the goal of personal academic achievement is paramount for the success of all students, teachers also need to be aware of the individual needs of their students, and to adapt their classroom environments and pedagogical approaches accordingly. In as early as the first grade teachers, like Dr. Evans, need to instill in students a pride in their academic work, as well as the value of pursuing advanced degrees:

If our schools, from the earliest grades, were to devote themselves to the work of nurturing in students a taste for reading and writing and were to maintain that nurturing throughout their school lives, there would possibly be fewer graduate students who spoke of their inability to write or their insecurity about writing. (Freire, 1997, p. 24)

Teachers should not have differing expectations for students based on their home-life or socioeconomic contexts; rather, teachers should strive to know their students as individuals in order to help support them toward the class' common goal of academic achievement. Delpit (1995) cites notions often popular in teacher education programs as a primary culprit in teachers' beliefs in the predestined underachievement of some students: "When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths" (p. 172). In the vignette, Dr. Evans is not lowering her expectations of Timothy in order for him to feel a false sense of achievement. Rather, she has taken the time to get to know about Timothy's life and the possible sources of some of his difficulties and she has made instructional choices in order to better support Timothy's educational needs.

Home and School Codes

In the following vignette, Dr. Evans recognizes the importance of literacy as more significant than the precise decoding of text. In teaching young children to read, she builds upon the knowledge and language they bring with them to her classroom. This vignette illustrates the importance of teachers' understandings of the native languages of their students. Delpit (1995) describes that "the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity" (p. 53). Here, by celebrating the centrifugal tendencies of the community, the linguistic forms that students bring to school, teachers have the power to create a stronger unifying centripetal force in their class.

While the children were in their reading centers this morning, Dr. Evans called one student to her back kidney table. She told him, "I want you to read this story to me." The story was called Buzz Off Bee (Devereux, 1997), approximately a kindergarten-leveled text. The story had a repeating sentence pattern, with each page changing only the word of the animal that was getting on the bus (included a corresponding picture). The text read: "The bear got on the bus. The duck got on the bus..."

Repeatedly, the student substituted the word "getting" for "got." Dr. Evans did not stop his reading the first time he said "getting," but did stop him the second time. She pointed at the word "got" and asked him to read that word again. She said to him, "You are reading so well this morning, but something about this page just doesn't make sense." When he read the word this time, in isolation rather than in the context of the sentence, he was able to read it correctly. Dr. Evans smiled, "That's it! Now go back and read the page to me again..." Happily, he went to the beginning of the first page and

read, “The bear getting on the bus.” Dr. Evans did not stop him this time, and let the boy read the book through to the end. When he left the kidney table to join his small group in the Library Corner of the classroom, I asked her about why she did not correct the boy when he continued to make the same miscue while reading the story. She pointed to the significance of the student’s repeated substitution for “got.” She said that the sentence structure of the book was “not part of his speech pattern.”

In the preceding vignette Dr. Evans supports the student’s reading as a meaning-making process, and resists over-correcting his decoding miscues. She understands that the miscue the child made is dialect-based, and does not necessarily indicate a lack of textual knowledge. Delpit (1995) cites a study conducted by Cunningham in which teachers across the United States were found almost three times as likely to correct oral reading micues that were dialect related (“Here go a table” for “Here is a table”) than those that were non-dialect related (“Here is the dog” for “There is the dog”). Dr. Evans recognizes that this student’s miscue, substituting “getting” for “got” is indeed dialect related.

Delpit (1995) also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the speech and language forms that children bring with them to the classroom. At the same time, it is essential that teachers build upon these native forms in order to teach “Standard English,” which will be essential for students’ later social and economic successes. Similar to Delpit, Dr. Evans realizes that to “suggest this form is ‘wrong’ or, even worse, ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family” (p. 53). Although some would argue that allowing any other than Standard English dialect would be perpetuating “falling literacy standards,” Dr. Evans demonstrates here the

understanding that curriculum, particularly literacy curriculum, is always grounded in social and political agendas, and that these agendas do not benefit all social groups equitably (Knobel, 1999).

However, Dr. Evans must also find a way to instill in this student the importance of acquiring an additional code, that of Standard English, in a non-threatening authentically communicative context. Both Delpit (1995) and Dr. Evans realize the ultimate choice regarding the appropriate form to use in any context will be up to that student: “If they have access to alternative forms, it will be their decision later in life to choose which to use. We can only provide them with the knowledge base and hope they will make appropriate choices” (p. 54). Although it is not clear how Dr. Evans later addressed this issue with this student, there are many ways a teacher may accomplish such goals. For instance, Delpit (1995) describes examples of teachers encouraging students to create their own bi-dialectal dictionaries of their own language and Standard English, as well as allowing students to create and perform various kinds of role-play to practice these different codes.

Honoring Outside-School Lives

In order to create a centripetal force of community in the classroom, the centrifugal tensions of the students’ and teachers’ outside-school lives must be made central to the classroom curriculum. Dr. Evans has quite literally taken on Lankshear’s (1998) challenge to teachers: “How much of the world are we prepared to admit into our classrooms?” (Searle, 1998, p. viii). If teachers do not allow the ‘worlds’ of their students into the classroom, then it may be impossible for them to ever truly understand and appreciate their strengths. The students’ real-life experiences are legitimized in Dr. Evans

classroom as she acknowledges that in order for the classroom community to experience centripetal unity and common purposes, there must also be a recognition of the realities of the students outside the classroom.

During the next several weeks, each child in Dr. Evans' class will get the opportunity to bring objects to school that "represent what is important to you." She tells them to bring in the "things that tell stories about your life." The assignment consists of taking a tote bag home, choosing seven objects (one to represent approximately every year of their life) to place in the bag, and then presenting the objects to the class – explaining the importance of each. After the presentation, the child's objects will be on display on a table in the room for others to look at over a period of several days. This activity centralizes the children's unique social, cultural, racial, religious identities to the curriculum. They are getting an opportunity to bring parts of their outside-school lives into the classroom for others to learn about. I learn later on that this introduction (the children bringing things in) is an introduction to a special photography project this class is participating in as part of research being conducted by the university. As part of the photography project, each child will take a camera home with him/her and take pictures of people, places, and things that are important to their lives. Dr. Evans emphasizes that the most important part of taking the camera home is that they (the children) take the pictures – rather than having their parent or family member take pictures of them (the child).

This assignment also provides evidence of Dr. Evans' recognition that language and identity formations are inherently linked, and are essential elements of the classroom community. As argued in the theoretical framework, centripetal and centrifugal

transactions shape language development as individuals use it to describe his/her experience and communicate that experience to others. These transactions are also relevant to identity formation: “By coming to some sense of *why* we are, we develop a greater sense of who we are, at least for any given moment. Through meaning we establish purpose, and through purpose we seek to understand ourselves as agents of that purpose” (Fecho, 2002, p. 98).

The centripetal and centrifugal transactions in the classroom community are also illustrated in this literacy activity. The students here have been given the opportunity here to make the text of their own lives, their identities, the centralized classroom curriculum. Thus, the centrifugal qualities which make each individual in the class unique – their homes, their families – are being used to facilitate a centripetal, unifying educational experience. In the above assignment, the children are asked to engage in a meaning-making transaction with the text of their lives. Here “text” encompasses “anything that can be read for meaning” (Fecho, 2002, p. 98). Examples of text for this assignment might include a favorite toy, a blanket or pillow, or family photographs. As each child is then given an opportunity to share this text with the class, the class makes new meanings of it in a centripetal process.

There are 21 students in Dr. Evans’ first grade class. She has a full-time paraprofessional, Mrs. Harris, who has known many of the children since the beginning of their kindergarten year. There are four white children in the class, one Brazilian child who speaks Portuguese fluently and is learning English. There is no English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program at this school. For their literacy activities, Parallel Block Scheduling (PBS) has been adopted. This allows children to remain in small

groups – approximately three to five students – for Language Arts. The children are divided into two large groups for PBS, “Approaching Grade Level,” and “On and Above Grade Level.” While one of the two groups of children remain in the regular classroom, the other group goes to another classroom for Science and Social Studies. While in the regular classroom for Language Arts, children rotate around three teachers (Dr. Evans, Mrs. Harris, and the Reading Specialist Mrs. Johnson) for literacy activities.

Today Mrs. Johnson, the Reading Specialist and Reading Recovery Teacher, is engaged in Guided Reading lessons with the children. The first group of children she works with is reading on a primer level (according to her). Dr. Evans is working on phonics skills with her group using a computer game. Mrs. Harris is working on sight words by playing a flash card game with the students. The children will all get to work with each teacher for approximately twenty minutes. Mrs. Johnson is using picture walks, working on phonemic awareness (“Get your mouth ready...”), and fluency through choral readings. Mrs. Johnson encourages her first group by noticing their reading behaviors. She says, “You all are good readers, so sit like a good reader sits!” and “I like that spirit!” Mrs. Johnson and Dr. Evans reward the children for remembering to return their books and reading logs to school every day by giving them a “Special Snack” for afternoon snack time.

During the first Parallel-Block Scheduling time, an older student comes into the classroom. At first Dr. Evans does not know why he is there, but Mrs. Harris quickly motions for him to see her. She whispers something in his ear, and he joins the children reading from the Browsing Boxes in the front of the room. He helps two boys who are reading Are You My Mother? (Eastman, 1960). First he reads the entire story to them,

pointing to each word as he says it. The second time through, he asks the boys to try reading one page aloud. This boy stays in the classroom for the entire Language Arts time – about ninety minutes.

After the children leave the classroom with Dr. Evans to eat snack and have morning recess, I ask Mrs. Harris who the boy who had come into the classroom was. From his behavior, I assumed that his reading to the first graders was some sort of reward he had earned in his own class. But Mrs. Harris explained that this boy was a student in the BD (Behavior Disorder) class. She had made a deal with the boy's teacher to let him come and read to the first graders if he had "a good morning." She explained further:

That's why I love my bus duty. I see some of those kids come off the bus looking so angry and upset. I try and catch them and give them a big hug before they walk into school... You've got to know where these kids are coming from. Now Richard is the oldest, and he's got 6 or 7 brothers and sisters under him. If you see the way he takes care of his younger sister in kindergarten, then you know he's got to be taking care of the others in the same way. I think Richard really just needs some one-on-one attention, because when he works with me, he knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing... I don't think he acts out because he wants to be disrespectful or defiant... it's just that he learned that when he acts out he gets that extra attention he's crying out for.... I tell all the kids that when they're in school, I am like their mom. I am here to give them all the love and attention they need, and discipline them when they need that too. I hope my childrens' teachers treat my kids that way too.

McLaren (1998) states, “To ignore the ideological dimensions of student experience is to deny the ground upon which students learn, speak, and imagine” (p. 218). In the above vignette, Mrs. Harris makes it a priority to know the experiences of students. She uses this knowledge then to help each student be successful in school by providing them the individualized support they need.

Summary

The vignettes presented here in the work are by no means singular to the themes in which they were placed - many of them certainly fit into more than one. Choices were made based upon the theme they best provided evidence to support. The discussion of the themes, as illustrated by the vignettes, shows that community and literacy, in the context of this first-grade classroom, cannot be considered independently. Indeed, they consist of, and depend on, opposing centripetal and centrifugal tensions that both define them cohesively and diversify their components enough to thrive.

As illustrated in the vignettes and discussion, high personal academic achievement was expected of the students in Dr. Evans’ and Mrs. Harris’ classroom. Although both teachers were definitely aware of the individualized needs of their students, all students were also expected to always put forth their “personal best.” Rather than what is sometimes termed “dumbing down” (Bloom, 1987; Sykes, 1995) the students, these teachers helped them experience a sense of success at school regardless of the level or pace at which they were learning.

In the classroom presented here, one of the ways Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris helped maintain the centripetal and centrifugal forces in their classroom community was by recognizing the importance of the differing home and school codes (Delpit, 1995) the

students brought with them to school. Realizing these sometimes monosyllabic differences in speech patterns, Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris broadened what was accepted as literacy in this classroom. More than the simple act of decoding text, literacy activities embraced the home speech patterns of some of the students, and expanded them to negotiate the similarities and differences between these familiar dialects, and the more foreign Standard English.

Another way in which Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris kept the oppositional tensions of communities in balance was to celebrate the outside-school lives and experiences of the students by making them central to the classroom curriculum. In the vignette presented, the students were invited to gather artifacts from home that held some special meaning to them and bring them to school where they would be presented and appreciated by the others in their learning community. In another example of the importance of knowing about the outside-school lives of students, Mrs. Harris described the home-life and background of Richard. With knowing some of the details of Richard's experiences, she was able to give him the extra support and guidance he needed at school.

CHAPTER 5

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Upon arriving at this point in the work, there has been a deepening of my respect for the classroom community I was privileged to have taken part in during the data collection for this study. After data for the study was collected and partly analyzed, I spent a year teaching in an elementary classroom. My understandings of the importance of creating and maintaining a sense of community in the classroom were thus both complicated and enriched. As a new teacher, faced with the intricacies of a classroom of elementary-aged children, I came to some more profound understandings of themes related to the creation and importance of learning communities, my notions of “literacy,” and the role of stories in relaying teacher and school knowledge.

In describing the “Educational Importance” of this work, it is important to note the difficulty in simply generalizing the notions presented here to all classrooms. Above everything, this project has illustrated to me the importance of celebrating the uniqueness of classroom communities. Therefore, in describing the “Educational Importance” of this study, my aim is not to “package” what I learned into tips teachers can use in their own classrooms. Rather, it is a reflection of what *I* learned while conducting this research, and how this work shapes my own teaching experiences. My hope is that teachers can use this work as a springboard for looking critically at their own practice.

As illustrated in this work, the bringing-in and honoring of the outside-school lives of students became paramount to this classroom's sense of community. Here, the reflection on Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) notions of the polyphonic novel, and Hermans and Kempen's (1993) work of the dialogic identity became relevant. Considering these theories in juxtaposition made their reflection on learning communities clear. Centripetal and centrifugal tensions in constant, yet balanced, opposition with one another are necessary for the vitality of communities, just as they are in language and identity. In order for a community to thrive, there must be centripetal tensions that unify a group around a stated set of values, goal, objectives and/or beliefs. But no less important are the centrifugal forces that maintain the integrity of the individuals that comprise the group.

In my own classroom during my first year teaching, I tried to incorporate what I learned about honoring the outside-school lives of my students. The most significant way I did this was simply through listening to my students. This act of "attending," something that the teacher in this study, Dr. Evans, appeared to do effortlessly, was a challenging yet powerful tool in the creation of a classroom community during my first year teaching.

As presented previously, the paraprofessional in the study, Mrs. Harris, was able to honor the outside-school life of an older student by inviting him into the classroom to read to the first-graders. In my own classroom, I tried to get to know my students and their families in meaningful ways. In the beginning of the year, I sent a letter to the families of my students inviting them to "Tell me about your child..." I was struck by the rich detail of the responses.

As we enter the twenty-first century, strong classroom communities are essential. As one superintendent explains,

...we have lost vital parts of a good education: the neighborhood and family.

While we cannot return to a simpler time, we must still find ways to give children a secure place to grow up, an opportunity to play and create and a chance to converse with adults. (Sergiovanni, 1994)

Students who are not getting their needs for community met by neighborhoods and families either create artificial and distorted belongings through gangs, or become alienated and detached (Brandt, 1992; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; & Seeman, 1942). When our basic need for community is not met we become alienated from ourselves, from others, and ultimately from society (Durkheim, 1960). Oldenquist (Oldenquist & Rosner, 1991) points to scientific evidence which suggests “humans evolved to be innately social animals, to be tribal creatures and group egotists who are emotionally dependent on group membership and who are discontented and function poorly in environments that are too individualistic” (p. 92).

My notions of literacy have also shaped and been shaped by this work. In 1991, the Labor Department’s study, What Work Requires of Schools, from the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), literacy is described as a pervasive deficiency in young people of information-processing abilities necessary if workers are to be well suited to the requirements of a high-tech economy. Although this study was published more than ten years ago, it is still the most prevalent in our schools. This definition of literacy, at first glance, may seem to “objectify” or “de-politicize” literacy to a set of skills every student would have the same exposure to, interest in, and opportunity to learn, but what is most unsettling to me about this view of literacy is its value described only in economic contexts. According to this view, the only reason any

of us needs to be interested in literacy is economic gain. It is important for teachers, like Dr. Evans and Mrs. Harris, who enact a critical literacy stance in their classroom, to fully reflect on the popular ideas and political rhetoric that oppose it. The vignettes presented in this study illustrate that, in this first-grade classroom, all of the meaning-making sociocultural experiences the children have had matter as important literacy skills that are to be built upon and enhanced. The most important difference between these perspectives on literacy is that one attempts to separate literacy from the social-political-cultural-economic contexts in which it exists, while the other not only acknowledges these contexts, but makes them central to the literacy learning itself.

My view of literacy, as I incorporated it in my own classroom during my first year teaching, certainly considered the sociopolitical contexts of literacy. For instance, during one round of Literature Study Groups about biographies, one of my students (whose native language was Spanish) asked about the meaning of the word “homosexual,” which she had found in a biography of Anne Frank (Adler, 1993). When she asked me about this word, other students overheard her and began to laugh. As I inquired with my students as to why this word would cause such a stir in our classroom, we began to unpack its meaning and examine it in the context of the life of Anne Frank. By considering the sociopolitical contexts of literacy in this instance, I was able to explore what could easily be considered a highly controversial topic with my primary-aged students. I believe that this event in my classroom ultimately led to a deepening of my relationship with my students and to the relationships my students had with one another. This event also illustrates the kind of trust that is necessary for teachers to facilitate the creation of authentic communities in their classrooms. Students and teachers need to be

able to trust one another as they inquire into topics that require them to take risks and/or challenge their ideas. Had I not trusted my second-grade students in their ability to consider a word like “homosexual,” I could have told the student who asked about its meaning to skip over it. I also could have ignored the laughing by the other members of the class. Had my students not trusted me enough to ask about the meaning of the word, and more importantly, why it would be in a book they were reading at the time, we would have missed the class discussion we engaged in surrounding issues of fairness, social justice, and discrimination.

Perhaps most profoundly, teachers need to tell their stories. But more than that, they need to use these stories to make new meanings, come to new understandings, and share these with others, both in the field of education and beyond. Teachers have a vital voice in the political conversations regarding the role of schools in the larger society. Far too often, unfortunately, teachers stories are not heard either because they are not told beyond the walls of the classroom or the school, or if they are told to others are dismissed as “non-academic,” or “deintellectualized”. Instead, teachers should

...produce narratives of failure and error as merely partial success, along with the heroic stories we all prefer to write and read, in order to help this thinking advance. But when all else has been accomplished, there will still be the little things done well or poorly, the things that make teaching artful rather than scientific, and in the end always partially insufficient. These will make the difference. (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 73)

This study represents one researcher’s attempt to tell some of these vitally important narratives. Through the use of qualitative techniques including narratives, vignettes,

participant observation, and interviews, I hoped to honestly present the realities of the teachers and students portrayed. It was my intent to provide a rich description of the way one first-grade classroom community used literacy and literacy learning to build and maintain it.

Indeed, the teaching of literacy and the creation of a classroom community are not discreet endeavors. This study examined how one first-grade classroom created a community around literacy. Building upon the notion that there are centripetal and centrifugal tensions in constant transaction around the use of language and formation of identity, it adds to the literature on literacy education by extending these transactional tensions to include ideas related to communities

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