Identity matters

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At a recent conference symposium session on literacy and identity, Allan Luke began his discussion of the conference papers by asking the presenters (one of whom was Elizabeth Moje): "Why does identity matter?" As literacy researchers interested in the relationship between literacy and identity, both of us recognize this to be an important, and too often overlooked, question in studies of literacy and identity. Why, indeed, should literacy theorists, researchers, and teachers care about how readers' identities are constructed, represented, and performed in acts of reading? Why should it matter that certain literacy practices may be tied to or evoke certain identities for readers?

Because we see these questions as central to issues of literacy pedagogy, theory, and research—that is, because we do believe that identity matters—we have decided to use Luke's question as our framing question for this conversation, in which we were actively engaged over electronic mail for approximately 4 months. Much of what appears here is our actual conversation, edited only for clarity. Other ideas were added as we read and re-read what we had initially written and found gaps in the flow of ideas.

As we explore Luke's question, we will discuss various theories of identity, the relationship between identity and literacy, and how identities and literacies are constructed and practiced within relationships of race, gender, class, and space. Woven into our conversation are findings of recent studies and our thoughts about what these findings and theories mean for K-12 classroom literacy practices.

Sarah Elizabeth, you have been thinking about Allan's question of why identity matters for a while now. If he asked you the same question today, how would you respond?

Elizabeth: My immediate response is that identity matters because it, whatever it is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with texts. Links between identity and self and consciousness have been well articulated by philosophers and psychologists alike. Mead (1934), for example, developed a fairly implicit philosophical and psychological explanation of how mind, self, and society were constructed and acted in relation to one another. Similarly, although Vygotsky (1978) did not use the terms self or identity, he laid out a scenario for the development of mind in individuals as they interact in society; they internalize practices, knowledge, and beliefs about the world and about themselves as a consequence of their interactions. In both of these theories, and in countless others, the formation of self, as well as some level of awareness of self, is a critical aspect of consciousness or mind. Because it seems that selfhood and identity are linked, and because mind and consciousness (as socially constructed) have something to do with learning and using literacy, we can argue that identity and literacy are linked in important ways.

Identity also matters because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward
one another depending on such understandings and positions. I recently conducted a focus group interview with four Latino(í) teens. We had lunch together at a shopping mall restaurant, and as we walked to lunch I watched how people in the mall interacted with us. One woman looked at me and said, as she rolled her eyes, “Oh, you lucky woman.” Others made a wide berth around us as we approached. But most interesting was our waitress’s response to the youth. At the end of our meal she treated the four teens to ice cream, telling them that they were the sweetest, nicest kids she had waited on in as long as she could remember.

Each of these interactions reveal something about how teens, in particular, are positioned on the basis of their identities. They are people who are challenging to be with (you lucky woman), people to be wary of (the wide berth), and people who are not typically sweet (the ice cream treat). What is especially interesting to me about the waitress’s comment, though, goes beyond what she might assume about the youth on the basis of their adolescent identity. As the waitress walked away, I looked at each of the youths and wondered what their teachers would say about them. How are they identified in school? What is assumed about them as they walk or ride their bikes around their neighborhood? How is their dress understood? Their brown skin? Their age? These qualities represent aspects of identity and play a role in identity constructions. Each quality matters to these youths as they go about their everyday community and school lives, lives that require making sense of various kinds of text. For these kids, identity matters, and it matters a great deal.

The converse of the argument that identities shape people’s textual and literate practices is that their literate practices play a role in identifications and positionsings. Street (1994) wrote of the differences in how housewives’ literate practices are read when contrasted with the literate practices of physicians. In my recent research on urban youths’ graffiti writing and reading practices (Moe, 2000b), I have observed that mainstream readers discount graffiti as a textual form and label graffiti writers as violent, deviant, or at risk of school failure. Despite the fact that graffiti uses alphabetic letters and other symbolic systems, many mainstream readers and writers do not count graffiti among real reading and writing practices. The failure of graffiti to be counted among legitimate literate practices stems from its identification with deviance than from its textual forms. Similarly, several studies have illustrated that teachers make instructional decisions ranging from choices of texts to how much reading gets assigned based on what they believe is true about readers’ identities (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Sarri, 1993).

Sarah: In addition to the reasons you have provided, it seems to me that there is another major reason for researchers and teachers to consider identity as we think about students’ literacy learning. Who students are influences how they interact, respond, and learn in classrooms. That is, the experiences they have had in their families, their previous experiences with institutions such as schools, as well as the larger social and political frameworks in which they have operated, have shaped their classroom interactions. In turn, who they are is an individual in terms of race, gender, and class contributes to the classroom interactions.

Elizabeth: Your last point is especially important. Sarah: A number of the youth I worked with in past studies rejected the readings that teachers had chosen for them because they could not identify with the people in the stories. In some cases the teachers had chosen literate texts they thought would connect with students’ experiences and, in particular, ethnic backgrounds, but the youth felt that the experiences and backgrounds of the characters in the texts were too different or distant (Fecho, 1998; Moje, 2000a; Obidah, 1998; Sarris, 1993). Both you and I, Sarah, have studied how literacy practices—whether reading a class novel or tagging a wall—shape or, at least, have an impact on, identities and identifications. That is, readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement (Fagley, Chern, Jolliffe, & Skinner, 1985; Ferdman, 1990; McCanthey, 2001). On a personal level, I observed a shift in my own identities recently. I read Diamant’s (1998) The Red Tent, a fictional account of the biblical Jacob’s only daughter, Dinah. Diamant’s account is completely fictional, mainly because women of that time had no voice in daily practices or in written accounts of people’s lives. Dinah’s only representation was as a victim of rape. When I finished reading the book, which positioned Dinah very differently from the biblical version, I was stunned to realize that throughout my life—and my very religious upbringing—I had never really recognized the voicelessness of women in the Bible. My reading changed the way I thought about my understanding of my upbringing, my religion, and my feminism. My identities were challenged in important ways and my everyday practices were certainly changed.

I reread parts of the Bible. I had conversations with other women about the book. What’s more, I will bring these changes and changes to my subsequent readings of all sorts of material. Sarah: Your example of your own identity shifts links to another reason that identity is worth studying. Clearly, the shifting you experienced occurred as the result of reading new material within a particular context, material that challenged some of your previous beliefs.
that were based on your social and cultural background. I think it is important not only to challenge our own identities but to question previous views of what identity is. Traditionally, many educators have relied on essentialist views to explain why certain kids do not do well in school. We have tended to use labels to characterize students as shy or aggressive, motivated or lazy, and this has given us license to dismiss our own roles as educators in promoting school failure. When we consider identities to be social constructions, and thus always open for change and conflict depending on the social interaction we find ourselves in, we open possibilities for rethinking the labels we so easily use to identify students. By considering identity as an important concept that needs to be embraced, challenged, and reconceptualized, we might be able to think about students and focus literacy practices in ways that will help us reconsider those labels.

Elizabeth Right. What you are saying is that identity matters because of the way the construct has been defined and used in the past. In addition, identity matters because so many new ways of thinking about identity have been proposed, conceptualizations that move beyond not only the labeling you have pointed out, but also the dichotomizing of possibilities for identity. One might argue that people can be both motivated and lazy, both aggressive and shy, depending on the spaces they are in and the relationships they enact within those spaces. What is more, educational and psychological literatures are replete with studies of identity, and these literatures draw on a variety of conceptualizations of the construct. In short, as keep up people keep studying identity, it matters.

Assuming that we’ve established some reasons for studying identity and literacy, and studying them in ways different than traditionally studied, what theories seem helpful to you in reconceptualizing identity?

Sarah. Some of the theories that derive from social constructivist and postmodern theories have acted as catalysts for my own thinking because they emphasize the constructed and dynamic nature of identity. For example, Searle’s (1980) defined identity as “a construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices” (p. 11). Miehl (1999) suggested that identity was relational, that is, individuals make claims about who they are by aligning or contrasting themselves with others. Both of these theories talk about identity not as a thing but as an abstraction, their ideas are helpful in moving us away from more traditional views of identity that focused on identity as a unified, cohesive essence belonging to an individual whose core undists or develops over stages (Erikson, 1968). However, when we start to pin down these abstractions to construct studies, it becomes rather difficult. How do you measure a consequence, or how do you find out how identity is relational?

Elizabeth. That is something I have struggled over in writing about youth. I could paint two or three different portraits of the same teen depending on relationships and interactions in the youth’s life I chose to examine. The student I watch struggling in an English-dominant science classroom seems completely different from the same student in the classroom of a fluent Spanish-speaking Latina teacher. The student I see dressed in school uniforms are different from one another—different from the same youth playing pop music CDs for me in their room. The central question is, do they enact different identities or are the differences just performances of one identity? How do we examine the differences in these performances of identity or in the relationships that enact those identities? And how do we write about them? Most publication venues do not allow us to show people in all their complexity. But how do we move identity theory forward if we cannot write about identities in their complexity?

Sarah. Your examples connect with issues I have grappled with as well. Much of the postmodern literature concerned with identity suggests that identity is multiple, fragmentary, and contradictory. These terms seemed to fit well with what I saw in a third- and fourth-grade classroom I studied (McCarthey, 1998). For example, a student, Rosal, described as very shy by her teacher was the center of large group settings and a small-group setting with a woman who was male. However, in a different small-group setting she was eager to act as a rator to another student who was struggling to read. I concluded from studying several students in the classroom that the task demands and setting as well as markers of social class, gender, and ethnicity influenced their interactions.

Yet, when I set out to look at how some of these postmodern ideas played out in a different context I was surprised to find out that, at least, for the fifth-grade students in another study, their identities were not so multiple, fragmentary, or contradictory (McCarthey, 2001). For at least half of the students, there was much overlap in how they described themselves and how others saw them. Especially for the few readers and writers, much of their identity seemed to be vested in their literacy achievements. Rather than being multiple or contradictory, their literacy and other social practices were almost isomorphic with one another. My data made me rethink a number of things. First, while I do not subscribe to the outdated core claims made about identity by more traditional psychologists, I do think that we may be more than an incoherent mass of contradictions. Our individual histories, cultures, and languages provide us with a kind of gel that holds us together. Second, the role of lit.
eracy in shaping who we are is probably even more im-
portant than I suspected.

Elizabeth: That last point raises an interesting ques-
tion: Is it, perhaps, less that literacy shapes who we are,
but that literacy and literate practices are tools for repre-
senting or performing particular identities? In other
words, is it possible that the identities of the children you
studied were actually more contradictory than they or
their families and friends realized, but that the literate prac-
tices available to them constrained their identity rep-
resentations and positioned them in particular ways? I am
reminded of Flanders’ (1969) work here. She found that ju-
ior high school age girls carried books with them that
they knew would represent them in socially acceptable
ways, but they actually read different books. These same
girls constructed socially acceptable writings in class, but
wrote different things in Flanders’ interactions with them
outside of school (see also Fassio, 2000; Mop, Willes, &
Passio, 2000; Willes, 1955). While I agree that we are
more than an inchoate mass of contradictions, I won-
der if the coherence that we see when we examine peo-
ple’s literate practices as emblematic of their identities is
actually a coherence borne of the literacies that are con-
sidered acceptable in their particular relationships?

Karen: Yes, I had not thought about coherence in
quite that way. Acceptable literacies, again, are going
to depend on the social context; likewise, our identities
to our culture and ethno-identities are constructed in
relation to other perceptions (Tatum, 1997). These
perceptions come together and may blend or clash, as
Sanup (1986) suggested. In a conference presentation,
Antaldisa (1999b) captured the notion that our identity
is constructed by not only our own but also others’ views
in an identity-as-clusters-of-stories metaphor. Antaldisa
claimed that we are “clusters of stories we tell ourselves
and others tell about us.”

The cluster-of-stories metaphor seemed to resolve
for me (at least temporarily) some of the extreme points
of view deflecting identity as either a core or a mass of un-
resolved tensions. Similarly, Mihaly (1999) has con-
tributed significantly to theory and research by collecting
data from craft persons who described their life experi-
exes, complete with contradictions and discontinuities, but
shaped their “sub-identities” (p. 80). His work, told in
narrative form, provides data to support the argument
that settings and practices defeat who we are and aspects
of our identities may conflict with one another. I also
found the cluster-of-stories metaphor a helpful rationale
for doing interviews with several people who are close to
an audience when conducting studies about identity. We
need to talk to the individual under study, but also others
with whom they interact on a daily basis to find out their
perceptions. What about you, Elizabeth, what researchers
or theorists have shaped your ideal?

Elizabeth: How much space do we have for this
conversation? My list is long, particularly because the
list includes theorists who did not explicitly write about
identity. For example, I’m influenced by the writing of
Mead and Vygotsky, as I’ve already mentioned. More recently,
my work has been shaped by Gei (1990), who has ar-
gued that there are ways of knowing, doing, believing,
acting, reading, and writing (he called them Discourses)
that are tied to cultural models by which people live.
Although Gei did not focus on identity per se, his de-

tories about literacy and Discourses certainly have implica-
tions for identity work. As people develop what Gei
called primary Discourses, which are embedded in the
cultural models available to them, they also develop
identities and identifications. The link between cultural
models and identities is important. Identities, following
such a perspective, are at least in part culturally situated,
mediated, and constructed. They are not solely an innate
quality that one is born with. Identities are built within
the social interactions one has within a particular
Discourse community. Furthermore, as people work to
learn secondary Discourses, those Discourses that derive
from cultural models different from their own, people
come up against other identities.

Here’s where the work of Hybridity theories such as
Antaldisa (1999a), Bhalia (1999), Hall (1996), and Luke
Whereas Gei described discourses in somewhat hierar-
chical way, these theorists argue for a sense of identity as
hybrid, as constructed from multiple experiences and re-

tationships that are enacted within particular spaces and
places. Thus, a person’s identity is not necessarily inco-
herent and contradictory, as you point out, Sarah. But
identity can be hybrid, it can be complex, and it can be
fluid and shifting as a person moves from space to space
and relationship to relationship.

Antaldisa’s (1999a) notion of identities as cluster of
stories that we tell ourselves and others tell about —
is useful because the cluster-of-stories emphasis allows
for the sense of hybridity, complexity, and contradiction
that I see in identity, without diminishing identity to enco-
rrence. The fact that others tell about stories allows us
to send the important point that identities are al-
ways situated in relationships, and that power plays a
role in how identities get enacted and how people get
positioned on the basis of those identities. I might tweak
this notion of story telling by saying that these clusters of
stories are performed or enacted, rather than only told.

Seeing the stories as performed allows us to see identities
as lived and relational, rather than as something set that
we name to others. It is especially useful for me to

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think about identities as performed or lived stories in light of a context made to me by a research participant when I asked her why she engaged in certain practices. She responded that she "just wanted to be part of the story." (2008a, p. 652) Her concept of selves under scores the idea that we live our identities in a sort of narrative, and that many people are searching for ways to construct or represent identities and stories that allow them to be free.

Sarah, your idea that our histories, cultures, and languages serve as a gel that holds us together is an interesting one. It is what identities are; a gel or glue that allows us to order a relationship with someone else in a particular space? Does that mean that conflicting or competing histories, cultures, and languages could be seen as stories that can dissolve, or at least weaken, an individual's identity gel, particularly when an individual is immersed in a context or space distinctly different from her own? When I think of your gel notion, I'm reminded of Bourdieu's (1980) notion of habitus, which he defined as, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring answers, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcome without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or of an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to obtain them. (p. 53)

Bourdieu located these systems in people's past and present everyday relationships and argued that people carry their habitus into different fields of action. The question then becomes what to make of this gel or habitus? Is it unchangeable? Can it be stretched? Adapted? Haggard's (in press) work on distinctions between identity and subjectivity are instructive here. Haggard distinguishes between the idea of multiple identities that people must negotiate, and a decentered self that "pushes back on those identities, continuously shifting and changing, never fully coalescing once and for all in a particular identity." According to Haggard, the idea of a decentered self allows for more of a sense of individual agency, a resistance to identifications that others make. Does Haggard's notion of subjectivities allow us to stretch the identity gel? Or is subjectivity the gel and identity the way others see the shape she gel'takes? And are there ways that we could work productively with these as conceptions of identity and subjectivity to help teachers, education researchers, school administrators, parents, and community members think about how to bring competing memories, cultures, and languages together without threatening to dissolve one or another?

Sarah is seems that we are trying to work through how identities are coherent, yet hybrid and stabilizing, yet dynamic.

Elizabeth: Yes. At some level the stability of an identity allows us to act—we could not be able to get through the day if we didn't have some sense of self (there's Mead speaking). And yet I know that the self is present and perform changes in different relationships. So what is the gel? Is it a sticky substance that holds these different identities together, but it is also a stretchy, elastic substance that allows people to manipulate their own identities and be done in different and relational—shape is it like colored dough, in that you can add different colors and some of the color still show up, but the overall-blend and create new colors? Sarah although the colored dough metaphor seems a little silly (there is where our identities as two moos with 4-year-olds can speak-play), it has some potential as long as we keep in mind that the practices associated with the dough that define it. Otherwise, it is just dough. Your daughter and my son probably share a lot of similar practices in their identity constructions because they have shared background in terms of having white, middle-class, professional parents and live in university towns. Most likely they use their dough (both actual and metaphorical) in quite similar ways, rolling it, shaping it, trying to make figures out of it (well), those are the acceptable ways, along with throwing it, cutting it, or segmenting it into the line of pieces that we can never get out of the carpet or bricks on our porch), as opposed to kids that ways familiar unfamiliar with this substance in a different culture may use and are thinking of the movie. The God Must Be Crazy? (1981), where the young man in Africa sees a soda bottle in quite different ways than an urban American might.

The point is that the gel or the colored dough can be shaped, mixed, torn apart, and reshaped, but at each point in time there is some substance, some coherence; for it to be discussed, analyzed, and changed. The models of what it can become, the multiplicity of shapes and forms, and the ways in which it is used are, of course, all culturally constructed. Does this help us think through the relationship between Bourdieu's habitus and some metaphor for coherence, however temporary it might be?

Elizabeth: My first thought is that the colored dough metaphor is especially useful not only because it illustrates how people draw from practices that emerge from our daily lives (and carpets), but also because the metaphor illustrates the risk in identifying in particular ways and in particular forms. Although we might feel safe in using this metaphor in our casual or electronic conversation, we feel some risk in positioning ourselves in a
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like the construct of identity needs to be pushed and re-
shaped to include a focus on agency. Conceptions of
identity as suggested by Nashler or Anzaldúa, among oth-
ers, leave open the possibility for identities to be consid-
pered relational constructions. The value of keeping the
term subjective in the discussion is that it reminds us
that people bring beliefs, experiences, and practices to
bear on their relationships. The constraint imposed by
the use of subjectivities or decentered selves is that the
terms do not necessarily highlight the possibility of hy-
bird identities or subjectivities. The concept of decen-
tered selves evokes a self always in context, always
changing, always resonating positionality, rather than a
self that might identify and be identified in many different
ways throughout one's life.

Sarah: While I find the emphasis on individual agency in poststructuralist visions of subjectivity to be crit-
cally important, we cannot underestimate the role of in-
situtional forces and factors such as race, social class,
gender, and language in how selves and identities get
shaped. In fact, there have been several ethnographies
that have investigated the ways that students represented
their racial and cultural identities in high school settings. I
am thinking particularly of Daniel Yon’s (2000) ethnogra-
phy of a high school in Toronto in which he found that
students actively negotiated and renegotiated their identities. They invoked racial and cul-
tural categories in relation to others in the group, and
context influenced how they talked about themselves and
others. Several individuals used the strategy of keeping
their public and private positions on race and inter racial
relations quite separate from one another. Yon suggested
that racial and cultural identities emerged as “unsatisfac-
tory and contested” (p. 103) and that youth constructed these identities “in relation, and often in opposition, to the con-
straints imposed by gender, race, and culture” (p. 122).

Weiler’s (2000) study of an alternative high school,
in which she focused on the identity construction of
young women from diverse backgrounds, makes impor-
tant points about identity. Weiler’s work challenges trad-
tional views that assume that young women of a certain
social class or racial or ethnic group share the same val-
es and aspirations. By demonstrating how young women
attained different values to schooling, future employment,
marrige, and children, she showed how fluid gender
identity is and discussed the importance of schooling
processes in shaping those identities. Both studies con-
tribute significantly to our theorizing about the roles of
race, gender, and social class in identity construction.

What does it mean that these categories, which were pre-
viously considered essentialist, are coming to be viewed as fluid?
spatial tactics of power and in everyday social, cultural, and literary practices.

My interest in spatiality stems from my work with youth in or connected to street gangs, in particular, but also, more generally, from studying youth's literacy practices in urban spaces. I am especially interested in how constraining, dangerous, or unwelcoming urban spaces push youth to use literacy in particular ways to claim, reclaim, or construct new spaces of the self. The youth I have worked with have also pushed me to think beyond singular notions of ethnicity, gender, race, and class as I try to undo extant practices, and I have found spatiality useful in understanding these complex representations. That is not to say that qualities of difference such as race do not matter in the lives, literacies, and identities of these youth. However, their lives take them through multiple spaces and their identities are consequently articulated and across multiple boundaries (Anzaldúa, 1990a; Bhabha, 1994). Spatiality theory can help to illuminate why people of the same gender and race, with similar ethnic and social class histories, might engage in different kinds of literacy practices.

My attention to spatiality is also prompted by research in urban and suburban schools that suggests a vast difference in the teaching and learning practices that occur in those two different settings (Anyon, 1981, 1997; 1998). I want specifically to examine how the urban space—and concomitantly, the urban school—shapes what happens in urban school settings. Why do urban teachers and administrators often engage in practices of dismissal and control? Certainly race, class, and gender relations are implicated in such practices, but the work of Astor, Meyer, and Behre (1999) on mapping school violence and beliefs about violence suggests that perceptions of and practices in particular spaces are also at work in these violent behaviors. For teachers and other school personnel who are outside of the urban spaces of the youth with whom they work, marginalized youth's literacy practices are foreign, repressive, villainous, even when the practices may simply be different rather than negative. The teachers' and administrators' lack of understanding of youth's out-of-school practices, coupled with their fear of difference and of the dark and shadowy spaces of the city and school, shapes practices of control that are enacted implicitly and explicitly in language and literacy teaching (Moje, 1990).

Sarah: As my interests in the relationships among identity, literacy, and learning have developed, I have become particularly interested in the role of language and development in identity construction. I am about to launch a study examining how first graders, fifth graders, and secondary students who are native Spanish or native Chinese speakers learn English think about their identities as writers. This study offers the possibility of exploring the role of development from a social-cultural perspective while interviewing writers who may have very different perceptions of themselves in no different languages.

I am reminded of a story told to me by my bilingual friend who is raising her child to speak Spanish at home and English at school (although it is not as dichotomous as it sounds). Her 3½-year-old daughter, Lea, announced that she doesn't speak English. Only Spanish. If her mother wanted to read in Spanish, she could read to Victoria (Victoria is Lea's Spanish-speaking alter ego who is named after her 6-year-old Argentine counterpart). I find this fascinating on so many levels. The first level, of course, is that Lea is beginning to simultaneously reject and maintain her Spanish native language, even as her parents made concerted efforts to retain their language and culture. But the second issue of interest is the belief by a 3½-year-old that she can assume identities that are different from each other and that are directly connected to languages. Lea's response certainly relates to Gee's (2002) view that "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world" (p. 715), but it also relates back to the issue of relationships among language, literacy, and identity. How can we examine these relationships among them without separating language, literacy, and identity into distinct categories or without lumping them altogether? That is why I want to look at students who speak different native languages such as Chinese and Spanish, not necessarily to look at broad cultural or language practices, but to examine in depth the language and identity practices of students in different settings who speak different national languages.

I also am intrigued by the role of development in relation to language, literacy, and identity. I find fascinating that a child who is not yet 4 years old could use language to represent herself in different ways. Elizabeth, your work has focused more on youth. What do you see as the role development plays in identity construction for youth? Elizabeth: Typically, youth, ages 12-20, have been identified as people in the process of becoming (Moseenthal, 1998, 2002). Although I find the notion of becoming troubling from a philosophical standpoint, and I have found little empirical support for the idea that adults (ages 21-100) have reached some stable identity (i.e., have become something), adolescence or youth is a unique time period in a person's development. Youth typically have more freedom outside of school than do children, and in some cases even than adults (although youth are more often monitored and tracked within communities), to pursue different uses of literacy.
and different forms of representation. Because they engage in and with many different textual forms and literacy practices, youth perhaps have more opportunities than adults or children to develop hybrid identities and to experiment with different identity representations in different spaces. In general, young people have access to a wide range of funds of knowledge at school, home, work, work-based organizations, and local groups, and sometimes outside of their local communities.

I think that we see more studies of identity and literacy conducted with youth than with children in part because adolescents can be more metacognitive about their practices and in part because adolescents are in between (see Bhabha, 1994) multiple spaces. Whether or not one agrees with the concept of becoming, youth are popularly construed as being between many spaces: childhood and adulthood; work and play; home, school, peer group, and community; romance and sex; popular culture and academic culture; science class, history class, and English class; comic book and Internet; local community and global marketplace. The list of "in-betweeness" goes on and on.

What's more, because youth are often viewed as being in the process of becoming adults, they are often treated in different ways from children. Contrary to what intuition might have us believe, the treatment of young people is often more controlling than the treatment of children (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1993). And yet young people invent ways—using literacies in the process—to manipulate and reshape the controls placed on them. In the process, they develop new literacies, literacies of attention, navigation, and critique that are unique to a global and technologized world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Drawing from their work with teen "zine" (magazine) writers, Knobel and Lankshear (2001), for example, argued that "young people are not held necessarily in a 'consumer trance' without sophisticated critical capacities" (p. 19) and are continually generating new ways of communicating and representing their identities, and of questioning dominant norms.

Sarah: When I look at the work you do, it highlights the ways in which youth react against institutions like school to reshape the controls and develop new literacies. It also seems that the most interesting practices that engage youth are those outside of the school setting. I think also of Heath and McLaughlin's (1993) work in non-school settings in which youth are engaged in the arts to develop a sense of connection and community. But this raises some interesting questions. Do we always need an institution to react against in order to create new literacies? Is there something inherently interesting in the non-school settings that school may not ever be able to match? Is there any hope for changing pedagogy in the classroom? Do you think there are some classroom literacy practices that might promote students' understanding of their own identities as literacy learners? For example, I know that you and other colleagues have done some work in the area of writing practices that go beyond expressivism. In what ways do you see some of these practices developing readers' and writers' identities?

Elizabeth Heath (personal communication, July 17, 1999) has argued that there is not much hope for traditional, public educational institutions to provide spaces for positive identity development for youth, especially for those who are typically marginalized in society. A number of studies of literacy classrooms could be used to support her argument (e.g., Fassio, 2000; Findem, 1996; Lemmire, 1994; Willis, 1993). For example, in the research that I conducted in a junior high school English classroom, my teaching colleague and I found that the students engaged in reading, writing, and talking that they thought was socially acceptable within the classroom and school space and within their school-based relationships (Mojt, et al., 2000). Because of their past experiences in English classes and in part because of the way we had cast the literacy practices of the classroom in terms of personal experience and fiction reading and writing, stories performed for the whole class spoke only of family vacations or experiences with family pets and were devoid of any mention of ethnicity, race, or culture.

Thus, despite the claims made by expressivist pedagogues that reading and writing workshop approaches build on and allow for diverse experiences and identities only mainstream genres and texts are typically valued. Not only does a privileging of the mainstream stifle any learning that theoretically should occur as a result of self-expression, but it also teaches students to subvert their identities to those of the dominant culture. This issue is not unique to expressivist pedagogies; social culture defines and delimits any pedagogical approach, but expressivist pedagogies have been expressly offered as a way to meet the needs and engage the interests of all students. Such claims fail to take into account the social and cultural norms of schools and society that shape the construc-

Sarah: Your critique of expressivist pedagogies is important for pointing out the limitations of expressivist pedagogy at the same time it highlights the dilemmas that teachers face in introducing strategies that might allow students to explore issues of gender, race, and social class. I am somewhat optimistic that if we implemented some of the practices that have been described to ad-

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supporting students' native language in the classroom is essential for students' cognitive and social development as well as sustaining their cultures and the sense of identity that comes from using one's native language (Gutierrez, Basquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). Additionally, having students read multilingual literature so that they have opportunities to see people from a variety of cultures represented is important for helping students develop, maintain, or challenge their sense of cultural identity (Au, 1995, Harris, 1992).

Education must go beyond these possibilities, as well, by suggesting that we share books that specifically address children and youth struggling with who they are. I am not talking about books that valorize the lone, white boy surviving in the forest after a plane crash and coming to learn about his inner strength, like Hatchet (Paulsen, 1986), but rather books that highlight the dilemmas that urban youth might face as they come to grips with what it means to be working class, Latino, and male in Los Angeles or middle class, African American, and female in New York City.

I also see the need for teachers to share books with multiracial protagonists who are clearly struggling with or accepting their multiple identities. These books may help stimulate significant discussions about gender, race, and social class in relation to students. It is important for teachers to engage in explicit talk about these issues rather than assuming identity as just one of the things that causes crises.

Elizabeth: I agree with your suggestions, Sarah, and partially with the last point. I believe pedagogy should revolve around the notion of hybrid identity as a positive construction, rather than as a source of crisis. I also agree that teachers should offer students opportunities to explore identity constructions and representations, especially in relation to the various texts they encounter in classrooms. Reading a wide variety of fiction that represents diverse groups of people with different backgrounds and experiences is one way to engage students in explicit discussions about identity, subjectivity, positionality, and power.

Likewise, teachers of content classes can ask students to engage in writing and reading across different discourse communities so that students begin to develop an awareness of the ways that different groups communicate according to the values, beliefs, and practices of the groups. Students can examine how people use language and literacy to identify or distance themselves and to claim authority—through powerful identifications—within particular groups.

Another possible pedagogical approach is to engage students in explicit discussions about how they see themselves and who they want to be. Markus and Nurius (1986) wrote about encouraging children and youth to articulate goals about who they want to be, their possible selves, and then to research the actions and practices necessary to attain their goals. Education Researcher & Oyserman, 2001). Such work moves beyond expressive pedagogy by engaging learners in explicit self- and future self-analysis, rather than in mere expression of self.

Losing from the possible selves work, however, is attention to the asymmetrical relations of power that enable some people to attain, much more than others, regardless of individual achievement (Steele, 1987, 1995). Rather than assuming that learning as identity construction, representation, and consciousness can be achieved if individuals simply learn to set and follow clear goals, we also need to provide learners with opportunities to examine their identities (and, thus, their goals) are constructed within and mediated by cultural and structural relations. We need to examine identities as social, spatial, and institutional constructions and work with students to develop tools—especially literacy tools—for challenging oppressive structures and for playing with the power of hybrid identities. We need to build on Huyghe's (in press) argument that teachers should engage students in resisting the identities that are often cast for them, to contest the positions that they are offered as children, as youth, and even as adult learners.

Sarah: I could not agree more. And I think it is a good place for us to end—one that encourages us to identify classroom practices that demonstrate that identity matters and is worthy of discussion, examination, and reconceptualization. Identity changes and challenges are, in fact, what literacy learning is all about.

REFERENCES


