Conversations in an 8th –Grade ELA Classroom: Spaces Where Young Adolescents Can Construct Identities

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The public discourse surrounding English Language Arts (ELA) education in the United States imitates the ongoing debate over state standards and high-stakes testing (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). Since the inception of *No Child Left Behind* and the subsequent integration of the *Common Core State Standards,* a paradigm shift toward accountability and the "quantifying of ability" (Beach, Campano, Edmiston & Borgmann, 2010, p. 8) has fostered "a remedial and deficit-based approach to teaching" (Beach, et. al., 2010, p. 8). This prescriptive approach prioritizes the "basic skills" of reading comprehension and technical writing composition and dissuades the integration of logical reasoning, critical thinking, creative expression, text synthesis, information analysis, posing and solving problems, communication, collaboration and reflection (Beach, et. al., 2010; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Lacking the opportunities to utilize these skills or *explore* in the ELA classroom, students experience teaching and learning devoid of meaning, empowerment and creativity, which has become associated with widespread student disengagement and superficial instructional practices (Alsup, 2010; Beach, et. al., 2010; Cunningham, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Considering the push to take constructive exploration out of ELA curricula in favor of technical skill building, it is necessary to question of what students are being deprived when they are denied the opportunity to engage in, and make meaning from, discursive literary work. The current study looks to an ELA classroom that has remained committed to authentic discourse and literary exploration for their potential benefits to young adolescents. Specifically, this study investigates the following research questions:

- How do young adolescents talk about identity in conversations about literary texts in an 8th-grade ELA classroom?

- What discussion mechanisms do young adolescents use in conversations about identity in classroom conversations?

Theoretical Framework

Engaging the psychological theories of Edward Thorndike, Arnold Gesell, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky, we learn that maturation and development manifest through the facilitation of, and participation in, oral communication (Hill, 2001). According to Thorndike (1910), children needed direct oral instruction to enhance their ability to speak, listen and interact but, Gesell (1925), asserted that talking supports children to mature and develop knowledge of self in a natural way. Drawing on cognition and development perspectives, Piaget (1955) believed talking supported the internal construction of language as it captured children's modes of thinking and problem solving (Woolfolk, 2013). Around the same time, Freire (1970) concluded that talking could facilitate the identification and change of sociopolitical power relationships among children and adolescents. Likewise, Vygotsky (1978) drew on a socio-psycho linguistic model to connect talking with the social construction of language, learning and the acquisition of knowledge (Hill, 2001; Woolfolk, 2013). Vygotsky's theory furthered the idea that learners were not alone in the learning process, and that learning was guided by social interactions with parents, teachers, peers and family members (Woolfolk, 2013).

Incorporating the role of the school institution, Michel Foucault (1980) studied how discourses existed within the school paradigm (Hill, 2001). Foucault (1970, 1972, 1980) realized the transmission of knowledge and power as a subtle "coercive force" (Hill, 2001, p. 21) instead of an overt act or top-down process[1]. Foucault (1972) argued that power existed within the relationships among people and manifested through their subsequent discourses to create "grids of identity" (Hill, 2001, p. 21). Elaborating on Foucault's assertions, Susan Hill explained:

> "…discourses make up practical grids of specification for diagramming, classifying and categorizing the subject in the social world. These grids are put to work in institutions in ways that generate self-surveillance, wherein the subject internalizes the disciplinary and cultural gaze as his or her own" (2001, p. 21).

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[1] A top-down process of learning is defined as "making sense of information by using context and what we already know about the situation" (Woolfolk, 2013, p. 286).

Foucault (1980) further concluded that these power forces underpinned the processes of teaching and learning, on which Hill (2001) expounded, "[This] provides insight into how the everyday classroom organization, grouping patterns, management structures, language and teaching practices…work to construct [learning] success or failure" (2001, p. 22).

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) provided further insight into the relationship between the learner and learning environment by introducing the idea of *capital* (i.e. cultural, economic, social and symbolic composition and resources) in concordance with *habitus* (i.e. worldview, aspirations, dispositions, norms and rituals). He found that a student's *habitus* and *capitals* combined to form his/her practices when confronted with unlike discourses, events or spaces (Bourdieu, 1986; Hill, 2001; Knapp & Woolverton, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Weis & Centrie, 2002; Wong, 2000). Through the acquisition of new discourses and the integration of learned knowledge, Bourdieu concluded that individuals moved across various cultural spaces that conflicted with, affirmed or called into question the person's habitus, which ultimately led to a rejection or adoption of new capital and/or discourses ((Bourdieu, 1986; Hill, 2001; Knapp & Woolverton, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Weis & Centrie, 2002; Wong, 2000).

James P. Gee (1991, 2014), purported that discourse spaces and literacy events were the intersections of competing *Discourses*, which he defined as:

> "Ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities. [They] are ways of being 'people like us'. They are 'ways of being in the world'. They are 'forms of life'. They are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social products of social histories. Each Discourse incorporates taken-for-granted and tacit 'theories' about what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' ways to think, feel, and behave. These theories crucially involve viewpoints on the distribution of 'social goods' like status, worth, and material goods in society" (2014, pp. 3-4).

Gee's social linguistic Discourse perspectives viewed interpersonal discourses as the mechanism for identifying, articulating and realizing Discourses. Gee wrote, "A good deal of what we do with language, throughout history, is to create and act out different 'kinds of people' for all sorts of occasions and places" (2014, pp. 2-3). He stressed, however, that Discourses may not be compatible and may conflict with one another. He wrote:

"Each of us is a member of many Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These Discourses need not, and often do not, represent consistent and compatible values. There are conflicts among them and each of us lives and breathes these conflicts as we act out our various Discourses' (2014, p. 4).

Therefore, according to Gee (2014), engaging in discourse with others activates individual Discourses and become points of conflicting ideologies, multiple identities and possible transformation (Gee, 2014).

Methodology

To carry out this study, I reached out to an 8th-grade ELA teacher at a prestigious 5-12 test-in magnet school that ranks as one of the top public schools in the Northeastern United States for permission to observe classes. After receiving permission, the teacher, Miss Rose[2], advised me of the "discussion-based" lessons for the upcoming units and encouraged me to visit on those days. Over the course of five field days in a three-week[3] span, I observed 18 40-minute class periods that consisted of 5 distinct lessons. Three of the five days, I observed four class periods, and on the remaining days, I observed three periods. Table 1 outlines the lesson themes, instructional methods and texts used for each field day. Each class was comprised of 25-28 students [4]between the ages of 12 and 14.

As I observed whole and small-group discussions, I took detailed field notes of what the teacher and students said. For the purposes of anonymity, no student names were taken and all indicators of identity were obscured. On the final day of observation, I was given permission to record the lesson due to the rapid nature of whole-group response. Once I felt I secured enough data, I transferred my hand-written field notes to the computer and transcribed the recording using the same software. Once all data were transcribed, I used soft coding methods to make connections across classroom discussions and identify dominant themes. Those themes provided the basis for this paper and have situated the trajectory for my discussion.

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[2] The teacher's name was changed in an effort to protect her privacy.
[3] Due to testing, days off and other instruction requirements, the observation days were not consecutive.
[4] The racial demographics for these classes are unknown, but the groups appeared diverse

Table 1 – Lesson Themes, Activities and Texts

Lesson Themes, Instructional Methods and Texts Used by Field Day			
Day	Lesson Theme	Instructional Method	Texts Used
1	Claims and rebuttals Multiple perspectives	Whole and small group discussion	*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) "The Blessings of Slavery" by George Fitzhugh (1857)
2	Author purpose and theme articulation	Whole-group discussion and chapter title creation (small group activity)	*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995)
3	Theme articulation	Chapter title creation (small group activity)	*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995)
4	Bias, claims and rebuttals and multiple perspectives	Whole and small group discussion	*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) "Refuge of Oppression: To the Public, Falsehood Refuted" by A.C.C. Thompson (1845)
5	*Romeo and Juliet* pre-reading	Opinionnaire (teacher generated), survey and whole-group discussion	*Romeo and Juliet* (Dover Thrift Edition) (1993)

Emerging Identities

Through the process of coding, the theme of identity emerged in three contexts - history, generation and individuality; and within these discussions, linguistic patterns emerged as indicators of these contexts. These findings are detailed in this section.

Identity in a historical context.

Working in the framework of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) and supporting texts (see Table 1), students discussed the positions and relationships of blacks and whites during the age of legalized slavery. The emergent pattern of discourse used across these discussions was dialogic, which created allusions to the process of conceptualizing the historical text and reconciling the identities of blacks and whites. Students spoke in phrases with upward inflections consistent with a questioning tone or overtly asked questions about the text and/or aspects of slavery. The following conversation was taken from a small-group exercise in which students had to conceptualize an underlying theme to use as a chapter title. This conversation showcases the interrogative pattern of these discussions:

S: *This [chapter] was about all the murders and stuff?*
S: *Yeah*
S: *So ummm…*

S: *So, I guess it describes how cruel people can be toward slaves and how they beat them to death?*
S: *I really don't know how to summarize this.*
S: *They use a lot of violence for stuff.*
S: *so how much slaves…?*
S: *So like how they are beaten?*
S: *So we ….?*
S: *So like slaves…?*
S: *Umm…this is confusing.*
S: *I guess like the violence slaves have to undergo?*
S: *No, I guess in the chapter he describes how nobody are worth…like …like justice?*
S: *…so like the will and injustice?*
S: *…so like 'The unjust worth'?*
S: *…so like they are not that worth like…?*
S: *…like violence toward society that is not worth that much…like violence toward a 'half cent'…no no no…like violence toward animals…?*

Although the dialogic pattern persisted across discussion spaces, it was most apparent in relation to historical events within the context of slavery.

Another pattern that emerged was the way students began categorizing whites and blacks as good and evil by determining their overall beings as worthy or unworthy of the students' respect. In the following examples, the students demonized white people and projected negative motives for their actions by ascribing negative traits to the white characters and using religious terminology (e.g. 'angel', 'devil', 'demon') to represent them.

S: *They're mean…the slave holders …they're lazy and they don't want to do [things] on their own.*

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S: *We could also talk about Sophia Auld being the only smiling white person he knows…*
S: *Sophia went from angel to demon.*
S: *I think he has hopes people can change…like he sees slaves get hurt and are human too…that gives Douglas hope people can change, if one can.*

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S: *'Mister' Covey to make it formal.*
S: *He doesn't deserve a title.*
S: *I mean like some people could do like…like news and story titles with a slash…when they cannot decide…like 'plan for escape/whatever'…I think it should be 'Life with Covey/Life as a slave'…*
S: *…so we could say like 'life with the devil/life in hell' …*

Likewise, the students advanced the good versus evil categorization by adding descriptions of terror to detail the abuse blacks faced at the hands of white owners. In the following selections, the students associate white people with cruel and violent behaviors:

S: *What's chapter 4 about?*
S: The *Savage Barbarians* [referring to white people]

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S: *Chapter 3…is about the Aulds…?*
S: *It's about the garden…*
S: *We should call it 'forbidden fruit'…*
S: *Forbidden fruit?*
S: *We should call it 'Creating Slavery'.*
S: *…so insensitive.*
S: *…the' terrible trade'?*
S: *….'Horrors of the farm'?*
S: *…'Horrors of the plantation'?*

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S: *This is all about his owner…*
S: *'Mean Mr. Gore'?*
S: *'The Gory Gore'?*
S: *Spooky sounding…*
S: *what does it mean?*
S: *…like bloody and violent*
S: *'Gory Mr. Gore'?*
S: *'Gory Gore'?*
S: *It has a nice ring to it*
S: *This is basically what he is like.*
S: *I don't like these people, so I shouldn't talk about them*

In other discussions, students activated their "moral identities" (Cunningham, 2010) by using the conversations to judge whether certain actions of whites and blacks were right or wrong. In the following exchanges, the concept of right versus wrong emerges through judgmental rhetoric and rhetorical questions:

S: *Pfft…it's saying slaves have no willpower to think for themselves…*
S: *Hehe…it is..?* [The laughter implied a sense of disbelief]
S: *I don't like how he is saying it. Miss Rose said he is like saying that slaves have no imagination…like that's the dumbest thing I ever heard.*

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S: *This [paragraph] is really sad. How could you give kids one shirt and one pants and no shoes? That's like really awful neglect.*

The discussion of right versus wrong also emerged while discussing the trustworthiness of Douglas' narrative. In an evaluation of the authors' motives for writing – both the *Narrative* and A.C.C. Thompson's opinion article – students questioned the veracity of the writings and seemed to reach a consensus that Douglas could be trusted, but the white writers could not be. The students conceded that Douglas' stories were probably exaggerated, but dismissed his hyperbole as unimportant since his motives of ending slavery were of greater significance. For A.C.C. Thompson, however, the students criticized all his claims and disregarded his evidence on the basis of who he was. The following excerpts were taken from a whole-class discussion and illustrate the varying perspectives on these two men:

S: *At some time, I think Douglas exaggerated because he uses really descriptive quotes from when he was young, but it is kinda okay because he was doing it to end slavery...*
S: *I think most of the content [in the book] is sort of an exaggeration...?*
S: *Why wouldn't he be trustworthy? He's writing against slavery He got so lucky during slavery. He learned to read and write during slavery. Could you imagine that? I could see how he is not trustworthy, but I think he is.*
S: *His story is like slavery. It's certainly bad, but maybe it was somewhere in the middle?*

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Discussing the Thompson letter…
S: *…like literally...all of his claims ...are like the same? Like [re-voice] 'I was there'*
S: *…like he argues with Douglas about the system…it was confusing...*
S: *At the end of this letter, he is a hypocrite* [re-voice] '*I own slaves. I love slaves. I didn't like slavery.'*
S: *He seems fairly….*
S: *….He's gay*
S: *…so it is obviously true that he was white...so his claims are like* [re-voice] *'yeah, [Covey] is really* nice'
S: *…slave owners treat [slaves] around guests well…but they don't really know how they treat the slaves…?*

In this exchange, re-voicing (Heath, 1998) as a linguistic technique is noted, but will be addressed in the following section.

Identity in a generational context.

Stemming from the discussions following the pre-reading survey for *Romeo and Juliet* (1993), emerged a discursive construction of identity in the context of generation. Specifically, the conversations about romantic love and parents as plot themes stimulated talk around the students' identities as young adolescents and their identities as part of a generation. The use of generalizations (e.g. 'us' v. 'them'; 'you' instead of 'I') and re-voicing (Heath, 1998) became indicators of these identity constructions. According to Heath (1998), re-voicing "appears in the talk of older children when they take on the role of someone else and speak as that person" (p. 227) and is modeled after peers, authority figures or popular culture figures.

The following excerpts were taken from the whole-class discussion to illustrate the generation of a group identity from a 'young adolescent' perspective:

T: *Do parents know what you are thinking about?*
S: *No...No...No...*[In unison]
S: *What they don't know won't hurt them.*
S: [Applause from class]

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S: *We have friends for a reason…you tell your friends some things and your parents others…but I guess if you are a loner then you might have to talk to your parents.*

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T: *Why don't you tell your parents about things that are important to you?*
S: *In some cases, parents may not be supportive…*
S: *…because we don't know how to tell them…*
T: *Do you think your parents want to know?*
S: [loud uproar of yeses and other ramblings]
S: *…like they'll get engaged with it and will keep questioning you about it…so like you don't tell them.*

Through the discussion of parents, the students spoke of themselves as a group of 12-14 year olds and used language (e.g. 'they', 'them', 'we' and 'us') to portray parents or adults as "other". By doing so, the differences between young adolescents and adults became apparent. In

the following exchanges, the distinction between the groups is realized through the articulation of opposing opinions between the students and their parents:

> S: *It's sort of like...at our age, you sorta forget like your parents were kids once...like they look really old...you don't really think like they sort of understood...at some point of time...ya know...about school and our lives...like I kinda see why you wouldn't tell your parents these things...*
> S: *...like I see it in a different way...like what if you want to go to one school, but your parents want you to go to another, but they're like both good schools...or like you want to study math, but they want you to study science, or you want to go to camp and they want you to get a job...they are both good choices...how do you choose?*
> S: *Going off of what she said, about opinions, despite what parents think, their children can be very different from them...or have very different viewpoints....just like you don't go up to a vegetarian and wave a hamburger in their face...sometimes you can't go up to your parents and say certain things ...sometimes if you share your opinions you're like provoking them...like you're trying to start an argument...sometimes there's just major differences between the parent and the child...different viewpoints...different opinions...different things they believe in...and a lot of those things can be very important to a person, so certain things you just don't do out of respect almost...*

In addition to delineating a 'young adolescent' group identity, it appeared that the students situated their collective identity in the context of the macro society by addressing certain social issues that are defining features of the millennial generation. In the following exchanges, the students discuss the belief in acceptance that is often attributed to current youth culture (Gollick & Chinn, 2013; Twenge, 2014):

> S: *Well, like, let's say a person is like....gay...and their parent is are like homophobes...that definitely won't work out...so the parents definitely wouldn't like be okay with that and the person is like* [re-voice] *'well, that's who I am'...so I don't really know where the understanding would come from...*
> T: *So, like the parents don't have all the information or that they are predisposed to a certain way of thinking...?*
> S: *This doesn't apply to me, but like I have a lot of friends who aren't straight...and if they were to tell their parents ...they would say like* [re-voice] *'oh it's just a phase'...or 'it's bad' ...I guess they like have like old-fashioned opinions I guess...and those get in the way...*
>
> ***
> S: *I guess like my mom...she was bullied a lot...and she like thinks it's going to happen to me...so she's always like saying...like always giving me advice like 'you don't want to do that...*[re-voice] *'you don't want to be bullied...you don't wanna be like me'....so sometimes it's kinda like annoying...because she doesn't see the*

change and like people have become more accepting…also it's very similar to what they said …it's kinda hard because she's like always trying to be aware of the things I say, but we usually have conflicting opinions …

Across discussions, other aspects related to the millennial generation (e.g. college admissions, physical appearance, technology and religious disaffiliation) emerged (Gollick & Chinn, 2013; Twenge, 2014), but the themes of acceptance related to sexual orientation was discussed most.

Identity in an individual context.

The final context for identity construction that emerged from the classroom discussions addressed the students being individuals with personal opinions, beliefs and attitudes. While discussing these concepts, students tended to use personal narrative and spoke using 'I' and 'me' to convey their ideas. The following exchange illustrates the use of personal narrative:

S: *[Parents] are reliving their lives through you…like what they didn't um…couldn't do when they were your age; they want to do with you. So like, uh,….say like…I don't know…like my mom wanted to always play volleyball….she'd be like [re-voice] 'hey hun, why don't you join the volleyball team?'…and then she'd be like [voice] 'hey let's go get ice cream' and then she'll drop me off at volleyball …like she'll do all this weird stuff…just to make me do what she wants to do or what she wanted to do…*

Across discussions, students seemed to use these spaces as opportunities to share personal information about their individual experiences and concerns. In the following excerpts, students express their individualities as *they* see them:

S: *I can't really tell my parents about my relationship status or my crushes because they don't …know my sexuality…*
T: *Okay, so sometimes there are really big parts that you don't really know how to broach that conversation…*

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S: *I never…I usually try not to tell my parents about my opinions…because certain opinions I have…like I don't' know…like my parents…like if I say like I like that …and they like…like they don't always respect my opinions….so I don't really like share them with really anybody…They respect me, but not my opinions.*

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S: *I feel like a lot of the time…like…like…my parents…like I don't want the reaction of* [re-voice] *'oh that's kind of ridiculous…that should not bother you'….Well, right it does…I'm sorry you don't feel that way'…well, I like having opinions and not being judged by them…*

Advancing the discussion of personal identity, students expressed a desire to be respected and validated as individuals. In the following exchanges, students express frustration over being dismissed and their subsequent worry of being seen as different:

> S: *Well, if I told them all [the stuff I was thinking], they would probably be like* [re-voice] *'what are you talking about' and see me in a different way and they'd think I was a weirdo…*
> ***
> S: *I don't know who said this, but someone said that parents do legitimize your opinions, but sometimes I like know my parents call my interests stupid…like not stupid like that…but stupid like put it down or say it's not interesting…so I don't like talking to them about those things because they'll say like* [re-voice] *'that's just a teenage thing, you'll grow out of that'…it's a phase, basically…I don't like when my parents tell me that it's a phase…like my mom will say 'it's a phase, you'll regret it when you're older…*
>
> ***
> S: *So, whenever, I wanna talk to my mom about something…like she tries to relate to it…like she knows kid feelings…* [re-voice] *'I know what you are feeling; I had the same experience when I was a kid'…yyyyyou don't know how I'm feeling because it's not you…they think that they know, but the feelings…they don't…they don't like know what like I'm feeling…*

The beliefs students held also became evident through these discussions. In the following exchanges, individual opinions about life and love began to emerge:

> T: *…so half of us said we believe in soul mates…but only a quarter of you said you believed in love at first sight…most of you think that that is nonsense…but some of you think it is possible…obviously our main characters Romeo and Juliet would answer yes…*
> S: *Isn't that kind of shallow?*
> T: *27% of you in here...she just called you shallow....why do some people think that love at first sight is shallow?*
> S: *I said I didn't believe in love at first sight because at first sight, you don't know the person…so how are you gonna know if they are really attractive or really weird…*
> T: *so you get partial information...incomplete information…if you're just using vision?*
> S: *Personally, I would never know...like yeah…it hasn't happened but…based on things I've seen, it can happen…but it's sort of very uncommon…but even if it's common it doesn't always work out…*
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> ***
> S: *A lot of times, I think about a lot of like future plans like that are kinda important to me, but I don't' tell my parents , because a lot of things that I think about pass –*

they come and they go – and I'm not quite sure on a lot of things that I think about….like one month I think about something and if I say it, then the next month they bring it up and I'm like never mind…I changed my mind…it's not what you thought…and then everyone gets confused…so I prefer to keep things to myself until they're finalized…

The students' discussions about individual beliefs also suggested a connection to how students made decisions. Much of the conversation related to sharing information with parents was indicative of how the students perceived consequences and chose actions based on those perceived consequences. In the following examples, we see how students made decisions based on personal beliefs and perceived consequences of sharing those beliefs:

S: *I listen to my mom's advice on a lot of things…but there are things I don't want to tell her because she like blows it out of proportion…so it's easier to get advice from friends…they know what else is going on and they know what is happening…whether you tell your parents even if it's not about you they'll like blow it out of proportion…*
T: *What categories of things do they blow out of proportion?*
S: *If you...like I don't mention crushes or anything like that to my parents…because they'll be like* [re-voice] *'no…you're too young for that'…*

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S: *Honestly, I talk to…like I like to talk to the people who are least like me…'cause my mom is a lot like me…and she's like* [re-voice] *'ok, so like we're like exactly alike and I know exactly what you should do and you have to do this or like you're going to die'…and my dad's like more accepting like…he's like…*[re-voice] *'okay'…he doesn't really like go into detail with his comments …he just says like* [re-voice] *'okay, okay' and like* [re-voice] *'that's how you feel…it's okay'…so it's like easier to talk to him 'cause he like doesn't have like this really opinionated response I guess…*

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S: *…like this happens to me a lot…like I tell my parents a joke that I think is funny and they're like…* [re-voice] *'that's mean to dogs' or something…but I wasn't trying to be mean…and I end up getting lectured about something that has nothing to do with the story I was telling…They use everything as a teaching moment and that's why I don't like sharing with my parents.*

In these examples, students' allude to the perceived consequences of being lectured and getting into trouble, which suggested their beliefs in avoiding conversations with their parents or deliberately withholding certain information. Likewise, these examples hinted at the young adolescents' appreciation of privacy secrecy and self-expression (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009).

Conversations Transformed

To better understand how the whole and small-group conversations in Miss Rose's classroom transformed into spaces of identity construction, we must analyze three underlying dynamics that converged to remake these spaces – young adolescents, discussion and literary texts.

In Jane Kroger's *Identity Development: Adolescence through Adulthood* (1996), we learn that young adolescence is a "period of disorganization" (p. 39) resulting from the combination of puberty, new relationships and new transitions, which leads to perplexity and "identity considerations" (p. 34). Kroger (1996) further elaborates that language is "a text through which identity is made, justified and maintained" (p. 22) as early adolescents undertake the process of distinguishing one's own values, ideas, talents and aspirations from those of their parents. In the following example, we see one student articulate the visceral frustration of being dismissed while attempting to separate from her parents' ideas:

> "*I feel like a lot of the time…like…like…my parents…like I don't want the reaction of* [re-voice] *'oh that's kind of ridiculous…that should not bother you'….Well, right it does…I'm sorry you don't feel that way'…well, I like having opinions and not being judged by them…*"

For young adolescents, many of their actions and reactions stem from the need to distance themselves from the "dictates of the internalized parent" (as quoted in Kroger, 1996, p. 39). This became apparent in this study as the students "re-voiced" (Heath, 1998) many of the things their parents had told them in order to establish their individuality. In the following example, the student takes on his mom's voice to assert himself as his own person:

> "*So, whenever, I wanna talk to my mom about something…like she tries to relate to it…like she knows kid feelings… [*re-voice] '*I know what you are feeling; I had the same experience when I was a kid'…yyyyyou don't know how I'm feeling because it's not you…they think that they know, but the feelings…they don't…they don't like know what like I'm feeling…*"

The students also used "re-voicing" (Heath, 1998) to allude to the parent-child conflicts that arise during this developmental stage (Hill, 2001; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996). In the following example, the student takes on the role of an unsupportive parent of a child who is gay and attributes the conflict to differences in generation:

> "*This doesn't apply to me, but like I have a lot of friends who aren't straight…and if they were to tell their parents …they would say like* [re-voice] *'oh it's just a phase'…or 'it's bad' …I guess they like have like old-fashioned opinions I guess…and those get in the way…*"

Young adolescence is a period heavily influenced by the parent-child relationship; however, it is also greatly affected by peer groups and the value of belonging (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996). Moreover, Kroger states that "peer groups and friendships provide context for later identity development" (1996, p. 54). In the following example, we see the collective peer identity emerge through the students' use of a generalized 'you', 'we' or 'our' to represent their generation and cast those without friends as 'loners' who have to talk to the 'others' (parents):

> *"We have friends for a reason…you tell your friends some things and your parents others…but I guess if you are a loner then you might have to talk to your parents…."*

For young adolescents, the challenges of integrating new social and institutional structures (i.e. teacher, school, peer etc.) are considerable since they must mitigate the varied expectations from the various structures and institutions with which they interact (Kroger, 1996). To do so, the young adolescents in this study employed personal narratives to mitigate the extrinsic and intrinsic forces at play during these lessons (Bruner, 2002; Kroger, 1996).

 Jerome Bruner (2002) describes narrative telling as "self-making" and describes it as:

> "[being] from both the inside and the outside. The inside of it…is memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, subjectivity. Part of this insideness is almost certainly innate…like our irresistible sense of continuity over time and place and our postural sense of ourselves. But much of self-making is from outside in-based on the apparent esteem of others and on the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed" (p. 64).

As a result, the personal stories that the students shared in class became more than just pre-reading exercises for *Romeo and Juliet* (1993); they became practices in sharing personal identities. For one student, a teacher-led discussion about confiding in parents became an outlet to express their[5] sexual orientation.

> *"I can't really tell my parents about my relationship status or my crushes because they don't …know my sexuality…"*

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[5] Due to the sensitive nature of this exchange, I am purposely using the ungrammatical 'their' to protect the student's privacy.

Across classroom conversations, the process of "self-making" (Bruner, 2002) extended beyond the cultivation of physical and emotional identities to incorporate cultural and historical Discourses (Bruner, 2002; Gee, 1991, 2014; Kroger, 1996).

Self and group identity takes into account the shared values and history of a people, but for young adolescents, "beginning to challenge these new capacities using culturally appropriate means of expression is another demand" (Kroger, 1996, p. 40). For this reason, the students' interactions with the historical texts *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) and the supplemental texts (see Table 1) became practices in conceptualizing the historical legacies of blacks and whites in American society and their subsequent identities (Alsup, 2010; Gee, 1991, 2014). For these students, engaging with the text became almost as real as engaging with another person. As Janet Alsup (2010) explains:

> "[For young adolescents] identifying or relating to a character involves a mental and emotional grappling with what the character represents an ongoing interaction between the reader's lived experience and the narrative with which he or she is engaging. While reading can and does evoke emotion and memory, the reader uses the narrative experience to reconsider these personal responses in a new, vicarious context" (p. 10).

Across discussions spaces, it became apparent that the students engaged with the text on a more intimate level. As the conversations progressed, they began to identify the mistreatment of blacks as unjust and began empathizing with them by demonizing the white owners. For instance, white owners were called 'devils', 'demons' and 'savage barbarians', and the slaves were associated with hope and strength. These students further developed a moral connection (Cunningham, 2010) with Douglas by outwardly questioning the actions of white people. In the following example, the "moral identity" (Cunningham, 2010) or "one's affect" of the student is activated by her realization of the neglect slaves endured:

> *"This [paragraph] is really sad. How could you give kids one shirt and one pants and no shoes? That's like really awful neglect."*

Upon reflection, the work these students did in relation to *Douglas* (1995), surpassed decoding and reading comprehension. Their discussions prompted them to conceptualize the historical identities of black and whites in the US, as well as categorize their actions as right or wrong, good or evil; which, in turn, created "a pathway to cross-cultural understanding and

heightened awareness of the goals of social justice" (Alsup, 2010, p. 13). In addition, these spaces contributed to expanding the students' "social imagination" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263) by building their "competence and propensity to recognize the self in other and the other in self… [through] conversational contributions about socioemotional logic" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263).

Conclusion

Reconciling identity is of the utmost importance for young adolescents (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996), so when they join together over a compelling literary text, the discursive space can be transformed into a practice in identity construction. Although this study was limited in scope, population and duration, it suggests that the confluence of young adolescents, scaffolded discussion and the substance of literary text can facilitate the adoption and rejection of new facets of identity (Alsup, 2010). The students in Miss Rose's classes utilized her lessons as a means to explore identity in historical, generational and individual contexts, which ultimately led to the creation of understanding of new Discourses (Gee, 1991, 2014) and a deeper awareness of society, justice and their positions in relation to each (Alsup, 2010; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Moving forward, more comprehensive research should be done in this area to better articulate the significance of discursive classroom spaces and the subsequent implications they may have.

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