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This study, an in-depth qualitative case study (Stake, 1995), framed with the theoretical tenets of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) focused on fourth-grade students' experiences in literacy instruction that emphasized agency as a reform tool in response to narrowed, standardized reform efforts that left students disengaged (Au, 2007, 2011; Jackson, 2003; Vaughn, 2020). The student participants, predominately from economically disadvantaged, non-white backgrounds, engaged in literacy participation structures that emphasized broad aspects of their learning, attended to their identity work, and promoted their engagement to illuminate how agency influenced the development of the three outcomes based on situated learning's participation and reification frameworks (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Their experiences have implications for involving students in instructional decision-making to adopt positive learning trajectories and broaden what counts as learning for diverse learners (Delpit, 2012). Findings suggest students deepened their content understanding; their identities shifted through their interactions to negotiate meaning with others, and students linked their engagement in their fourth-grade literacy studies to their future life goals. Moreover, traditional achievement measures were positively impacted by such attention to students' learning, identity, and engagement through their participation in communities of practice and their acts of reification (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

IF THEY LEAD, WILL WE FOLLOW? AN EXAMINATION OF FOURTH  
GRADERS' AGENCY IN LITERACY

by

Salem R. Metzger

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Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Salem R. Metzger, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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*Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and*

*diligence.* – Abigail Adams

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Two fourth grade teachers, Lila and Amanda, expressed frustration with district mandates to demonstrate fidelity with scripted literacy programs. While they were committed to teaching in Title I schools, accountability pressures were slowly undermining their desire to remain in the profession because they had lost confidence in the feasibility of externally mandated reform measures to improve their students' overall learning and attitudes (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy 2000; Duffy, 1998; Miller & Duffy, 2006). They viewed district recommendations as supporting what Au (2007) described as a dominant accountability pedagogy: (a) a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on test-defined content, (b) a focus on mastery of isolated skills, and (c) an emphasis on teacher directed instruction with a prescribed curriculum. They believed such practices were the reason why students viewed the completion of classroom literacy assignments as a chore, completed mainly to address the school district's desire for higher test scores (Miller, 2003; Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993). Moreover, teachers believed such practices limited their opportunities to discover students' interests and educational goals. They wanted to expand their classrooms' criteria for success to increase the likelihood of students becoming engaged in their studies.

Delpit (2012) viewed school dependent students, like those who participated in this study, as marginalized and because of this status she believed that they were ten

times more likely than students from more affluent schools to need high quality teaching. Participating teachers did not view their district's reform-based instruction, which was based on evidence-based practices, as high quality. Teachers believed existing external mandates did not constitute high-quality instruction because they limited the number of pathways students had to become engaged successfully with their studies. They believed students' learning, broadly defined to include content understanding, strategic reading, test scores, and self-regulated learning abilities; views of themselves as learners; and engagement in daily studies were negatively affected by such practices.

Teachers wanted to change their school's reform practices so that they aligned more directly with students' interests and expectations, shifting the instructional focus from evidence-based practices to develop what Bryk (2015) called practice-based evidences. Teachers wanted to implement a higher quality of instruction by increasing pathways for students' success through the use of frequent discussions and collaborations, increasing opportunities for students to discover personal meaning in their studies by interacting with classmates (Delpit, 2012). They believed students would become more engaged in their learning if they were able to have more input into the nature of their studies, particularly if they shared opinions with classmates and teachers as they sought personal connections to the curriculum. Instead of working independently on prescribed curricula, teachers wanted students to have frequent opportunities to exchange opinions on self-selected texts, offer contributions regarding their participation in daily instructional activities, and share personal views on potentially inherent controversial subjects or topics (Haberman, 1991). If such opportunities occurred

regularly, teachers believed students would become more engaged, develop more positive academic identities, and demonstrate improved achievement.

To reach these goals, teachers aligned daily curriculum activities with students' interests and expectations, what Jackson (2003) referred to as 'identity congruence.' By promoting this congruence, teachers positioned students agentially, that is, they allowed them to become active decision-makers regarding who they wished to be and how they wanted to be positioned by others (Jackson, 2003). Vaughn (2020) viewed such opportunities for students to contribute to the focus, direction, and format of their academic studies (Akos, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Reeve & T'Seng, 2011) as critical for the education of students of color and English learners, particularly those from families with minimal economic resources. Teachers also addressed what Jackson (2003) referred to as 'identity watersheds,' students' failure to meet daily academic expectations, e.g. homework completion, studying outside of school, involvement in discussions. Once again, such actions are particularly critical for marginalized students, who traditionally have few opportunities to identify with schooling norms (Haberman, 1991; Wolter, 2016).

The critical question guiding this study is the extent to which such changes would positively influence the intended outcomes and whether students from different backgrounds, genders, and academic histories would benefit similarly. Across their academic careers, students spend roughly 14,000 hours in school; students in this study only would participate for approximately 1,000 hours. Would this instructional intervention for one school year make a difference or would this duration be too short a

period of time? My dissertation addresses the question of how the promotion of agency influenced learning, defined to include self-regulation, test scores, strategic reading, and content knowledge; how students viewed themselves as learners; and their engagement in daily academic studies.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Situated learning, a sociocultural theory, serves as a theoretical framework for this study because it underscores the potential for students who have been marginalized, for whatever reason, to adopt positive learning trajectories when they see value in becoming members of a particular learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The question of whether students see value and adopt a positive learning trajectory is related to the extent to which the number and type of instructional opportunities in their classrooms allow them to have input regarding what they believe matters with their education. Students have fewer opportunities when educators endorse an instructional model where learning is viewed as the acquisition of discrete facts, packaged in tightly sequenced curricula, delivered in a prescribed order, and measured by high-risk assessments. Research has documented the limiting effects of this instruction on students' overall engagement and views of themselves as learners (Aukerman & Chamber Schuldt, 2016; Wells, 2011; 2012). When students have opportunities to interact with classmates, contribute to the nature of their studies, and participate and reflect on joint meaning making, situated learning predicts their adoption of positive learning trajectories (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This adoption occurs when educators attend to certain tenets of situated learning theory. Namely, educators need to examine what they view as the most important

conditions for teaching and learning (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) posit necessary conditions for learning, which, if addressed, increase learning and engagement and promote positive identities, thereby increasing the likelihood of participating teachers achieving the expected outcomes. First, learning is social, therefore, students need opportunities to interact with one another and with teachers. It is through these social interactions that competence is defined in relation to their active engagement with the curriculum. Such interactions provide opportunities for students to discover and construct meaning through their engagement with others. It is this type of opportunity which allows students to negotiate personal meaning and reconcile past academic achievements with present challenges, and future goals. Lave and Wenger (1991) draw attention to this assertion, writing, “The generality of any form of knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances” (p. 34). Learning is thus conceptualized broadly, in accordance with situated learning’s emphasis on the social interaction and participatory nature of competence, its ‘situatedness’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This attention to a learner’s past, present, and future contrasts with the individualized, decontextualized nature of skills acquisition, similar to the dominant approach to teaching traditionally provided to marginalized learners.

Central to this belief was the idea that inviting students to act agentially, to offer input regarding the nature of their literacy studies and then to offer feedback on their engagement, would contribute to the adoption of positive learning trajectories. Such a perspective aligns with situated learning’s views of learning as the connection between

the learner and their engagement in the learning process and is consistent with the community of practice fostered in the two participating fourth-grade literacy classrooms. This view of learning, one that privileges social interaction and co-participation, promotes membership in the learning community and engages students in the expert work of performance, invites the development of positive learning trajectories. The community of practice participating teachers designed represented roughly 1,000 hours of students' 14,000 academic hours in public schools. As stated earlier, the critical question is how these 1,000 hours influenced learning, identity, and engagement for a group of students with different ethnic backgrounds, languages, gender, and achievement histories? The key to addressing this question is the establishment of communities of practice, in which, students have multiple pathways and opportunities to experience success by providing input and feedback into the nature and format of their academic studies.

### ***Communities of Practice***

When designed appropriately, communities of practice, groups of students who share a common goal and learn how to collaborate to accomplish this goal, are inherently social and include broad membership opportunities (Wenger, 1998). They are critical to the intervention because they present new criteria for how teachers and students define and evaluate academic success, thereby providing parameters through which instructional activities are designed (Carlone, 2012). Quite simply, if students need to come together to have opportunities to influence the nature and direction of their studies, teachers need to design such opportunities accordingly. These opportunities provide a new way for

students to be successful, a new set of norms, in that, learning, with a focus on participation, occurs both individually and in communities (Carlone, 2012). It happens in the reciprocal relationship between individuals and communities, where individuals, in this case, students, contribute input to the practices of their communities, which, in turn, refine their practice and involve new members (Wenger, 1998). This view of learning, based on mutual engagement in communities of practice, is consistent with the intervention's emphasis on student agency as an essential educational reform tool.

Mutual engagement assumes learners are involved with determining what matters and such parameters are negotiated collaboratively through participation within the community of practice. By participating in determining what matters, individuals establish a place and unique identity within a learning community (Wenger, 1998). Part of the membership is enabling engagement where students contribute to their community of practice. Here, engagement begets belonging, students thus negotiate what matters mutually and their involvement promotes competence and the shared practice of negotiating the norms for determining success. The mutual engagement negotiated among students in the community of practice does not presume everyone has the same understanding, rather, meaning can be negotiated and renegotiated because a community of practice is not a static enterprise.

As a result of their participation within a community of practice, students are able to construct new imagined worlds, where they project their own meanings into the discourse: Wenger refers to this projection as reification (1998), a term that was not mentioned in the earlier situated learning literature. Participation and reification overlap

with no clear demarcation between them as each enables the other, despite their unique yet complementary purposes. Most importantly, as Wenger stated, “Whereas in participation we recognize ourselves in each other, in reification we project ourselves onto the world” (1998, p. 58). Reification thus aligns more with students’ construction and discovery of unique personal histories and their resulting contributions to the learning processes as they negotiate meaning within a developing personal area of studies, whereas participation aligns more directly with a student’s ability to meet the challenges of a community of practice’s newly established norms and practices. Reification and participation thus serve as a lens through which educators can understand the intertwining development of students’, learning, engagement, and identity.

To establish a new community of practice, teachers intentionally sought to build on student interest, elicit feedback, and plan formatively based on their input---this process was an ongoing and dialectical endeavor, as students engaged in the social nature of learning. This engagement with and from their peers was intended to help them develop positive learning trajectories. This community of practice, which differed from the individualized, test-centric instruction of previous years, aimed to create space for students’ unique, identity work, their reification, which developed through their active engagement in practice with peers. Because participating teachers centered students in the mutual engagement of negotiating the norms of the practice, they moved from traditional assumptions of teachers with sole decision-making authority and students as passive recipients towards a more balanced power differential, which reflected both parties' mutual engagement and interests (Johnston, 2012).

Membership in communities of practice denotes the use of agency to negotiate meaning; joint enterprises are important for understanding positive learning trajectories for marginalized learners because each student is engaged in collective decision-making. Participation and reification within communities of practice includes all aspects of individuals, how they are situated historically, socially, culturally, and institutionally gets refracted in the joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). Here joint enterprise does not ensure total membership agreement, rather, meaning is negotiated mainly within the community by its participants, not solely by external directives. Notably, negotiated meaning within joint enterprises is reflective of larger contexts within which the community of practice exists (Wenger, 1998); such meaning negotiation is predicated on students sharing perspectives as valued members of the learning community, setting parameters for how students use language and tools, interpret their actions and the actions of others; and how others define their contributions to a community of practice (Carlone, 2012). Holland and Lave (2009) refer to this tension between external forces and individual goals as the development of one's "history-in-person" (p. 4).

Such tensions allow for the simultaneous development of students' engagement, identity, and learning. Ambiguity is a central part of how students determine what matters for their meaning negotiation. Community members' consensus is not a requirement, "...mismatched interpretations or misunderstandings need to be addressed and resolved directly only when they interfere with mutual engagement" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 83). Misunderstandings are places for deeper understanding and negotiating new meaning, rather than problems to solve in traditional teacher-directed

instructional environments. Opportunities for students to participate within their community of practice shape the negotiation of norms that address such ambiguity and misunderstanding.

### ***Student Agency***

Agency is the catalyst to promoting competence and socially negotiated meaning. Agency, students' ability to direct the nature of their studies based on their interests and input, served as an educational reform tool and framed the impetus for the yearlong intervention. Vaughn (2020) writes of the importance of capitalizing on opportunities to draw on students' ideas, questions, and interests to cultivate student agency in classrooms generally, and more specifically in school contexts where students of color, especially those with limited economic means and English learners, are typically denied such opportunities to demonstrate agency. Her work on student agency reflects the context of my study. Consistent with communities of practice, Vaughn (2020) forwards student agency as multi-dimensional; it is not simply an individual endeavor, agency extends to learning contexts that include consideration for students' cultures, languages, and interests, and opportunities for student agency exists in school contexts where students and teachers collaborate and co-construct learning. Examples of students acting agentically include offering opinions about topics of study, generating ideas about what to study, and designing and problem solving in response to their suggestions (Vaughn, 2020). Vaughn's view of student agency aligns with situated learning and, more specifically, the design of communities of practice, because of her attention to promoting

positive learning trajectories for marginalized learners while involving them in their studies and meaning negotiation.

Each of Vaughn's dimensions for agency include individual acts and choices that transform the context of the learning environment, furthering the idea that agency is more than an individual construct. Her view of agency includes persistence when obstacles are presented because individuals learn how to make decisions and act on opportunities; this is consistent with self-regulated learning where students set and work towards goals and persist at points of challenge (Miller & Massey, 2017). Vaughn's (2020) analysis of student agency is important for understanding the students in my dissertation study because I see agency as co-created with peers and teachers across various interactions; "agency is co-constructed in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as students adopt various identities in complex social situations and experiences. As individuals negotiate across these communities, they develop perceptions of themselves in relation to schools (i.e., reader, writer, a certain type of learner, someone able to pursue their interests" (p. 112). This dialectic view of agency aligns with studies on student engagement that foreground dialogic classrooms (Johnston, 2012), as supportive of engaging adolescent readers (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Opportunities to demonstrate agency have broad implications for expanding what students have the potential to be and includes choices for them in terms of their personal goals and who they want to become (Adair, 2014). This view of student agency is consistent with developing students' identity work (Carlone, 2012), how they wish to be seen by others, by attending to their

history-in-person (Holland & Lave, 2009) and ideological becoming (Stetsenko, 2009) in their literacy studies.

### ***Agency in Literacy***

The transition from traditional skills-based to student-initiated instruction required a consistent and prolonged instructional effort by teachers. At a surface level, the most apparent change was the creation of a more personally relevant curriculum, where teachers selected texts and designed challenging activities that aligned with students' cultural experiences and backgrounds (Gay, 2002). This change would not have occurred, however, without a commitment to a variety of complementary and supportive instructional practices---dynamic learning (Johnston, 2012), high-challenge tasks (Miller, 2003); and equity-focused discussions (Haberman, 1991). To promote dynamic learning (Johnston, 2012), teachers reduced asymmetrical power relationships with students by asking open questions, allowing for multiple interpretations; avoiding direct evaluation of ideas; positioning students so that they were facing each other, and sitting with students in groups. These practices helped students to counter negative beliefs regarding fixed and permanent abilities; view challenging assignments as engaging, requiring both time and effort to complete; see collaboration with classmates as central to school success, not necessarily tied to an individual's intelligence level; and view education as preparation for socially useful endeavors, all of which align with communities of practice theoretical tenets. To promote challenge, daily instructional assignments required the reading and writing of extended prose while students collaborated with classmates for extended time periods (Miller, 1995, 2003; Miller & Duffy 2006). To promote equity, the teachers

adopted Haberman's (1991) recommendation by having students discuss issues of fairness, equity, and justice.

Given the focus on the literacy curriculum and the emphasis on developing opportunities for students to remake themselves as learners by helping them to make personal and social connections with their studies and each other, Aukerman's (2007) research framed the reading and writing instruction. She operationalized comprehension beyond its traditional emphasis on cognition by defining it in three ways: comprehension as outcome, comprehension as procedure, and comprehension as sensemaking (2007). Similar to Jackson (2003), who stated instruction rarely addresses the individual's perspective and interpretations, Aukerman argued traditional accountability-based reading instruction rests predominantly in the first two domains, where students are led to a singular standard understanding of text, either by teacher-initiated evaluations (passages) or by a set of strategies taught independently, such as predicting or summarizing (strategies) (Boardman, Boele, & Klingner, 2018; Broaddus & Bloodgood, 1999). Aukerman (2007) did not discount the utility of comprehension as outcome and comprehension as procedure, but she argued that if you start with comprehension as sensemaking as your central focus, you will embed the other two comprehension constructs based on student needs. Conversely, if you started with reading as outcome or procedure, teachers were unlikely to develop personal meanings between students' interests and daily curriculum topics.

Promoting an emphasis on sensemaking helped position students in a manner where they would come to value conversations with classmates because they would be

exchanging multiple interpretations and perspectives, thereby allowing them to become engaged in a community of learners in their dialogic classroom (Johnston, 2012). An emphasis on interpretive authority and literacy participation structures prioritized students' textual interpretations, practices which privileged the demonstration of student agency (Aukerman, 2008; Santori, 2011; Wilkinson & Son, 2010) and meaning negotiation in a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). Similarly, Ivey and Johnston (2013, 2015) documented shifts in agency, finding dialogic discussion groups to be a transformational experience for students, their identities, and their social relationships with others; a hallmark of their study was the emphasis of student choice. Each of these practices are consistent with Lila's and Amanda's intent to access students' agency as a reform tool to promote students' personal connections with the curriculum and design collaborative opportunities for students to learn from and negotiate meaning with others in a variety of literacy activities.

### **Literacy Participation Structures**

Students engaged in literacy across their fourth-grade academic year in the following participation structures: book clubs, writer's workshop, whole group modeling, research projects, whole class reads, and independent reading. The participation structures afforded opportunities for students to hear feedback in multiple ways, including small group and whole group discussions that provided multiple perspectives; writing, and individual conferences and interactions; each of which were rich opportunities for negotiating meaning socially. The literacy participation structures expanded the adopted reading program by emphasizing student choice and feedback,

characteristics of high-challenge tasks (Miller, 1993), dialogic communities of practice (Johnston, 2012), and opportunities for sensemaking (Aukerman, 2015). Communities of practice assume students' learning, identity, and engagement are always present; instructional opportunities promoted and emphasized all three as pertinent to student development throughout the year. Consistent with situated learning's view that learning is socially constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I viewed opportunities for student interaction, including topics of interest as fundamental to the community of practice for fourth-grade literacy. Attending to students' past, present, and future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), their 'history-in-person' (Holland & Lave, 2009) and 'ideological becoming' (Stetsenko, 2009), were viewed as central to their fourth-grade literacy experiences.

### **Outcomes: Learning, Identity, Engagement**

In the following sections, I discuss more recently published studies, which I believe helped me evaluate students' learning, identity, and engagement, specifically by attending to how the literature aligns with situated learning, and specifically how this fit with the participation and reification frameworks. Maintaining situated learning's premise that students' learning, identity, and engagement develop concurrently, with their joint influences demonstrated differently with various participation and reification processes, any attempt to separate the three constructs as it relates to the eight case students' development was not viewed as feasible, nor practical. Therefore, I sought a nuanced understanding of their influence and intertwining by looking at the extent to which they vary according to students' backgrounds and types of instructional

opportunities (Nasir, 2002). A focus on individual case student data across time and data sources helped me illuminate the subtle aspects of students' development across these areas within their communities of practice.

### ***Learning***

The goal of using student agency as an internal reform tool to initiate and sustain the intervention included a desire to broaden traditional views of learning through student participation; consequently, it included self-regulatory abilities, content understanding, strategic reading, and performances on traditional achievement measures. Across these areas, learning was conceptualized as students' ability to take future actions by expanding their control over various regulatory aspects of the learning process through their participation in their class' community of practice (Roth, 2011; Roth & Lee, 2007). Such an emphasis on student participation addressed identity watersheds and students' congruence with school expectations and their lived experiences (Jackson, 2003). The literature suggests learning is multi-faceted, despite external mandates' emphasis on learning as a singular focus on test scores; such an expanded view of learning aligns with situated learning's goals of multiple pathways for success within the community of practice.

Self-regulation is viewed as the ability to identify a goal, determine information sources to study this goal, monitor progress throughout, and persist when faced with difficulties (Massey & Miller, 2017). The development of these goals was viewed as occurring most successfully through a learner's active exploration of topics of interest and their participation in their studies (Hickey, 2011; Roth & Lee, 2007). This

assumption is consistent with ideas of how knowledge is constructed socially with others, moving beyond self-regulation as an individual process, reflective of opportunities to participate within an established community of practice. McCaslin (2009) expanded the notion of self-regulation to co-regulation, emphasizing its collaborative nature. Subsequently, Hickey (2011) extended her notion of co-regulation to community regulation, whereby knowledge is constructed in small groups and learning communities and participation is a joint enterprise (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Both of these reconceptualizations of self-regulation are consistent with situated learning and the intervention's focus, in that, the unit-of-analysis is students' assuming different roles and responsibilities within a community of practice and not their mastery of isolated skills mastery. Instead of relying on traditional and individually focused intervention and enrichment strategies, teachers opted to situate the intervention by familiarizing students with tools to demonstrate their conceptual understanding in small and large groups, where the strategies and tools for disciplinary learning were modeled and co-constructed. Thinking about learning as co- or community regulation foregrounds students' participation in experiences that include the use of authentic tools and materials in their classroom community (Hickey, 2011). Such an exploration of learning illustrated how case students described their understanding in relation to the routines of their classroom communities, particularly to develop their understanding of new content. Most importantly, given the nature of discussions between teachers and students, the intervention viewed student misconceptions, not as a lack of content understanding on the

part of students, but as a need for teachers to address any misunderstandings by students regarding their use of disciplinary tools (Hickey, 2003; Hickey & Shafer, 2006).

With content learning, I focused on opportunities for students to demonstrate meaning making within and across communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). To further this goal, the intervention included student participation through opportunities to read, write, and discuss topics of interest over several weeks, consistent with studies on high-challenge tasks that promote understanding by studying topics deeply and for extended time, rather than taking a cursory, surface learning approach (Miller, 2003). Students' personal connections to their studies and sensemaking are evidence of their deeper understanding of content learning. As stated earlier, students were positioned with interpretive authority by embracing a comprehension as sensemaking approach that encouraged connections to students' lived experiences and prior readings (Aukerman, 2015).

I looked at the nature of students' personal connections between their lives, other texts, and connections to the world (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007) to explore aspects of their strategic reading that supported their sensemaking. As further evidence of their participation, consistent with close reading, students were expected to demonstrate an intent focus on text, read and reread sections, used textual evidence to support their answers, asked for help, and shared responses (Brown & Kappes, 2012; Pearson & Heibert, 2013). Such a focus on text analysis requires multiple readings with the intent of deepening understanding, consistent with aspects of strategic and close reading, and

supports broad notions of learning beyond skill acquisition. Such practices required students to exhibit new behaviors within their communities of practice.

For traditional achievement measures, I explored indicators of competence from our students' perspectives including performances on benchmark tests, end of grade tests, and reading levels. This outcome has a long history in research, in that, most researchers caution teachers against making such achievements as a public end-goal because it interferes with agency and increases anxiety (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2018), restricts with the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and interferes with student's moral development (Johnston, 2019). Students demonstrated learning broadly evidenced by their goal setting and monitoring progress towards goals, content understanding, strategic reading, and traditional achievement measures through their participation in their fourth-grade communities of practice.

Each of these dimensions of learning provided a framework through which students' success was redefined, providing new parameters for their participation, within their new community of practice. Taken collectively, expanded notions of learning demonstrate how different types of learning are more inherent in the curriculum and instructional opportunities. Traditionally, the curriculum is not aligned with students' interests; Delpit (2012) sees this as a problem for certain populations for whom the gap between school curriculum and personal relevance is wide. Agency is the initiation of that alignment within situated learning and shows teachers how to successfully address the identity watersheds that could limit student participation and identification with the curriculum. Teachers assumed that unless students were successful across these different

dimensions of learning, then they would have few opportunities to remake their identities as learners and become engaged in their studies. Stated differently, without successful participation while meeting the different components of learning, students would not be able to express various aspects of reification, related to their identity work and engagement in their studies.

### ***Identity***

Situated learning posits students' identities are co-constructed with others in communities of practice through meaning negotiation and can change based on new group understandings, thus students can have multiple identities operating concurrently (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These co-constructions and reconstructions are important because they provide opportunities to become a new person and explore ways of being beyond one's current conceptualization (Wenger, 1998). Where learning parameters were more aligned with the student participation framework, student's identity work was indicative of student's reification and, as stated earlier, was dependent upon their successful participation. Consistent with situated learning, I examined identity development by looking at students' academic rites of passage; descriptions of themselves and others as learners; and meaning negotiation at the social and personal levels. The community's rites of passage, or normative practices, largely determine who students are obligated to be and their local understandings of competence, with students authoring themselves based on the community of practice's joint understanding of identities (Carlone, 2012). The rites of passage and who students are obligated to be in their communities of practice are consistent with what Gee described as opportunities to

be a certain “kind of person” (2000, p. 99); in this study students were obligated to be readers, writers, thinkers, and discussers. As students successfully adopted the community’s rites of passage and addressed identity watersheds (Jackson, 2003) through participation in their community of practice, I expected to see aspects of their reification emerge through their identity work.

Participation in meaning negotiation in the joint enterprise occurs socially where students position themselves and others as competent and others either accept or reject such subject positioning (Moje et al., 2009); individual meaning making is related to students’ seeing relationships between their academic studies and their personal lives (Jackson, 2003). Carlone’s (2012) considerations for studying identities in school settings combined the individual and community influences of meaning making in students’ emerging identity work. Her chapter pushed me to think about identity work as a question of who students are obligated to be in their communities of practice and the interplay of how students form identities in and through their literacy practices, and how such identity work leads to their reification and becoming. To explore aspects of students’ identity work, I first looked for the rites of passage within communities of practice, that is, students’ attitudes toward challenging assignments and traditional achievement measures, completion of identity watersheds (Jackson, 2003), and membership in literacy participation structures. Such rites of passage ultimately determine the extent to which students have a say in the curriculum and view their studies as meaningful. Additional indicators of students’ identity work included how they described themselves and others as learners, and their collective meaning within the

obligations of who they are expected to be in their communities of practice (Carlone, 2012), again an emergence of their reification and becoming. Next, central to identity work is the relationships they draw between their studies and lived experiences, and personal stances towards agency, such as their points of self-advocacy and outreach to peers. Situated learning fits identity work in that students negotiating and finding their unique space within the community of practice can involve them demonstrating multiple identities based on the context because identity work is not individually achieved, but rather related to their contextual opportunities for participation and reification.

### ***Engagement***

Consistent with situated learning, engagement is conceptualized as demonstrations of participation and reification. Participation occurs in communities of practice through mutual engagement in the joint enterprise, where learners work collectively to negotiate meaning through the groups' normative practices. Participation takes place through actions with others: it is how we recognize ourselves in others (Wenger, 1998). Alternately, reification is a projection of ourselves onto the world, covering a wide range of cognitive processes, including making, designing, representing, naming, encoding, and describing, as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding, and recasting. Such processes allowed students to explore who they are, who they are not, and who they could be, given their expectation for future academic successes (Wenger, 1998). In sum, participation focuses on active engagement in daily academic studies, satisfaction with those tasks, and understanding others' thoughts, feelings, and intention, whereas reification concerns statements of personal

transformation, students' ideological becoming (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2015; Stetsenko, 2009).

A focus on engagement as participation is consistent with what traditional achievement motivation research assumes; participation as getting students involved for utility purposes of increasing interaction (Eccles & Wang, 2012). It is inclusive, albeit it quite implicitly, of relational and cultural implications, beyond a sole focus on individual constructs such as self-efficacy (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), relating to both the social and interactive participation within communities of practice. Engagement as participation is necessary to students following their lines of interest and involving them in their academic studies.

Engagement in communities of practice with a dilemma-driven curriculum opens opportunities for education to be both formative and transformative, where students follow lines of interest, develop perceptions of themselves and others, and explore who they are, who they could be, based on where they come from and where they could go through their participation with others in their studies (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This view expanded how I thought about engagement and student participation as reification, by focusing on its ultimate purpose, students' becoming: hence the need to examine the relationships among students' past, present, and future learning goals, how they thus explore possibilities, reinvent themselves, and conceive different futures within valued communities (Crick, 2012; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stetsenko, 2009).

Ivey and Johnston's studies on reading engagement (2013, 2015), show how personally relevant texts promote positive relationships, identity development, desire to make a moral difference, and social imagination, which is compatible with aspects of students projecting themselves in the world. Each of these outcomes are consistent with the goals of this intervention. Moreover, this view of engaged reading, beyond the reductionist fashion of reading to acquire specific content, reflects relationally oriented reading instruction that encompasses development of students' social imagination, that is the ability to "think about the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others" (Lysaker & Miller, 2012, p. 148), while simultaneously developing constructions of themselves. Additional studies with school-sanctioned reading (e.g. Allington, 1994; Worthy & McKool, 1996; Worthy, 1998) highlight the importance of personally relevant texts that align with students' out of school experiences, allowing time for them to read and think deeply about such texts, and acknowledging the dichotomy between texts that engage adolescent readers and traditional skills focused reading materials, further acknowledgement of the importance of reification.

Specifically, I distinguish my study's examination of student engagement in literacy from behavioral engagement because I explored the ways elementary students link their engagement in their community of practice to their ideological becoming and their understanding of others in relation to themselves (Stetsenko, 2008, 2009), their reification as a consequence of their participation within their classroom's community of practice and their quest to find personal meaning in their studies. Students' statements about their participation in literacy tasks, their personal transformation and how their

identities as learners changed as a result of engaging in discussions of dilemma-driven texts, and their projections of themselves on the world through reification were indications of their engagement in literacy, where student participation increased the likelihood of reification and their reification led to further engagement in their studies.

In summary, the literature on broad notions of learning to include students abilities to set goals and monitor their progress towards such goals, deepen their content understanding, read strategically, and demonstrate proficiency on standardized tests reflects the need for students to participate in their communities of practice through developing shared norms and negotiating meaning within the joint enterprise collectively with their teacher and peers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participation in their communities of practice support broad learning opportunities for students and is instrumental to reification that emerges more clearly in students' identity work and engagement with others in communities of practice that leverage student agency for sensemaking and their becoming.

In the preceding sections I separately outlined the parameters for learning, identity, and engagement, however, in situ they were all present and not simply disentangled for analysis. These ways of thinking about the three outcomes collectively are consistent with the social theory of learning, joint meaning negotiation within communities of practice, and the reificative processes of the communities, that is the manifestations of students' learning, identity, and engagement into 'thingness' (Wenger, 1998). By centering my study on specific students, I highlighted how foregrounding

student agency influenced the development of their learning, identity, and engagement in their literacy studies. I pose the following question to guide my dissertation study:

1. How do teacher-designed opportunities to demonstrate agency influence the learning, identity, and engagement through participation and reification frameworks of eight fourth graders from two classrooms across an academic year?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Methods**

##### *National Context*

Over the past forty years, while accountability pressures have increased in schools, external reform mandates have aimed to standardize teaching and view learning as tied mainly to measurable goals. Consistent with the writing of Taylor's, *Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor, 1911), educators continually attempt through such efforts as Reading First (2002), No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and Common Core State Standards (2010) to maximize learning by teaching isolated skills; streamlining instruction with pacing guides and standards maps; incremental benchmark testing to measure standards; identification of targeted goals to design interventions; and reteaching and evaluations until mastery on benchmark assessments is attained (Au, 2007; Miller, et al., 1993),

As stated earlier, Lila and Amanda, questioned whether recommended reform-based practices, which are associated with Au's (2007) dominant accountability response, were effective with marginalized students who traditionally scored poorly on state mandated literacy assessments. They preferred to thoughtfully adapt their instruction (Duffy, 1993), using formative assessments to alter their practices on an ongoing basis. They wanted to be positioned as expert decision-makers who use their knowledge

of students to tailor instruction to benefit learning, based on in-the-moment decisions (Vaughn et al., 2016).

### ***School Context***

This study is situated in classrooms composed of school-dependent students (Delpit, 2012), the majority of whom are food insecure, first generation students from immigrant families, and traditionally marginalized. Merritt School originally built in 1929 by a local mill owner opened its doors to the children of the local mill workers. In the last 90 years, the area surrounding Merritt Elementary has been a consistent home for local African American families, primarily blue collar and service workers; in 1990 refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia attended the school; in the early 2000s an influx of Sudanese families sought refuge in the neighborhood; central and Latin American immigrants began migrating to the district most recently. At present nearly 70% of students are Latinx; 28% are African American, and 2% are either bi-racial or Caucasian. Nearly all Merritt students (97-98.4%) qualify for free breakfast and lunch based on their families' economic means.

Historically, Merritt students have had low proficiency scores as measured on state EOG tests. Prior to the study year, about thirty percent of Merritt students scored in the lowest quintile, an estimated one-quarter in the second, thirteen percent in the third, about one-quarter in the fourth, and none scored in the top quintile. Despite repeated external reform mandates, each of which were consistent with the framework provided by Au's (2007) dominant accountability approach, the school's test scores remained largely unchanged. Because of the stagnant nature of test performances across the last twenty

years and their school's traditional emphasis on the dominant accountability response, Lila and Amanda sought an alternative approach for their students.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

My professional experiences in an elementary school serve as the impetus for my quest to learn more about how to develop broad notions of learning, increase positive academic identities, and increase student engagement. I winced at the 'Pinterest' approach of printing out thematic materials and contributing to the minutiae while negating students' intellectual legacies (Delpit, 2012), depriving students' access to high-quality instruction. In many instances, I felt empowered and believed I was making progress toward increasing literacy achievement with historically marginalized students. However, at times what I succumbed to instructionally and what I witnessed other well-intentioned practitioners do was little more than skills-based instruction that left students deprived of meaning making and connected learning, and even more troubling, I gave students a cache of strategies they failed to apply independently.

I realized schools were not reforming to reach the outcomes I sought. Thus, I returned to graduate school. Throughout my work in this study I have deliberated on how to attend to students' learning, identities, and engagement in literacy. I am particularly interested in developing such outcomes in schools like Merritt, serving 'school-dependent' (Delpit, 2012) students and families historically marginalized by reform efforts that emanate from a deficit perspective, further decentralizing students, and inordinately subjecting them to skills-based instruction (Au, 2007; 2011; Jackson, 2003). I have spent the entirety of my teaching career serving school-dependent students

in a variety of capacities from classroom teacher to literacy specialist, as a curriculum facilitator, and currently as a researcher and teacher educator. Unable to name it at the time, it was the disequilibrium between schooling and students' identification with school that prompted me to return to graduate school (Jackson, 2003).

My professional history at Merritt influenced my participation in this study. As a former classroom teacher, literacy specialist, and curriculum facilitator at the school, I worked with both teacher participants prior to my return to graduate school. Moreover, I collaborated with Sam, who has been involved at the school over the last 25 years, in various research efforts and partnerships with the university. Together, across the year-long research project at Merritt we explored aspects of identity, engagement, and learning, broadly defined, through a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978; Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Tracey & Morrow, 2017, Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003). Undergirding this research is my belief that student learning is formative, complex, and socially constructed, rather than linear and predictive.

### ***Study Design & Participants***

I selected an in-depth qualitative case study analysis to analyze eight case student participants and their literacy experiences in two fourth-grade classrooms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Gillham, 2000). This approach identifies issues, frequently influenced by political, social, historical, and personal contexts, that expand the case and help us to see the case more contextually, thereby aligning with the sociocultural theoretical framework of my study: moreover, by doing so, this case study identifies the etic and emic issues to illuminate how case students perceived their instruction and classroom community

(Stake, 1995). In accordance with recommended selection criteria, the case students represented a balance of gender, ethnicity, and competence: none of the selected students were pulled from the classroom for special instruction, thereby increasing their data points across the year (Stake, 1995). Of the eight case students, two were African American, one female and one male (Heaven and Justice); one was bi-racial, an African American female (Rhianna); and five Latinx, one female (Daniella) and four males (Abe, Diego, Jonathan, and Josue).

Table 3.1

*Case Students Analyzed*

Name	Teacher	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade Level	Designation
Rhianna	Franklin	Female	Bi-racial	Above	AL
Heaven	Franklin	Female	African American	Above	AL
Josue	Franklin	Male	Latino	On	EL
Abe	Franklin	Male	Latino	Above	None
Justice	Southern	Male	African American	Above	None
Daniella	Southern	Female	Latina	On	None
Jonathan	Southern	Male	Latino	On	None
Diego	Southern	Male	Latino	Above	None

*Data Sources*

My in-depth qualitative case study analysis included the following data: (1) surveys, (2) interviews, (3) observations (audio and video recorded), and (4) writing samples.

**Surveys.** Survey questions were selected from a list adapted from Aukerman's research (2015) to elicit students' perceptions about their identities as readers, prior reading experiences, and how they perceived the school's and teacher's influences on their development of personal goals. The first set of questions, listed below, elicited students' perspectives about who they were as readers, how they perceived prior reading experiences, and what changes they would make if they could redesign their instructional opportunities. At the beginning of the school year, fourth graders in both classes responded to the following questions:

1. In your opinion what makes a great teacher?
2. List three adjectives your teacher would use to describe you.
3. How would you describe reading last year?
4. What would you change about reading?
5. Why do you think Merritt teachers want you to become a successful reader?

At the end of first-quarter, students then responded to the following short answer questions:

1. What words would you use to describe reading first quarter?
2. What would you change?
3. If someone asked you, 'How does this year compare to last?' what would you tell them?

Both sets of questions helped to form a nascent understanding of the classes' normative practices, how students compared prior reading experiences with current instructional opportunities, and how they related their engagement in such normative practices with their ideas of successful readers.

**Interviews.** Beginning in December, case study students were interviewed individually about their literacy experiences the first half of fourth grade. Interviews lasted a half hour on average. Students reviewed responses to the survey from the end of first quarter, identified and talked about favorite literacy activities, and elaborated on their answers. A second round of interviews were conducted following the same protocol at the end of the year. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis.

**Observations.** Classroom observations were an integral part of data collection. Students were observed in whole class settings, small groups, book clubs, and individual conferences. Observations were used to determine students' developing identities, engagement in literacy activities, and learning over the course of the school year. Consistent with the ideas of communities of practice, classroom observations allowed me to examine the nature of students' participation in various literacy activities; how they negotiated meaning with others and reconstructed competence; how they related their learning to lived experiences, and the nature of their personal transformations during fourth grade. Content from these observations were used to further design and redesign communities of practice and instructional opportunities based on student feedback and input. I also recorded field notes and researcher memos after each visit.

**Writing Samples.** A key piece of formative assessment that informed the nature of instructional opportunities we implemented, writing samples were evidence we collected that illuminated students' content understanding, how they reified their learning and projected their understanding for others, and were demonstrative of their engagement

in researching topics of interest and reading personally relevant texts. Student writing was a window to their content understanding and self-regulation abilities, reflecting who they were as learners, and how they shared points of interest.

Students maintained book club notebooks throughout the year that addressed their small group goals (e.g. what to read for homework), connections, and wonderings as they read to facilitate discussion and demonstrative of formative assessment of their comprehension. They also wrote summaries of whole group readings, wrote letters to Will Hobbs, the author of *Crossing the Wire* (2007), and wrote personal responses to the question ‘what does my face say to the world?’ after reading *The Skin I’m In* (Flake, 2007). Similar to my review of observation data, I analyzed writing samples, looking for patterns as evidence of development of their learning, identity, and engagement across the school year. Students discussed EOG data and word recognition performances in their final spring interviews. These data were included in my analysis qualitatively to support the case student descriptions.

To contextualize students’ participation and reification, I reexamined my researcher reflections and informal planning notes with teachers as secondary sources of data that supported my understanding of the community of practice.

### ***Coding***

To understand how learning, identity, and engagement developed through participation and reification frameworks from the perspective of those involved, I re-examined all of the videos, interviews, observations, field notes and planning meeting transactions, to develop my understanding of how students’ learning, identities, and

engagement evolved throughout the year. To triangulate data, I looked for patterns by focusing on what the teachers did and what the students did using a constant comparison analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I coded across the different data sources within and across students during the academic year. I engaged in further peer debriefing and member checking with both teachers and Sam to increase reliability and addressed any disconfirming evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I primarily relied on a constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss, 1987) with each iteration of analysis seeking to reduce, collapse, and conceptually code broad themes to draw conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 2014). I looked for instances of overlap between what the data suggested and during which literacy activity they occurred, and at what point in the school year, to add a temporal understanding of my outcomes; looking for such confirmatory evidence across data sets and time could illuminate commonalities among students or indicate which literacy activities were most influential to developing students' learning, identities, and engagement.

I first analyzed the newly designed criteria for determining success within communities of practice to determine the extent to which students were able to meet the new academic expectations. As noted in Table 3.2, the main difference between participation and reification is the participation codes were deductive and outlined the criteria for success, while the reification codes were mainly inductive, and were the criteria for individual development. Students' participation was determined largely by literacy structures and an emphasis on agency—students requested challenging material,

their input influenced the nature of their instructional opportunities, and teachers developed tasks that promoted persistence across time in collaboration with others. To be successful, students were expected to offer their input, collaborate with others, and work on prolonged projects that included opportunities to read, write, and present their work.

Table 3.2

Participation and Reification Parameters by Outcome

	Participation (criteria for success)	Reification (criteria for individual development)
Learning	Select topics of interest with increasing challenge	Find content consistent with interests.
	Construct responses with multiple paragraphs over extended time periods while collaborating with classmates.	Share interests with classmates and explain selections.
	Set goals and monitor progress towards goals,	Develop questions and goals to pursue interests.
	Read strategically – make connections and claims and provide evidence	
	Understand how task completion requires ongoing persistent engagement	
	Demonstrate one's understanding of a topic	

Table 3.2

Cont.

	Participation (criteria for success)	Reification (criteria for individual development)
	Understand norms for success and development: who you are as a learner, your responsibility to others (input, feedback, reflection, select group members, monitor group progress, select texts and response formats)	Develop an understanding of emerging competencies.
Identity	Provide input into direction of studies by connecting with personal experiences & interests	Understand how emerging competencies relate to future goals.
	Provide feedback regarding one's engagement within an instructional activity	Understand how personality traits, e.g., leadership, relate to instructional activities and future goals.
		Reflect on how present interests relate to evolving future goals and expectations
Engagement	Explore different topics relative to one's interests	Find possibilities to personalize studies
	Identify others' who share interests for collaboration	Discover links between engagement in an activity and future goals
	Participate in prolonged effort over time relating personal experience, considering character intention, issues of fairness	

This re-examination of the classrooms' communities of practice helped me see the nuance between students' mutual engagement in the joint enterprise and shared repertoire of their classroom experiences by more closely examining the instructional opportunities and types of tasks teachers provided (Wenger, 1998). Initially I had several codes for how teachers and students interacted together in different participation structures (e.g. book clubs, whole class modeling sessions), but as I began to look at the themes collectively through the community of practice lens, I interpreted the case students' interactions indicative of *participation* within their communities of practice. I broke down students' *participation* further by examining the nature of their participation within their classroom's communities of practice and how success was defined within each structure. I reanalyzed all the video and audio transcripts of classroom activities and developed codes for student participation across the school year and for each outcome, reflected in Table 3.2.

I conceptualized *participation* as group membership in the community of practice and the normative practices co-constructed amongst members, where successful participation in learning was evidenced in students' selection of topics, engaging in prolonged tasks that emphasized strategic reading and collaboration with others. Furthermore, successful participation involving students' identity work and engagement included students' input into the direction of their studies, group member selection, monitoring progress toward goals, and identifying potential group members who share interests and whose perspective will deepen understandings of inherently controversial issues involving justice and fairness. Such participation in the community of practice was

central to students' reification opportunities, in that, their successful participation allowed them to develop unique places within the curriculum.

Next, I analyzed individual case student data to understand the aspects of their reification across their fourth-grade academic year in relationship to their participation in various instructional opportunities. I thought about *reification* as examining individuals' unique status in the group, how s/he perceived themselves and the personal meanings they discovered and constructed through their studies. Successful reification in learning included finding content consistent with their interests and developing questions to study interests; evidence of reification in identity work included understanding personal competencies and how that understanding related to personal goals; and reification in engagement was evidenced in students discovering personal links between topics of study and how engaging in such study and interactions with others related to future life goals (see Table 3.2).

My initial intent for this study was to interpret how aspects of students' learning, identity, and engagement are influenced by their participation in agentic literacy opportunities. Therefore, to examine the reificative aspects of their participation in communities of practice they co-constructed, I returned to the data to look for indications of students' perspectives on their *identity* work, *engagement*, and broad definitions of *learning*. An examination of students' reification was less clear because there were no preexisting criteria in the literature from which to draw. Thus, I returned to the data to compare and contrast what the students indicated across their data sources and developed categories based on their responses. I analyzed the case student data (e.g. interviews,

survey responses, writing samples, video and audio recordings of their work in classroom activities) looking for indications of their perceptions of their *learning*, *identity*, and *engagement* based on these criteria. As I coded, I developed summaries, or narrative descriptions (Stake, 1995) of each student; similar to researcher reflections, I noted hallmarks of the nature of their contributions and how they emerged and developed in the data with each iteration of analysis. I examined each student individually first, then looked for emerging patterns across cases and temporally, connecting their interpretations of aspects of their learning experiences, identity work, and engagement to what was going on in the greater context of their classroom community. I developed student summaries and narrative descriptions and again reduced my analysis to four thematic descriptions for each case student, each of which reflected the emergence and development of their reification across the three outcomes. First, I developed a *personal orientation* profile for each student in which I analyzed aspects of their reification and how they projected themselves across the year, cognizant of the fact, based on the research literature on identity, that personal orientations are not necessarily unidimensional. Next, I categorized their individual *indicators of success*, or how they talked about their markers for achievement, followed by their *instructional focus* or *topic of interest*. Finally, I thought about each case student's *optimal instructional opportunity*, or the literacy participation structure in which they thrived and discussed their pathways to success.

My analysis emphasized the reciprocity between student participation in instructional opportunities and reification, and how these iteratively influenced each other

(Wenger, 1998). With a final analytic pass, I inferred connections across cases and noted nuances between students. Throughout analysis, I met weekly with Sam to discuss my approach and ensure my methods were consistent with the data collection and events of the school year in which we collected data together. It is important to note while the teachers provided the context for the communities of practice in which these students participated; my analysis focused primarily on how students perceived being leveraged as agentic and their reificative aspects in their fourth-grade literacy practices. As such, I will not explore teacher contributions in depth in my dissertation; that analysis is the focus of a different manuscript.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Participation Framework: New Expectations for Kids**

Because students' learning, identities, and engagement are intertwined I looked at students' participation and reification in literacy studies across their fourth-grade school year, where I viewed participation as an individual student's ability to meet the challenges of the newly established norms within their community of practice, and reification as an individual's unique placement in the group. I present exemplary examples of the participation findings, each of which demonstrates how students' participation in communities of practice influenced their reification and individual development as a consequence of their engagement in agentic literacy practices. I analyzed all the video and audio transcripts of students engaged in different literacy participation structures throughout the school year and looked for patterns in the nature of students' participation in their literacy studies. After several iterations of analysis, I identified two participation themes across my three outcomes, learning, identity, and engagement (see Table 3.2): student *input* strongly influenced the design of daily instructional opportunities and students' *feedback* regarding their abilities to meet the demands of the high-challenge tasks largely determined the nature of students' participation in their community of practice and teachers' responses to their participation.

### *Student Input*

Students engaged in establishing rites of passage, the pathways for success, early in the school year. One of the initial goals of the larger design-based study was to implement book clubs as a tool to increase student engagement in their literacy studies. I analyzed the video and audio recordings of both classes involved in establishing the parameters for group participation, discussion norms, and expectations for writing and demonstrating understanding in September. Even in this nascent stage of the study, students had input regarding the nature and direction of their participation---choice of texts, group membership, and response format. Each form of input was indicative of the influence of participation on their learning, identities, and engagement. For example, Lila's class spent considerable time developing discussion norms and modeling what successful participation in a discussion looks like and sounds like; specifically, they outlined the idea of piggybacking, or building on previously stated ideas to keep the flow of conversation going. Consider this whole class exchange from late in September, where a student suggested they should piggyback on ideas and that ideas should be wonderings:

Lila: We should be piggybacking on wonderings.

Heaven: I respectfully disagree; they might just have the same wonderings, that's all they're doing.

Lila: I agree with you, our ideas are our wonderings.

Heaven: It's gonna stop the conversation.

Lila: On our poster maybe, we can brainstorm what these ideas look like.

Heaven: Yeah.

Abe: I think that what they said, I disagree because if you only have wonderings, what about all the other stuff you're thinking?

Lila adds their thinking to the class anchor chart.

Josue: I think you're right, keeping your eye on the speaker, some people look at the speaker, but sometimes they don't listen. I think you're correct.

Heaven: [Nodding emphatically in agreement.] And maybe we can understand others.

Rhianna: I respectfully disagree with Neveah. Sometimes when you're looking at the speaker, when the teacher is walking around, they know you are participating and you are an active listener.

Infinit: I agree. Look at the speaker is very important because if you're looking at somebody else, not focusing on the speaker, you're hearing the noises.

Heaven: I respectfully disagree, but at the same time I agree. If you're looking at the speaker, but what if you need to look at the book?

Lila: Can I jump in? Can we keep both? Keep up with the group and look at the speaker. I see what you're saying. Can we keep both?

Heaven: Yeah.

During this minutes-long exchange between several students and teacher, students are seated at desks, but physically turned to face each other when someone spoke, called on each other and took talk turns without directing their comments to the teacher.

Meanwhile, their teacher stood at the corner of the room, near the door, purposefully letting students talk while she took notes of their interactions, further instantiating the normative practice of students contributing input and feedback to the joint enterprise. The students and their teacher co-defined what success looked like in whole class discussions and book clubs, and while they eventually reached a mutually agreed upon decision about

successful participation, it was acceptable for students to ‘respectfully disagree’. Such normative practices worked across other participation structures later in the year such as whole group modeling, whole class reads, and research projects, in which students were expected to make choices regarding texts and group member selection, come to the group prepared, share their understanding through group interactions, and monitor individual and group progress.

The first week of October was a much anticipated and celebrated week with the implementation of book clubs. While students had input over the text they read and group membership, the teachers expected students to read and write daily as part of their book club participation. Many of their conversations were rooted in text-based discussions, evidence of their strategic reading and acknowledgement of sharing their understanding with others. Groups’ text-based discussions evidenced their close reading, featured lots of turn taking, expressions of enjoyment, citing specific excerpts, and animated laughter and chatter. Consider this book club discussion from a group on October 3:

Diego: Baby crying, I can relate to that. Am I allowed to say this bad word?  
Stupid. (reference to bird)

Jonathan: I wonder why Fudge doesn’t want to be like his real name? Farley Drexel Hatcher. Right here he says [pointing to excerpt of text], don't call me Farley, I'm Fudge.

Diego: Fudge used to call Peter Petah.

Jonathan: That's how you know he’s faking.

Diego: I think he's taking it seriously, he's the only one that doesn't know it's a joke.

Jonathan: I wonder why he has a basketball there on the cover?

Diego: I wanted to ask, today do we want to do the same thing for lunch?

Axel: Let's do it on Monday, Wednesday, Friday at lunch.

Jonathan: What about Tuesday?

Diego: So, no Tuesday, no Thursday. At lunch yesterday [he turned to me to explain, we were reading chapters 1 and 2], we just started talking about it, started reading chapter 3. For HW read chapter 3 and reread 1 and 2.

This text-based discussion demonstrates some negotiation in the joint enterprise as they determined how much to read and if they will continue to read outside class-sanctioned times, but it also evidences they are making connections to their lives, though nothing too revealing, and it demonstrates their participation and interest in continuing to read and discuss further.

Students contributed input to direct the nature of the literacy instruction they were provided through their selection of texts, group member selection, and their negotiation of successful participation norms. Such input was formative to the literacy practices because it altered the nature of tasks in which students engaged in their community of practice.

### ***Student Feedback***

Within weeks of book club implementation, Lila and Amanda shared their frustration that group discussions were limited to superficial connections---students actively listened to one another, but they rarely built on each other's ideas. As we, the four adults, grappled with the teachers' concerns about superficial conversations, the students had concerns of their own. Students reported they misunderstood what

summaries were and asked for help developing theme-based summaries of their readings, evidence of their personal progress monitoring and feedback on their abilities to meet the demands of high-challenge tasks. As such, we developed model lessons in which both classes gathered in one classroom and their teachers or Sam modeled how to summarize portions of text to identify a theme. These whole class models were infused with opportunities to work in small groups, with weeks of discussing, writing, and presenting collaborative summaries, demonstrative of students' participation in prolonged effort to read and write over extended periods of time. Without students' feedback regarding this academic challenge, teachers noted how they would have proceeded to the next skill on the district recommended pacing guide. These summary writing model lessons were indicative of how students influenced the nature of instruction by providing feedback and indications of their misconceptions and also evidenced evolving rites of passage as students negotiated their new understanding within in established whole group and small group participation norms. The implementation of our whole group summary writing models was also a watershed moment because we read, discussed, and summarized interesting, challenging texts based on students' feedback.

To support students developing competencies in response to their feedback, we modeled how to summarize with high interest, challenging texts such as Langston Hughes poetry, a short story from Sandra Cisneros, and decodable expository texts that centered on issues of justice and fairness, such as school shootings, civil rights, and immigration policy. Our inclusion of personally relevant texts afforded students the

opportunity to wrestle with divergent ideas, consider alternative perspectives, and explore literary language.

One November morning I recorded a group of three boys taking turns reading a poem; their reading included the intonation and prosody evocative of a poetry slam. Justice directed who would read each line and invited me to join them. Following the reading, Justice led a discussion on hypocrisy, a theme he noted in the poem. Alexis asked what hypocrisy meant and Justice offered his definition and followed up his comment by drawing our attention to a line in the poem, “I carry around the pain like so many nickels and dimes.” Discussion ensued about how heavy nickels and dimes are, what a great simile that was, and how our narrator keeps adding pain, building our idea of the metaphorical weight. Diego asked about a specific line and its meaning and the guys reflected on double standards, being judged by others, and insecurities. Finally, about ten minutes into their reflection of the poem, Justice powerfully stated:

In third grade people started judging me. Other people were doing the wrong thing, doing something bad, they wanted me to do it with them. I could hang with the crowd, but it would have been the wrong crowd. In third grade I was bad, I was hanging around the wrong crowd. They kept telling me to do bad things and I just did it.

I observed similar conversations around other personally relevant texts; as students read and thought about challenging topics collaboratively, issues of fairness and justice, they revealed personal anecdotes, and their place in the world became central to their small group discussions and summaries they shared with both classes during whole group modeling. Student questions transitioned from technical aspects such as desired length to

considering precise word choice and how to condense many ideas into central themes that captured their collective understanding, a signal of their successful adaptation of the new norms for success.

In response to students' feedback requesting challenging material, we continued reading personally relevant texts when we returned to school in January. Sam modeled how to write a themed summary using an article from newsELA on gender equality and Title IX legislation. As students split into groups around the room to develop their summaries, I observed a group of four Latino boys. The foursome discussed their personal interpretations of the article and worked collaboratively to draft a summary. Diego related the article to his sister's competitive swimming, followed by a connection to his older brother's tenuous immigration status. Diego, Alexis, Bryan, and Jonathan shared a deep understanding of immigration reform, how their older siblings would be impacted with changes to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and fear for their families and uncertain futures. I share a brief excerpt here:

Alexis: It's just that people are being selfish about other people or what they do or the color of what because like, right now, they don't really let us, what we want to do, because there have been different changes with the president.

Jonathan: Ever since, Dr. Miller said, the government did something to let the girls do the same sports as boys.

Salem: Yes, he was talking about Title IX. Talk more about that, Alexis.

Alexis: In the old days there's some changes, too, but now here we have some more difficult changes because since Donald Trump has been president. It can actually do what we...

Jonathan: We basically hit a, we hit a...

Diego: Dead end almost.

Jonathan: Yeah! Dead end.

Diego: Well not a dead end, but a dead end. But that hasn't exit, there's only one exit to it. Well it has many places to go, but only one shall let you go completely. Kinda like a maze.

Jonathan: It's like if you hit the dead end you want to turn around, and you like want to...

Alexis: You can always turn around your feelings or your thoughts, but

Jonathan: It restarted basically.

Diego: When you said about the president Donald Trump, we cannot turn around right now and say, well not that we see Donald Trump how he is, we can't switch him right now. We have to wait two years.

Alexis: Yeah.

Jonathan: Or maybe eight. They can expand it like they did with Barack Obama. Four years or eight years.

Diego: Kind a like a benchmark. You get an answer, get it wrong, too bad, too sad.

Salem: So, what does it mean for you in your everyday life?

Jonathan: Mostly...

Alexis: That means we're getting affected because we don't get to do what we want to do in our lives.

Salem: Why is that?

Alexis: Because they've been changes in our lives that were maybe too hard for us. And...

Diego: One day we will conquer over it.

Alexis: Maybe they were too hard for how they affected us, now we can't do that much stuff anymore.

The boys continued, discussing the border wall, local ICE raids, and deportation fears. The boys' conversation was the impetus for our reading *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007) and *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 2007) as whole class reads. Expanding on our format of using personally relevant texts, we sought chapter books with challenging material that reflected our students' lived histories, their requests for topics of fairness and discrimination, and engaged them in deep thinking about the world and their place in it. Consistent with the communities of practice literature, my data indicated student participation in their literacy communities of practice influenced their learning, identities, and engagement through opportunities to select topics of interest with increasing challenge, set goals and monitor progress, engage in prolonged studies, and share their understanding publicly. Moreover, through participation students demonstrated an understanding of themselves as learners and who they were obligated to be in their communities of practice, by providing *input* and *feedback* into the direction of their studies, by relating personal experience, and collaborating with others to study topics of interest through prolonged effort, foreground issues of fairness and linking their personal becoming. The nature of their participation within their communities of practice was uniform in that they engaged in the same literacy participation structures; next I explore the reification findings for a better understanding of the individual nuances across cases.

### **Reification Framework: Student's Projections of Themselves**

After reviewing the affordances of the communities of practice established in the two classrooms, I examined individual case student data to deepen my understanding of how engaging in agentic literacy practices influenced the nature of the three student

outcomes, through a reification framework. For each case student I analyzed all of their sources of data and developed profiles as evidence of their reification through their *personal orientation*, their *indicators of success*, the *instructional focus or topic of interest* in which they engaged, and their *optimal supportive instructional opportunity*. I present eight cases.

***Daniella: The Teacher & The Advocate***

I like it [book club] because you can know about someone that you don't know. And you can help other people from other classes. So, they can become like, like they can become smart and get, get Bs and As. And so, they can get a better life. (12.14.17)

Daniella was a petite Latina student with a kind smile and quiet disposition. She would be easily overlooked in a traditional lecture format because she rarely offered verbal contributions in the whole class setting. The nature of Daniella's participation in small group discussions contributed to the emergence of her *personal orientation* as a teacher. She was often the group scribe, summarizing and recording group discussions, and standing up to coach her group's presenter, though never the sole presenter. Daniella talked about her goals of becoming a teacher and actively supported group mates' understanding, particularly a peer who found comprehension challenging. Her orientation as a teacher was evident in her comment, "I want to challenge other students so they can know what they can do in fourth grade." Initially, in the fall she discussed becoming a teacher generally, but by spring she was more specific, stating she thought perhaps a high school teacher so she could teach history or biology, reflective of her emerging interest in historical fiction. Daniella grinned a huge smile when we told her teachers have to get up

early; she was not fazed by our good-natured teasing. Staying steadfast to her goal, Daniella assured us it was okay to get up early if she was helping others, a signal of her emergence as *The Advocate* to come.

Daniella discussed her personal *indicators of success* in terms of traditional reading levels. Early in the year, she could quickly relay each of her reading levels since Kindergarten when asked to talk about herself as a reader. She was conscious of what would make her a better reader, telling me, “I have some work to do on summaries” (12.14.17). When she discussed her appreciation for reading *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007) in the spring, she proudly noted it was above her level, but she was able to understand.

In the fall as part of their animal research project, Daniella elected to study spiders. She worked diligently to read and research information and design a digital storybook of her learning. We asked her about why she chose to study spiders and she timidly responded that she was terrified of spiders in her backyard. She saw this research project as an opportunity to learn more in hopes of allaying her fears. Daniella was the only student who discussed her choice of topic in relation to learning more about her life; others discussed it as a more perfunctory task that increased their content understanding. Later in the spring Daniella discussed a variety of topics that interested her, including ‘culture and society’, ‘bullying’, inclusion and ‘popularity’, and liking people for who they are, not what they look like. She discussed researching the Bermuda Triangle before offering she wanted to study the KKK next because she questioned why they hated people so much. Her *topics of interest* included learning more about her fears and

uncovering a deeper understanding of cultural topics such as bullying and discrimination, and how such topics surfaced in her life.

Daniella credited book club and small group discussions as influential to her reading growth in fourth grade. She said, “I liked it [book club] because it got my grades up a little bit up in reading. Since we did our EOGs, I got 4 on reading and last time, I didn’t do so well. Last time I got a 2.” Where her contributions in whole class settings were more of a silent supporter, her timidity dissolved and she assumed a more active role in book clubs and small group discussions, often prompting her peers to return to the text to clarify misconceptions, as a teacher might. Further, she credited discussions with her peers as valuable to deepening her understanding, clarifying her misunderstandings, and helping her decode ‘tricky’ words as she encountered them. She liked discussing interesting and challenging books with others: “I liked shared reading because, I got to talk a lot in there. When we did shared reading, when I started having rough times understanding it, I started talking more and more.” Daniella praised getting to spend time talking about a book she was interested in with others and valued the opportunity to learn more about her peers. Daniella prioritized book clubs and small groups as *optimal instructional opportunities*.

Daniella appreciated the opportunity to read, write, and discuss challenging texts that were personally relevant. She spoke eloquently at the end of the year about her family’s immigration experience and how she connected that to the class reading of *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007). She told her older sister about the book and her sister read it, surprised that as a fourth grader Daniella read it in school. Across the year,

Daniella named small group opportunities as influential to her development as a reader. She reported disliking reading previously, but in fourth grade she read more than 50 books. Finally, while Daniella, *The Teacher* appreciated the affordances of small group discussions, she credited her teacher, Amanda with giving her space to develop her confidence to participate without fear of having the wrong answer. She poignantly said, “Ms. Southern is my favorite teacher out of every teacher. She helps us a lot. And tells us no one is wrong. No one told me that before. Other teachers used to say that’s wrong in front of the whole class and that’s why I got really shy. I’m not shy anymore.”

Finally, Daniella’s perspective on her developing confidence was evidenced in her writing. She indicated the extent of her change from a quiet, timid student towards more confidently participating when she wrote:

Shy. I am shy like a turtle. I have answers but never respond. I’m not really confident talking to my class. My mouth is quiet my head or brain is thinking. I just sit and listen. But now I will be confident as a bull. (I’m a Girl personal writing, 2018)

She wrote of her eagerness to learn and connected her goal of becoming a teacher and how helping others is a benefit of her learning. Daniella’s commitment to learning and developing her confidence in small group instructional settings continued the following year. As a fifth grader, dismayed with the type of instructional opportunities she was provided, Daniella, *The Advocate*, wrote a letter to her principal advocating for the fifth-grade teachers to include book clubs because students felt successful and engaged with book clubs as fourth graders. Sadly, her efforts did not yield changes in her fifth-grade instruction. However, as a seventh grader, Daniella returned to visit Amanda

and self-reported being in the advanced reading class and how her experiences in fourth grade stuck with her and encouraged her to speak up more in classes.

***Abe: The Literary Critic***

Sometimes in my head I sometimes think I am in a book, and I'm making the book my world. (6.8.2018)

Abe joined Lila's class after the first weeks of school, transferring from a school in a nearby state. He took it in stride when there was no desk for him due to overcrowded classes, quietly working at a table under the window with his books and folders stacked neatly beside him. This was evocative of the same 'roll with the punches' attitude Abe demonstrated throughout the year. Abe's father spoke Spanish, yet he and his sister were not fluent and spoke English with their mom. He expressed concern for his sister knowing Spanish and was hopeful she would be accepted into the school's dual language program as a kindergartener the following year. The nature of Abe's participation was consistent through the initial stages of observation and data collection when students were negotiating the rites of passage and their communities' normative practices. Abe was especially focused on group membership and homework completion in book clubs, "And the first book club I got into, we were doing good and I noticed that not everybody does their homework. There was one person in my group...I wanted everybody to do it so that they could participate and have fun" (6.4.2018). He frequently contributed to class discussions as they prepared for book clubs and established group norms.

I dubbed Abe The Literary Critic as his *personal orientation* because overwhelmingly his comments revolved around character intention and motivation, how he related to characters, and how he saw writing as demonstration of ‘deep understanding’. In the spring Abe discussed at length different books he read commenting on the characters saying things like:

I liked that book [The Skin I’m In] because Malika starts exactly like my writing it started not that good and then it improved. And she starts as if she has no friends and she’s lonely. But she ends up turning out and respecting herself and not letting people boss her. And well, she has a lot of power, but she can’t use it because everybody in there thinks she’s a joke. But, until Kayla came, it made the story a little deeper, and I like that.

Discussing another book, the class he read he continued:

I liked “Crossing the Wire” because he tried his best to do a lot of stuff, and even though he didn’t get to stay with his best friend, he still stayed there because he cared about his family and he knew that if he went his family would still be poor. So, he was a very good character. He did a lot.

He summarized his talk about different books he read: “Well, I like a lot of books it has stuff that makes it go deep and deep, with characters that are not named but they go into the story a lot” (6.4.2018). Abe’s explicit wishes for ‘deep’, challenging material were consistent throughout the year.

Abe’s *indicators of success* included his acknowledgement of slowing down, rereading, and thinking carefully as a reader; and he saw his writing as a measure of his understanding. He reflected on his changes as a reader from third grade when he told us he thought being a good reader meant being ‘very speedy’; he thought being the second

or third person to finish indicated he was a good reader. Abe shared he did not raise his hand in previous grades, ‘because we still had a lot of hours left’, further indication he thought work completion was the measure of success previously. Conversely, as a fourth grader he changed his approach, “So, in fourth grade I take my time, I check over my work, I see if I have the correct answer, and I use all the strategies that I’ve been helped with” (6.4.2018).

Abe appeared unaffected by standardized testing; when asked about his EOG score he simply replied, “I got the same score as my grade [4]” (6.4.2018). I pressed him about his disposition towards testing and asked if he thought about his scores during the year. Abe nonchalantly offered, ‘not really’ before confirming a final thought on testing, “I just wanted to get a four or a five to see if I was good at fourth grade, if I listened or if I didn’t” (6.4.2018). He spoke more extensively about the books he was reading, his writing, and his experiences in different participation structures.

Abe’s desired *instructional focus and topics of interest* revolved around his desire to improve his writing. He was keenly aware of his development as a writer. He brought up the topic of his writing early in the year when he said:

Well, when I was in other grades, I wasn’t the best writer. Most people couldn’t understand it. I didn’t write very neat, or I didn’t space out my words in other grades. I wasn’t the best writer. And, um, when I got into this class, I started writing about a book that I might like. It took me a while with the writing because I don’t write a lot. I didn’t write a lot in my other grades. (12.12.17)

Here his comment focused more initially on writing conventions, with an undertone of conveying meaning, yet, he indicated that he was writing more as a fourth grader and

related his writing to books he read. During his spring interview, Abe again brought up his writing and I pressed him to say more. He commented:

Because when I do the writing, I can go deep in it, and I don't always have to share it. But I do because I want to see if my work is good or not. And the writing we are doing now, "What does my face say to the world?", it's a very deep one, so not many people share. So, when I share, I say it with joy and happiness. And that's what I like.

As the year evolved, the way Abe discussed his writing transitioned from an emphasis on conventions to more content and his quest to personally relate to books and his experiences as a reader. Over the course of the school year Abe increased the amount of writing he did and his comment above indicates he appreciated sharing his work with peers and getting feedback.

Abe's *optimal instructional opportunities* occurred through writer's workshop and the inclusion of challenging, personally relevant texts. Whereas he discussed the perfunctory affordances and constraints of each of the participation structures when asked, Abe spoke animatedly about his opportunities to write. Abe saw writing as a way to learn more and expand his view on topics; he focused on the utility of writing as a tool to support his learning, but also as an expression of his identity when he discussed how to maximize his learning by slowing down. On April 18, 2018 I observed Abe in a writing conference with Ms. Franklin. Afterwards I asked him to talk about his work as a writer. His explanation follows:

I thought writing was one thing; when I wrote this, I thought to write what came from the book, not anything that came from my brain. When I write this, I inspire myself to write more, more than just things that come from a book, stuff that you

know that might happen. This had thinkings in it, I put thoughts, I really didn't know what to think about. So, when I think about a book, I read it, when I write about it, I really want to know if I can write more, more, more.

Here we see Abe challenging himself to extend himself as a writer. Later in our conversation Abe commented how his writing improved when he came to this class because of writer's workshop. He appreciated how writing was modeled and attempted to tailor his own writing after his teacher's instructional conferences. Further, he conveyed opportunities to share his writing with others was important to his work; he wanted their feedback, "I want to see if it's good or not, if I've improved. I want to see if it's better" (4.18.2018). Finally, Abe poignantly connected his improvement in writing with his quest for deeper understanding when he expressed writing helped him find the important points and helped him understand why people love texts so much. He further connected the importance of developing such a deep understanding and appreciating a variety of work, "...because there's writing in the whole world" (4.18.2018).

Abe, *The Literary Critic*, wrote a two-page theme analysis of *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007). He opened his analysis with these two sentences, "There are times when people have hopes they can provide the needs for their family to survive. A theme from *Crossing the Wire* is hope for family" (3.21.2018). He artfully described the protagonist, Victor and his journey to support his family financially and to protect his risky friend, Rico, as evidence to support his theme of hope. Ever the one to connect his reading to his deep understanding, he concluded his theme analysis with this sentence, "We all hope when something bad happens, we want it to be better" (3.21.2018). Opportunities to think

deeply and share his perspective through writing contributed to Abe's success as a fourth-grade literary critic.

***Jonathan: The Tortoise & The Little Engine That Did***

I try to work my best and try, try to do it harder. I try my best to never give up, and to succeed (12.12.2017)

Jonathan, a short Latino boy, was the middle child. His older brother in high school, was a strong student academically, and his younger sister, a Kindergartener was happy to let her older brothers do everything for her, according to Jonathan. He talked about his parents in terms of their hard work, both working long hours to support the family. Jonathan was kind to others, a perceptive listener, and was observed inviting his peers into the conversation and building on others' ideas in whole group discussions. He was unassuming and yet, passionate about social topics.

Jonathan's personal orientation as *The Tortoise* or *The Little Engine That Did* was evidenced in his perspective to testing and traditional achievement measures. His mantra of 'slow and steady' growth and expansion continued when he talked about his projection and his satisfaction of beating his projected score, "Well, since my projection was to make a three and I made a four, that is a huge step up to me" (6.4.2018). We congratulated him on his success and I pressed him to talk about the significance of beating his projection. Jonathan's response was powerful, he stated: "I wanted to pass that test to have a better grade, like a huge one, to show them that I'm not that number – I'm a bigger one. And that I'm not one single number, I can become any number" (6.4.2018). Jonathan's pride at achieving his goal, beating his projected state test score,

was important because Jonathan was not an academic super achiever, yet he was reflective and prioritized goal setting and taking actionable steps towards his goals. He was *The Little Engine That Did* because he made steady progress throughout the year, by reading challenging texts, engaging in conversations about relevant topics with his peers, and writing about his interpretations of his experiences. Of the eight case students I analyzed, he made the least progress on his word lists assessments, a measure of decoding, however, he capitalized on opportunities to study relevant topics, discuss his learning with peers, and monitor his progress toward his goals, and with a sustained effort he defied the traditional odds and achieved his goal.

Jonathan embodied some aspects of an individual work ethic, however, he privileged individual growth and expansion as opposed to individual achievement as his personal *indicators of success*. Jonathan consistently described his fourth-grade literacy experiences using some form of the word expansion throughout the year. In their very first book club meeting, I observed Jonathan dutifully talking to his group members about his goal for book clubs:

Axel [to Jonathan]: What did you have?

Jonathan: I want to write fast, read bigger books, make higher achievements.

Diego: So, like go to grade level, if you can, go above grade level?

Jonathan: Yes.

Jonathan frequently discussed goal setting and expanding his learning. In the fall we asked him to rank the participation structures by which he liked most and for each he

described how they benefited him personally and contributed to his growth. Jonathan saw the utility of reading and writing in various participation structures as helpful to his efforts to achieving his goals of being on grade level, or beyond.

Jonathan's instructional focus or *topic of interest* evolved from researching dolphins in the fall because they seemed interesting to more compelling, democratic social issues in the spring. Jonathan's interest in political events and his participation in a small group conversation between four Latino boys I recorded in January, was the catalyst for our reading *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007) with the two classes. Jonathan was a passionate voice, combined with three of his peers who led the discussion of immigration reform, fears over deportation, and DACA legislation one morning in January 2017. Originally tasked with determining the main idea and supporting details of an article on gender equality, the four boys connected their summaries of the reading with current events and personal experiences. Jonathan surfaced issues of fairness, personal connections, and concerns about friends and family who faced deportation. At several points the boys talked over each other, scrambling to build on each other's comments, share first-hand accounts, and confirm their experiences. Jonathan participated prominently in subsequent class discussions about their reading of *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007); he questioned the fairness of discrimination and hypocrisy of the President's inaction to resolve immigration reform when the First Lady was an immigrant. Jonathan reported sharing his reading with his mom who in turn told him stories of her immigration experiences, which he shared to make connections with and

build on his peers' comments in whole group discussions. Jonathan actively engaged in readings and discussions about democratic issues, discrimination, and bullying.

Jonathan benefited from the social interaction of whole group readings and book club discussions as his *optimal participation structures*. In such settings Jonathan was afforded opportunities to grapple with challenging texts, perhaps previously denied to him because of his 'bubble' status as an approaching grade level student. The social interaction of book clubs and whole group readings and learning from and about others' experiences were influential to Jonathan:

Well, learning other people's backgrounds, or what they've been suffering or struggling through, is very exciting to learn. Because my learning has been to my background, not to other people's background. It's fun to imagine what other people's backgrounds are instead of mine, and doing something different once in a while.

Moreover, in the fall Jonathan discussed the personal benefit of engaging in learning with peers when he stated the affordance of book clubs was: "To expand how I, how I connect to people and how reading will let me go to get higher education" (12.12.2017). In a traditional classroom setting that prioritized skill acquisition and individual accomplishment, I am not convinced I would have seen Jonathan as a strong student. However, he benefited from the social aspects of literacy in his fourth-grade community of practice that provided him opportunities to read challenging material, discuss politically relevant topics, and learn from and with his peers.

Ever *The Tortoise or The Little Engine That Did*, Jonathan ended his spring interview telling us the importance of fourth grade for his future. Initially, Jonathan told us he wanted to be a cook, but this year changed him:

Jonathan: I don't want to take my brother's idea, but I want to reach bigger than his idea.

Salem: What's his idea?

Jonathan: Being a lawyer. I don't know. I just thought of this idea. Basically, this is the lowest goal I would want, but I want to reach bigger now because of this year.

Finally, Jonathan captured many of our participants' ambivalence as our year together came to a close. Reflecting on his experiences in fourth grade he said, "Well, I don't want it to come to an end, but it has to be one way because I want to go up and reach my dreams instead of staying down here. And I want to stay down here, but I want to reach my dreams, too" (6.4.2018). Jonathan's persistence and his willingness to engage with others shaped the nature of his success in fourth grade.

### ***Diego: Horatio Alger & The Future Politician***

Last year I was on the tightrope and wobbling. I was kind of alright, in the middle struggling. Now I'm in the good, like nothing's wrong. (12.12.17)

Diego's *personal orientation* as Horatio Alger reflected his consistent commentary that his hard work and determination would lead to success. He was a Latino student with an engaging smile, who conversed comfortably with everyone, and much like the author, Horatio Alger's novels, Diego saw the utility in his efforts and

maintained a laser focus on working hard and doing well. He proudly discussed his nomination as a Ben Carson Scholar and how he expended a lot of effort on his application to secure scholarship money for his future higher education. Diego described his family in ways that espoused middle-class values more so than the other students; he reported family walks at a local park, visiting the downtown library to check out books, and talked about his older sister's competitive swimming. My *Horatio Alger* kept his groups organized and focused on the task at hand; he was practical and pragmatic. Diego secured space in the cafeteria for his book clubs to meet during lunch to continue their work and challenged his groups to reread or read more than the proposed amount. Diego was intent on a clear path to success, one that stemmed from his hard work and determination, much like a *Future Politician*.

Diego's *indicators of success* were his test scores and individual achievement. Diego discussed his teacher's comments on first and second quarter progress reports that praised his efforts to learn more and knew his growth on mock testing before the final end of grade test. Diego was disappointed that he scored the same percentile as his projection, "At least I didn't drop. But I wanted to be higher than 83" (6.4.2018). Despite his individual success Diego expressed disappointment in the class' overall performance:

Well, you guys really did a great job. And I find that it's kind of us as students who didn't complete our job. Like you guys did the best you could and it was our turn to like return the favor, I guess. And we didn't complete it exactly.

Diego moved to Merritt School as a third grader; prior to that he attended a traditional school that he described as one of the best schools in North Carolina, but after his sister

finished there something happened, and he believed it was no longer as good as it once was. Diego discussed his Ben Carson scholarship as a badge of honor, a highlight on his resume that would eventually lead him to greater success. Reminiscent of a politician's acceptance speech he thanked Sam and me in his final interview stating, "Well, I would like to thank you all for being so kind and caring. And giving us our own opinions and choices that we can make" (6.4.2018). Diego saw traditional achievement measures as indicators of his success and how individual accomplishments were advantageous to achieving his goals.

Diego diplomatically and deliberately discussed the value of each of the participation structures during his interviews; he noted the utility of each and how they lent to his literacy development in fourth grade. Essentially, he told us, give me the tools and I will make it work, though he valued group interactions and independent thinking time; he was able to see the interconnectedness between the literacy participation structures. Diego's *optimal instructional opportunity* was anything that included choice and challenge. In December he said:

I said good because like all those five things we're doing...I was like actually good at it. Also, midway through first quarter and like they were starting to bring on new stuff and I like new challenges, I guess. And there were more challenges and I was like this is the best thing that ever happened to me.

Diego continued that he liked hearing from other students' perspectives in the whole group settings, but also appreciated the solitude of independent reading and writing time. He noted how it was okay to disagree or think differently and he liked that their teachers

modeled for them and gave them a choice regarding which text to read, with whom to work, and how to respond.

Diego as *Horatio Alger* was a consistent presence in the class's development of community norms and development of pathways of success, but he was also an enduring presence in the class readings and discussions of relevant, challenging topics. Diego's *topics of interest* initially included informational texts, because he felt they provided opportunities to deepen his learning, and eventually topics that discussed immigration reform and Dreamer's legislation. He was a central voice in the previously mentioned immigration discussion between the four Latino boys that prompted us to read *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007); Diego relayed personal experiences with immigration and posed questions for the classes to consider during whole group reads and small group discussions. He praised the class reading *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 2007) because it gave them an opportunity to learn about how to stand up against discrimination.

Diego saw himself as part of a 'rags to riches' Latino 'American Dream', hence why I called him *Horatio Alger*. He expressed his family's immigration plight and the risks his father took to immigrate to the United States and saw his efforts as his individual contribution to the family's success. I envision his future campaign stump speeches, appealing to the working Latino families he hopes to represent as *The Future Politician*. Diego saw the benefit of choice and challenge to his development. In true Diego fashion he moved to another school for fifth-grade, on to the next stop on his personal trajectory.

*Josue: The Social Worker & The Inclusion Specialist*

They probably think, because they think differently than me. Some people that are lower level they're probably that way because they don't really like talking a lot, and then at the end you find out that they're actually really good readers. (12.15.17)

Josue, a smart, yet humble Latino boy established his *personal orientation* as *The Social Worker* and *Inclusion Specialist* early in year. When given the opportunity to choose groupmates, Josue frequently chose three boys, all of whom were identified as exceptional and were often pulled from the classroom for intensive intervention. He consistently coached them with patience, encouraged their participation, and dutifully answered their questions and asked for their feedback when the group was making decisions. I observed Josue engaged in a book club with his three group members, after a nearly 23-minute discussion where the group was relating content learning and their lived experiences, they decided to read on. Josue looked directly at Jason, who had struggled to keep up, and said, "You got this?" (11.13.17). His personal orientation as the *Inclusion Specialist* was a key point of his December interview; when asked about his desire to include the three boys, he responded:

Because I don't feel like people who have a level lower should be with people who have the same level as them. Because like, if someone's a higher level than them they could probably learn more from them and they improve and they get to that level they are. (12.15.17)

Josue maintained his personal orientation as the *Social Worker*; during the winter Jason had emergency eye surgery after an accident that left him visually impaired. When Jason

returned to school with an eye patch Josue checked in with him each morning at breakfast to see how he was feeling and read chapters aloud to him to avoid straining his good eye. Finally, during a teacher planning session in October, Lila referred to Josue as Damian's 'mentor', as she reflected on group interactions she observed. Josue worked well with his classmates, but it was his persistent attention to and inclusion of the marginalized readers that deemed him the *Inclusion Specialist*.

Josue's *indicators of success* included his contributions to support others and his individual growth in terms of reading levels. Like others, he was well aware of his reading levels from prior years, the students he was typically grouped with were stronger readers, and what his projections were for end of grade tests. Josue talked about book levels in terms of comprehension, with comments that linked his reading level to his ability to understand what the words told him. For example, when he discussed his end of grade test he said:

I need to work on more, understanding the questions and how you use some strategies. I didn't feel as confident because I felt like I was confused. When I read the passages, some were long, the questions were difficult. (6.7.2018)

After further discussion, Josue reported scoring just below his projected score on the reading test. Seeming rather dismayed, he sighed, "I felt like I could do better than that, at least I passed it. And didn't just go down" (6.7.2018). Despite passing the end of grade test, Josue's personal growth was not as sharp as some others, however, his contribution of supporting others was significant and he praised opportunities to collaborate with peers in December, "in this year, we actually get to help each other and we actually can choose

our groups instead of choosing our own levels” (12.15.17). Josue likely sacrificed personal growth for the sake of including others.

With Josue’s attention to making meaning his *topics of interest* included reading texts with themes such as persistence, survival, and moving forward. Josue was insightful and consistently looked for ways to make personal connections to his readings. Consider his reaction when asked about reading relevant texts such as *The Skin I’m In* (Flake, 2007):

From the beginning, I was like, ahhh, I don’t think it’s gonna be a good book. But now, Malika found out her dad wrote poems, he died in a car crash. I feel like, she says she’s ugly, well other people say that. But I think she sees more in herself.

He continued:

What got me hooked was when Malika was having those issues, at school and everything. I had something like that in common at my old school. These three kids were always judging me because I wore clothes that didn’t match. I felt like Malika but they weren’t judging my skin, they were judging me on my look. I felt like the book and me had a connection. I loved how she fixed it, but I never fixed my problem, I left it alone. (6.7.2018)

As Josue read, he saw his life in the texts and explored ways of applying lessons from the book to his life. Consider his recollection of book clubs:

Our book is kind of sad, but it still motivates me to read. Because it’s like if you get lost from your family, it doesn’t mean you can’t find them, it just means that you have to try to find them, instead of give up and leave that in the past. If you miss something, keep on looking for it, don’t forget it. [Reading *Call of the Wild*] (6.7.2018)

His *topics of interest* were evidenced in his contributions to whole class discussions; Josue could be heard surfacing themes of perseverance and reflecting how characters continued to try hard things, despite previous setbacks.

Josue, the *Inclusion Specialist*, thrived in book clubs and whole class discussion opportunities as his *optimal participation structures*. Book clubs did not support him in academically challenging work most of the time, but he engaged in the socially challenging work of including marginalized readers and supporting their involvement. It was in book clubs where Josue emerged as the *Social Worker* and *Inclusion Specialist* that defined his successful contributions that year. Specifically, Josue noted the importance of the two classes working together collaboratively, “Because we're all together. We all get to our share ideas. And it's really fun, because Ms. Southern's class thinks differently than our class. And if we combine them together, we can get something that me and our class couldn't get” (12.15.2017). Interestingly, a result of Josue's participation in whole group discussions with both classes yielded a relationship with Amanda, not his teacher of record; she observed his contributions in the whole group setting and recommended a few mystery titles he might like to read. Josue, the *Social Worker*, relied on the interactive nature of his instructional opportunities to support his understanding of texts, his personal interpretations, and his advocacy to include less proficient readers in the community of practice.

***Rhianna: The Facilitator & The Collectivist***

It [group work] helps me because some of my other groupmates, they know things that I don't know. So, everybody's different abilities in my group all ties in to one really good ability (12.14.2017)

Rhianna, a bi-racial teacher's child, immigrated to the United States from Canada. While she was easily one of the smartest students in terms of traditional achievement measures, she never positioned herself as such, in fact she consistently praised the effort and contributions of others, thus evidence of her *personal orientation* as the *Collectivist*. She was the stereotypical 'ideal' student who shied away from talking about herself, with merely a diminutive thanks if you complimented her. Rhianna was the quiet, yet pragmatic presence in whole group discussions that established group norms, often naming others to involve them in the joint enterprise, for example when she said, "Shi'Asia, I'd like to hear what you have to say" (9.25.2017). I thought of Rhianna as the *Facilitator* when I examined the way she led small group discussions, often restating what she heard her peers say to summarize, or asking groupmates to support their assertions with textual evidence, much like a teacher would facilitate a group. In the spring Rhianna partnered with Heaven to offer individual writing conferences to students seeking additional feedback on their work. She was the quiet, supportive voice, frequently praising her peers' efforts before offering suggestions or next steps. Rhianna, the *Collectivist* and the *Facilitator* privileged opportunities to interact with her peers and engage in collaborative sensemaking.

Despite being a *Collectivist*, Rhianna's personal *indicators of success* were inherently individualist; she saw her traditional achievement measures and test scores as evidence of learning. In fact, she is the only case student who mentioned anxiety towards testing. Rhianna's comments about end of grade tests:

Yes, testing. I had a break down before testing. And so, I always get nervous before tests because like I know I've learned everything but at the same time I think I'm going to freeze up and everything will just go away and I won't know what to do. So, I just freeze up and I get nervous. (6.5.2018)

Rhianna was aware of her growth in various aspects of reading; in the fall she mentioned that as she listened to herself read; she noticed her fluency had improved. Never one to take credit for her own success, at the end of the year she stated:

I had a really good teacher and she taught me a lot of new things that I haven't learned before and I had some ups and downs but at the end of the day it was always a good day because I was learning something new.

Even though Rhianna viewed group work and her teacher as essential to her learning, her primary indicators of success were her results on traditional achievement measures.

Rhianna's *instructional foci* were history and personal relevance. She sought opportunities for personal relevance, particularly if it supported her acquiring deeper understanding, but she would read anything. She liked opportunities to read nonfiction, especially texts that helped her understand the world, "I like it because you do get to focus on it and you get to find cool meanings behind the book and I like informational text because it's about history some of them and I like to read those books because it gives me things to think about and how the world came to be, things like that" (6.5.2018).

While she preferred historical pieces that deepened her understanding, Rhianna found utility in the fictional texts we read that dealt with relevant topics. In a whole class discussion, she shared how her immigration story differed from her classmates from Central and Latin America; as a Canadian immigrant her only memory of crossing the

border was having to throw away her banana at Customs, which stood in stark contrast to the recollections of some of her classmates. Rhianna noted the distinction between her connections with *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007) and her peers' when she commented:

Well, to be honest with you I kind of liked the Skin I'm in better because I can relate more with it because Crossing the Wire was more about Hispanics and how having a tough time in life and have to cross the border and my parents never had to deal with that. So, with the Skin I'm in I get to relate more with my personal life because I'm a brown young lady and I got teased like that in my younger elementary years, so I can relate with the Skin I'm In more. (6.5.2018)

Rhianna's comments linking her desire to learn more history to better understand the world and her quest for personal connection reflect how she attempted to make sense of her place in the world, her becoming, through her fourth-grade literacy opportunities.

Rhianna's *optimal instructional opportunity* was anything that involved opportunities for collective sensemaking with her peers. Specifically, in December, she named book clubs as influential to her learning because she had the opportunity to read books she had never heard of and explore new authors she found interesting. Further, Rhianna credited her improved reading to opportunities to talk with others to understand classmates' perspectives and how they shaped her own. In June she reflected:

I liked shared reading because like I said like when you're reading along with her [teacher] you see things that other people might not notice so when you see that you just think about it but you keep reading along to find newer things, but you're still thinking about it and when it's time to discuss you get to share that with your class and then like they can think about it and then add something new to it that the whole class gets to think about. Like one time we were reading the Skin I'm In and Heaven asked a really good question and the whole class had to think about it for like five minutes because it was a good question but you had to think deeper about it because it was not surface level and the more you thought about it

the more ideas you got about it. Each of those activities [literacy participation structures] the teachers let you make a lot of choices. (6.5.2018)

Consistent with the message many of her peers reflected, Rhianna noted the importance of choice and stopping to think deeply about what others were saying in their community of practice.

Rhianna, the *Collectivist* and the *Facilitator*, was the reliable, responsible student who looked for ways to deepen her understanding and connect personal meaning through interactions with her peers. She happily facilitated groups, yet never sought the individual acknowledgement of such leadership contributions. In April she wrote a poem demonstrative of her reification.

My Face  
By Rhianna

What does  
my face say  
to the world?  
My face says  
brown is  
beautiful  
my face says and  
wants to join  
people together.  
My face  
says a lot but  
all of it is important  
like the fact  
that my face  
isn't perfect.  
But the real question  
is what will  
my face say in  
the future?

Rhianna's writing reflects her initial becoming, how she became more aware of her place in the world, while simultaneously emphasizing her desire for people to come together, evocative of her personal orientation as a *Collectivist*.

***Justice: The Tough Guy & The Social Activist***

If you are a good reader you should be able to help others if they're not the brightest. (12.12.2017)

Justice, the self-proclaimed 'tough guy' was an African American student who had recently moved from Chicago with his father to escape neighborhood violence. Initially he was unenthused being in a new school and was circumspect of his new surroundings. Through his participation in his class' community of practice he shared stories from his past, including he had gotten in trouble by associating with the 'wrong kids' and he and his father narrowly escaped violence on a city bus. At times I observed Justice at his desk scowling over a disagreement he had with his teacher, Amanda. His reputation as the *Tough Guy* mostly dissipated as he and his classmates influenced the nature of their instructional opportunities through their input and contributions to the shared repertoire. When students were negotiating norms or discussing complex topics, Justice confidently offered alternative perspectives, pushing others to evaluate before simply agreeing. I asked Justice about his contributions to class discussions, he replied, "I didn't like to discuss with people at first, but now I do it. I get to share my opinions and disagreements with others" (6.6.2018). Justice's emergence as the *Social Activist* evidenced early when he encouraged less proficient readers in book club. He noticed a group member playing instead of participating. Justice chose to mentor his peer, "I try to

encourage him to talk. He sometimes listens, sometimes he doesn't. If you are a good reader you should be able to help others if they're not the brightest" (12.12.2017). Finally, Justice' *personal orientation* as the *Social Activist* was evidenced in his desire to learn about ethical issues and justice, such as his research on the school to prison pipeline or reading to learn what people with Asperger's experience.

Justice's *indicators of success* included his desire to be the best, "I want to be at the top, I want to be number one" (12.12.2017) through hard work and participation. He considered himself a smart reader because he read on grade level and "I'm an active reader because I answer questions and I give hard questions." Justice contrasted his schooling experiences in Chicago to his fourth-grade literacy opportunities:

I feel good because this is probably the hardest, I've worked in my whole life based on school because my past teachers in Chicago just didn't care. Like, we would just do whatever, but Ms. Southern, she kind of pushes you. I feel like if I was still in Chicago, I probably would have been on a like a third-grade reading level probably. (6.6.2018)

His desire to be number one did not come at the expense of others, Justice was aware of the importance of helping others through mentoring peers in book clubs. Justice's idea to improve his reading level was to read challenging books, ones higher than his current level; he shared this advice with his group members. Despite passing his end of grade test, he did not meet his projected score. Justice overslept the morning of the test and arrived at school after the test began; he was visibly frustrated and acknowledged his attitude prevented him from doing his best. Though test results did not reflect his best work, Justice proudly stated he read 37 books in fourth grade, compared to the seven he

read the prior year. Such an accomplishment is reflective of his desire to improve through prolonged effort and hard work.

Justice was introspective, he frequently reflected on his prior experiences as a student and contrasted them to his participation and academic identity as a fourth grader. He was aware of society's expectations for him as an African American male and recognized a strong work ethic would help him succeed. Justice's *topics of interest* included fairness, justice, and defining yourself against societal expectations. When given the choice to read the required text from the reading program or *Crossing the Wire* (Hobbs, 2007), Justice chose to read the fictional account of Victor and Rico coming to the United States, "I chose *Crossing the Wire* because, even though I could put myself in [title], it wouldn't be the best choice for me. Victor and Rico are sacrificing themselves, not just basketball" (2.9.2018). His comment led to a class discussion on the merits of text selection and surfaced students' continued requests for challenging books with topics in which they could grapple and make sense collectively. I was surprised he chose the immigration text over the basketball book, thinking he would want to read it for enjoyment, because of our in-the-moment conversations about various sports. Justice responded, "Yeah, I like to interpretate" as further indication of his desire to read, discuss, and interpret inherently complex issues. Justice chose to research the school to prison pipeline after reading an alarming article that linked prison capacity projections to fourth-grade reading scores. He was understandably concerned about what that meant for students' futures and eloquently captured society's expectations of young black males in his writing:

## What Does My Face Say to the World?

My face says that I have a bad attitude and that I don't care about school. It says that I'm mean, very angry, disrespectful and don't know why I'm at school. My attitude is nasty and that I don't care about anything. Also that I don't like to be talked to and I get mad over small stuff. My face says that I might be one of the prison pipeline kids.

What will my face say and attitude say to Ms. Southern from here on out? I'm a young, black respectful boy. Doesn't talk back, doesn't argue. Works my hardest and stays focused. Doesn't play and stays on topic. And will be helpful to my peers and learn from them too. And when you tell me something I will do it with no response and my face says I won't be one of the prison pipeline kids.

Finally, Justice's desire to learn more about issues of justice and fairness were not exclusive to his personal struggles, he saw the benefit of hearing other perspectives. I directly asked him why he was interested in such issues, he responded, "Probably because things that I went through. And things that I know and I'm close to what other people have been through too and it's interesting to see what other people have to go through" (6.6.2018). Justice's *topics of interest* reflected his personal experiences and desire to learn from other perspectives.

Whole class discussions and independent reading were *optimal participation structures* for Justice. He benefitted from sharing collectively and hearing different perspectives in the whole class discussion format, yet, he appreciated the opportunity to get lost in a book and challenge himself to read texts that he thought contributed to his development. Justice discussed his affinity for independent reading because he could, "get in the zone and read and read and read. And then I get to learn about that book and how it could help me in life" (12.12.2017), an acknowledgement of his becoming, linking his academic studies to his future life goals. He also praised the opportunity to interact

with others and hear what others think in whole class discussions. Justice saw the whole class discussions as a place to express himself and share his personal interpretations, while benefitting from hearing other perspectives. Such personal expression was important to his understanding, “You’re giving your kids a chance to let out their steam and what they think about what you’re trying to say to them and they’re letting us think on a whole other level and having to think outside the box and not usually just thinking on base level” (6.6.2018).

Justice was a study of contrasts; he was the *Tough Guy* from Chicago, yet he was the *Social Activist* who mentored others; he explored the tensions in his life and was eager to shatter societal expectations. He believed in his personal work ethic, but he also acknowledged his teacher’s role. In both his December and June interviews Justice referenced Amanda’s influence and how she had high expectations for him.

Because this year, my teacher, like last year my teacher pushed me, but she didn’t push me as hard as Ms. Southern is. Cause last year, my teacher, she just let us read on the same reading level but like once every blue moon she let us take a test and see if we should go to the next reading level. (12.12.2017)

In June, Justice spoke with admiration for Amanda, “I don’t know where she got it from, but I just know that I worked the whole school year” (6.6.2018). A few weeks after school ended in June, Justice’s dad texted Amanda to thank her for an incredible school year and to let her know he and Justice were moving back to Chicago that summer for a job opportunity.

### ***Heaven: The Spokeswoman & Poetess***

They [teachers] don't think like us, so I think that we learn more from kids because we get different opinions. I feel like I get more out of my peers instead of my teacher. (12.15.2017)

Heaven came to fourth grade with a reputation as a difficult student. She was an African American student in transition; she frequently experienced homelessness and moved between shelters and temporary housing throughout the year. Consequently, she often came to school late or fell asleep in class. As a warm demander with high expectations and a recognition of her inherent ability (Delpit, 2012), Lila won Heaven over; she wanted to work for Lila and sought Lila's validation. Heaven's personal orientation as the *Spokeswoman* emerged early in the year as students worked to establish normative practices. In whole class discussions, she happily offered an alternative perspective, respectfully disagreed with peers, and pushed the class to reconcile misunderstandings and explore character intention. Despite her participation in book club, it was Heaven's comment, "these books are too vanilla, I cannot relate to the characters" (10.3.2017) that prompted us to re-evaluate what books we offered, as her peers emphatically agreed with their *Spokeswoman*. Ever the one to have a pulse on the needs of the class, Heaven, the *Poetess*, implemented writing consulting groups with Rhianna in response to her peers' desire to write poetry; she reflected in December about her plan for poetry groups, "I wanted to bring in poetry clubs 'cause I like doing it and there is eight people in my classroom who actually like to do it too" (12.15.2017). Heaven's personal orientation as the *Spokeswoman* reflected her strong relationship with

Lila; Lila leveraged Heaven's leadership potential and as a consequence, Heaven gave feedback openly and honestly on behalf of herself and her classmates.

Heaven's *indicators of success* included public recognition for individual accomplishment and challenging herself. In her fall survey, Heaven named herself as a great reader; when I asked her to elaborate, she claimed to be a great reader, yet still improving. She discussed her reading levels by the colored leveling system their reading program used, and then said, "I just wanna' go all the way and one other thing, I wanna' beat [Student from previous year]'s high score, 'cause she made it all the way to bronze and I want to make it to bronze too!" (12.15.2017). There was much schoolwide publicity when students reached new reading levels; it was displayed on the in-school announcements presentation when students earned the next colored reading ribbon. Heaven was acutely aware of how to improve her reading; she wanted to read challenging texts and write about her understanding. She expressed a love for literature, but also saw the benefit of reading nonfiction to deepen her understanding. Heaven reflected nonchalance regarding her test performances at the end of the year, flippantly commenting she earned fours (considered proficient), and maybe next year she would earn a five. Heaven wanted to improve as a reader, and she wanted to be recognized for her accomplishments.

Heaven displayed two *topics of interest* consistently throughout the year; she wanted to study and write poetry and she wanted to read and discuss issues of fairness. In December Heaven expressed her desire to include more poetry in their studies, she told me, "I was going to bring this up to Ms. Franklin, I was going to confront Ms. Franklin

about this, I think that during writer's workshop we should just add in poetry clubs to that" (12.15.2017). Heaven's poetry was a medium to demonstrate understanding and make sense of her lived experiences in relation to what she read. She wrote the following poem:

I'm broken  
I'm that broken down toy  
You never played with  
I'm that broken down pencil  
You never used  
I'm worn out  
I'm that worn out dress you  
No longer wear  
I'm that worn out Barbie  
You never shared  
I'm that worn out pair of pants  
You never put on  
I'm that worthless old rag doll  
You used to play with  
Or am I  
No I'm not  
I'm that person you  
Never seen  
I'm that girl in the back  
Of the class that doesn't laugh  
I'm that girl that has  
Nothing to say to anyone  
I'm that girl that wishes she  
Would say what she wants to say  
Poem inspired by Mockingbird

Heaven's notebook, filled with poetry she wrote was stained, pages were tattered and torn, she lost more than one notebook in the transition between temporary housing and shelters, but it was a tangible representation of her understanding and connection to what she read and her projection of her struggles into the world. She spoke passionately about

her poetry and was fully involved in leading writing conferences with her peers. Heaven was a leading voice in foregrounding issues of fairness in class discussions. Early in the year when students were making superficial connections to the Judy Blume texts, it was Heaven who pushed others to think about characters' intent and motivation, posing questions, like, 'Why do they keep leaving him alone, aren't there any parents? They don't treat the brothers fairly, of course, he's going to act out.' She was consistently concerned with treating people fairly. She picked up on this as a theme in the texts she read, "Like it was fun hearing about some people in our class like they had connections with Rico and Victor and how they're parents were from Mexico or something and like the Skin I'm in how people talk about how people shouldn't treat people that type a way, like how John-John treats Malika" (6.5.2018). Her emphasis on writing poetry and reflecting on issues of fairness were demonstrative of Heaven's participation and reification in her fourth-grade literacy experiences.

Heaven's *optimal participation structures* were opportunities to discuss challenging material and writer's workshop. She saw the connection across participation structures early; Heaven noted the importance of collaborative groups such as book clubs and whole class reads to hear different perspectives and share her own. She was the *Spokeswoman* who championed the efforts to read more relevant material, texts that challenged students to think about fairness and complex issues, topics that prompted her to reflect and write about her thinking. Heaven evidenced the importance of clearing up misconceptions with others through discussion and exploration of topics in relation to their lives. Her participation in the community of practice influenced her personal

understanding and her writing demonstrated her reification. She wrote this in response to reading *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 2007):

What my face says?  
You know what it says  
It says that I'm competitive  
And  
It says I like to crack open a book  
It says I like to laugh  
It says that my voice is louder than a bomb  
It says that I have more than one emotion  
So yeah that's what it says  
And maybe one day it will seem unknown  
Well here is the poem where I am officially exposed

Heaven was a confident voice influencing the negotiation of meaning and establishing the normative practices for different participation structures. She also used opportunities to write to demonstrate her understanding and reification of herself onto the world.

Heaven discussed her work ethic and her attitude toward hard work in both her interviews; in the winter she reflected how Lila appreciated her efforts:

Because she's [Lila] always talk about how I'm so smart and I like to, that's the reason I wrote about my journey of writing and reading and I love to learn. And being at school a lot. And even though, when I'm really frustrated, I never really give up. So, that's why I think I'm really hard working.

In the spring she summarized the school year:

It went pretty good. I tried my hardest all the time and I work my butt off and I got what I deserved.

Her remarks about her hard work and affinity for being at school contrast her comments about her prior school experiences where she did minimal work and saw school as a chore, where she got reprimanded for her challenging behavior. Heaven, our *Spokeswoman* and *Poetess*, came to fourth grade with the weight of a reputation as a defiant student, but she worked hard and left Lila's class with an air of confidence and validation. Despite many efforts to keep her at Merritt for fifth grade, Heaven and her mother moved, and she enrolled in another school.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

When students have opportunities to interact with classmates, contribute to the nature of their studies, and participate and reflect on joint meaning making, situated learning predicts their adoption of positive learning trajectories (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This adoption stands in contrast to students' perceptions of their prior instructional experiences, where they were told what to read and how to read with few opportunities to share and collaborate with classmates. Implementing instructional strategies consistent with situated learning's emphasis on interaction and joint meaning making expanded students' opportunities for learning, experiences that promoted positive academic identities within a curriculum that engaged them in an examination of the links between their present academic studies, past lives, and future goals. This adoption of new learning trajectories also impacted positively their performances on traditional achievement measures, e.g., word recognition abilities and achievement on mandated end-of-grade literacy assessments.

An emphasis on promoting demonstrations of agency provided the impetus for this adoption as teachers aligned the curriculum with students' interests and expectations, soliciting their input and feedback, which, in turn, dramatically changed instructional activities, sometimes on an hour-by-hour basis. When granted agency, students interacted with classmates; provided input and feedback to teachers who dramatically

altered the nature of daily instructional opportunities, which allowed students to engage with others to negotiate meaning within newly established normative practices (Vaughn, 2020; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, as students met collaboratively in book clubs, they struggled to identify with the middle-class characters living in Manhattan in the Judy Blume texts; consequently, they requested texts that centered on their daily challenges and were reflective of the sociopolitical context of my study. This finding and other are consistent with sociocultural views of agency (Akos, 2005; Reeve & T'Seng, 2011; Vaughn, 2020), which highlight the importance of an interaction between the community of practice's context and student initiative.

Throughout demonstrations of agency, teachers aligned classroom assignments with students' interests, each of which required authentic reading and writing abilities; students, in turn, requested more opportunities to become engaged in activities which reflected their lived experiences, leading them to think about issues of fairness and justice in the world. Students requested more relevant readings, wanted to practice the writing of thematic summaries far beyond the time that was recommended in district pacing guides, and contributed to discussions based on their reflections and needs. Their input and feedback were critical determinants of how teachers designed their instruction, an indication of how agency promoted, influenced, and jointly determined emerging norms for success with communities of practice. While such actions could not always be anticipated, each one helped the students to examine personal expectations while reflecting on the meaning of their engagement in daily studies. Soliciting input and requesting feedback was far easier for teachers to accomplish than their ability to address

students' requests to personalize daily instructional activities while simultaneously providing the necessary supports for students to successfully complete the resulting assignments. Without their successes across these two areas, however, Delpit (2012) believes reification for marginalized students is unlikely to occur.

While acts of participation and reification overlapped, often with no clear demarcation between them, each enabled the other, contributing to unique, yet complementary purposes. As previously stated, participation is how we recognize ourselves in each other; reification is a projection of ourselves on the world (Wenger, 1998). As such, as noted in the diversity of experiences and orientations across the case studies, reification aligned more with students' construction and discovery of unique personal histories and their resulting contributions to the learning processes as they negotiated meaning within emerging personal areas of study, whereas participation aligned more directly with their ability to meet the challenges of their community of practice's newly established norms.

When the community of practice provided new norms for success, ones that differed from students' prior schooling experiences, students adapted to the new criterion for success, as evidenced by their ability to read challenging material, identify with characters' intentions and motives, and their engagement in sensemaking by offering multiple perspectives. Their participation and ability to adapt to new norms for success led to increased opportunities to adopt positive learning trajectories and engage in their studies, all of which are necessary for reification. Accordingly, reification and

participation served as a lens through which educators can understand the intertwining development of students', learning, engagement, and identity (Nasir, 2002).

The key to establishing communities of practice that emphasize student participation and reification is the promotion of multiple pathways for students to succeed and see themselves reflected in their studies and interactions with others; through their input and feedback into the direction of their instructional opportunities, again where participation begets reification, and reification leads to further participation within the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). As a result, while students participated in similar literacy activities, each individual developed a unique identity. Aspects of students' reification were detected in the nuanced examination of individual case student data where their identities emerged and evolved as a result of their participation, and their engagement and interaction with others shaped their mutual understanding of relevant topics, how they were positioned in the world, and how such understanding influenced their future selves. In terms of reification, there was a political slant to conversations students initiated which reflected the greater sociopolitical landscape: these conversations were not viewed by students, teachers, or parents as contentious, rather they saw them as opportunities to explore who they were in relationship to others. As such, conversations surfaced a variety of topics, ranging from their animal research and conservation efforts to more controversial topics such as school shootings and civil rights. Acts of reification varied by individual, but evidence of each case students' reification consistently emerged across four areas.

Students' evolving personal orientations underscored how they were able across the year to discover unique spaces within the curriculum. Justice and Heaven, two African American students who entered fourth grade with reputations for being difficult shifted their orientations through their reifications to demonstrate strong leadership abilities and the potential to study challenging topics such as discrimination and prison. Rhianna and Jonathan demonstrated aspects of reification in their writings, exploring what their faces said to the world as bi-racial and Latinx students; Daniella's reification surfaced in her emerging confidence to engage in her studies while helping others; Abe requested meaningful texts that helped him explore character development more deeply as evidence of his reification; Diego led conversations about immigration policy while he planned his life goals; and Jose engaged in the socially challenging work of including and advocating for others who differed intellectually as demonstrative of his reification. As previously stated, students' participation within the joint enterprise of their communities of practice was essential for these students to develop and foster their reification. Without teachers addressing students' ability to complete assignments in a timely fashion, ask relevant questions, engage in and complete challenging tasks, and read and write extended prose while collaborating with classmates, their identification with schooling would have been limited (Jackson, 2003).

Situated learning provided a good framework for this intervention because of its attention to individual and group aspects of participation and reification. Through co-creating group norms that emphasized sensemaking, opening space for collective problem-solving, and fostering relationships between students, individuals engaged in

studies that were personally relevant and evidenced their emerging identities, which encouraged their participation and broadened their opportunities for demonstrations of their learning. The supportive community of practice with multiple pathways of success that emphasized joint meaning making and interactions for further discussion and sensemaking were influential to students' participation and acts of reification.

My study has implications for instructional practice, specifically the role of texts in literacy design. Early in the intervention students indicated they wanted more challenging texts that reflected characters' struggles demonstrative of their own lived histories. Choice was an integral part of the intervention from the initial planning stages (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; 2015). Yet, students' continued requests for socially and personally relevant texts, ones they could ponder and write about, led us to adopt realistic fiction books with characters who more closely reflected their cultural backgrounds, but also ones that centered on inherently controversial topics such as immigration, racial discrimination, civil war, and students experiencing physical differences (Haberman, 1991). This is a critical distinction, selecting texts that included characters that merely looked like them was not enough for the students. For example, this distinction was most prominent when Justice rebuked the reading curriculum's required text of an African American basketball star, in favor of a text about immigration, because the text afforded him opportunities to identify with a character's struggle. Increasing student book choice differed from their prior literacy experiences, but the inclusion of challenging texts that more closely aligned with their identities and personal struggles encouraged student participation in ways I did not predict. For instance, Jonathan not known for his academic

achievement, stood out as an active voice in class discussions about immigration policy, credited challenging material and opportunities to interact with others as expanding his future options (Cuban, 2009; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

I questioned earlier; would one school year be sufficient time to detect change across the three outcomes? Further, is the duration of an academic year long enough for students to adopt more positive learning trajectories and link their fourth-grade literacy studies to their future life goals, their ideological becoming? The answer is yes.

Establishing communities of practice in which students collaborated through interactions with their peers and teacher to determine normative practices for mutual engagement and negotiating meaning within the joint enterprise were critical to the success of students' abilities to adopt positive learning trajectories. Such an influence was demonstrated in students' participation and reification aspects; students' participation to provide input and feedback into the nature and direction of their studies influenced their reification, the ways they demonstrated their becoming, how they projected themselves into the world. One school year was sufficient to see emerging, yet nuanced development across the three outcomes as a consequence of students' participation and reification, an indication they were able to adopt more positive learning trajectories in a mere school year, within their community of practice.

Attention to the development of outcomes across the year counters educational policy that demands directly teaching skills to get instant results. Students' test scores, their performances on end of grade tests and decoding tasks, demonstrated the emphasis on the three outcomes concurrently supported their achievement on traditional measures,

an endorsement for future educational policy to expand what counts as learning. My study supports future policy implications that shift the direct-coupling accountability frameworks dominating the instructional landscape of our schools by demonstrating you can increase standardized test performances while also attending to broad notions of student learning, increasing their academic identities, and engaging them in personally relevant studies. Counter to present claims of finding ‘a magic bullet’ (Cohen, 1987), schools need to shift to a more comprehensive accountability approach with a focus on multiple outcomes fueled by an emphasis on student agency.

This study was heavily grounded in classroom experiences; the intervention, giving fourth-graders agency in their literacy practices, was successful largely because the students experienced success. Students experienced success across the three outcomes; their learning was expanded to include opportunities to set and work towards goals, they read strategically and closely, and engaged in prolonged tasks that required effortful reading, writing, and discussing with others. Their identity work included giving input and feedback about instructional experiences that reflected their interests and related their learning to their future goals, while they engaged in studying their interests and found possibilities to personalize their studies to identify others with shared interests that related to their lived experiences and expanded goals for their future selves. Several students commented they worked harder than ever in fourth grade; they credited their teacher and peers for encouraging such engagement and demonstrated pride as a result of their effortful year. Students’ participation in their community of practice were uniform across cases, with agency influencing their expanded learning opportunities, academic

identity, work, and their engagement in their studies, yet their individual acts of reification, particularly their personal orientations, differed amongst students.

The success of my dissertation study hinged on the ability of the instructional intervention, in which we emphasized student agency with school-dependent students (Delpit, 2012), to influence three central outcomes, establishing learning broadly, attending to students' academic identities, and engaging students in relevant literacy work. My study has implications for how teachers involve school-dependent students (Delpit, 2012) in their studies, thereby expanding their learning opportunities. We substituted the Judy Blume texts when the students told us they were too 'vanilla'; their input was significant to making the curriculum relevant, consistent with Delpit's (2012) ideas, and without it, we would have not known to make the change. Through this in-depth qualitative analysis, Lila, Amanda, Sam, and I knew these students well, and they knew us. We celebrated successes, we listened to harrowing stories of personal risk, we laughed at each other's jokes, and we shared dismay at news headlines as students feared for the safety and security of their loved ones. In knowing the students well, the teachers slowed down the curriculum and modeled strategies longer; they turned students towards one another, contributing to their emerging identities as knowledgeable experts and co-constructors of meaning; students advocated for what they needed, and supported one another in their goals, and teachers de-emphasized testing as the sole criterion for success. All of this took time, included intensive support, frequent communication from collaborative colleagues, and courage to trust and reflect on formative assessment data collected daily in-the-moment.

As part of the interview protocol we asked for student feedback on each of the literacy participation structures implemented, in hopes of identifying students' favored structure to focus our attention. In the middle of the year students favored book clubs but had positive reactions to each of the structures for different reasons; by the end of the year the distinction between structures was less clear. Students struggled to identify one structure they favored over another, citing the affordances of each and how they contributed to their learning, identities, and engagement through the participation and reification frameworks. This implies no single participation structure will capture the depth and complexity to address the educational reform effort sought through eliciting student agency; much like the intertwining of outcomes (Nasir, 2002), it was the intertwining of the structures that supported students' development in literacy. Further, as previously stated, while our intervention did not prioritize skills-based instruction, participating students increased their competencies as defined by traditional achievement measures, confirming that prioritizing broad notions of learning, attending to students' identity-work, and engaging them in their studies increased their achievement.

A limitation of this study is the peripheral participation of students identified for exceptional services that took them out of the general classroom for extended time for intervention instruction, despite student requests to remain with their peers for core instruction. Though, their stories are interspersed with the case students who mentored them and included them in the community of practice, the students who were pulled from the classroom were not present enough in the data to determine the impact of their participation and reification as a consequence of being granted agency in their literacy

studies in ways that other students demonstrated development across the three outcomes. Such a limitation is concerning for equitable educational opportunities and raises questions about how to support achievement outcomes for students with a variety of intellectual abilities.

Additionally, while students made anecdotal reference to discussing their learning with their families and teachers shared parents' comments of increased reading for their students, a way to strengthen future studies would be include families in the interview process to gain a clearer understanding of how students' lived experiences were impacted by their participation in their classrooms' communities of practice from their family's perspective. This additional layer of understanding would strengthen the connection between students' lived experiences and their academic tasks, further addressing the identity watersheds and abating disidentification with school (Jackson, 2003), with the likelihood of increasing participation and acts of reification.

Finally, the findings from this study were compelling, particularly the reification findings of individual students, yet I feel they were just the initial step towards developing students' learning, identities, and engagement in ways that supported their ideological becoming. What a wonderful opportunity to study this community of practice longitudinally, over the course of years to learn how extended opportunities to interact with others, influence instructional experiences through the selection of relevant topics of study with inherently controversial issues, and engage in discussions from different vantage points would contribute to pathways for success and an identification with schooling (Jackson, 2003) for the diverse learners in our classrooms. If one school year

made such a profound difference for some students, I can only imagine the possibilities if their entire public-school career, from kindergarten through high school afforded such opportunities for participation and reification.

While the primary focus of my dissertation is to understand the participation and reification of students being granted agency in their fourth-grade literacy instruction, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the collaboration between the participating teachers, Lila and Amanda, Sam, and me. Students benefitted from the near constant communication and collaboration between Lila and Amanda; frequently their drives to and from school were consumed with calls to alter instruction based on the day's formative assessment and noticings. Moreover, Lila and Amanda benefitted from consistent university support in re-structuring the adopted reading program to more closely align with their desired goal of increasing student engagement in their literacy studies. Not all teachers are afforded opportunities to experience such camaraderie and collaboration in designing instruction with their students' interests in mind.

In summary, by reforming literacy instructional practices to emphasize student agency, students directed the nature of their studies to broaden their learning, contribute positively to their academic identities, and engage with others to link their studies to their future life goals. They engaged in a community of practice that included their participation in establishing what counts as success and offered them opportunities for reification, to project themselves onto the world. The nature of the tasks, the possibilities for collaboration, and the shift in students' identities, and increased engagement support

leveraging students as agentic in their literacy instruction. In short, the students led, we followed.

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