The Social Drama of Literature Discussions in a Fifth/Sixth-Grade Classroom

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This year-long study examined how conceptions of what it means to read and discuss literature shaped peer-led literature discussions in a fifth/sixth-grade classroom. Using performance theory as a lens, the researcher explored the relationship between social and interpretive expectations in the classroom and the positions students took up during literature discussions. Analysis of literature events rig that in peer-led groups students worked to create solidarity and delineate boundaries, to vie for power and interrupt authority, all related to their engagement with and interpretations of literature. The social drama that existed in this classroom surfaced often during peer-led literature discussions, creating situations in which students negotiated social positions and commented on the meaning of social and interpretive competence. This research complicates the role that power and status play in literature discussions, making visible shifts in power as they occur in moment-to-moment interaction. The findings hold implications for teachers and researchers to critically examine the practice of peer-led literature discussions and the many social conditions that shape how students engage with literature.

Recent research on literary response underscores the complicated interaction among all members of a classroom as they perform their interpretations. Even in classrooms where teachers invite personal responses to literature, social and cultural factors within and beyond the classroom make it difficult for some students to accept the invitation (Alvermann, 1996; Finders, 1997; Lewis, 1993; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). Differential status can lead to silence or resistance on the part of students faced with peers and teachers whose literary interpretations emerge from a position of power. Peer-led literature discussions are credited with solving some of these problems by opening the way for more egalitarian talk structures, with students collaborating equitably in forming interpretations of texts (Leal, 1993; Short & Pierce, 1990). However, few studies examine the influence of student power and status on peer-led discussions of literature. The present study addresses these issues through an exploration of the power shifts that occur in classrooms and their shaping influence on the nature of peer-led discussions.

In order to understand the ways in which the literary culture of a classroom is created within the interwoven social contexts of classroom and community, I conducted a year-long ethnographic study of literature discussions in a combined fifth/sixth-grade classroom. I address the following research questions in this article which focuses specifically on peer-led literature discussions and their relationship to the classroom context: (a) What meanings do students and the classroom teacher give to the reading and discussion of literature and how are these meanings related to social and interpretive expectations within the classroom? Social expectations are defined as those related to the beliefs, values, and norms for interaction promoted within the classroom. Interpretive expectations are defined as those related to the reading, understanding, and discussion of literature. (b) How do conceptions of what it means to read and discuss literature shape peer-led literature discussions? (c) In what ways do contexts beyond the classroom shape peer-led literature discussions? As the theoretical framework below makes clear, I am interested in the ways that classrooms function as cultures. Given this interest, my research
questions focus on the meanings given to a particular cultural practice (the reading and discussion of literature) and consider contexts within and beyond the classroom to include such sociocultural conditions as social class, gender, age, perceived ability, and peer status. Examining the discourse surrounding the reading and discussion of literature within a particular classroom site can enrich the field's understanding of how classroom contexts shape the way students engage with literature.

**Theoretical Framework**

Current conversations about the social and cultural constitution of literacy point to the complex relationship between individuals and the nested contexts that shape literacy practices (Bakhtin, 1981; Blomme, 1983; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Heath, 1983). The theoretical framework that informs this study includes a view of classroom life as a culture enacted through discourse and ritual (Griffin & Mehan, 1981; Turner, 1969). Discourse, as I use it throughout this study, includes not only classroom interaction but the world views and ideologies that regulate and define life in the classroom (Brodkey, 1992; Weedon, 1987). While a culture shares norms and standards for belief and evaluation (Goodenough, 1971), it is also dynamic, "something actively produced and displayed" as it is co-produced by teachers and students (Patthey-Chavez, 1993, p. 37). Because interaction is constituted in relations of power, the meaning of classroom rituals varies depending on one's position and status within the classroom (Turner, 1982). Thus, practices and beliefs within the culture of the classroom are created discursively through and against competing interests and differential power relations. As Bruner (1986) defines "A culture is as much a forum for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules or specifications for action" (p. 123).

**A Performative View of Classroom Context**

In order to better understand the social positions from which particular students speak and act and the power relations represented by those social positions, I turned to the interdisciplinary field of performance studies. Performance studies views all social action as performative. From this perspective, speakers and writers take up positions in relation to the expectations of others and the social codes and discourses available within a given context (Bauman, 1977; Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Conquergood, 1989; Davies & Harre, 1990). In the hypothetical case of a sixth grade voracious reader discussing a text with a fifth-grade reluctant reader, the positions each student takes up may change as the discussion progresses. The fifth grader might want to take up a position of resistance as well as compliance, disinterest as well as engagement in the course of one discussion, for instance, depending on the context of that interaction. Let's imagine that the sixth grader begins the discussion by performing the role of a teacher, and the fifth grader dutifully conforms. Later in the discussion, however, the older student shifts to an engaged stance in relation to the text and the discussion, causing the younger student, a reluctant reader, to become disruptive and avoid interaction.

These performances depend not only upon the moment-to-moment shifts that occur during the interaction but also upon the relationship established between these students in and out of the classroom; each student’s position and status within the classroom and neighborhood may play a role as well. Adopting a theoretical framework that views all social action as performative provided me with a way to understand the fluid nature of social interaction during literature
discussions in the classroom site for this study.

A performative view of classroom context complicates a central tenet of social constructivist learning as it has been represented by literacy researchers and educators in recent years—that classrooms should serve as unified learning communities. Such classrooms are "student-centered," the literature suggests, sites where students can share their voices equitably in talk and writing about texts. However, some literacy theorists have questioned the reality and even the desirability of such classrooms, warning that within them social conflict and difference are often masked. Pratt (1987) criticizes the utopian nature of this view, arguing that speech communities are not linguistically or socially unified. An idealization of community works against the processes that need to take place in classrooms where language should be used both to critique and produce social relations (see also Phelps, 1988). Harris (1989) also calls for rethinking the concept of community. Drawing on his own ambiguous identities related to social class, he describes the "tense plurality of being at once part of several communities and yet never wholly a member of one. . ." (pp. 11-12). Extending this argument to the classroom, Harris proposes that classroom discussions ought to focus more on how competing discourses shape social practices than on achieving community consensus.

Rather than being conflict-free, classroom communities are subject to the everyday tension, the regular give and take of conversation between members of a community who have differential needs, beliefs, patterns of interaction, and positions of power or status—members who must share certain norms and standards of the classroom culture, but who are themselves participants in cultures beyond the classroom. Turner (1969, 1982) refers to conflicts within communities as social dramas that grow out of the multivocal nature of rituals and their meanings. Social dramas, he argues, have the potential to shape subsequent performances and lead to cultural growth. In this way, through conflict within communities, context is dynamic.

Given a dynamic, shape-shifting view of context, Bauman and Briggs (1990) argue that researchers must attempt to "discern how the participants themselves determine which aspects of the ongoing social interaction are relevant" (p. 68). Whether students perform for the teacher or for particular peers during a literature discussion, for instance, might shift depending on a student's intellectual engagement or relationship with teacher and peers. Moreover, the ways in which a student performs may relate to the degree to which the contextual discourse is authoritative in that it does not invite addressivity or transformation (Bakhtin, 1981; Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Bakhtin proposes that speakers and audiences address one another by producing utterances constituted in an awareness of the expectations of others in the interactional context. However, authoritative discourse does not allow for the give and take between social voices that leads to appropriation and change. Such authoritative discourse need not stem solely from the teacher, but may be inscribed in the performance of particular students as well. Studies that explore classroom context focus on the positions students take up as performers in the classroom in consort with teachers' performances, revealing the dialogic relationship between the two (Baker, 1993; Davies, 1983; Gilmore, 1985; Mehan, Hertwick & Meihls, 1985). Viewing interaction in this way foregrounds the interplay between context and performers and illuminates the competing "voices" that constitute each performer and his/her audience. Grounded in a performative view of classroom context, this study conceives of social action as performative, speech communities as heterogeneous, and contexts as continually reshaped through social interaction.
The Making of Meaning in Peer-Led Discussions

In examining how literary understanding is shaped by different talk structures, researchers have begun to study peer-led literature discussions in elementary classrooms that have been found to provide increased opportunities for participants to construct knowledge collaboratively (Almasi, 1995; Langer, 1993, 1995; McMahon, 1992; Weinck & O'Flahavan, 1994). Almasi, for example, found that peer-led discussions led to more episodes of cognitive conflict with self that increased engagement with text.

Peer-led groups are not without their complications, however, and recent studies suggest that taking the teacher out of the group does not necessarily result in equitable relations (Cohen, 1994). In literature discussion groups, students bring to the group existing practices (ways of talking, thinking, and acting) constituted through such conditions as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and peer status (Lewis, 1995). In groups initiated by the researcher, Enciso (1994) found that students' literary responses, as well as her own, were shaped by social, cultural, and personal identities which should be both acknowledged and examined. Other researchers have found that students come to literature groups with socially gendered ways of talking about and valuing texts (Cherland, 1994; Evans, 1996). Lensmire (1994) used peer-led groups frequently in his work with third-grade students in a writer's workshop setting and found that rigid hierarchies related to socioeconomic status governed access to resources and privileges meant for everyone in the class (such as inclusion in groups, representation in stories, opportunities for peer response). McMahon (1992) found that one of her focal students, whose status was below that of two other boys in his book group, formulated responses to match those of whichever boy he perceived to have more status during a given discussion. These findings suggest that future research examining peer-led literature discussions can answer important questions about how status and power relations among members of a classroom shape what students are able to understand and share about the literature they read.

Method

Research Setting and Participants

Emerson School (a pseudonym, as are all names in this article) was an elementary school situated in an older neighborhood of mixed-income residents. Of the school's 366 students, 17% were on free and reduced lunch. I chose a multi-aged classroom because of my interest in how age differences shape classroom context and literature discussions. In deciding upon the classroom site for this study, I looked for a teacher whose pedagogy would allow for much peer-led discussion, student decision making, and collaborative work, and who herself would have a strong identity as a reader and writer. The teacher who agreed to participate in the study, Julia Davis, met these criteria. Her reading curriculum was literature-based and students spent most of their time in small groups discussing journal responses. Julia made her love for reading known early on, telling her students on the first day of class, "Pick your favorite spiral and label it 'Reading.'" Working in pairs and collaborative groups was common practice in all subject areas and students worked with the teacher to solve problems and formulate goals. In addition to the teacher, parents of focal students and three administrators at the district and building levels were interviewed in order to understand the school, district, family, and community contexts that inevitably shape the classroom.

After spending two months in Julia's classroom, I chose five focal students for this study. My
goal was to choose students who were representative of the classroom population, yet who would provide contrasting characteristics. With these criteria in mind, I chose European-American focal students. Julia's classroom included just three students of color out of twenty-five students. Two of these children were international students who spent time with an ESL teacher during reading, and one was an African American student who had been advanced one grade level.

Table 1 includes characteristics of focal students. The column labeled "#LDG" lists the number of literature discussion groups in which I was able to observe each student participate. The (T) following "SES" and "Ability" represents "Teacher" and signifies that student designation in these categories is from the point of view of the classroom teacher. I include only the teacher's point of view in this chart because my research questions focus on how meanings within this classroom have been discursively constituted. While the designation of one's social class background and ability are not constructed entirely through the teacher, the teacher has a primary role in shaping the authoritative view of student identity in the classroom. Parents' occupations, included in the student sketches below, served as social class markers in addition to teacher designation. Originally, I had chosen six focal students, but one sixth-grade female, the only sixth grader designated as working class, was dropped from the study because I was unable to observe her participation in a sufficient number of literature discussion groups.

I wanted the study to include both working class and middle class students because in initial conversations with parents, school personnel, and community members social class emerged

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<tr>
<th>Focal Students (Each Student chose his or her own pseudonym)</th>
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<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>James</td>
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<td>Jason</td>
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<td>Nikki</td>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>Mackenzie</td>
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**Teacher**

- European-American and middle class; late forties
- Literature-based reading program
- Strong identity as a reader and writer
- Strong commitment to literacy learning and teaching
- Emphasis on student decision-making and collaborative work

**Parents of Focal Students: Secondary Sources**

- James's mother
- Jason's mother
- Nikki's mother and father I
- David's mother and stepfather
- Mackenzie's mother I

**Administrators: Third Level Sources**

- Principal of Emerson School
- District Director of Curriculum I
- Literacy Specialist (for three schools)
as a salient feature. For instance, when I asked the coordinator of Emerson's neighborhood association how she would represent the socioeconomic status of the community, she reported that the Emerson community is one where middle class and working class people live side-by-side. I received a similar response from the literacy specialist who added that Emerson was the most diverse school in the district in terms of the wide range of income levels represented. At the time of my initial phone call to Julia, she too described the school as a place where "kids who are low SES and low achieving are best friends with kids who fly to Europe at a moment's notice." She added that parents in this neighborhood generally taught their children "to respect idiosyncrasies" in a way that created what Julia described as a "classless" classroom.

What follows is a sketch of each focal student drawn from my field notes and interview transcripts with the purpose of orienting the reader to each student's classroom and community status. I begin this process with a caveat: In keeping with the theoretical frame for this study and its emphasis on the dynamic and performative nature of context, I avoid a structural view of status that delineates how status hierarchies are maintained within an existing social structure (Sutton-Smith, 1982). Rather, I am interested in the shifts in power and status that can transform social conditions. In determining broad status hierarchies, however, I used ethnographic tools including the following: formal and informal interview questions related to the social organization of the classroom and school (e.g. questions about identifiable groups and friendship patterns); observational indicators of status over time (West, 1996); and student-generated sociograms indicating friendships within the classroom and within the school. An example that combines interview and observational data about status would be the rigid memberships that governed seating privileges in the lunchroom where specific tables held students of a particular status (e.g. a table for popular sixth-grade girls, one for mixed fifth/sixth-grade boys of average status, etc.). Emerson's lunchroom delineated boundaries related to status as defined by degree of popularity, which is often the way that children mark out difference (Eder, 1995).

David: "The head that wears the crown." The title of this section refers to the phrase Julia used during one of our interviews to describe David, a phrase that underscores his position as leader among his fellow students. David, a sixth grader designated as middle-class and high-ability, held high status within the classroom and the community. His father if was an attorney and his mother was employed by an educational firm. My field notes are full of examples of David's helping other students, actively participating in discussions, doing the work he had been asked to do, and generally fulfilling the role adults in his life would want him to fill, yet I learned that David often got into trouble outside the classroom. David was able to manage multiple performances, including adult-pleaser, engaged learner, and rebellious youth, while retaining his leadership status. When I asked David during our final interview how he would describe his role in the classroom, he first said that he was always "goofing off," but then added that "Mrs. Davis always says that I'm a leader." His self-defining discourse, then, matched the bad boy/good boy dichotomy that seemed central to how others viewed him.

Mackenzie: "Socially literate." Many of my conversations with Julia about Mackenzie, a sixth grader designated as middle-class and high ability, centered on her social power. Her father worked in sales and her mother was completing a bachelors degree at the university. Mackenzie was described by her teacher as "socially literate" and by her mother as "powerful." She could be helpful and solicitous of others or she could be exclusive. Mackenzie's status in the classroom was
evident throughout the year: she was one of two students, both girls, elected to student council; she was the student coordinator for the school's conflict resolution program; she and her good friend Brooke were nearly always self- or teacher-selected leaders during peer-led literature discussions. When I asked Mackenzie how she would characterize her role in her classroom, she said "...to talk when no one else will. I'm right behind Brooke in that." Mackenzie excelled both socially and academically and was enrolled in the school's program for gifted students.

**Jason:** "School is school" and "home is home." Jason, a fifth grader designated as working-class and medium/low ability, did not engage his family in school activities. Jason's father was a plumber and his mother worked as a sales clerk. His mother told me "I guess school is school and that is left there. And home is home." Jason was quiet and accommodating. Socially, he did not have close friends in the room, although he was not an obvious outsider. He was one of two students who took the bus to school from a nearby rural area, which meant that he had to leave class ten minutes early and couldn't gather with the others in the school yard after school. During our first interview, Jason's mother had mentioned that she was surprised to learn from Julia that Jason didn't talk much in class for social or academic purposes because his teacher the previous year had complained that Jason had done too much socializing. By our final interview, she expressed concern that Jason had lost his friends from the previous year without having made new ones. "He doesn't seem to care," she added and went on to explain that he was busy playing baseball and spending time with his family.

**James:** "Life is a job for this little kid." The title of this section refers to a phrase Julia used to describe James, a fifth grader designated as working-class and low-ability. It is a phrase that underscores his difference from other students in Julia's class. James lived with his mother, who was a domestic worker, and, later in the study, his mother's fiancé. James's mother entered a substance abuse program twice during the year of this study. James's status within the classroom community fluctuated throughout the semester but was often fairly low due to the ethos of this classroom which placed value on school success. In collaborative groups, his ideas were usually not taken seriously, and he often played a slightly resistant (either angry or goofing-off) but manageable role. At various times during the year, Julia and James's mother would work closely together, and for a short time James would keep up with his work. At one point, his mother told Julia that she couldn't help James because things were not going well at home. Julia let James know that he was going to need to take extra responsibility for a while, but this talk did not have a lasting effect. Julia felt that James needed constant monitoring and began to think that he'd benefit from extra help with a special education teacher the following year.

**Nikki:** "Stirring up the chickens." Nikki, a fifth grader designated as middle-class and high-ability, was characterized by her mother as the member of her family who was always "stirring up the chickens." In some respects that phrase characterized her role at school as well. While the making of one's identity is always in process, for Nikki the manifestation of that process seemed almost palpable: She could be withdrawn and sullen, or giggly and animated; eager to please or eager to irritate; engaged and curious or bored and critical. Nikki's father was a health professional and her mother a graduate student at the university. She was enrolled in the school's program for gifted students and was seen as a strong student, but one whose interpretive stance frequently contested dominant cultural views.
Researcher's Role

My level of involvement as a participant-observer was moderate, defined by Spradley (1980) as "a balance between an insider and outsider, between participant and observation" (p. 60). Because my questions depended so much on understanding the culture of the classroom as constructed by Julia and her students, I believed that my participation in literature discussions might have been intrusive and caused students to be guarded in sharing their beliefs with me.

Given the challenge of researching children, I decided to establish myself not as an authority figure and not as a peer, but as a "quasi-friend" or "tolerated insider in children's society" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 88). Within the first month of the study, I began to eat lunch with students and talk with them as they gathered on the playground. This level of involvement helped me to understand the nature of the students' friendship circles within and beyond the classroom and eventually to choose focal students. Apart from these forays into the children's world, however, my early stance in the classroom would more aptly be characterized as that of an observer rather than participant. My presence was acknowledged in many ways, including attention from the children, but during this time I never spoke during book discussions, and I rarely discussed pedagogical issues with Julia. Beginning my study as more of an observer than a participant allowed me to bathe in the culture of this classroom until I became familiar with its shared practices, beliefs, and expectations.

Early on, I suggested to the teacher that I might read aloud to students on occasion, reasoning that this would help me to establish a relationship with the students without placing me in a teacherly role. On a day when Julia was going to be absent, the students were to discuss books in peer-led groups, and Julia asked me if I'd keep an eye on a student (one of my focal students) who rarely participated during discussion. I reminded her that I didn't feel I could say anything to encourage his participation but would let her know what I observed as I watched the group. After our conversation, I questioned whether it was possible, even desirable, to define myself as an outsider observing a "natural" setting when I clearly had become a part of the setting. It was natural for me to be there as a person, an adult, a "quasi-friend" and "tolerated insider." While did not become a full participant in the classroom, over time the students more often requested my responses, not only during literature discussions but during routine social exchanges as well. I began to acknowledge my personhood in the life of this classroom and my potential influence on the students' public performances.

Data Sources and Collection

In conducting this study, I worked to achieve "data triangulation" (Denzin, 1970, p. 237) by employing multiple data sources to provide for a variety of perspectives in examining both student interactions and the nature of the school, district, and community. Data sources included audiotaped literature discussions; interviews with students, teacher, parents, and administrators; field notes taken throughout the year; students' written responses to literature; and student sociograms delineating their friendship circles. Interviews with parents and administrators were most useful in answering my third question regarding contexts beyond the classroom. All other data sources were used in answering my first two research questions.

For the first week of class, I attended every day and stayed for all subjects other than math and science. For the rest of the year, I spent ten hours per week in Julia's classroom, divided among three weekly classroom visits. These visits included participant-observation during
reading, a weekly writers' workshop session, and occasional lunch and recess periods. Students spent much of their reading time during the year in teacher-led or peer-led small groups. In addition, Julia read aloud four novels to the class and many shorter fiction and nonfiction works. Most days also included time for independent reading of books chosen by students. This article focuses only on the peer-led discussion setting. Findings related to teacher-led discussions in the classroom are reported elsewhere (Lewis, in press). Group formation often depended upon the books students chose, and because I did not want to disrupt Julia's usual way of forming groups, I was not able to observe all of my focal students for each literature unit. I did, however, observe each focal student throughout his or her participation in at least four literature discussion groups, audiotaping discussions three times per week. In addition, audiotaped comments Julia made to introduce themed literature units or particular book discussions.

I audiotaped semi-structured formal interviews with all participants, using question guides in order to compare data from multiple participants. I held semi-structured interviews with Julia in August, November, March, and June, focusing on her purposes for reading and teaching literature, her goals for literature discussions, and her views about focal students. I held two semi-structured interviews with focal students, one in January and another in June, focusing on their social networks, their choice of key events during literature discussions, and their opinions about literary practices in their classroom. I audiotaped semi-structured interviews with parents at the beginning and end of the year that focused on literacy practices at home, connections to school, and views about social and literacy growth. I held one interview with the director of curriculum, one with the school principal, and one with a literacy specialist, focusing in each on beliefs about the reading and discussion of literature and literary practices at Emerson and in the district. Informal interviews were an important data source that took place regularly. Held throughout the year with the teacher and with individual or groups of students, informal interviews were brief, often audiotaped, conversations that took place in spare moments during my visits to the classroom.

Data Analysis

At a time when those of us who do qualitative research have begun to examine our own positions in relation to contexts, participants, and sources, recognizing that interpretation is constituted in positionality, we often hold on to the notion that true findings will eventually "emerge" from the data. Troubled by this view of analysis, I looked for an alternate view, and was intrigued by what Brantlinger (1993) calls a "hermeneutic interpretive" approach, one that acknowledges one's own interpretive stance at the same time that one becomes immersed in the perspectives of participants. With this approach in mind, I tried to acknowledge both the multiple perspectives represented by research participants and to reflect throughout the process on the sources of the theory I generated. Erickson (1986) argues that theory is not generated simply from the ground up, but rather that theory generated inductively from data is simultaneously sifted through the researcher's "culturally learned frames of interpretation" (p. 140). During data collection, I made repeated passes through interview transcripts to help me plan future interactions with participants in follow-up conversations. I listened to the audiotapes of literature discussions regularly and logged each tape using a format adapted from Merriam (1988, p. 85). Field notes, typed and expanded weekly, were a source of ongoing analysis, with an eye toward recurrent patterns that I began to label using key words (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These patterns provided a lens through which to observe future interactions.
Approximately every six weeks, I wrote an analytical memo in which I examined in more depth the patterns I had noticed and began to theorize what they might mean in terms of my interpretive frame. The themes I considered evolved over the course of the study as depicted in Table 2. For example, the first set of themes, developed during data collection, referred to the roles students took up during literature discussions and were shaped by my theoretical predisposition toward performative theories of literacy and social interaction. Because I was interested in how contexts affected the roles students accepted, rejected, or embraced in class, I began to categorize performance settings (e.g. small group peer-led discussions organized by the teacher) and the roles that students played within each setting (e.g. resisting or disappearing). After data collection was complete, I identified general themes suggested by my research questions: classroom culture, performative roles, meanings given to literary practices, and contexts beyond the classroom. Having organized field note data into these four categories, I developed a list of analytic categories and subcategories to use for coding interview transcripts and tape logs (Table 2, #4). However, I soon abandoned this coding process, which included, for example, nine subcategories under the heading "literary understanding," because it led me to approach my data in isolated segments rather than as contextualized events.

### Table 2
#### Evolution of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes Developed During Data Collection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student role during literature discussions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Achievement/intellectual engagement</td>
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<td>• Playing the game</td>
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<td>• Resisting</td>
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<td>• Disappearing</td>
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<td>• Social allegiance</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Probing cultural knowledge and assumptions within a reader-response framework during teacher-led discussions.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Themes Developed After Data Collection</th>
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<tr>
<td>3. Organizational themes suggested by research questions</td>
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<td>• Classroom culture</td>
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<td>• Meanings given to literary practices</td>
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<td>• Contexts beyond the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. More specific themes with many sub-categories</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Status and solidarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Performative roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Meanings ascribed to the reading of literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Literary understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Classroom culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Culture of school/district</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Culture of home/neighborhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers probes and questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Three analytic categories regarding the literary culture of the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Characterizations of literature discussions</td>
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<td>• Performative roles enacted during discussions</td>
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<td>• Interactions that reveal the purposes and expectations of lit. discussions in various settings</td>
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Eventually, I developed a few major categories that would help me analyze the literary culture of the classroom and make connections between important literature discussions and the social positions of the participants. Three analytic categories informed my analysis of specific literature events, defined as any school activity related to the reading or discussion of literature: (a) characterizations of literature discussions, (b) performative roles enacted during discussions, and (c) interactions that reveal the purposes and expectations of literature discussions. Deciding to focus on contextualized events meant narrating interactional contexts rather than describing each focal student as a particular case.

I focused my closest analysis on two categories of events: (a) key events—those that research participants characterized as particularly significant (Erickson, 1986; Gumperz, 1986); and (b) illustrative events—those that depicted performative roles that were repeatedly documented in field notes and audiotapes (J.D. Marshall, personal communication, October 18, 1994). In writing about these events, I have framed each with the sociocultural conditions of its occurrence, including the social and interpretive competence of the key players in the discussion as well as information gleaned from interviews about home/community contexts. I've done so in keeping with Goffman (1981), who argues that analysis of the social conditions that shape spoken interaction must be “identified and mapped with such ingredients as are available to and in local settings” (p. 193).

Results

The meanings of social and interpretive competence in this classroom were promoted by the teacher and performed by many of her students. This resulted in expectations for action and interaction that some students were willing or able to enact and others were not, thus shaping student status in the classroom and opening spaces for resistance. I will discuss results related to my first research question by describing expectations for literary interpretation and social interaction, depicting a classroom reading practice, offering a profile of a focal student, and providing interview clips that reveal the shaping influence of particular social conditions on the classroom culture.

The Classroom Culture: Interpretive and Social Competence

Julia's beliefs about what it meant to read and discuss literature created a set of interpretive expectations in the classroom. During an early interview, when asked what she wanted students to get out of reading and discussing literature at school, Julia had this to say about the subject:

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Mostly that—we all own books in different ways depending on where we are and the life we've lived . . . and I want kids to know there is no right interpretation, even about nonfiction. I want them to read with a little bit of doubt in their minds about anything they read . . . a little skepticism, a little distance from it. At the same time that I want them to own it, I want them to say, "Oh yeah, this is, this is one way of reading this right now."
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In June, she added the following comments:

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Imagining yourself having other lives gives you, it seems to me, more power over the kind of life you do lead.
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To Julia, reading literature involved entering into the text world, resisting text worlds, and examining one's immediate world. Her words speak to her conviction that readers must adopt a critically engaged stance. Reading closely was a priority for Julia, and interpretive competence in her class meant, in part, that a reader must refer to text in the process of supporting claims or
working through difficult sections. For instance, when discussing a book she read aloud to the class, *The Brothers Lionheart* (Lindgren, 1985), Julia asked students "What exact words did [the author] write to make us all decide Hubert is a traitor?" When Julia asked about another character in the book, one student suggested that maybe the character was somehow connected to magic. Julia replied "What's in the book that you're putting in the box in your head labeled magic?" Most often the literature groups discussed a common book in order to make for the more substantive book conversations Julia valued. She found that students who came to her class after having been in a class where all the students read individual books of choice (using a Readers' Workshop approach) were good at "empty chatter about books" but didn't read closely or talk about anything substantive.

The entries students wrote in their journals were also shaped by the boundaries of interpretive competence. When Julia first discussed journal entries, a sixth grader raised her hand and said, "Here's a hint to fifth graders. Don't say 'This character did this and then he walked.' Tell us what you think about it." Julia, affirming the student's comment, told the class "Yes, we all have read the book, so we know what happened. We need to know what you think." Meaningful inquiry was important in Julia's class. Toward this end, she invited students to ask their own questions during literature discussions, to include intriguing questions in their journal entries, and to choose books with questions in mind.

Mackenzie and David gave much the same meaning to the reading and discussion of literature as did Julia. David told me why he read fiction: "Because I want, I want to know what they would do. I want to be able to act out what they were doing in a situation without knowing." Mackenzie said that reading literature at school makes you "think about things differently." Nikki, too, liked to talk about "meaty" ideas in books. While many students in Julia's class shared her beliefs about literature, especially the sixth-grade girls, James and Jason and several other boys did not. They preferred summarizing books or talking about favorite parts over discussing ideas and felt that the main point of book discussions was to find out about new books to read. "I don't care about the characters," Jason once told me. "I just care about plot." In an early interview James said that he would rather not discuss books at school so that he "could have more time to do other things." Later in the year, he reported that he did not like being in book groups with girls because "they talk too much." When I asked him what he got out of book discussions, he replied that he learned "what other people's books are about." James and Jason had different standards for interpretive competence than did the teacher and many of their peers.

Just as there were expectations for interpretive competence in this classroom, there were expectations for social competence as well. Being socially competent meant that one must take responsibility for the well-being of the classroom community, value learning from others, set goals and work toward positive action, appreciate human connection and collective history, and take learning seriously. This was the social community in which Julia would want to live and it was the social community she promoted. She believed strongly that students benefit when they are allowed to learn from each other, and collaborative learning occurred both formally and informally. On the first day of school, Julia asked the students if they understood a particular concept. When few raised their hands, she asked them to talk with their neighbors and told them to get some ideas from those they talk to. "We're all learning together and we'll all have opportunities to teach," she told them. In helping students learn to work together collaboratively, Julia tried a variety of approaches, some that she used only when she first taught group dynamics near the start of the year. For instance, during the first peer-led discussion, students started with
three poker chips each and placed one in the center of the circle each time they contributed to the discussion. She also modeled how to make connections between one's own comments and those of others and she occasionally requested that students write a discussion agenda. Often, she discussed with students what she meant by fair and equitable conversation.

Julia wanted students to share with her the responsibilities of forming a classroom community. Class rules were formulated through a group process of brainstorming and prioritizing; time spent on read-alouds and in reading groups was negotiated; kids were taught to view their classmates as experts; Julia kept a journal along with her students for a book she hadn't read before; students participated in assessing their own growth because, as Julia told them, "I see you from the outside," but "you see from the inside." Throughout the year, then, she shared power with her students in many ways, although she wielded power as well. Julia felt comfortable making her expectations known. She usually in eluded a reason for the expectation and tried to relate the reason to human needs for safety and respect. Forming a community was important to her, but it had to be one in which she would want to live. The kind of community Julia wanted to live in was one where people took an interest in what others thought and where they had an historical ethos upon which to draw. She often extended the community beyond the classroom or even the particular historical moment, referring to those in the "Emerson community" who had since left, demonstrating the importance of being rooted in this neighborhood over time, of knowing the I people and the terrain.

Enacting culture through the ritual of read-aloud. This section frames a slice of life in Julia's classroom the first read-aloud of the year—in order to depict the classroom context that Julia worked to create. Julia's comments about the read-aloud practice she initiates at the start of every year underscore its ritual power. During our third interview, I asked Julia what she did to form a classroom community. (The following conventions are used in the presentation of transcripts: [text] indicates descriptive text added to clarify elements of the transcript; text indicates emphasis; ( ) indicates unintelligible words; . . . indicates extracts edited of the transcript; / indicates interrupted or dropped utterances.)

I think the central, the most important thing I do at the beginning of the school year is I read to them . . . . There's something about that curling up on the floor together, get a pillow, take your shoes off, and I never say that, I just allow it . . . . Really what I'm about with that first experience is seduction into this community. This will be – especially it worked beautifully for James – this is a place in which you will be safe. This is a place in which you will be at least part of the time intrigued because of the quality of the question, not because the teacher wants you to be, and not because it's where you ought to be, and not because this is your task in life at this time, but because aren't stories wonderful.

Julia's comments make explicit the meaning she gave to the read-aloud practice and the context she hoped to create with her students. Understanding the ritual function of the read-aloud was no mystery. Julia signified this function through the language she used to talk about read-aloud: community bonds, first experience, safe place, seduction. It was the ritual experience that was most important to her, for it transcended academic skills to become a message of what this culture of the classroom would become. As she explained it to me, "It's much more than modeling the reading process."

In their work on ritual, anthropologists Moore and Myerhoff (1977, p. 7) describe formal properties of collective ritual, underscoring the importance of what they call the "collective dimension." The collective dimension is represented by Julia's description during the interview of what she sees as the meaning of this kind of literary practice – the enactment of ethos and the
claiming of a classroom culture. During read aloud, Julia sat at the front of the room on a chair. The girls and a few of the boys gathered around her on the floor. Most often seven or eight boys chose to sit at desks surrounding the read-aloud area. Students on the floor brought pillows and often took off their shoes; the girls gathered on the floor clustered together, leaning on each other's shoulders or resting in each other's laps. Often they traded places to bond with another girl nearby.

During discussions of read-aloud stories, the underlying question was one related to Julia's desire to enact a culture: What do we have in common? This question coincided with the discursive production of classroom community evident even on the first day of class when Julia asked students "Where do you want to travel this year? What do you want to accomplish?" and then added "We're coming from different experiences to come together as a group." This underlying question was addressed in a discussion of The Brothers Lionheart, for instance, that focused on beliefs about an afterlife. Evident in the talk was what Julia meant when she referred to "the quality of the question." She led a discussion of beliefs about death and afterlife in an effort not only to help students make personal connections to the text, but also to claim community through the exploration of a subject that she knew would be meaningful to many students.

Through this display, Julia and many of her students worked to establish a community ethos, one that suggested acceptable academic and social performances, including intellectual engagement and social allegiance. However, a closer look at one of my focal students, James, serves to complicate what classroom culture might mean to Julia and the students who helped her enact it. James sat in a desk outside the inner circle. He was a fifth-grade boy in a class where the central power lay in the hands of sixth-grade girls (developed in a later section). James was identified as a working-class and low-ability student. Emerson was the third I school James had attended in four years. At the end of the year, students wrote lists of humorous awards for the achievements of their fellow students. David awarded James "The power to survive anything," which would seem apt to students at this school because James's life so contrasted with their own.

While James did not participate during the discussion of The Brothers Lionheart summarized above (he shrugged when called upon to speak), he sometimes appeared to be engrossed in this first read-aloud of the year, offering his predictions, caught up in the excitement of the story with the others. Once, sitting at a desk between David and another classmate, he seemed particularly involved, his hand raised every few minutes. Indeed, for many discussions of this book, he seemed caught up in the classroom ethos. Although Julia felt that "we're really swimming upstream with that one [meaning James]," she insisted that he loved learning and suggested that this may have been the first positive experience he'd had in school.

At other times during the reading of The Brothers Lionheart, James did not respond as he had during the above excerpt. On a day when Julia asked the students to talk about their favorite thing to do – something that brought them joy (which related to a section in the book) – one student talked about sitting in a first-class seat on an airplane and looking out a dark window, another talked about reading by the fire, and James said he didn't know. Another time James was able to answer a question Julia asked about an important character, Hubert, making another appearance in the book because "David told me." David, slightly embarrassed, added "Yeah, because he was such an important character early in the story, and usually authors bring important characters back." The contrast in their interpretive competence according to the standards of this classroom is apparent in the juxtaposition of their responses.
After his initial sporadic involvement, James had trouble existing within the community as it had been promoted by Julia and performed by his fellow students. He often didn't complete his homework and was expelled from two literature discussion groups for not completing his journal for two consecutive days. The sixth-grade girls frequently reprimanded him for not writing long enough journal entries.

These breaches aside, James held authority in the classroom to varying degrees. James felt that Julia liked him – a fact he pointed out to me in an interview – the thought of himself as a good reader (at least compared to other subjects), and he was, on and off, the closest friend of David, a social and academic leader. As Julia told me, "James has got a lot of acceptance, but the people from whom he seeks acceptance accept him because he is naughty." David was attracted to James's resistance to school until it threatened his own school identity and he dropped James as a friend. There was power in James's performance as a resistant student, power that was complicated and intensified because of his closeness to Julia in spite of this performance. For instance, he turned to Julia when David dropped him. James, like all of the students, had multiple and sometimes contradictory identities within the classroom, a condition not unique to this context, but one that Bakhtin (1981) and theorists who view social action as performative (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Davies & Harre, 1990; Pineau, 1994) consider to be inherent in all interaction.

Differential status and power within the culture. Moor and Myerhoff (1977) argue that because rituals are meant to signify shared beliefs and cultural meanings they often make visible “those very things which are most in doubt” (p. 24). Three conditions, ability, age, and gender, surfaced repeatedly in the data, representing a challenge to the enactment of classroom culture and making visible differential status and power within the classroom, and, consequently, within peer-led literature discussions. Here I offer brief clips from interviews that reveal something about each complicating factor. For the purposes of this article, in order to introduce efficiently what in actuality were dynamic and intersecting conditions of classroom life, I present each condition in isolation. Readers will see the conditions at work as they shape literature events depicted later in this article. Although social class also figured prominently in terms of status and power during literature events, it surfaced in interviews primarily in talk about the community rather than the classroom and won't be included in this section which focuses primarily on the classroom context. The literature events included in the next section, however, show that the working class students in this class were not as successful academically or socially as the middle class students, suggesting that social class and ability intersected as conditions important to classroom context and its relationship to the discussion of literature.

I'll begin this section with a discussion of perceived ability and the tensions it produced within the classroom culture. When I asked the teacher and Mackenzie, an academically successful focal student, what they saw as the difference between the large group and small group discussions, their answers, on separate occasions, centered on issues of ability:

Julia: The large group is to show us that we are all the same, that we're not high kids, medium kids, and low kids – that we all have something to contribute.

Mackenzie: It's kind of hard for me to discuss whole group because I'll get it, you know. I'll understand what is happening, but she'll have to stop and explain it for everyone else and it just kind of gets annoying sometimes.
In another interview, Mackenzie mentioned that during whole-class discussions she didn't like having to listen to students who speak because the teacher asked them to rather than because they care about the book. Mackenzie added that she preferred being in groups with sixth grade girls because "they are at my speed." She felt that there should be a test at the beginning of the year to set up groups "of people that can and can't process certain things." Nikki expressed similar sentiments about read-aloud discussions:

I mean, I've tried like just sitting there and listening, but I really cannot do it. I just can't be in school if I don't contribute. So I try to contribute, which I like doing and because they [the teachers] want to call on all the people who haven't been contributing, and then I start to get bored. And then I start goofing off while they are trying to make the other people not goof off.

These comments suggest that while Julia yearns for a collective experience, Mackenzie and Nikki interpret the whole-class context as one that is constituted in difference.

Age was another complicating factor in terms of the classroom collective: The fifth graders often felt as though they were outsiders in relation to the insider status of the sixth graders, nearly all of whom were now in their second year with Julia. For instance, Anne, a fifth grader, complained about the sixth-grade girls: "We want to be friends with the sixth-grade girls, but they don't want to be friends with us. They're not nice to us." Kate called the sixth-grade girls "The Stretch Pants Club," repeating a mockery of their well-matched outfits I had heard before. All agreed that only Jane, a fifth grader who had been friends with a popular sixth grader since early childhood, was allowed to associate with the sixth graders.

Even Nikki, who generally wasn't afraid to speak her mind and characterized herself as "opinionated," felt intimidated being the only fifth grade girl in one of her book groups. Another time she mentioned that it bothered her that Julia chose only sixth graders for leadership positions. She always knew that either Brooke or Mackenzie would be chosen to lead book groups, for instance, and felt that there were responsible fifth graders who could handle the job as well. "They just don't get recognized, of course." Jason, too, explained that "in the Alanna group, like most of them were sixth graders, and so I'd kind of get left out a little bit, but I was kind of scared to get in 'cause they were older." He added that the sixth-grade girls didn't invite him to speak until everything he wanted to say had already been said. This was an important issue for Jason. Repeatedly, he told me that he preferred to be in groups with only fifth graders. Jason made it clear to me how he saw the relationship between age and power in the classroom when I asked him who made most of the choices in the class. "Mrs. Davis and some sixth graders," he told me.

Gender also contributed to differential status and power in this classroom. Julia was well aware of her reputation, among students and parents, as one who favors girls and discussed the issue with me during several of our interviews.

Oh, yeah. My reputation is I just like girls . . . . But I simply don't have as much of a reference for boys. I don't do baseball. I don't play ball of any kind. So I just think I have more in common with the girls . . . because I have a lot of daughters, and they [the girls in her class] are in a lot of things with my daughters. So we have a lot of common bonds.

During this interview, I also asked Julia why she thought girls were so powerful in her class – even, I admitted, at times controlling. Her response was quick and forceful: "Oh, I don't think it's possible for a woman to be – I really don't. I mean I think you have to be focused or you end up being patted on the head."

The students brought to their classroom the complex conditions of their lives as did Julia herself, whose strong beliefs about the lack of power girls too often experience surfaced
repeatedly during our conversations. Julia assigned the sixth-grade girls leadership roles 
(particularly in literature discussion groups), but it was understood that when acting as leaders, 
the girls would follow through with their teacher's agenda. This role for girls supports 
Walkerdine's (1990) theory that in student-centered classrooms girls are often positioned as 
mothers/teachers whose job it is to regulate the behavior of boys.

Status and power relations connected to ability, age, and gender, along with other social 
positions shaped by local contexts (e.g. social class, allegiances) suggest that there will be 
collective and disharmonious dimensions of a culture. The boys who sat outside the inner circle 
during read-aloud, often as nonparticipants, manipulated the social codes available to them within 
this context to resist the expectations of others. One can claim that they were excluded from the 
inner circle or that they performed roles that drew attention to the margins. While the read-aloud 
practice, in its display of collective ritual, was not an open space for much negotiation from the 
margins, the next section will show that the peer-led practice in the classroom resulted in more 
space for the negotiation of social roles.

Social Roles in Peer-Led Literature Discussions

When discussing literature in peer-led groups, students would choose a book of interest from 
available thematically-tied texts. Three or four groups were formed based on student choices. The 
data theme I discuss in this article, "performing social roles," focuses on social competence and 
negotiation in peer-led groups and considers how interpretive competence shaped social power 
within the groups. What follows are brief interview clips as well as data exemplars from one key 
and several illustrative literature events. Depicting these events, which include the moment-to-
moment performances I set out to examine, is in keeping an ethnographic approach meant to 
understand the beliefs and actions of participants. The key and illustrative events depicted reveal 
two patterns related to the performance of social roles based on data from peer-led literature 
discussions: (a) achieving social and interpretive power and (b) interrupting social and interpretive 
power. I'll begin with an anecdote important to understanding the patterns that follow.

I asked each of my focal students to tell me who controlled the talk during peer-led 
discussions. David answered without hesitation: "Whoever's got the clipboard." Julia would ask 
one student in each peer-led group to keep a clipboard which held a form to be used for 
documenting group processes. When I asked Nikki the same question, she thought a moment 
before replying: "Well, Ms. Davis writes it down. And then the person with the clipboard – it's 
like the congress and the president, they make the laws. But then the police keep them enforced." 
I asked if the congress and president were Ms. Davis and the police Mackenzie and Brooke, since 
Nikki often complained about the authority these students held in the classroom. "Yeah, I guess. 
And then . . . but, you know, they can take one subject [for discussion] that they like more and 
enforce it more."

Two students in Julia's class regularly held the clipboard: Mackenzie and her good friend 
Brooke, another sixth grader viewed by her teacher and her peers as competent and responsible. 
There were no stated procedures for selecting the person for this position; Julia simply chose 
someone, usually a sixth grader whom she thought would responsibly handle the job. This 
anecdote serves both to underscore the issues of power relevant to the two patterns discussed 
below and to situate Nikki, David, Mackenzie, and her friend Brooke, who figure prominently in 
literature events.

Achieving social and interpretive power. Analysis of literature events led repeatedly to the
use of talk in peer-led groups as a way of achieving social and interpretive power. Revisiting the relationship between the social and academic in this classroom reminds us that to have social and interpretive power in this culture meant taking learning seriously and accepting an ethos that centered on inquiry and achievement. In order to achieve such power, students vied for it, creating solidarities and boundaries between themselves and others in the process. Achieving social and interpretive power often meant making visible its absence in others.

During peer-led discussions, whether one performed or was accepted as an insider or an outsider had much to do with one's social and interpretive power. The insider roles were frequently taken up by Mackenzie, Brooke, and their close friends. Even when the girls weren't designated as leaders by their teacher, they would take it upon themselves to direct the discussion. Nikki pointed out that "if they [Mackenzie and Brooke] get told they are a teacher, they have a feeling that they have to do everything teacher-like, you know." One reason for Mackenzie's "teacherly" role in discussion groups may have been that she was uncomfortable when discussions did not meet her need for order. She felt that with Julia as part of the group, students were more attentive, there were fewer incidents of misbehavior, and "Mrs. Davis help[ed] them get their point across." When I mentioned that other students I talked to felt that the teacher would sometimes recast their ideas in ways they didn't understand or felt alienated from, she told me, "What you need is confidence—enough to be able to say, 'No, that's not what I was thinking. I was thinking this.'" She explained that this was easy for her to do with her teacher because Julia didn't mind when students disagreed with her point of view.

In fact, Mackenzie thought that it was easier for her to express what she really believed about a book when her teacher was present. She gave as an example a discussion I missed in which the group had discussed whether it was right for a character to plot revenge. Mackenzie felt that she had to say she thought it was right to plot revenge because everyone else in the group thought so, many of whom were her friends. But when Julia asked her what she thought, she found herself saying that it was wrong because "That's really what I thought." I asked her if having Mrs. Davis there had anything to do with her decision to say what she believed: "Probably. I mean, knowing that Mrs. Davis was definitely gonna, I knew before she said it that she was gonna agree with me." The meaning that Mackenzie gave to the reading and discussion of literature matched well that of her teacher, whose views are discussed in an earlier section. When I asked Mackenzie why she thought her teacher asked her to read literature in school, she replied:

To expand your mind. To make you think about things differently…..Different from your own lives. Different from what you think of things. Different from what your parents grasp……I think it's important to learn about things that aren't close to you.

Given that Julia thought it was important to retain some distance, some skepticism, as readers, it should come as no surprise that Mackenzie, who also valued a critical stance, was a student who helped to shape and sustain interpretive and social competence within this classroom culture. When Mackenzie had trouble keeping up with her work, her social class and social acceptance in the classroom enabled her to forcefully state her case as in the following example which took place when members of her literature discussion group wanted her to read more chapters over the weekend than she was willing to read:

Today, I go home. I have piano. Then I come home at 5:30. I have to go to the dance 'cause I have to set up. Then on Saturday, I have to clean the to do house, then go to my grandma's to color eggs. Then on Sunday at eleven, teach- I go to one grandma and at about five I go to the other grandma. Then it's Monday already. Just so you know.
Her peers accepted this explanation, I suspect, because Mackenzie's life as she described it seemed entirely natural to them. Such was not the case for James. James, who lacked social and interpretive power in this classroom, eventually had to leave the group reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961) because he didn't keep up with the work. Most of the students reprimanded James for not completing his work when they met for peer-led discussions. David, an engaged learner during most literature discussions, also reprimanded James at times, but he would cover for him when the teacher, who represented an authority to be resisted, was present. Once, near the end of James's participation in the Red Fern discussions, at a point when he was barely hanging on, he came to group with a short journal entry. After he read his entry, two girls asked him if that if that was all that he had written. He said yes but looked down as he spoke. Tara asked, "Didn't you do Chapter Eight?" James shrugged his shoulders. David told him, "You were supposed to do Chapter Eight." The students were to look for examples of the way that the main character exaggerates. James had no examples and did not contribute to the rebe-discussion that followed.

This was a common occurrence for James. Even at the end of the year, when he had read *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962), his role in the peer-led group combined resistance with silence. In the following scene, the students had finished their respective books and Mackenzie's job was to direct a discussion of advantages and disadvantages of each society represented. When she asked James about the advantages of living on the planet Comazotz from Wrinkle, he initially had nothing to add. Later, James said that the disadvantage was that "The Black Thing's gonna take over all the planets in the world," and added at this point that the advantage was "The dark thing's cool," but no one responded.

After this point, James starting repeating, again and again, the words "no fear," a phrase that had come up in the discussion. Mackenzie, hoping to include James in the discussion, asked, "But is there fear in Wrinkle?" James told her he didn't know, and she replied, "There isn't, is there" [spoken as a statement rather than a question], and continued:

Mackenzie: Think of a situation where there was [fear].
James: When that person got pulled into that black hole.
Lisa: I know, teacher Mackenzie. I know one.

Although Lisa used a sarcastic tone in addressing Mackenzie as "teacher" in this example, she was willing to play the game. Later in the discussion, Mackenzie asked James about the lesson of Wrinkle.

James: In what? In the book? [He had been busy making airplane noises when she interrupted him.]
Mackenzie: Yeah, what do you think the message is?

James didn't answer. Here James played the "bad boy" role (making noises, not meeting expectations for social and interpretive competence) and the girls attempted to regulate his behavior. When James offered an example of fear on the planet, no one followed up on his comment, underscoring his outsider status despite Mackenzie's teacherly attempts to include him. Achieving social and interpretive power in the classroom also depended, in part, on allegiances formed in and out of school. These allegiances among students, often based on long-term friendships within the community, played a part in determining what was said during peer-led discussions and who was empowered to say it. One vivid example occurred during a discussion of
Red Fern that included seven students: five sixth graders—four of them good friends; three fifth graders—none of them close friends. When Mackenzie read the following sentence from her journal, "Billy's living his grandfather's dream," a conversation ensued about the students' grandfathers, a conversation that included only the four sixth-grade insiders, all girls, and one fifth grader, Kate. This led them back to fruitful comparisons between their own grandfathers and the grandfather in the book, a conversation in which, again, only the insiders participated. When Brooke brought up that the dogs in the book yelped with every step they made, an animated discussion took place with Kay, a popular sixth-grader, jumping in to explain what the whole scene must have looked like:

Kay: But then they're running so fast, I don't think it would be able to come out of their mouth that fast . . . . cause you know when, when dogs run, because they, they like move like their front and their back foot and they go like this and like that, and like that [gesturing to demonstrate].

At this point a fifth-grade girl, Tina, who rarely met class expectations for social or interpretive competence and whose friends were not in this I group, tried to jump into the conversation.

Tina: So, my dog, my dog, my dog /
Kay: [talking over Tina] then move this one and then they move like that one and then/
Tina: My dog, my dog runs /

Brooke and Kay carried on, talking over Tina. Tina continued to say "My dog . . ." and Kate finally softly told others to let Tina talk. Tina tried again:

Tina: But, but my dog, my dog's front feet, when my dog runs / [the sixth-grade girls continue to talk over her].

Tina finally stood up and tried again:

Tina: When my dog runs, his two front feet run like this [continue to ignore her throughout.]

Finally there was a pause in the sixth-grade girls' conversation and Tina told them quickly about her dog, giggling nervously at the end of her sentence. No one followed up on what she had contributed. Instead the sixth-grade girls' allegiances to one another came into play again as Kay addressed her next comment to Brooke, referring to Brooke's dog by name:

Kay: Oh my gosh, Brooke, when we came to do that thing with [Brooke's dog], remember we came to your door for the money for your parents, well your dog . . . she came up and she stood where—these are the bushes right here, she stood there and she goes and then she started jumping up and down like this, like she wanted to get out.

Mackenzie picked up this conversation because she knew Brooke's house and dog too, and the conversation continued among the three good friends until the session was over.

Social and interpretive power were sometimes achieved by drawing attention to those who lacked such power. This dynamic was evident in peer-led discussions of Alanna: The First Adventure (Pierce, 1983), which included many high-achieving students. During an interview, Julia described the Alanna group this way:

But the Alanna group, now here is an issue we care about .... I mean, it has all the hooks. Besides which, they are a passionate bunch. They are vying for power, social power with each other. A lot of them are trying on
adolescent wings to see how they fit.

Of the four focal students who were part of the Alanna group—Mackenzie, Jason, Nikki, and David—the latter two loved both the book and the discussions, particularly those that were peer-led. Nikki and David both valued the lack of structure in the discussions, the way that students sometimes ignored the journals entirely, focusing instead on intriguing questions or sections of the book. They loved that their teacher had very little input into many of these discussions, unlike Red Fern which was more controlled procedurally. Neither minded that at times everyone would talk at once or engage in separate conversations in pairs or triads. Both Mackenzie, also in the group, and Nikki mentioned that "the loudest voice gets heard," but only Mackenzie was bothered by this.

Jason enjoyed the book but was intimidated by the group and felt uncomfortable during the discussions. Julia described Jason's family as working class, close knit, but not particularly interested in education. She saw Jason as a student who had trouble with reading comprehension and often chose books, including Alanna, that were too difficult for him. Jason's mother, on the other hand, thought that Jason didn't participate for fear that he would be put down by other students. He and another student, Sam, were indeed the center of much discussion during Alanna. During one peer-led discussion Julia noticed that Jason and Sam were not included and insisted that the group had to arrive at a plan to make the discussions more democratic. The students argued with her, expressing, in the course of the conversation, the following comments, which were selected because they represent the dominant theme of this conversation. Jason and Sam were present when the comments were made.

Nikki: Why can't they talk to somebody else?
Brooke: Why don't they open their mouths and start talking?
Kay: We like it this way.
Lisa: We aren't talking to our friends. We're just talking to everybody.
Steven: We're just talking whenever we have a good idea to say about the subject.
Brooke: You think that we're not all hearing it but we are. We hear.

Julia told them to write in their journals about solutions to the problem. When she left, the students expressed more indignation, including the following comments

Brooke: Everybody write, "I want to keep it the way it is."
Mark: He [Jason] gets as much out of this as we do.
Lisa: Yeah, because he listens and we talk and he gets a whole bunch of ideas.
Jane: And, I mean, if you don't want to talk, then that's fine.
Steven: Do you like it the way it is Sam?
Sam: Yeah, I don't want to talk.
Lisa: You like to listen, right?
Brooke: You get to listen to everyone's ideas.
Nikki: They just don't have as strong as opinions….If Jason doesn't want to talk, he gets to listen.

Eventually, Julia returned and told the students that if they wanted to break into small groups with people they enjoyed talking to, she could arrange for that at times. But other times would be spent talking equitably in the designated group. Although the issue never again came up directly, the remainder of the group discussions included references to Jason's and Sam's contributions or
lack thereof with solicitous attempts made to include them.

Interrupting social and interpretive power. Conquergood (1989) proposes that researchers need to look for spaces where performances interrupt authority because those are the open spaces where social conditions and power relations can be transformed. Interruption of social and interpretive power occurred during literature discussions, with one example taking place during a discussion of Red Fern that became a key event in that participants characterized it as significant. Julia had been absent and Brooke was in control of the discussion, empowered to lead and obligated, she felt, to appropriate the role of "teacher." Brooke's performance in the group was regulatory, keeping the group "on task," reprimanding a student who wasn't prepared, and asking questions about the reading provided on a handout Julia had prepared. By contrast, Lisa, who held much social and interpretive competence as well, made it clear that for her the discussion ritual had a different meaning—to deepen a reader's understanding. Whereas Brooke wanted the unprepared boy to correctly answer her questions, Lisa communicated her different understanding of interpretive competence when she explained to him, "You need to read over it and talk about it to yourself and maybe with another person it before you come to group."

Mackenzie, one of Brooke's closest friends, had this to say about Brooke's stance on literature discussions.

Mackenzie: Brooke pretends she likes to [discuss books].
Cynthia: You don't think she likes to?
Mackenzie: Brooke's a good actress. She's told me she doesn't. She has told me she hates discussing books.

Later in the conversation, I asked Mackenzie if she knew why Brooke felt this way, and she replied:

She hates sharing her experiences, because she is afraid the teacher is going to say, "Oh now, that's wrong. That's not what you are supposed to think," you know. That kind of embarrasses her—that she could be thinking something totally different.

As seen through the eyes of her close friend, Brooke was not interested in entering, examining, or resisting texts through discussion. Rather, Mackenzie saw her friend as one who performs competently because she understands how to speak and act in this context.

An interruption in Brooke's discourse occurred when another sixth grader in the group had just read her journal entry. Brooke wanted to move on to her next question, but before she could, Lisa asserted her very different notion of interpretive competence during book discussions:

Lisa: Does anybody have any /
Brooke: Okay. [She wants to move on.]
Lisa: Wait. Before you go on, before you go on, does anybody have any questions, I mean /
Brooke: about the chapters.
Lisa: or, or things to talk about that they have any ideas about.
Brooke: We have to answer the questions.

Brooke regained control, but her discourse had been interrupted. When Brooke's control of what counts during literature discussions wavered, an alternative view surfaced. Lisa pointed to the value of asking questions of personal significance and talking about ideas, a view much like
her teacher's. The students also read their journal entries for discussion that day. After Brooke read her entry, another student accused Brooke of rehashing the plot in her journal instead of sharing her thoughts or interpretations. Here, again, Brooke's notion of interpretive competence was called into question. Therefore, although Brooke was, in many ways, inscribed with power in this class, although she was from an affluent family, was achievement oriented, followed all the rules, and spoke with confidence, these factors alone did not result in her unwavering power.

Viewing this Red Fern discussion from a performance perspective foregrounds the interplay between context and performers and the competing voices which constitute each performer and his/her audience. It is tempting to view Brooke's control within the framework of social reproduction theory, to account for her power as though it were an outcome of her privilege in and out of the classroom. No doubt, Brooke's socio-economic status contributed significantly to her status in the classroom. But authority in classrooms shifts with moment-to-moment interaction, depending upon a multiplicity of factors. Brooke lacked power when she was unable to control those who resisted her dominance during book discussions, and when her interpretive competence was called into question, but she wielded power as the one who had been designated as leader.

The roles performed by the key players in this discussion sustain certain structures of privilege and power based on factors such as social class, gender, age, perceived ability, and peer status, but they also interrupt the influence of those very conditions. It is noteworthy that this interruption occurs, in part, through Lisa's enactment of interpretive and social competence according to Julia. Therefore, although Brooke's power had been interrupted, the teacher's interpretive authority remained intact. A vivid example of a student's interruption of interpretive power occurred among a group of eight students during a discussion of *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), a book about the Nazi takeover of Denmark. The students include Jason, Nikki, and David, all focal students described in earlier sketches. This illustrative event begins with one comment that Jason read from his journal.

Jason: [reading from his journal] Lise died when she was just a few days from marriage which was pretty sad since she was so close to getting married. There was also a king named Christien and then her little story was over.

Nikki: I have a question. Why is it so sad that she got—died just before she got married?

Jason: Well 'cause/

Lisa: Because she was getting married and then all of a sudden she died.

Kate: Duh.

Nikki: But I don't get why that means sad because like it'd be sad if she just got married and died, I think.

David: It'd be sadder. It's always sad when someone dies.

[laughter]

Kate: Not to Nikki. It's like, oh great a person's gone. Yes!

Nikki: What's it matter if she died before she got married. [Others are talking over her, teasing her.] I mean, marriage isn't that big of a deal.

Several Students: OOOOH! .

The students continued along these lines, contesting Nikki's critique of Jason's journal entry for another twenty-seven turns, ending with Kate apologizing to Jason because "Nikki had to make such a big deal." Jason is absent from the entire event after his initial quietly-spoken "well
During an interview, Jason told me that he didn't like discussing big issues because it was too hard and too slow. His favorite literature group was an optional all-male group that discussed independent reading at the end of the year. This group consisted mostly of fifth graders who, according to Jason, talked about "what's happening, how we like the book, what we like about it." Although Jason told me that the gender makeup of the group didn't matter to him, just the grade levels, it is interesting to note that his favorite group was an all-male group. In keeping with research findings on the relationship between reading preferences and gender (Cherland, 1992; Sarland, 1991), it was a group where the boys focused on plot and action rather than on character relationships. Although the Number discussion was one time when Jason attempted to meet the expectations of an audience that valued talk about characters, he still functioned as a silent member of the group. Having already described Jason's performance in literature groups and some of the sociocultural conditions that may have shaped that performance, I'll turn to Nikki, whose role is central to this event.

Nikki, a fifth-grader, was considered an oppositional thinker by her peers and her teacher. The discussion about marriage and death was not the only time that Nikki's performative role served the function of critique. Often, during both peer-led and teacher-led discussions, Nikki challenged the status quo, insisting that she wanted to read books from alternative points of view. When a group of students read *April Morning* (Fast, 1961), a book about the American Revolution narrated by a young boy whose brother was a Committeeman, Nikki brought up an alternative point of view:

"I notice how everyone's like "Oh those Redcoats are horrible," but like we don't really know that because — that's just our point of view. But the literature that we have here is all written from someone who's thinking of our point of view. But, you know, everyone who fights a war thinks they're right and thinks the other person's a bad guy."

Other students who used literature largely to probe dominant cultural assumptions identified with Nikki. For instance, as she spoke about the need for a British point of view, David, another sixth grader in the group, expressed agreement, saying "I was just thinking that." In my final interview with David, I asked him if when he thinks about literature discussions anyone's comments particularly stand out for him. He told me that Nikki's did:

"She always thinks like, for some books that are from the American side of view, like April Morning, she'll try and think of what the, what the British soldiers are thinking, you know. And that's exactly what I was thinking, so she says a lot of the same things as me."

Julia was concerned that Nikki used her intelligence only to critique rather than for the purpose of positive action. She worried that Nikki didn't think she had anything to learn from others. Despite this breach of competence, Nikki was a reader who often read against the grain of the text, a role very much in keeping with Julia's vision of what good readers do.

From a performance perspective, Nikki's interpretation of Lise's death before her marriage both met and resisted audience expectations. In challenging the notion that one ought to be sadder if someone dies before marriage, she questioned the importance we place, within the dominant culture, on the institution of marriage, suggesting that perhaps marriage isn't "such a big deal." In doing so, Nikki resisted the version of reality promoted by the text as well (Patterson, Mellor, & O'Neill, 1994), one that aligns an emotional response to Lise's death with her impending marriage (see Lowry, 1989, pp. 16-17), just as Jason experienced it. The reading formation produced by this text is powerful when combined with that produced by our cultural reverence for marriage.
Nikki's response resisted both, and her peers attempted to censor her for having done so. Despite her critique, which brought a round of "ooohs," Nikki was uncomfortable setting herself apart from her peers and contesting the expected response, especially for females, to place importance on marriage; thus, later in the exchange she added that she liked to make a "big deal" out of marriage. Although Nikki resisted the interpretive expectations of both the text and her audience of peers, the latter unwilling to join her in questioning the cultural reverence for marriage, she did meet her audience's social expectations by performing as Nikki was expected to perform: staging a critique and offering an alternative point of view.

While the teacher is absent from this scene, she is always a presence in the classroom. As Bakhtin (1981) would have it, speakers are aware of other voices in or around the interactional context, particularly authoritative voices. Nikki's performative role worked on two levels in relation to her teacher: on the level of interpretation, with Nikki performing in ways consistent with the meaning she and her teacher gave to the reading and discussion of literature, and on the level of social dynamics, with Nikki's manipulating the discussion so that it sustained debate, and so resisting her teacher's expectation for how a literature discussion should unfold. Nikki's performance interrupted the power of the text and its social currency, yet this interruption cannot be viewed apart from the social conditions that surround it. As this discussion excerpt demonstrates, interpretation itself is a performative act embedded in social contexts.

Discussion

This study examined the nature of social contexts and interactions as they shaped the literary culture of a classroom. Within the culture of a classroom, as Erickson (1986) notes, meanings shaped by social and cultural conditions beyond the classroom are sustained through interaction. As the key and illustrative events included in this article reveal, such conditions of meaning are not only critical elements of the classroom culture, they are also critical dimensions of literature discussions as well. Given the widespread adoption of literature-based reading programs in elementary classrooms nationwide, more research on the social dimensions of literature discussions are needed to add to the body of research on student/text interaction (Cox & Many, 1992; Galda, 1982; Purcell Gates, 1991). Any attempt to understand the transaction between reader and text must include an examination of the many social conditions that shape how students engage with literature.

Performing the Literary Culture of the Classroom

Classroom context, nested within broader social networks, is created through a set of discourses and rituals promoted by the classroom teacher but performed in various ways by all members of the class. Rituals, such as read-aloud time, served as an enactment of life in the classroom, with particular emphasis on what it meant to have social and interpretive competence. As in any culture, however, members gave meaning to the ritual in multiple ways, depending on their social positions within classroom and community contexts. David's tendency to make intertextual connections, to ask questions, muse, and wonder about, texts all worked in consort with Julia as she worked to create the meaning of interpretive competence in the classroom. Mackenzie positioned herself as an engaged student during read-aloud, answering questions, offering interpretations, yet she claimed that the class as a whole held her back, thus rejecting privately, though not publicly, Julia's sense of how a social community should function. James and Jason sat
outside the inner circle during read-aloud, making visible the disharmonious conditions of the classroom culture and the shaping influence of these conditions on what literature meant as well as how one engaged with and understood literary texts in the classroom context.

It is clear that social conditions worked to position students as more or less successful in relation to others within the classroom culture. That said, a close look at students’ multi-layered performances calls into question any easy conclusions we might make. David, we learned, disrupted social norms as he embraced them, whispering answers to his friend James during *The Brother’s Lionheart* read-alouds as though it were an act of resistance, yet fully aware that sharing information was valued in the social environment of this classroom. James held authority through his friendship with David, his frequently resistant stance, and his positive relationship with Julia, providing another example of how the sometimes contradictory positions students take up in relation to the social codes and discourses available to them produce the context just as the context produces available positions. Dyson (1994) points out that when we begin to see students as negotiating multiple identities, we realize the limits of the current pedagogy that values an authentic unified self and search for ways to acknowledge the overlapping and often conflicting selves students must negotiate. A multivocal classroom, in my view, is one where students can take up multiple positions and feel comfortable with overlapping identities, where social drama can lead to cultural growth.

Performing Peer-Led Discussions

The achievement and interruption of social and interpretive power were the most salient features of peer-led literature discussions in this classroom. These discussions often sustained, but sometimes interrupted, status and power relations as they existed in the local scene of classroom and community. Some peer-led discourse—Brooke’s, for instance—would be considered more authoritative (in Bakhtin’s terms) than others. Rather than decentering power in the absence of a teacher as they are meant to do, these peer-led discussions often gave dominant students a position of power. Just as context shapes performance, however, ongoing performances continually shape and reshape classroom context, such as when Brooke was in charge of the Red Fern discussion only to have her interpretive competence called into question. In this case, Lisa’s performance interrupted Brooke’s authority creating an open space for cultural change. Another liminal space occurred when Nikki challenged dominant assumptions about marriage during the discussion of *Number the Stars* depicted earlier. In doing so, she had to juggle the roles she played and the selves they represented: oppositional student, strong critical thinker, antisocial learner, fifth-grader primed to be a leader next year, young girl wanting to fit in. The roles and social networks are intertwined and knotty, leaving students with much to negotiate, not only in terms of how discussions proceed, but also in terms of how texts are understood.

Throughout this study, students reported to me that their experiences in literature groups were shaped in part by other members of the group. Jason was intimidated by sixth-graders, James didn’t like to be in groups with the girls whom he felt were favored by Julia, Nikki wanted to have “meaty” discussions with sixth graders, Mackenzie found that peer-led groups created too much pressure to conform, and David believed he had to please his teacher when she participated in literature discussions. Students reported acting differently in different groups, depending on the expectations of group members. In addition, they used the groups to create solidarity and delineate boundaries, to vie for power and interrupt authority, all related to their engagement with
and interpretation of literature. Conquergood (1995) discusses the ways in which Turner (1982) transformed the commonly-held view that to perform roles was to be inauthentic—to engage in fakery. Turner proposed, instead, that to perform roles was to engage in social action, acknowledge multiple identities and layered contexts, recognize positions of power and, always, to continually create culture.

Students used peer-led discussions to comment, directly or indirectly, on the constraining and enabling features of social and interpretive competence as they were constituted in this classroom culture. Many of the key and illustrative events depicted in this article include such moments. While these comments did not inevitably lead to transformation, they did, at times, lead to a meta-knowledge of classroom interaction and structure through which multiple voices came into contact with and changed one another. The social drama that existed in this classroom surfaced often during peer-led discussions creating situations in which students negotiated social positions and engaged in meta-discourse about the meaning of social and interpretive competence.

Bakhtin (1981) uses the term "heteroglossia" to refer to the social languages that intersect and sometimes collide when people speak, the ways in which one social language is embedded within utterances as well as interactions with others. Peer-led groups functioned as spaces where social languages within the classroom came into contact with one another, embodying power, difference, and the control of meaning in the classroom. The nature of these peer-led groups brought to the surface the competing identities students must address within themselves and others, the multiple roles they played within the social networks of their classroom, their families, and their communities. Although such liminal moments can lead to cultural change, they often reified rather than transformed differential status. At these times, peer-led groups marginalized students who were seen as having less social and interpretive competence in the class, thus re-centering authority in the hands of high-status students. This research suggests that when the teacher gives up power, powerful students will take up the slack.

Limitations and Implications

In this study, I set out to represent the "depth of context" (Stuckey, 1991, p. 45) that shaped cultural meaning related to literary practices in one fifth/sixth-grade classroom. Despite this goal, I find myself now thinking about what I have left out, the defining gaps. In any classroom, the rituals and routines are multivocal, their meanings dependent on one's position and agency as enacted through moment-to-moment interaction. So, for example, I omitted Nikki's relationship with her friend Lisa and its shaping influence on Nikki's performances during literature discussions, a history that created tensions played out, at times, in literature events I did not use as data exemplars. The limitation I point to here is one I believe to be inherent in the nature of ethnography. Some of the particulars, so contextualized while in the field, have been reduced to a minor segment of an illustrative event even in this study claiming to attend to them. Furthermore, in attempting to reveal the ways in which social conditions intersect to shape meaning in the classroom, I necessarily rejected an approach that would isolate specific conditions or variables. While such an approach would not have been in keeping with the goal of ethnographic research to show how multiple factors intersect upon a given case (Rosaldo, 1989), it may have resulted in a more precise rendering of the effects of a specific social condition on a particular student's performance in literature discussion groups.

The purpose of ethnography is to "explain cultural representations" (Athanes & Heath, 1995, p. 267), yet the politics of representation as discussed by postmodern and feminist
ethnographers (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Clifford & Marcus, 1986) suggest that such explanations can never be innocent. The researcher's position in relation to informants and the informants' positions in relation to each other have everything to do with what gets represented and how. Near the end of the study, Julia often wondered aloud what I would make of the data and would fill me in about events that occurred while I was away. How did she choose what I to tell me at these times, or what self she would present in answer to one of my questions? How did I determine what to share about my observations or when to align myself more with students as opposed to Julia? Rabinow (1977) refers to the partial understandings that are the most one can hope for between researcher and informants, the small ways in which they can or cannot understand the historical conditions that constitute "otherness." Just as the students had to juggle multiple selves as they interacted with peers and teacher, Julia and I had selves to negotiate as well. It became increasingly clear to me that my very presence altered the setting to some respect, and that, as in any relationship, my comments were "read" by Julia through the politics of our relationship and the partial understandings that our interactions produced.

My presence was interpreted in different ways by my focal students as well, possibly influencing the ways in which they represented their classroom. For instance, one saw me as a friend, another as a teacher-figure, and a third as someone who caused him to think harder about books and discussions in anticipation of interviews. While it has been important for me to keep these perceptions in mind, my interest here was not in trying to represent the "real," but in examining the nature of the representation and its relationship to embodied action. Having avoided use of a video camera, and having depended instead on my field notes, I may have been limited in my analysis of the nonverbal components of the classroom.

Teachers can play an important role in helping students work through the social drama that surfaces during literature discussions. Acting as participants in such groups, they can lead students in meta-discussions of power and difference within the classroom context. Julia participated in these ways on several occasions not reported in this discussion of peer-led groups, drawing attention in one case, for instance, to the dominance of female voices in a particular group. Another time, after Julia listened to the tape of the discussion I reported earlier during which Nikki expressed her beliefs about a character's impending marriage, Julia talked with students about why their turn-taking was not equitable. (Occasionally, Julia would audiotape peer-led discussions as she had done in years past, a procedure unrelated to my research.) She went on to legitimize and extend both Nikki's and Jason's interpretation of the text, inferring possible reasons for their responses which never got voiced during the actual discussion.

A pedagogy that keys into the intersecting network of social relations within and beyond the classroom, one that makes available to students new roles to take up, new ways of constructing a self in the classroom may lead to individual growth as well as growth within the classroom culture. A student like James, for instance, can offer resistant readings of texts not available to other students. However, because of his role as a student resistant to the social ethos of the classroom, his comments were often disregarded, effectively silencing his vision of the text world. When he announced in his peer-led group's discussion of A Wrinkle in Time that "The dark thing's cool," his peers did not respond. Indeed, it may have been difficult for his peers to take the comment seriously because such a vision of the Black Thing (evil in L'Engle's Christian belief system) represented too much of a break with their reality. Luke (1991, i, 1995) advocates a critical literacy, one that would involve teachers and students in examining the discourses they embrace, enact, and resist. Davies (1993, p. 157), too, argues for the important role of the
teacher in providing a forum for critique in the classroom, claiming that "if the language used in
classroom text and talk is treated as transparent, it is more likely to become the reader's language
through which they fashion the world and themselves." James's comment can be seen as just the
sort of resistant reading that, if extended, could move students toward a critical awareness about
the ways in which children's literature naturalizes a white, middle class, Christian world view.
Although social drama may surface in peer-led groups, the teacher, even when not present, is very
much a part of that drama in terms of defining what it means to engage in classroom practices
and to be seen as competent members of the classroom. As teachers and students examine
together existing power relations and limiting discourses, perhaps they can begin to negotiate
social drama and challenge inequities. Although social conditions constitute as discursive
practices, new discursive practices can transform social conditions (Fairclough, 1989), and
educators need to know more about the teacher's role in achieving such transformation.

While the classroom teacher and like-minded students will inevitably have more power in
regulating classroom discourse (in its broadest sense), they are not the only shaping influences. All
members of the classroom perform roles through interaction that reshape the classroom culture
and thus the ways that literature can be read and discussed within the culture. Social conditions
related to status shape who speaks, how they are received, and what they understand and say
about texts. When students read literature, they must find a position from which to speak in the
midst of the many voices they confront within the texts they read, the classrooms they create, and
the worlds they inhabit.

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