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SCHOOL CULTURE, STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT READERS, AND THE DIALOGICAL SELF

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ABSTRACT. Sociocultural perspectives of literacy emphasize the role of the larger environment in the shaping of literacy practices. As a result, some researchers theorize students don't fail in school, but that schools fail students by denying them opportunities to practice literacy in personally meaningful ways. Evidence of such is manifest in the narrative identities of struggling adolescent readers. Identities result from the selective emplotment of events, signs, and symbols into narratives that help the individual make sense of the world and the self's role in it. Narratives, and the identities that result, represent the coming together of the stories individuals tell, as well as those told about them by collectivities and others. As a part of a larger multiple case study, this paper examines the narratives told by Sarah, a struggling adolescent reader, about her reading abilities. Through a series of in-depth interviews and observations, transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to the preunderstandings used to emplot narratives, Sarah shared her perceptions of herself, her experiences in school, and reading. An analysis of Sarah's stories demonstrates the role of the dialogical self in the emplotting of her narratives and indicates extensive dialogues with the larger school culture. Understanding the role school culture plays in struggling readers' narratives offers opportunities to recognize discourses that alienate students who learn differently. These understandings also offer teachers and researchers opportunities to question current practices and the extent to which they support students of all ability levels.

KEYWORDS: Dialogical self, Bakhtin, Identity, Literacy, Narratives, Struggling readers

I walked over to 21 year-old Sarah, who was bursting with enthusiasm. I hadn't seen her for three months because she moved to another state for the summer, but upon her return she was anxious to talk. I wondered about her experiences in months since we finished our last interview. I anticipated her eagerly telling me about her family, how many roller coasters she rode that summer, or expressing her anticipation about the upcoming semester as she inched closer to earning her associates degree in science and becoming an occupational therapist. As we met I braced myself for the tale of her latest adventure, but to my surprise, the first thing she shared with me had little to do with anything I had predicted. Instead, she started talking about reading.

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"It took me six weeks to make it through the Michael Phelps biography, but I liked it. *Twilight* took me four days." As I stood there listening, I didn't know what to say, undoubtedly looking surprised. As a confident reader, I didn't think *I* could make it through any of the *Twilight* (2005) books in four days. But for Sarah, who struggled with reading since elementary school, devouring a book that thick so quickly represented the ultimate triumph.

As I stood there processing Sarah's disclosure about her new reading practices, especially in light of everything she and I had talked about in her interviews, I realized that, for Sarah, rattling off her reading list was about more than literary excitement. It was a celebration of her ability to actively participate in a discourse community central to her identity. Reading opened up the world for her, but not just in the sense of posing new perspectives; rather, it allowed her to participate in community of readers in ways she had previously only observed from the periphery.

As teachers and researchers who engage in a myriad of literacy practices throughout the day, it's easy to overlook the significant role reading plays in the demands of daily life, particularly in the field of education. However, for students who struggle with reading, hardly a day passes when the routines of the classroom don't remind them of their struggles. Through the lens of the dialogical self, this article explores the influence of larger discourses, such as school culture and traditional classroom practices, on the identities of struggling adolescent readers. It begins with an exploration of issues surrounding struggling reader identity, those elements that influence identity construction, and needed research pertaining to these issues. It then transitions to a discussion of the theories of the dialogical self that provide a framework for exploring these issues and the methodological approaches that support such exploration. Next, the discussion focuses on the narratives told by Sarah, the student described above, concerning her experiences as a struggling reader in school and an analysis of these narratives based on principles of the dialogical self. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of these ideas and the implications of this research that pose critical questions concerning the long-term influence of traditional educational practices on the lives of students.

Struggling Reader Identity: Unpacking the Issues

Between one third and one half of US high school students struggle with basic reading skills and only one third of ninth graders will graduate with the skills necessary to enter the work force or go on to postsecondary education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The College Board announced just over half of US students who took the ACT in 2005 lacked the reading skills necessary for the demands of college-level reading (ACT, 2006). While it's difficult to attach precise meaning to statistics like these, together they point to a central issue: large groups of adolescents struggle with literacy skills.

Defining "Struggling Reader"

Although the term "struggling reader" may seem self-explanatory, it actually encompasses a variety of students who have difficulty reading texts for any of a number of reasons. In some references the term refers to those diagnosed with difficulties, those in need of remediation, and those unmotivated or disengaged (Alvermann, 2001). However, in others it also includes those who experience difficulty because of language learning issues, those who experience comprehension challenges, and even advanced students who stumble over difficult text (Beers, 2003). More broadly, it refers to students who do not connect with in-school literacies, either because of language or cultural differences or those who are positioned as outsiders in relation to the dominant groups of the school and community (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brian, 2000). Together these ideas encompass a wide spectrum of students, far more than just those with clinically diagnosed reading difficulties.

Issues of Identity

Beyond the obvious issues facing students who struggle with reading in terms of skill development and text comprehension, struggles with reading also influence identity development. According to postmodern theories, identity is not a fixed entity, but a co-construction with the other that takes place in a constantly changing process (Bakhtin, 1993; Hermans, 2001; James, 1890; Ricoeur, 1984). As such, the formation of the self and self-awareness, in this case particularly as a reader and a learner, exists in the mind and through the transactions that take place between the individual and the world (McCarthey & Moje 2000).

This idea becomes significant when considered in relation to students and texts. Moje, Dillon and O'Brian (2000) explained, "learners' identities both shape and reflect the meanings they make from text, their interactions with text, and the ways they are positioned or position themselves" (p. 176). According to these authors, how students see themselves influences the way they understand texts, how they interact with texts, and the way they position themselves as a learner. From this perspective, identity exists as a central component of meaning making as well as a key element in understanding the self.

Peter Johnston (2004) explained it another way when he wrote, "Children in our classroom are *becoming* literate. They are not simply learning the skills of literacy. They are developing personal and social identities—uniqueness and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming" (p. 22). In other words, although students need to be taught literacy skills, learning skills alone will not be enough. Helping them assume identities as successful readers and learners is key as well. Although instructional resources exist to help struggling readers, "too many young people leave our schools with identities as poor readers and failures" (Greenleaf &

Hinchman, 2009, p. 11). Therefore, addressing issues of identity exists as a central factor when combating literacy struggles.

Influences on Developing Reader Identities

Thus far, research points to a variety of interconnected factors as influential in reader identity development. For instance, other individuals, such as teachers and peers, as well as past experiences significantly influence the way students construct their narrative identities (Finders, 1997; Hall, 2007; McCarthey, 2001). Students draw on assumed norms, rules, and symbols from the discourse of the larger society as they interpret themselves as learners. Students also make assumptions about their role and place in schools from discourses such as school structures, the curriculum, and the cultures these systems seem to value (Dressman et al., 2005; Lenters, 2006; O'Brian, 2006; Tatum, 2008; Triplett, 2004; Wortham, 2003). Although all of these factors prove significant, the following sections offer an in-depth review of research specifically focused on the influence of the larger discourses of the school and curriculum on the identities students assume.

Previous research details how the discourse of the school community often influenced the way students viewed literacy, validating or rejecting those literacies students espouse. These experiences taught students what counted as acceptable, school-sanctioned literacies and what did not, even leading students to feel personal rejection when schools did not sanction their literacy practices (Lenters, 2006). Other research described how perpetuating literacy as a set of decontextualized abilities validated good-bad reader binaries, leaving students to try to figure out who were the good and bad readers in the class and often causing them to internalize these labels (O'Brian, 2006). In other words, the literacies schools validated or allowed students to practice became factors in the way students viewed themselves as capable learners.

Curriculum also played a significant role in the construction of student identity, particularly when students or teachers used students' lives to explore texts and content. Social identity and curriculum potentially mediated one another, causing students to develop identities, in part, as a result of class discussions centered on certain themes and suggesting sometimes students are forced into roles based on the way teachers use curriculum to encourage connections to larger discourses and students' lives (Wortham, 2003).

In addition, research showed the specific role language arts courses played in the identity development of struggling readers. Broughton & Fairbanks (2003) explained the "nature of the literacy curriculum [in language arts] inherently lends itself to the exploration of identities, focused as it is on individuals' abilities to read, write, listen, and speak" as well as opportunities to "respond to the complexities of their own and others' life experiences" (p. 433). Similarly, in his work with classroom dialogue,

Fecho (2000) invited students to critique dominant identities, demonstrating the way issues of power and identity transacted with students' lives, ultimately revealing the way students negotiated these positions and making these issues particularly relevant to English/language arts teachers.

Significant research also centered on the potential of texts to offer students ways to explore alternative learner identities. For example, Reeves (2004) illustrated the way texts both caused students "psychic pain" but also supported identities students enjoyed (p. 23). Others described the way texts offered adolescents opportunities to try on roles, becoming both a reader and a player in the text (Neilsen, 1998). Tatum's (2008) study of African American males showed how certain texts offered different ways for students to think about their life choices, connect to characters, and reflect on their own choices. Miller (2000) also used literature to offer alternative perceptions and to improve the self-concepts of at-risk females. All of these studies emphasized the way texts worked as powerful forces in shaping reader identity.

Numerous studies demonstrated the significance of school-validated literacies in the development of reader identity. In one study, changes in attitude and ability occurred in the life of a struggling student when the student was encouraged to incorporate his strengths into literacy activities rather than just focus on school-sanctioned reading (Triplett, 2004). In others, engaging students in meaningful literacy activities validated their reader experiences, helped them see themselves in content, and provided needed support to acquire skills for academic success (Dressman et al., 2005). Meaningful literacy experiences captured students' attention and simultaneously provided the constant support needed to help these learners acquire the skills necessary to achieve academic success.

In summary, the documented long-term effects of reading struggles demonstrate literacy failures can cause students to "generate identities that interfere with future literacy learning" and require "special conditions to shape new and productive identities" (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000, p. 3). Although instructional resources exist to help struggling readers, many students still graduate or leave school self-identifying as poor readers because of a failure to address these identity issues (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Each of these studies points to the significant role of school attitudes towards literacy, as well as the influence of school sanctioned literacy practices on reader identity development.

In contrast, when schools allow non-traditional approaches to literacy learning, such as by reading texts outside the canon enjoyed by students or by including digital literacies as part of the curriculum, schools tell more than one story about what reading really is and offer struggling readers greater opportunities for success. Also, when schools provide opportunities for students to see themselves as readers, especially those students who do not typically identify themselves in this way, struggling readers often

adopt new reader identities. As a result, particular attention must be directed to this issue.

Missing in the Research

Current literature addresses and affirms the identity of struggling readers as a co-construction developed in dialogue with others and the environment. Heretofore research has primarily considered the role of teachers, texts, and personal perceptions as they influenced the identities of struggling readers. However, research is needed that examines ways in which classroom spaces challenge detrimental school-wide structures and traditional discourses in order to help struggling students take risks and re-envision themselves as the readers they want to become.

Few studies focus on the dialogues that take place within the student and the transformations that take place as a result of these negotiations. The need exists for research that explores the way readers' dialogue with the influences that shape their narrative identities and make clear the role of the other. This includes studies examining ways to help students think about the identities they assume as readers and how these transact with their other identities (Williams, 2004). Here the theories of the dialogical self take on special import. Examining struggling reader identity issues through this framework opens up a way to consider students' reader identities and larger discourses that influence the way struggling students author and re-author their identities.

Theoretical Framework: The Dialogical Self

In contrast to the humanist concept of the subject, Bakhtin (1993) proposed a more postmodern subject with "two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other" around which the ordering of life takes place: "myself and the other" (p. 74). Just as knowledge cannot be separated from the lens used to understand it, individuals cannot define their existence without doing so in relation to the other.

The interconnected nature of the relationship between self and other led Bakhtin (1984) to explain, "the single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human existence is the *open-ended dialogue*" (p. 293). Only in dialogue with others and with the world can one truly understand the self. Dialogues, even those occurring in the mind of the individual, shape the self. Therefore, "the fact that a listener, another person, is always present or implied, makes the self a dialogical phenomenon *par excellence*" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. xx). The individual always pre-forms thoughts for, speaks with intentionality towards, and anticipates the response of the other. Either real or imagined, these dialogues take place with the other in mind, "dialectically merged" and mutually conditioned by each other (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 383).

Hermans' conception of the dialogical self resulted from Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel, where the individual lives "in a multiplicity of worlds" that each has an author "telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds' and where the authors of these worlds enter into dialogue with one another" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 46-47; e.g. Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). However, such dialogues extended beyond the literary and into a realm that touches "the very essence of personality" where the stories individuals author reinforce, contradict, and work for or against the stories of others (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992, p. 28). This variety of perspectives represents the voices of both real and imaginal others in the individual's life, as well as the various parts of the individual. The influence of these positions points to the importance of the other in the construction of identity. Examined specifically, external voices, internal voices, and collective voices each play a significant yet distinct role in the way individuals dialogue with the voices of others to author and re-author the narratives that comprise their identity.

External Voices

Hermans (2001) described how, from a young age, individuals become "continuously involved in dialogues in which representatives of the community (mother, father, aunt, uncle, teacher, peers) place them in particular positions (child, pupil, friend)" and address them in approving or disapproving, but never neutral, ways. The individual transforms these dialogues from the "'you are…' utterances from the community to 'I am …' utterances in constructing a self-narrative" (p. 263-264). In this process the individual receives the perspective of the other, opening up a way to self-understanding.

Outside voices represent powerful forces in the telling and interpretation of individual narratives. Teachers working with students who are "highly dependent on the voices of significant others and the (collective) stories told about him or her," play a significant role in the way students construct their identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). Stories students tell about themselves comprise their identities, but so do the larger collective stories told about students by teachers and institutions.

Imaginal Voices

Dialogues that occur within the mind of the individual as they consider the words and positions of, what Hermans called, "imaginal" others also play a significant role in the dialogical self. Imaginal dialogues "exist alongside actual dialogues with real others and, interwoven with actual interactions, they constitute an essential part of our narrative construction of the world" (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 28). These voices represent perspectives the individual has assumed and incorporated into his or her repertoire of positions.

While such dialogues may take place outwardly, they primarily occur inwardly as individuals question, pose issues, and critique their decisions against the background of the voices of others. These dialogues with "our critics, our parents, our consciences, our gods, our reflection in the mirror, the photograph of someone we miss, a figure from a movie or a dream, our babies, or our pets," all represent exchanges that contribute to the way people make meaning of their experiences (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 28). The results of these communications influence the individual's understandings of self and of the world.

Because these positions "are not simply 'copies' of the views of others, but imaginatively constructed and reconstructed in the course of development," they may not be the actual perceptions of a living other; rather, they exist as internalizations, interpretations of voices and assumed positions that influence the construction of the self (Hermans, 2001, p. 264). In this way the voices become incorporated "as *living presences*" in the individual (Morson, 2004, p. 326). Just as the voices of real others work as a force shaping student identity, imaginal voices perform a similar function.

Collective Voices

The narrative identity of the individual "operates at the level of *both* individual *and* communal identity" (Kearney, 1996, p. 182). Individuals draw their identity from the communities they are a part of and interpretations of stories they tell. As individuals identify with "particular groups, classes, or categories of people and disidentify with other ones," both of these associations contribute to the composition of individual identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). These collective narratives represent another featured voice in the dialogical self. Carol Christ argued "an important feature of collective stories is that they are preexistent, that is, many of them exist before the individual becomes a member of the community" and are part of an identity individuals assume because such stories help organize experience (as cited in Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 118). Like other narratives, these collective stories are never neutral, but work in both positive and negative ways in the construction of the self.

The stories told by collective voices allow individuals to adopt ideas about themselves in order to make sense of various positions or stories and manifest the "intensive transactional relationships between self and society" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). In schools this might be seen in roles assumed by different social or ability groups. For example, the identity of a "struggling reader" may be one a student assumes as a result of descriptions or repeated associations with certain experiences or in response to particular structures that define what it means to be a reader. This identity may result from actual dialogues or from inferences the student makes as a result of these experiences. As Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained, the individual's "views and experiences of people who represent these groups are strongly and pervasively influenced by the collective stories in which these groups and their

representatives function as characters that are depicted in highly colored and affective ways" (p. 120). As a result, identities are formed by and in conjunction with the larger narratives of collectivities.

Further, these dialogues, both with others and with communities, are not limited just to words, but to all forms of expression. They take place through transactions that occur as the individual "participates wholly and throughout his whole life" with "eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds" as "he invests his entire self in discourse" that "enters into the dialogic fabric of human life" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). The gestures, routines, habits, and patterns that play a role in dialogue become additional parts of this interpretive process and the transactions that occur.

Finally, it also becomes important to note the effects of the heteroglossic tensions inherent in these dialogues. Bakhtin described the "processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification" that occur when voices engage in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 272). Although greater unity and understanding often results from these exchanges, a certain sense of stratification occurs as well. In the context of the dialogical self, this means that these different voices, constantly competing for supremacy, never reach a final agreement. Instead, an acceptance of disparate voices means individuals may simultaneously see themselves in conflicting ways, depending on which voice speaks the loudest.

It is these collective voices that will be explored in the discussion of the data that follows. For students that self-identify as struggling readers, this heteroglossic tension becomes evident as they negotiate their understandings of themselves as students who struggle against the backdrop of their successes. In a sense, they might see themselves as both struggling and successful, but constantly trying to reconcile their identity as one or the other.

Methodology

As a researcher seeking to understand the way literacy experiences influence the identities of struggling readers, it became imperative to identify a methodological framework conducive to interpreting the stories shared by the students in this study. In this case, the principles of philosophical hermeneutics, specifically Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative, offered a methodology to guide the interpretation of this data. Philosophical hermeneutics provided a way to examine how the elements that comprise stories, what Ricoeur (1984) called preunderstandings, offered insights into the interpretations of the narratives of adolescent struggling readers.

The sections that follow offer an overview of the principles of philosophical hermeneutics and the mimetic structure of stories, as well as an exploration of potential insights these ideas provide when used to conduct identity research, particularly research framed by the theories of the dialogical self. These sections will be followed

by an overview of the research design, including the methods of data collection and analysis. The concluding sections will discuss issues of validity and trustworthiness, as well as limitations of this approach. Ultimately each section will contribute to a discussion of how philosophical hermeneutics, particularly Ricoeur's concept of three-fold mimesis, offers a methodology to examine issues of identity construction in the case study narratives of struggling adolescent readers.

The Role of Philosophical Hermeneutics

The study of hermeneutics focuses on "the science or art of interpretation," in this case, of texts and stories (Grondin, 1994, p. 1). Specifically, the work of philosophical hermeneutics focuses on "the event of understanding or interpretation" of the other (Freeman, 2008, p. 386). As a method of understanding stories, hermeneutic perspectives play a key role in making sense of the way struggling adolescent readers interpret their in-school experiences, as well as in the way I interpreted my data.

In particular, Paul Ricoeur, twentieth century philosopher and figure in the field of philosophical hermeneutics, wrote about the narrative structure of life and the way individuals bring together the elements of their existence to make sense of their experiences as stories (1984). Drawing on Augustine's theories of time, Ricoeur developed the theory of a threefold mimetic process that explained how individuals create stories and make sense of their experiences through constant interpretation and re-interpretation.

According to Ricoeur, narratives are comprised of meaning and symbols that already exist as unique elements of the individual's understanding. These preunderstandings, as Ricoeur calls them, influence the way individuals make sense of the world. Some preunderstandings consist of structures such as other people, individual goals, circumstances, motives and past experiences. These might also include symbols and norms the individual understands about the world that provide a framework for meaning making. In addition, temporal structures play an important role as well because temporal structures give meaning to action in relation to time; that is, they define those moments the individual becomes preoccupied with, attends to, and uses to reference and make meaning. Together these preunderstandings exist as the components that make up the first part of this three-fold mimetic process, referred to as mimesis^1 (Ricoeur, 1984).

The second part of Ricoeur's mimetic process, mimesis^2 or emplotment, creates connections between an individual's preunderstandings and links them together in substantive ways. This emplotment occurs as events are brought together and relationships are created between parts and the whole, both chronologically and non-chronologically. Finally, the third part of the mimetic process, mimesis^3, occurs as the individual's preconceptions come together with all of these other elements and the

individual derives meaning from this whole. It is at this point where meaning is imbued into the story (Ricoeur, 1984).

Using Ricoeur's Theories to Research the Dialogical Self

Ricoeur's theories of narrative offer valuable insights into the dialogical self. Hermans described the ordering and re-ordering of events and moments in ways similar to mimesis[1] (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). Through the process of time, these moments are emplotted and ultimately individuals makes sense of their own understandings in relation to the world as they construct narratives of their experiences. Hermans also noted, "new experiences may influence not only the account of one's present situation, but also of one's past and future" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 15). In other words, individuals' narratives about their identity as successful readers might change after repeated failures, perhaps even causing them to re-evaluate their previous constructions by including experiences that they had heretofore excluded from the constructed story.

In the process of mimesis elements of mimesis[1] and mimesis[3] influence one another reciprocally and both account or changes in the way narratives of identity are emplotted. In Ricoeur's terms, the re-emplotment Hermans described would mean taking parts of mimesis_1 into account in ways that change the emplotment in mimesis_2. Hermans and Kempen (1993) referred to such changes when they explained some alterations "may have direct repercussions to the story involved, and therefore both telling and retelling are essential to personal narratives" (p. 15). Possible repercussions, for good or for ill, include the altering of identities constructed around particularly significant personal narratives. In this way, the telling and retelling of narratives exists as essential to understanding the ways they influence identity now and in the future.

From a methodological standpoint, Ricoeur's theory of mimesis offers a unique approach to the analysis of narratives and to using the dialogical self to affect change in the narrative identities of individuals. First, Ricoeur defines the pre-understandings used to construct narratives. His definition of these pre-understandings allows researchers to identify these elements in the narratives told by struggling readers and therefore to see which pre-understandings prove most significant to the construction of individual reader identities. Identifying the most significant pre-understandings in each narrative may offer insights into which elements possess the most potential to help the individual re-author their narratives and construct new narratives. An additional benefit of using Ricoeur's theories to analyze these narratives includes the way he theorizes about the process of time. Because the temporal element of narratives means stories are changed and reinforced over time, unpacking multiple layers of meaning can be complex. Time both solidifies and changes meaning as certain narratives are challenged and reinforced when viewed against the changing backdrop of future experiences. Helping individuals re-evaluate their narratives against these changing

elements—in other words, zooming in on opportunities to dialogue with and reinterpret their stories in light of new insights—may also allow them to re-author their narrative identities in new ways.

Methods

With Ricoeur's theories of narrative providing the methodological framework of this research, I designed a multiple case study (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2004) to explore the experiences adolescent struggling readers. The seven students who participated in the larger study included both males and females of various ages, grade levels, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, despite these differences, the characteristic each student shared in common was that he or she self-identified as a struggling reader.

The data collection process formally took place over a five-month period. For each case study I conducted between three and five audio recorded, in-depth interviews (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). The interviews protocols included specific questions designed to learn more about the students' educational history, current educational and reading experiences, perceptions of themselves and their educational experiences, but were also designed to give students opportunities share past experiences in narrative form (deMarrais, 2004).

After I transcribed the data, I analyzed the stories shared by the students according to the structures outlined in Ricoeur's concept of the threefold mimesis, focusing specifically on their interpretations of their experiences as readers and learners. Through these structures I identified those elements key to the narratives told by these struggling adolescent readers. This approach also allowed me to focus on what I refer to as dialogical-self moments, or those moments where students shared particular narratives or ideas with which they were in constant dialogue as they constructed their understandings of themselves and literacy learning. Although each of the students evidenced these moments to varying degrees, the discussion in this article is limited to Sarah's dialogical-self moments where the larger discourses of the school and curriculum were prevalent pre-understandings in narratives she used to make sense of her reader identity.

Issues of Validity

Hermeneutic research positions understanding as a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1975/1989) where individuals might not necessarily agree, but where they engage with one another's ideas in ways "in which both [individuals] are transformed" (Freeman, 2007, p. 942). From this perspective, hermeneutic frameworks inherently account for the researchers prejudgments and prejudices because these elements cannot be extracted from the analysis; rather, they become a part of it.

Applied to the particular context of this research, the stories told by Sarah, as well as my own reconstructions and analysis of her stories, cannot escape the influence of my understandings of struggling readers as a teacher and researcher. They are also informed by my work with other struggling readers. But as a part of a narrative analysis where narratives are viewed as reconstructions of events rather than factual realities, I acknowledge the significant role of interpretation on each level of sharing and analysis while remaining true to the narratives shared (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Throughout the research I drew on multiple sources of data to make sense of the stories the participants shared and provided opportunities for them to review my analyses of their narratives. In addition, to ensure the integrity of the research design, I modeled interview protocols, instruments, procedures, and data collection techniques after those of other rigorous studies designed to examine issues of reader identity (Hall, 2009; Moje & Dillion, 2006; Reeves, 2004).

Often case study research is viewed as limited by the generalizability of the results it produces (Yin, 2009). Although Sarah's understandings of her experiences might not reflect those of the whole population, they do offer insights into the perspectives and experiences of a marginalized population. Other studies of struggling readers suggest similar understandings of the ways these students understand their academic and reading experiences. As such, this study might be logically generalized to understand the experiences of the larger populations of struggling adolescent readers in US schools (Luker, 2008). In offering this perspective I don't claim that the stories of all struggling readers are identical to Sarah's, but I do suggest that the experiences Sarah shared and those elements that proved significant in the way she made sense of her experiences offer glimpses into the ways schools and structures might be perceived by students who struggle with reading. For this reason, the understandings offered in this study prove valuable.

Sources of Data

The narratives shared in the discussion that follows are drawn from the case study of Sarah, a 23-year old college student. Those included here focus primarily on the stories she told about herself as a reader and learner as a result of dialogues she had with institutional structures, testing, or school practices.

Although on the surface Sarah appeared quite similar to other students at the state college she attended in the US Southeast, the road she traveled to get to that point in her life was challenging academically and emotionally. As a child she enjoyed kindergarten, but first grade was a struggle that she ultimately repeated. Second grade marked a significant improvement and a teacher helped Sarah's mom troubleshoot Sarah's increasingly obvious academic struggles, ultimately leading her to be diagnosed with ADHD. Sarah qualified for special education support and started taking Ritalin

(which she later quit taking a few years later when they realized she was misdiagnosed), but in addition to these interventions, Sarah attended summer school to receive additional help. However, the extra schooling did little good in terms of addressing her reading struggles.

School continued in a similar manner, year after year, with a few teachers helping Sarah along the way. She was diagnosed as dyslexic and despite the highs and low with regular classroom teachers, Sarah loved her special education teachers. Although Sarah specifically recalled a teacher telling her that her test scores indicated she'd never read about a third grade level, Sarah didn't feel labeled in detrimental ways by the term "special ed," until she got to sixth grade and the stratifications became so noticeable that participating in the special education classes became synonymous with the negative social stereotypes.

Mid-way through high school Sarah read the first book she remembered enjoying, which led her to others. The next year, after taking the graduation tests multiple times, she finally passed all her high school graduations exams and received her diploma the summer after her senior year. Now, with two years of college under her belt, Sarah continues to struggle with school, but has successfully met each challenge. As we talked in our interviews she reflected on her past experiences, as well as the way these experiences continue to influence the way she sees herself as a reader and learner.

Discussion of the Data: Sarah's Dialogical-Self Moments

The following sections offer several glimpses into the stories that comprise Sarah's narrative identity. Sarah's narratives offered multiple moments of insight, not just about the experiences of struggling readers, but also about the role of the dialogical self in the construction of her identity. Those included here represent some of the most significant and reoccurring in our dialogues and reveal what I refer to as "dialogical-self moments" or those narratives that Sarah repeatedly shared as central to the way she views herself as a reader. Specifically, these narratives reflect the role of the larger discourses or school, the general curriculum, and texts in the way Sarah made and continues to make sense of her identity. Because Sarah recalled vividly so many of her early experiences, her stories serve as strong exemplars of the role of the dialogical self in the way past experiences continue to influence the way she emplots her narrative identity and her ideological becoming as a reader and learner.

The Little Kid's Area

As Sarah and I talked about her reading struggles early in her childhood, she shared one of the first incidents she remembered associated with reading and school. In third grade her class would go to the library and each student would be allowed to select a text based on his or her reading level, as determined by a computer-based reading program. The program used by Sarah's school to monitor student reading consisted of a

series of quizzes students take at the completion of each book they read. The students' score on the quiz indicated the students' reading level and students' future reading choices were guided by this system.

Sarah told me how, during their trips to the library, the media specialists would tell each student his or her reading level. Students would then be excused to make their new reading selections, but they were only allowed to choose from the books on their level. Rather than looking forward to this time at school, Sarah dreaded it because, as she explained,

> I would have to go pick them out in the kindergarten or first grade section when everyone else could go pick their books out in like the third, fourth, or fifth grade section, the bigger books at the library. But I would have to go pick out in the little kids' area. And I felt really dumb because it would be like "okay, I have to go over here." So I'd make sure all my classmates were picking out books before I would go pick out my book so they wouldn't see me picking out a book.

Sarah didn't recollect any of her classmates calling her names or teasing her, but for Sarah, these episodes played a central role in the way her classmates formed perceptions of her. Sarah's personal experiences with reading and schooling had already caused her to be painfully aware of her own struggles. However, she had no desire to have her classmates know of her struggles. But for Sarah, the divisions among grade level texts caused her to be ostracized from her classmates in physical ways that alluded to the academic and ability level differences among them as well.

It's possible, even probable, that the media specialists did not intend to make Sarah feel bad about her reading struggles. Usually the intention of decisions to restrict students to leveled texts appropriate to their reading level is to ensure success with a book. More than likely, the librarian's efforts centered on ensuring students' success by directing them towards books on ability-appropriate reading levels. However, the physical separation of books into levels only caused Sarah to see herself as different in yet another way from her classmates.

It's also important to consider the significance Sarah placed on the words of the teacher and other authority figures at the school. She didn't challenge their instructions; rather, she obeyed and internalized them as well as their accompanying labels. This story about herself as a third grade reader existed as a significant one that found its way into many of the experiences Sarah shared with me. Whether she bought into this narrative based on these experiences with this program or as a result of tests or as a culmination of all her struggles, this is a story she dialogues with often.

An additional point of interest focuses on the significance of high-interest material and reading ability. Multiple studies demonstrate that students are capable of reading beyond their measured ability levels when they are able to read texts they

consider to be of high-interest (Wigfield & Asher, 1984; Guthrie & McCann, 1997; Swan, 2003). In contrast to the way this moment reinforced and perpetuated the perception Sarah had of herself as a reader, reading a book she wanted could have built her confidence and captivated her interest. Had the media specialist allowed Sarah to explore high-interest books beyond her predicted ability level, Sarah may not have only been successful with the texts, but it may also have challenged Sarah's perceptions of herself as a struggling reader. However, in multiple ways these school structures and routines further marginalized Sarah as a struggling reader rather than helping her.

"I Messed Up on the Third Word"

The stories Sarah shared from her years in elementary school also offered some unique perspectives on classroom activities. Reading in school, whether out loud, silently, with the group, or individually, proved problematic. She explained, "I never really volunteered in elementary school to read. When I did, I never got picked on to do it."

Although the research on reading out loud varies, classroom teachers know benefits and drawbacks to asking students to read out loud exist (Allington, 1984; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). While the teacher gets to hear students read out loud individually, this means the other 30 students in the class may or may not be reading along. One version of this activity, often called popcorn or round robin reading, represented a particularly problematic experience for Sarah as a struggling reader. Although there are variations of this activity, each essentially consists of students reading a text out loud and either the teacher or another student "popcorns" to another reader at a certain point. Since students don't know when they will be picked, this is supposed to motivate all students to be on task as the class reads. However, research has shown activities such as these not only fail to offer the support readers need to strengthen their abilities and students who struggle "find this publish[ed] display of their lack of competence in reading an ongoing source of embarrassment that is not easily forgotten" (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003, p. 512). For students who struggle with reading anyway, being asked to read out loud without warning and without an opportunity to prepare exacerbates their challenges.

Sarah described an experience from fifth grade involving a substitute teacher and popcorn reading:

> The popcorn reading was like, "If you mess up on the word then you have to popcorn to somebody else" so they started with me and I messed up on the third word and they were like "You have to popcorn to somebody else." So you would popcorn, but the smart kids would only pick the smart kids, they wouldn't pick the dumb kids because like the smart kids could read four or five sentences.

Although in this example Sarah didn't report anyone in class calling her dumb, for her the meaning was clear: the smart kids read a lot, the dumb kids messed up a lot and the category you fell into became obvious three words after you started your turn reading.

Sarah's interpretation of these events and her performance put her in the dumb category. Further, once these categories were established, the smart kids maintained control of the reading by "popcorning" to other students who could also read well. For Sarah this activity and the response of her peers played a role in her interpretations of herself as a struggling reader. Influenced by the opinions of her peers, whether real or imagined, Sarah cared how her reading skills influenced her peers' assumptions about her.

She described another example associated with popcorn reading where she and her mom had been able to prepare by reading the text the night before. One particular passage stood out to Sarah because the word that was the subject of the text sounded like and looked like Sarah's last name. She remembered thinking "Oh, that's kind of like my last name, I want to [read] that." She described how she really knew that page because she and her mom had read it the night before and then she had re-read it multiple times.

Unfortunately, the teacher didn't call on Sarah to read that section, but the teacher did call on Sarah to read another. But, as Sarah described it, "I didn't know like half the words. And I felt dumb or I felt like kids were laughing at me or they thought 'Oh, she doesn't know how to read like you're supposed to know how to read.'"

Again, her understandings of the opinions of her peers played a significant role in how she perceived her ability as she read out loud as a part of this seemingly innocent class routine. Sarah knew she struggled, which already made her feel like she was dumb: not reading equated to not smart. When interpreted in the light of her past experiences reading with her peers, this new experience reinforced the negative labels she assumed, leading her to believe her latest attempt would only result in her classmates' mocking her.

One of the most interesting features of this narrative exists in the way these experiences reading out loud still influence Sarah's actions when asked to read out loud in school or at church. Although she still struggles when asked to read in public, she's developed ways to help her, in her own words, "deal with it." She explained,

> It's just one of those struggles I've had to learn how to deal with. But I've kind of learned how to manipulate it…I mean having the experiences of [thinking], "Okay you can ask for help" or you can be like, "Okay I don't know this word" and somebody will say it, that kind of thing.

Like some of the other readers in this study, Sarah developed strategies to help her work through her struggles. In this case, and of particular significance to those interested in the dialogical self, one of her primary strategies involves talking herself through the situation. In the instance above this strategy involved her inner dialogues and included reminding herself she could ask for help rather than feeling bad that she couldn't accomplish a task on her own. Another dialogical strategy she mentioned consisted of admitting she didn't know a word and relying on someone else to say it or help her pronounce it.

Although such strategies might not reflect more traditional strategies students are taught to use when reading, they still helped Sarah work through her reading challenges. She now sees asking for help as an option. She learned if she waited long enough or said she didn't know a word, someone else would say it, which became a coping strategy to get through a passage she had to read out loud. Sarah stops herself in the midst of a difficult passage and reminds herself she can ask for assistance. She asks others to help her as she encounters challenging words. These strategies are an important part of her inner dialogues, even now, as she continues to work through her reading challenges.

Sarah found herself relying on these strategies often, particularly with her sister and cousin, both of whom had become part of a support structure for her. Although at school she couldn't rely on them, when she went to church or religious study classes, Sarah depended on these two to help her if she struggled. When possible, Sarah would sit with these two on either side of her in class. If asked to read, Sarah would begin while the other two listen closely. When Sarah paused momentarily, this signaled she wanted help and one or the other will whisper the word to her. Sarah would repeat the word and continue reading.

Although not ideal as a long-term solution, this strategy worked for Sarah in many ways. It allowed her to participate in class when called on, just like the other students. Because her sister and cousin offered help when she needed it, Sarah didn't have to worry about standing out or appearing different. However, these strategies aren't fail-proof; she still experienced the stress of not being able to read through these moments on her own.

"I Got to Read What I Wanted to Read"

Like many other students, Sarah identified the time when she first read a chapter book on her own as pivotal in shaping her perceptions of herself as a reader. In high school she participated in silent sustained reading (SSR) time, but "didn't enjoy it…I hated it." She felt this way her whole freshman year and into her sophomore year as well. It only became a little better that year because her teacher allowed her to fall

asleep during this time, as long as she had a book on her desk, without giving her any grief about it.

But then Sarah discovered the book *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Bradshares (2001). Sarah asked her sister for her opinions about the book and although Sarah's sister was not interested in it, she encouraged Sarah to read it. Sarah quickly became engaged and found it easy to read, even though it was a thick chapter book, a common deterrent to many struggling readers. She told me,

> I couldn't wait until SSR time because I would read it for 30 minutes. I would just flat out read…that's when I started to love reading a lot more than I did. Because I got to read what I wanted to read and I didn't' have a teacher telling me, "This is what you have to read."

Research shows student choice in texts plays a significant role in reader engagement and ultimately the creation of lifelong readers (Campbell & Donahue, 1994; Palincsar et. al, 2007). In this case, Sarah's ability to select her own book made all the difference, perhaps in part because of her inability to make such selections in elementary school. Her attitudes also reinforced the idea that students who struggle with reading don't like teachers forcing books on them (Lesesne & Buckman, 2001). As Sarah selected books based on her own interests, she flew through them. She explained this was the first book that "I had ever read by myself from front to cover—front to back."

This dramatic change in Sarah's desire to read not only marked a change in her attitudes towards reading, but also in her perceptions of herself as a reader. She explained this change occurred because

> It gave me that accomplishment [like] "You know, it may take me a little longer to read a book, but I can read it. I like reading books on my own. I don't like being pressured to." And from that point on, I would read books.

Again, through her inner dialogues Sarah revealed the shift in perspectives she embraced. Regardless of whether or not the change in Sarah was actually this instantaneous, it challenged her previous ideas about herself as a reader. This successful reading of a chapter book—the first one she had ever selected, started and finished on her own—became a powerful story in her inner dialogues. A new story about herself as a reader began and challenged her ideas that she couldn't read at all.

Successfully reading a text on her own also marked the beginnings of reading as a social experience for Sarah. Participating as an active member of a literacy community challenged the typical role she assumed and expanded her identity as a reader. This book, and those she would read in the future, became opportunities to interact with others in realms where she had previously been excluded. She described how, after this experience, she went to her cousin to talk about the text and how because

of that discussion, her sister read this book as well. "Now it's like one of our favorite books because it's like a book that I understand that they understand … they got it with me and it was very—just awesome." Reading became an opportunity to become part of a community of individuals dialoging about stories.

Her statement describing this book as one "that I understand that they understand" also pointed towards significant ideas Sarah had about what kind of books she could read in comparison to her sister, cousin, and others. Previously Sarah saw herself as only able to read texts below her family members' reading ability levels. Now, as one who could read texts that her family members also found engaging, this idea of her as a third grade reader continued to be challenged.

By her own admission, this experience caused her to reshape her ideas about herself as a reader. Now she explained, "I would read books. Well, I would read one occasionally." This moment also represented the beginnings of a new link in the chain of dialogues she authored. In our last conversation before she left for the summer, she talked to me about her changed feelings towards reading and the role it would play in her summer adventures.

> I've come to find … that I like autobiographies better than I do fiction books--about certain people I like to read…Usually it would have taken me a whole year and a half to read, but after reading a couple books, I've gotten faster at reading.

She realized reading this first book on her own meant that she couldn't continue to see herself as only a third grade reader. Her ability to distinguish between genres she liked and disliked as well as her ability to offer her own opinions about books and to read increasingly faster altered the way she participated as a reader among her friends and in school. In short, she now considered herself a reader.

Understandings and Implications of Sarah's Dialogues

Although Sarah's successes as a student and as a reader have set her on a very hopeful trajectory, in a sense these dialogues mark moments in her individual process of becoming (Bakhtin, 1981). Her recently developed love of reading and her ability to working through the academic challenges she faces helped her alter her perceptions of herself. She now sees herself as participant in a community of readers, as well as one who can tackle academic challenges. But these are just two elements of Sarah's reader identity. She will continue to dialogue with many other elements throughout the years and in the face of future challenges and successes. In these and in other dialogues, more changes lie ahead.

Sarah's narratives point to the significant influence of institutions and structures, particularly schools and the pedagogical practices they perpetuate, in the way struggling adolescent readers make sense of their identity. Bakhtin (1993) described "myself and the other" as two different but correlated centers around which life and experiences are

arranged (p. 74). It's around these centers of self and other that teachers and students develop and weigh their opinions, ideas, and beliefs as they transact in the classroom.

For example, the assumptions she made about herself because of school structures often led her to construct negative interpretations of herself as a reader and learner. The nature of learning activities often positioned Sarah in ways where she and others compared Sarah's abilities with those of her classmates. In contrast, connecting with her sister and cousin as they talked about books allowed Sarah to view herself as a member of a community of readers. By being able to take risks in a literacy community where she felt safe to fail but also where others knew she could succeed, influenced her willingness and desire to face reading tasks. Although research points to the idea of peers playing a role in the way struggling readers enact their identities (Finders, 1997; Hall, 2009), the structures that encourage collaboration rather than competition are evident in the stories Sarah shared and suggest this influence may be even greater than initially thought.

Sarah's dialogues also raise questions about the lasting power of labels, especially those bestowed by institutions such as schools. Dweck (2006) explained that when individuals are associated with negative labels and stereotypes, they expend great amounts of mental energy worrying about whether or not their actions or performance confirms those stereotypes, energy that could be directed towards learning and performance. Sarah often referred to the label third grade reader" in our discussions. Regardless of where the label started, it's longevity in Sarah's stories proved a powerful force in the way she understood herself as a learner. Although I don't question the legitimacy of Sarah's struggles, I wonder how much more difficult they may have been because of the ideas assumed by her and others about her abilities because of the influence of this label of third grade reader. For example, what assumptions about Sarah did teachers make as a result of these labels Sarah assumed and had associated with her learner identity? Did these assumptions limit how her teachers interpreted Sarah at school?

Finally, one of the things that most impressed me about Sarah was the way she used her dialogues to inform the work she saw herself doing in the future. As she talked about the way her struggles influenced her beliefs about the abilities of the children she would work with as an occupational therapist, she explained, I know what they've gone through and I know I can help them get through their struggles like I have." I wondered about the way her narratives will influence the children she encounters in the future. Is she right? Will she be a more effective therapist because of her ability to relate to and connect with the struggles of these children? If so, what are the implications of this for teachers? One implication might be to suggest the teacher's narrative identity significantly influences his or her students. The way teachers view their struggles and abilities position them in very particular ways in the classroom and with students.

Understanding to what extent these narratives matter in their work with students could also influence the way we train teachers to work with students.

When considering the ethical implications of the school structure, Feinberg (1990) wrote, "The testing and sorting of children according to scores on tests [and] the articulation of educational goals with industrial needs…are difficult to reconcile with traditional ideas about the limits of state power and the importance of the individual" (p. 165). The ways we assess and label students represents just one of the many ways larger discourses and institutions influence student identity. This research doesn't advocate for abolishing assessment, but the affects of these modes of testing and sorting on the individual cannot be overlooked. Without opening up our current and often narrow definitions of assessment, traditional classroom practices, and the definition of what it means to succeed in school, we risk alienating students like Sarah who might succeed under a broader scope. Failure to do so only perpetuates negative inner dialogues and contributes to identity issues in students who might otherwise succeed.

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