DEFYING DEFICIENCY: REWRITING DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY,

ABILITY, AND RESILIENCE IN LITERACY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

I. INTRODUCTION

A Literacy Story

If you were to assume because I am an English teacher that language came naturally to me, you wouldn't be wrong. I learned to read and write early and in a completely conventional fashion: my parents read to me as a child, I had letter blocks to stack and alphabet magnets to shuffle unintelligibly around the refrigerator door. My parents guided my hand along giant print tablets, and we spent countless hours at our small-town library, browsing the aisles until I had their inventory all but memorized. I even had an extended support system in my literacy learning ventures: my grandparents. It was at their house, while my parents worked, that I developed both my propensity and appreciation for language and the stories it can create.

My grandfather, despite only having a middle-school education, was an intelligent and imaginative individual. He worked with me incessantly, and while he encouraged me to test the conventional limits of language and illustrated how it could be played with, I was not allowed to get away with using it incorrectly. He loved to recite - and I loved to hear and correct - his stolen renditions of Archie Cambell's spoonerized fairy tales. *Rindercelly and the Pransome Hince* and *The Pee Little Thrigs* gave me the chance to try out my inner English teacher early in life.

"No, Gran-bob," I would declare through my giggles. "It's *Three Little Pigs*!"

"Oh, right." He would continue, "So the pittle ligs went out that day…"

"GRAN-BOB!"

Our small town had a proportionately small newspaper, the *Mineral Wells Daily Index*, but that was fine with me. The only page I needed at that point was page eight: the one toward the back with the comics and puzzles. As soon as I could maneuver a pen, I

was invited to join in the fun of doodling all over the "funnies." Not a character went unscathed as we amended mustaches, cowboy hats, bunny ears, and propeller caps to every frame. Between the silly hats and facial hair, Grandbob was always filling in the rigid boxes below the comic strips with letters I didn't yet understand. I learned quickly that the crossword puzzle was not a comic to be doodled through; it had rules. It was sacred ground for only just the right letters - tools didn't have yet.

Gaining those tools didn't take long in the world he had created for me, where words came in all flavors and were ripe and ready for my picking. I found my own vocabulary lessons everywhere, even in the music that lilted on a regular basis from his amplifier in the kitchen. He played his black Baldwin 6-string and sang with a voice that was simultaneously smooth and gruff, like swimming through gravel. Music was how he and my grandmother met - he played a gig at the bowling alley she managed. By the time I turned five, I had claimed the role of his tiny back-up singer. This in itself was a language-learning experience, as we harmonized our way through the likes of Patsy Cline and Willie Nelson:

"*In the twilight glow I see he-*"

"Wait, Grandbob. What's *twi-lite*?"

"Oh, it's that sparkly time just before the sun sets and nighttime gets dark."

"Oh, okay.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

"Alright. *In the twilight glow I see her, blue eyes cryin' in the rain...*"

Grandbob never acknowledged that my vocabulary might have age-dictated boundaries or that our interactions should be modified to be more child-like. He talked to me like I was another adult - albeit small and full of questions, which he was always happy to answer. He assumed a high level of capability in me, and I lived up to his assumptions. While I couldn't quite put together letters to form my own words just yet, reading others' words had come quickly and naturally for me, and The Daily Index continued to provide us with regular fodder for reading practice.

Though we always ended up back at the comics and puzzles, we worked our way through the other pages together. Page four might tell us how Friday night's football game had gone down at Miller stadium – the ancient football field west of town where Mineral Wells teens and their parents filled the stands and ate frito pie while watching their kids and classmates get tossed around in the grass. On page six, we would find the obituaries, engagements, and birth announcements - it was the page we would flip to see all phases of life in one place. Page seven held the classifieds where we hunted out our garage sales. My pudgy fingers, covered in Cheeto dust, would follow his knotted, nicotine-stained ones along the lines of text as we read together. This practice opened yet another door for my language learning, just as music had. While neither practice reflected the English instruction I received at school and certainly would not show up on any benchmark test, they became without question the strong and valid bedrock of my individual literacy.

When at six years old I had moved on from the letter magnets and mastered Boggle Junior, I was allowed to start helping with the crossword puzzles. This signified a major coming of age for me. Though it still happened from my place on my grandfather's

lap, I had graduated from drawing propeller caps on comic characters to scrawling letters into neatly aligned boxes. I would be making words, though not with the freedom that my pencils and thick-lined writing pads allowed. Grandbob always completed the crosswords in pen. His capital letters-- the perfect, lilting script that even the undereducated of his generation had mastered-- neatly filled the intersecting rows and columns. The finality of the ink on the thin newsprint meant that this was no place for playing with words; we had to be totally sure of the answers before writing them in the boxes.

"Let's see," he began. "Six down: a group of people. What's another word for a group of people?"

"Hmm…" I pondered aloud, scouring my mental database of words for a match. "Oh! A crowd!" I snatched up the pen and hunted for 6 with its tail of boxes below it.

He caught me before my ballpoint touched the page. "Now wait a minute – it can only have three letters. Let's keep thinking."

"Oh-"

"Let's try *mob*. Can you spell *mob*?"

"Mmmm – *EM*!"

"Yes ma'am, *em*. What else?"

"Muh-awwww… *Oh*?"

"*Oh*. And the last one?"

"Muh-aw-buh. *Bee*!"

"Alright, *bee*."

These new restrictions, though daunting at first, became challenges for me. "How could there be so many words for the same thing?" I thought. While they were often

words I didn't yet know, the opportunity to learn both the spelling and the meaning provided a strong foundation for my development. Words inevitably repeated as clues in newspaper crossword puzzles were recycled, and my vocabulary quickly grew in size and sophistication. I began to see words in a whole new light – they were problems to be solved, challenges to be met.

As I progressed into grade school, it did not take long for me to become a teacher's pet and insufferable pedant. It was lucky that I had managed to endear myself to my second grade teacher from the start, because I made quick enemies with her student teacher when I corrected her use of the common double negative, "ain't got no," in front of the class. "A teacher should know better than to talk like that," I told both my parents and grandparents impudently that evening when I had to explain the yellow mark on my conduct sheet.

By fourth grade, I was the champion of my grade's Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) program. I racked up more points than I could ever hope to spend in a year and burned through book after book from the school library, most well beyond the 4th grade level. Nevermind the more mature themes and literary nuances I missed by reading Stoker's *Drakula* at age 10; I could understand the words themselves and that was enough to get me through the surface-level tests at the end, earn my points, and maintain my title. By sixth grade I had earned two first-place trophies in the school spelling bees and gone on to place in the regional competitions. I spent incalculable hours writing and rewriting the words from my study booklets; I had stacks of composition notebooks filled with rows of repeated words. My capacity for school-based literacies built upon and

easily integrated with the groundwork of my home literacies, and quickly became part of my identity– I was *a reader.*

As I progressed through the secondary grades, my writing garnered the attention that my ability to read had in my earlier years. When I didn't bother with daily homework, my writing and practiced ability to test well got me through with a passable GPA. Eventually, it was my essays and SAT scores that opened the door for me to be the first in my family to pursue a bachelor's degree at a prestigious state school, and it was no coincidence that I chose to use the opportunity to study language. It came as a shock to no one when I became a teacher eight years later; the only surprise was that it took me so long to do so.

At age 26, as I entered into teaching at an alternative high school where every student is at the very least labeled "at-risk" and many wear additional markers such as "remedial," "developmental," and "ESL," I asked myself: what might my experience have been like if the narrative were different? Had I not been taught to read and write by such an active and available support system, who despite being low income and not yet college-educated, were familiar enough with cultural codes of power and the social importance of certain literacies to expose me to them and encourage my command of them alongside my home literacies? Had I been among those who simply didn't test well, or for whom the test was not written, and had my individual literacy– my academic worth– been judged singularly by that performance? Had I overheard, or been directly told, stories about my inadequate literacy, my inherent deficiency, and my need for remediation if there was to be any hope for my lifelong success? Looking at my students, I think I have an inkling.

A Literacy Counterstory

Asia and I sat across from each other at my desk, pouring over every word of her paper together. It was more help than I probably should have provided for a Dual Credit Comp II student, but she came to me knowing that she was in over her head and needed the guidance. She also knew she held a soft spot in my teacher heart; she had been in my freshman English class in my first year of teaching, her second year of high school. When I made them play an ice-breaker game in the first week of class, she begrudgingly stood in the circle, arms crossed, and told everyone that she didn't like people. I took that as a challenge, and by the spring semester I was the person she came to when she needed the space to unload. Suffice it to say, she needed a space.

That first year Asia had a pregnancy scare, and lost one of her brothers to gun violence while the other was denied parole for his gang-related offenses. She carried an odd combination of anguish and relief with each occurrence; it was such a complex and precarious balance of emotions even for an adult, but this 15-year-old lived in that space. Some part of her wanted badly to be a mother and equated her role and worth as a woman with childbearing, but another part knew she might want other things in life, too. Maybe even first. She loved and missed her brothers and deeply grieved their presence in her life, but also knew that their respective absences, however tragic, meant she could distance herself and her much younger sister, Izzy, who she often babysat, from their downfalls.

When I sat down with Asia at the beginning of the semester, she told me "I'm no good at English." I didn't have much reason to doubt her; she had failed the reading and writing STAAR exams the year prior, though not by a lot. Her benchmark scores at the

beginning of the school year suggested she was reading at about a 7th grade level. "That's workable. We'll get you where you need to be," I assured her, and she rolled her big, dark eyes behind false lashes. "Yeah, they said the reading classes would help at my last school too, but…" Unabashed, I continued: "What are your goals? Short-term, long-term-- whatever-- what do you want to do?" She shrugged shoulders, and very honestly answered, "I dunno, survive?"

My English I class that year limped along as I adhered to the curriculum assigned by my charter district. As we approached Thanksgiving, we began the unit on analytical essays, which are notoriously hard to teach to students who have, up to that point, only been asked to recap stories and summarize plotlines. The lesson guides provided a few short stories from which the students were to choose one for analysis, so I thought I would assign the stories to be read over the break.

"I don't get these," Asia told me that week. "They boring, and use all these big, old words. How am I supposed to *ana-lyze* them when I don't know what they sayin'?"

She had a good point. Her options were "The Bet" by Chekhov, "The Necklace" by de Maupassant, and "Masque of the Red Death" by Poe. Not particularly engaging or applicable material for any teenager, particularly those who had historically struggled with school-based literacy. Additionally, Asia was biracial– a black latina, and nothing about the assigned readings spoke to her.

"Geez, yeah, these options kind of suck," I responded, much to her surprise. I hadn't yet branched out from the sanctioned lesson plans, and doing so felt a bit treasonous, so I continued in a whisper: "You know, as long as you can show me that you

8

can analyze a piece of literature, I don't think it should matter what it is. Grab those fat books from the bottom shelf, let's find something a little newer."

"And maybe not *so* white?" she said under her breath as she pulled my undergrad English anthologies from the bookcase.

"You might enjoy this one," I said, tagging Perkins' "The Yellow Wallpaper." We skimmed the contents pages together, until she was drawn to a name that looked remotely familiar: *Sandra Cisneros*. "Oh yeah, she's *good*. If it doesn't work for you, try this one," I suggested, tagging a story by Hurston. With a tiny sense of renewal, Asia took my book and left for the break.

She read all three stories that week. When we returned from Thanksgiving, she started raiding my bookshelf, beginning with the anthologies with which she was already acquainted and eventually finding Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* and Morrison's *Beloved,* which she borrowed over Christmas. She stayed late for the assistance we had both assumed she needed to keep up with the class, but by the spring semester she pulled ahead. I gave her material for upcoming units, so that on days when she had to watch Izzy and didn't make it to school, she had things to do and wouldn't fall behind again. She flew through the remainder of her English I course, passed the English I STAAR exam in March, and around Spring Break chose to stack her classes so she could double-time her way through English II.

The following year, Asia took a field trip to see a human biology exhibit with her health class, and returned with a new fascination. "What can I do in the medical field with just a *little* training?" she asked me. I had transitioned to a hybrid position in which I was half-English teacher, half-College and Career Transitions counselor, so it was an apt

query for her to bring to my desk. "I can't be in college long enough to be a nurse," she

continued, "I'm not smart enough anyway, but there's other things, right?"

"Well," I began, "I think you are smart enough to be a nurse and I could see you

being good at it, but I understand that committing to two years of college might feel like a

lot right now. Let's look at ACC."

As I pulled up our community college website, she interjected: "Nah, miss, I

can't… wait, two years? I thought it took longer than that?"

I tried to stifle my smile as she took the bait. "You *can* get a four-year Bachelor's

degree in nursing, and you'll make more money and have an easier time landing jobs

with it, but you can also be a Registered Nurse with an Associates. That's usually two

years, but it's a competitive program, so yes, it would probably take three… but you

could look into phlebotomy, or medical imaging, or even EMT, those are way shorter

programs with some overlap in the nursing coursework that you could build on over time,

while you worked."

She remained uncharacteristically quiet, undoubtedly navigating her teetering

equilibrium of emotions, obligations, and possibilities, as several certificate and degree

outlines emerged from my printer. "You have lots of time to think about it," I assured her,

"and there are high school classes you could take to try it out before you commit. Just let

me know what questions you come up with."

Asia promptly enrolled in our Medical Terminology class, and I chided her as she

flipped through flashcards in my classroom one afternoon, "Lucky for you medical terms

are Latin, not English, huh?" Without looking up, she shook her head and clucked,

"Nuh-uh, Miss." She completed the entire course in six weeks with an A and rode the

subsequent tide of momentum, completing the remainder of her lingering sophomore-level work as well as nearly all of her junior-level courses. As we neared the end of that year, she came in to talk futures again.

"Maybe I could be a doctor. I think I want to work with women, like a gynecologist."

This time I failed to hide my beaming as I agreed, "Yes, totally. I could see that. It's a lot of work and school, but it could pay off in a lot of ways."

"Yeah Miss, I just think, *man,* I made it this far - I'm seventeen! Without getting pregnant, or on drugs, or in prison. I'm the first person in my family to do that, and the first to finish high school. I just feel like I gotta make the most of that opportunity."

Indeed, Asia made it not only through high school, but through four dual credit classes in her senior year. In the fall, she successfully completed English Comp I and US Government– the classes we were lucky enough to host on our campus, so they offered a less intimidating gateway for students into the world of college-level work. That spring she bravely bussed to the closest community college campus for Intro to Psychology and English Comp II. It was the latter that brought her back to my desk, where we examined her draft together. It was another analytical essay, this time over Diaz' "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)."

It was clear to me that Asia *got* this story, deeply. It hit home, and she was struggling to remove herself from it in the way she did when she was analyzing Carver or O'Connor the previous semester. As a result, her language in this essay was not the detached, academically appropriate writing I had seen her practice in earlier essays. It

reflected the story, which is itself written in Diaz' signature relaxed, code-meshed style; and it reflected *her*-- how she thought, how she spoke.

"What are you saying here?" I asked her, highlighting the next line.

She sighed, clearly already frustrated. "I mean, I'm tryin' to say that he don't actually know nothin' about how to get girls, he like *needs* to know, and he wants you to think he knows. But he don't know. He's just insecure, he an insecure li'l fuckboy and I think that's the theme."

"Yes, totally, you're nailing it. Now just tell me that like you were telling your professor."

"Okay…" she straightened up in her chair, adjusting her posture as she got into character, and cleared her throat. "Yunior doesn't know how to get girls, but he wants you– I mean, the audience– to think he does. He is insecure and… feels pressured by society to be macho. As a man, he *should* know how to get girls, so... he fakes it... to... compensate for his lack of experience."

"Great, now type that out."

We worked this way through six pages as she revised line by line, until every double negative and null copula were standardized to fit what we both knew was expected. I knew the language had to be "corrected" to receive the A she wanted, but it pained me to be the person to strip *her* from that work.

Asia pulled an A on that paper, and B in the class. She graduated, and took her 12 credit hours and 3.75 GPA with her to a nearby state school, where she is now on her way to a nursing degree, with a hope to possibly someday pursue a Masters and become a nurse practitioner. While she is not just surviving anymore, she is still fighting similar

uphill battles in college: she continues to occasionally doubt her own legitimacy as a college student, she is the subject of race- and culture-based assumptions regarding her academic readiness, and she is still learning to navigate systems that operate in social codes which she was not endowed by her upbringing.

Problem Statement

The American education system has become gradually more populated with students like Asia– students of diverse backgrounds whose ability to read and write sufficiently is doubted and disparaged from increasingly early ages, who are defined by their scores on standardized tests which only serve to measure biased school-based literacies, and who hear and believe the narratives of mediocrity and failure being told about them. Shannon Carter confirms that in her experiences teaching both secondary and postsecondary English, deficiency designations such as "low performing" or "at-risk" "indicated little more than the darker color of our students' skin and the lower socioeconomic status of their caretakers" (4). One need only glance at the latest report card published by the National Center for Educational Statistics to see a quantitative representation of these narratives: in 2019, nearly half of twelfth-grade students identifying as white were deemed to be reading at or above a proficient level, while only 25% of Hispanic and Latino students and 17% of Black students met the proficiency mark. While over half of public school students in the US are considered low-income based on their eligibility for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) only 23% of those test as proficient, while about half of students whose family income is too high to qualify pass the reading proficiency test. However, the National Council for Teachers of English warns that the assessments which produce such statistics "are not always valid

measures of [poor and minority students'] ability, and their opportunities to learn are diminished as a result" (3).

While the literacy assessments described above seek to identify struggling students, better serve underprivileged groups, and close the gaps between their academic achievements and those of mainstream students; they do as much to perpetuate the problems faced by these students. Their early predecessors have bolstered claims of insufficient literacy– particularly among students of diverse backgrounds– since the late 19th century, when the American educational system began to expand, "admitting in turn the sons of the middle class, and later the daughters, and then the American poor, the immigrant poor, veterans, the racially segregated, the disenfranchised" (Rose, "Language" 355). Kathryn Au explains that "because the school is a mainstream institution, instruction is carried out in ways following mainstream standards for behavior and reflecting mainstream cultural values" (302), and thus does not allow space for varied literacies and educational foundations. This increase of student diversity, alongside a rise in testing and accountability measures and constant but quiet shifting of literacy definitions, expectations, and standards has led to exaggerated claims of widespread illiteracy in the U.S. Dennis Baron suggests that such claims are nothing new:

> The perennial complaints about the inadequacy of earlier stages of education all seek to assign blame: after all, the claim goes, the literacy crisis is real, so it must be somebody's fault. If we are to believe news reports from the past century, not to mention accounts from earlier points in human history, readers have never been up to the demands put on them by texts, and writing skill has always lagged far behind the imaginary benchmarks that purport to measure

successful composition. In short, our literacy has always been in crisis. (425)

The language surrounding the perceived literacy crisis is rhetorically dramatic, ranging from what Neal Lerner refers to as "schoolmarm-ish chiding and conservative blame-game" (18) to more alarmist spectacles of patriotism and urgent narratives of national defense (Brodkey 148). In state and national reporting, the discourse relating to language surrounding literacy assessment and accountability has embraced the vernacular of business and finance, quantifying every data point possible in terms of efficiency, return on investment, and future earning (or loss) potential. As Angela Green describes, the "language surrounding education… especially literacy, is now tied almost exclusively and quite openly to individual and national economic viability" (371). Meanwhile, the rhetoric used to describe many students' language learning process reflects what Mike Rose calls a "mechanistic-medical model of language" ("Language" 352), particularly in reference to students of diverse backgrounds who most often bear labels such as remedial and deficient.

This rhetorical approach to the portrayal, assessment, and categorization of American students and their literacy achievements does little to identify anything more than symptoms of systemic issues, and does even less to suggest constructive solutions. What it does achieve is the development of narratives about students and reading and writing educators in the US. These words shape the stories we tell about students in America's public school system: stories of deficiency and inferiority; of resignation, failure, and despair. They are stories that offer little in the way of bright futures, but instead insist that students who do not exhibit sufficient skill in school-based literacy are

defective or disordered, lacking in some moral aptitude, and likely doomed to subpar prospects of livelihood.

Behind each negative designation and each story is an "implicit standard of normality against which the measurement is being made" (Winslade and Monk, 54). These are "majoritarian stories": dominant narratives that perpetuate and privilege the norm in literacy education– typically white middle class knowledge, dialects, codes, and behaviors– "by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (Solorzano and Yosso 28). They inform what qualifies as "good" reading and writing, and who qualifies to perform those skills. Furthermore, as Aja Martinez explains majoritarian stories "distort and silence the experiences of people… distanced from the norms such stories reproduce" ("A Plea" 51) . They influence the way that the general public views students– especially students of diverse backgrounds, those who exist on some margin of society– as well as educators and the institutions of learning to which both belong. They also impact the way some educators view those students, and more importantly, how struggling students come to view themselves and their roles in those institutions and beyond.

These narratives are especially disheartening for me: as a high school English teacher and a graduate student of English composition they tell untrue stories about both me and my students, and the work that we all do. I have worked for and with, almost exclusively, students considered "at-risk" for eight years. As such, this is at once a professional, academic, and profoundly personal research topic for me. I know firsthand the impact that the national discourse surrounding literacy education has on educators, how it drives an obsession with assessment which in turn shapes both the value of the

work we do and the standards to which we teach. I have seen the power of the clinically-influenced rhetoric of deficiency on our students, how these labels shape what they think of themselves as learners and individuals, and serve to limit their literacy achievements and, often, their trajectories in life. I have lived in the space between high school English instruction and college composition, a chasmic purgatory that the latter insists on maintaining for the sake of status and the former works to bridge on behalf of every college-bound graduating senior. Based on these experiences, I can claim with confidence that this rhetoric of deficiency is neither accurate nor constructive, but may very well perpetuate the problem it says it seeks to define and eradicate.

Research Questions and Significance

This research project is guided by the following questions:

- What stories do students tell about their literacy experiences in a culture of educational accountability, and what can we learn from them?

- What stories are told about students, and how do those narratives influence their self perceptions and motivations inside and outside of school?

- How are those stories shaped and perpetuated by accountability standards and measures that currently govern literacy education, and the discourse of deficiency that accompanies them?

- How do these questions apply similarly-- and differently-- in secondary and postsecondary literacy education? What is the significance of this for reading and writing pedagogy?

These questions and their answers have rippling implications for those involved with reading and writing education at every level. Literacy educators may take away a

greater understanding of the lived experiences of their students, which could be used to adjust curriculum and pedagogy to be more reflective of and engaging to their students. For education administrators and educational policy makers, this may likewise offer a lens into the learning environments they shape and encourage a greater mindfulness in the rhetoric employed in literacy education policy and administration and a reconsideration or reframing of the ever-growing accountability measures that govern public education. Considering the experiences of students, alongside their demographics, benchmark scores, risk factors, may provide a rich personal context to the substantial quantitative data that already exists, and help all those involved with literacy education understand the impact of their roles. Ultimately, my aim is to bring deeper understanding to the complex and evolving topic of reading and writing education, and that it may better equip us all to build environments that promote the literacy learning of students at all levels, and together write new stories of progress, potential, and success.

Chapter Overview and Approach

In order to satisfy the guiding questions outlined above, I take a two-part qualitative approach which incorporates scholarly research with narrative. This work is rooted in a social constructivist perspective, through which larger cumulative meaning can be pulled from individual experiences. However, I also integrate aspects of critical social theory, which I discuss in detail later, in that this project seeks to prioritize the experiences of marginalized groups of students and offer some groundwork for changing literacy education in ways that serve them more equitably. Through this lens, I look at literacy narratives– not just those assigned as essays, though they can be valuable pedagogical parts of the process– but those that often go unwritten, undiscussed, and

even unnoticed. Drawing on Linda Adler-Kassner, Mary Soliday, and others, I investigate the stories of how a person came to conceptualize language, and also the external stories told *about* their ability to use it. Following Bronwyn Williams' work, I will also explore how those narratives and their associated discourse of deficiency impact literary agency, and students' motivation and resilience to perform academically literate identities. Mike Rose and Shannon Carter inform my examination of how an ever-growing culture of educational accountability, standardization, and high-stakes testing has shaped that discourse and the lived realities of students and their reading and writing teachers. Finally, I lean on NCTE and CCCC– especially contributors to a special symposium therein– to consider how these factors apply at all levels of English literacy education, including postsecondary, and why it matters. This theoretical infrastructure as well as the cross-disciplinary foundation of scholarly work in Composition Pedagogy, Educational Psychology, and Reading Education is outlined in greater detail in Chapter II: Review of Literature.

The narrative components herein take the form of Counterstory, which is generally defined as the telling of stories of those people whose experiences are not often told. As a methodology, it can be a tool for analyzing and challenging majoritarian stories of privilege (Solórzano and Yosso 32) as well as for "exposing stereotypes, expressing arguments against injustice, and offering additional truths through narrating authors' lived experiences" (Martinez, "A Plea" 51). Chapter III: Methodology covers my approach to data collection and analysis, character composition, and narrative process, and includes ethical considerations and acknowledgements.

Chapter IV: Findings, contains the heart of this project: the Counterstories. Part I of this chapter attends to the literacy journey of Hugo and his progression over two years' time from statistical failure to burgeoning success. It delves into a young lifetime of limiting labels and restrictive stereotypes, which posed major obstacles for Hugo prior to stepping into my English classroom and continued to influence his trajectory thereafter. Hugo's story allows me to explore the ways in which literacy instruction goes beyond the basal skills of reading and writing to be instrumental in the development of personal, social, and academic identities of students, and depicts the ramifications of problematic narratives and the effects that stereotyping and negative story-telling can have on students' perceptions of themselves within the context of school.

Part II of this chapter follows Sam, a gifted writer and budding social activist, over three years of his high school experience. It provides an illustration of missed opportunities and overlooked potential when our view of "good" reading and writing is narrowly defined and tethered to character and behavior. This allows me to examine classroom practices through Sam's story that hinder literary agency, and suggest alternatives to work around the reigning culture of literacy accountability and counter deficiency discourse. As part of this exploration, I also scrutinize the practice of high-stakes standardized testing and the shortcomings of heavily regulated majoritarian expectations of literacy.

In Part III of this chapter, I turn the focus back to my own experiences as both a student and teacher to consider the boundaries between high school English instruction and college composition. By integrating parts of my own ongoing literacy narrative, I investigate the reasons those boundaries exist so stringently, how the division may be

perpetuating the ongoing perception of a literacy crisis, and how that perception and its

related rhetoric impacts students on both sides of the divide.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The language surrounding literacy education in the US has come to reflect many varied inputs and influences, but less and less so does it resonate with what we know about education itself. On one hand, it has "become increasingly inflected with the mercantile" (Green 371), illustrating the concept of literacy as a set of basal skills required for the purpose of personal economic viability and national prosperity. On another, it reeks of clinical verbiage, symptomatic of our need to categorize, count, and cure perceived impairments. At the transitional point from secondary to postsecondary education, it becomes an implement wielded to defend the sanctity of the academic institution and keep those who underperform, or perhaps perform differently, out. In any case, when analyzed it reveals a deeply held belief that struggles with school-based literacies are indicative of deficiencies in character, culture, and morality; and it exposes the numerous "political, material, social, and ideological constraints placed on literacy education" (Carter 1).

This language is formed in the heavily data-driven culture of academic accountability, the quantitative scope of which is neither wide nor flexible enough to account for students' complex realities. In a world where actual individual learning and growth is overshadowed by reporting for the sake of "access, alignment, affordability, and accountability" (Adler-Kasner, *Activist* 65), it is the place where a majoritarian bureaucracy seeks to make sense of the patterns in students' literacy performance and achievement, and to account for those who do not fit into the dominant definition or agenda of school-based literacy. The result is a discourse that is harsh, invalidating, and impersonal.

The reality is that there exist individuals for whom these labels are very personal, and who, regardless of what those labels might suggest, understand the stories being told about them. These individuals– our students– experience this language and the narratives it shapes in very different ways. Instead of outside observers peering upon a broken system, they are themselves the subjects of observation. Adler-Kasner reminds us that those students are "not lists of symptoms to be addressed or behaviors to be modified, but whole people whose existences [are] comprised of these tales" (*Activist* 3). The discourse of deficiency "works [its] way into the cultures of schools and into the thinking of adolescents themselves" (Sadowski 3); it breeds a cynicism for school and aversion for reading and writing in those students, and creates a canon of inadequacy which becomes ingrained in their identities. This is particularly true in literacy education; as Williams says, there exist undeniable "connections between literacy experiences and performances of identity" (5). As a discipline, literacy goes beyond the realm of skill as it informs how we communicate and perform those identities, and provides the medium through which we think about and interact with the world. While students are learning to read and write, they are also "developing personal and social identities - uniqueness and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming" (Johnston, Choice Words 22).

This chapter will discuss the existing literature relevant to these themes, and will review the scholarly work on literacy learning, literacy narratives, and agency in the academy on which this thesis builds. Before diving into the review of literature, which is organized thematically going forward, I will address a few key terms and phrases that are used consistently throughout this work. First, I regularly refer to *school-based literacy*, which speaks specifically to the limited reading, writing, and communication skills taught

and valued by American public school systems. School-based literacy tends to consist of a narrow band of reading comprehension and basic writing skills in English perceived as necessary for academic and professional success (Rose, "Language" 346; NCTE 2; Adler-Kassner, *Activist* 76). These standards are based on a white, middle-class ideological model of language, behavior, and achievement which alienates students who fall outside of those demographics. The CCCC speaks to the long-debunked myth of " a single American 'standard English' which could be isolated, identified, and accurately defined," and urges us to "ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves" ("Students' Right" 3).

Additionally, I borrow the phrase *students of diverse backgrounds* from Kathryn H. Au, a prominent literacy educator and researcher who focuses on culturally responsive teaching, to describe those students most often alienated and rejected in literacy education. She uses this phrase, as will I, to refer to "students in the United States who are usually from low-income families; of African American, Asian American, Latina/o, or Native American ancestry; and[/or] speakers of a home language other than standard American English" (298).

English as More Than a Core Class

Though one would be hard-pressed to find a written explanation in any teaching standards or mandatory knowledge and skill guides, the English classroom is a site of more than just learning to read and write. While teaching the skills of reading comprehension or sentence structure, literacy educators are also informing, shaping, and often challenging the medium through which students make meaning of and for themselves: their language. Brodkey invokes Foucault and other poststructuralists in stating:

> We are at once constituted and unified as subjects in language and discourse. The discursive subject is of particular interest to those of use who teach writing because language and discourse are understood to be complicit in the representation of self and others, rather than the neutral or arbitrary tools of thought and expression… (88)

Such is the nature of English classrooms, reading and writing labs, and other sites of literacy learning across the nation: that students themselves are their own subject when learning to use language.

In "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narrative," Soliday refers to language as "as a means of self-definition and self-representation" (512) and describes milestones in literacy learning as " moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development" (511). This would mean that the everyday work of mediating our students' literacy education is also facilitating their self-discovery and growth as individuals. While this article specifically focuses on

literacy narratives, it rests on her underlying belief of language acquisition as "a meaningful social drama" (514) that is an integral part of personal identity development.

Continuing in this vein, Williams says literacy can "nurture and sustain our need and potential for human connection" (189). His book *Literacy Practices and Perceptions of Agency* explores the social and emotional aspects of literacy education, and how those practices impact identity, attitude, and impressions of ability that play out in and outside of the classroom. He is forthright in his statement that reading and writing "have a substantial impact on the perception and performance of identity" (5), and speaks to the importance of recognizing the work we do with each student in a given day as adding to an existing foundation for "the literate identities they will continue to construct in the years ahead" (186).

In addition to serving as a foundation for identity and self-conception, literacy education provides a necessary infrastructure for the development of knowledge in other subjects, academic and otherwise. While respective works of both Adler-Kassner and Rose are explicated more fully in the following section, their input on literacy as fundamental to other knowledge is too pertinent to leave out here. Adler-Kassner describes "the idea that writing instruction contributes to the development of students' 'critical intelligence'" as a "a mainstay of [our] field" (*Activist* 52), while Rose states that an ability to read and write "seems central to the shaping and directing of certain modes of cognition, is integrally involved in learning…[and] is essential to the very existence of certain kinds of knowledge" ("Language" 348). Additionally, the CCCC highlights the nature and power of language and, thus, the enormous potential for harm held by deficiency narratives and its associated rhetoric in literacy education: "personally, for our

students as human beings; and academically, for our students as learners, since learning is mediated through language" ("Writing Assessment" 434).

Language and Labels in Literacy Education

The expected approach to literacy education and its surrounding discourse has come to rely on terms of deficiency, focusing heavily on those standards students are unable to meet as a starting place. At the primary and secondary levels, one is likely to encounter students who are ""remedial," deficient," "at-risk," or "ESL;" in post-secondary those students might become "basic," "provisional," or "developmental." In "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University," Rose explains that this vernacular "came from a progressive era desire to help all students progress through the educational system. But the theoretical and pedagogical model that was available for 'corrective teaching' led educators to view writing problems within a medical-remedial paradigm" ("Language" 352). In both this article and his book *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose examines such labels, the assumptions they inform about the students they describe, and the often unfortunate and unfair systemic outcomes. He explains that "to be remedial is to be substandard, inadequate, and, because of the origins of the term, the inadequacy is metaphorically connected to disease and mental defect" ("Language" 349), and suggests that as a field, "we seem entrapped by this language, this view of students and learning" ("Language" 352).

Rose goes on to suggest that deficiency rhetoric gains its meaning "in a political more than a pedagogical universe" ("Language" 349), stemming from a desire to maintain the hierarchy of higher education. Lerner addresses the political nature of such labels at the postsecondary level in his essay "Rejecting the Remedial Brand: The Rise

and Fall of the Dartmouth Clinic." Using Dartmouth as a case study, he illustrates what happens when the branding of students as "remedial" or "basic" conflicts with the brand an institution is expected to uphold. Lerner speaks to the political push of elite institutions "to be vigilant to protect the integrity of that brand from the uncomfortable reality of student performance" (14), and describes higher education's sometimes scornful approach to writing remediation "in which underprepared students are branded out of existence" (13). Both Lerner and Green point to the pressure placed on institutions by external forces to uphold those brands and churn out "highly literate" graduates. In "The Politics of Literacy," Green analyzes accountability reports on higher education in the context of related American education reform, with both reporting and reform hinging on the perceived literacy crisis. She explains that "government and industry have steadily increased their collective demand for educational accountability, largely through standardized testing" (368), while linking literacy education "to every conceivable political or social issue" (370). This justifies the political interest in categorizing and controlling reading and writing education, as it frames literacy as a matter of national security and prosperity.

Curt Dudley-Marling addresses the similar branding that takes place at the primary and secondary levels, focusing mostly on the term "struggling readers" but also discussing the "wide variety of labels [that] have been applied to students who fall outside the lower boundary of 'normal' or are just 'below average'" (2). In "The Trouble with 'Struggling Readers'," he rallies against the use of labels to categorize students in their literacy development, stating that "labels for school failure are metaphors that

shape our understandings about learning and learners and… implicat[e] them in their academic failure" (2). In doing so, he campaigns for all those involved in literacy education to be mindful of our own language and its impact on students.

In *Choice Words*, Peter Johnston calls language "the central tool of [teachers'] trade" (4) and likewise advocates for a more conscious use of language in literacy classrooms to facilitate the academic and personal development of students. He speaks to the careful use of language to reframe students' in-class efforts and accomplishments in ways that inspire agency, to create supportive classroom communities in which students can try on new learning identities and grow into "literate, caring, secure human beings" (97). He offers practical suggestions for doing so through subtle shifts in language, through which he says teachers "mediate children's activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life, and themselves" (4).

In telescoping out from the detailed discourse of deficiency to the larger narratives it informs, Adler-Kassner states that those stories of inadequacy "do not reflect what we know, as a field, about writers' abilities or about the best ways to help students develop their writing abilities" (4). In her book *The Activist WPA*, Adler-Kassner focuses on framing those stories in context of the increasing culture of educational accountability, addresses the issues exacerbated by that culture (with specific attention to the Spellings Report and NCLB), and makes a case for developing a more integrated vision for English education at all levels. She asserts that these narratives "have become the backbone for stories about education" that not only thwart students' ability and desire to engage in literacy learning, but ultimately "undermine the authority of teachers" (11).

This concept of narratives limiting the performed identities of the students they describe (as reflected in the works of Adler-Kassner, Martinez, Victor Villanueva, Rose, Williams, and numerous others in the fields of Composition and Reading Education) is parallelled in Educational Psychology. John Winslade and Gerald Monk say that "identities are not the sole property of the person to whom they are attached" (15), but are the aggregated sum of "the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell about us" (2). In *Narrative Counseling in Schools*, they expound on the ramifications of problematic narratives and the effects that stereotyping and negative story-telling can have on students' perceptions of themselves in the context of school. Additionally, they illustrate the power of positive narrative and how the opportunity for self-reflection and reframing can be life-changing, particularly for marginalized students. They speak to a human tendency to "live our lives according to the contours of a problem story laid out before us" (3), suggesting that labeling systems in literacy education perpetuate debilitating stereotypes and specify roles that are not "bases for competence or confidence" (56).

Impact of Institutionalizing Language and Literacy

The classification of students as deficient based on their literacy performance relies on a systemic acceptance of a "good" English and a "bad" English, with the former reflecting the school-based literacy described earlier in this chapter and the latter encompassing any deviation from that. Heath defines this "accepted fact" about literacy: "Every school child is supposed to learn to [read and] write in school… No one asks why every school child should learn to write according to the ways in which writing is taught in school" (25). In "Toward an Ethnohistory of Writing in American Education," she

provides a brief sociohistorical overview of the bisection of English into an approved "right" and stigmatized "wrong" way of use, and argues that this strictly segregated view of English is less about academic or linguistic propriety and more about the culture and character associated with language across its spectrum of use. She states that literacy education and the measurements employed therein are "associated with normative judgments about standards not intrinsic to the linguistic code, but to the individual creators of language" (35), suggesting that it is not the language itself, but the individuals and cultural groups employing the language that are judged to be either appropriate or problematic.

Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Martinez agree with Heath that the dichotomized approach to English "stems from ideas that stigmatize world languages… and that alienate too many students from language education" (xxi). In their book *Code Meshing as World English* (edited to include works by Condon, Jones, Love, et al. that also inform this thesis), they and their contributors advocate for equality in education through a blending of discourses and identities; a less ethnocentric definition of intelligence and academic preparedness; and a greater recognition of the language, knowledge, and skills that diverse students bring into the literacy classroom. While the literacy practices and linguistic behaviors of mainstream students (ie: white and middle-class, or students who were at least brought up with access to those codes) facilitate those students' success in school, the practices and behaviors of students of diverse backgrounds are often "viewed as substandard discursive products, as performances that do not follow traditional monolingual paradigms and educational goals" (xxvii) despite being legitimate examples of literacy.

Such traditional educational goals are a driving force in the development and persistence of the discourse of deficiency in literacy education. While the CCCC Committee on Language identifies that "one function of the English teacher is to activate the student's competence [with language], that is, increase the range of his habitual performance" (9), the range allowed for by current teaching standards is severely limited to school-based literacy. In its statement "Students' Right to Their Own Language," the committee says that while "the human use of language is not a simple phenomenon" (2), it is has been "taught as though there existed somewhere a single American 'standard English' which could be isolated, identified, and accurately defined" (3). It goes on to state that:

> This restrictive attitude toward usage is intensified by the way school grammar is presented as a series of directives in which word choice, syntax, surface features of grammar, and manuscript conventions are lumped together in guides of "correctness"... By appealing to what is labeled "proper," they encourage an elitist attitude. The main values they transmit are stasis, restriction, manners, status, and imitation. (14)

This simplification and standardization of English comes from a largely political necessity to count and categorize in a culture of increasing educational accountability, and its reliance on standardized testing to do so.

On the topic of standardized testing, the CCCC asserts that a single assessment "can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions" ("Writing Assessment" 432). Published twenty years after "Students' Right to Their Own Language," the CCCC Committee on Assessment's position statement upholds that not

only are "tests that purport to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' writing in a general sense" inappropriate, but that "when used to make statements about student learning, misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color" (433). Furthermore, it calls literacy assessments which alienate students from reading and writing "counterproductive," and those that "fail to take an accurate and valid measure of their writing even more so" (434). While the CCCC's "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement" is primarily focused on entry exams for postsecondary education, NCTE (of which CCCC is a constituent group) also released a policy brief which speaks to the impacts of standardized testing on student learning. It confirms that even two decades later "standardized tests have different effects on various populations of students, and usually lead to significant limits on learning among poor and minority students" (2); and are also "not always valid measures of their ability, and their opportunities to learn are diminished as a result" (3). In addition to recognizing the biased nature of standardized test as well as the side effects of narrowing curriculum and deprofessionalizing English teachers by reducing their authority and autonomy, the NCTE policy brief also notes the personal impact from the high-stakes assessment of a hamstrung version of English literacy:

> Student learning is also limited by testing's inflexible sorting of students into categories of proficient or not-proficient. It can be very difficult for students designated as not-proficient to imagine themselves as effective readers and writers. This test-generated binary is troubling because it gives no space to the full range of features that comprise effective reading and writing. (2)

The overall sense from literacy educators, English scholars, and their professional organizations is that high-stakes standardized testing of English literacy is, at its best, ineffective for data collection and inappropriate for informing curriculum and pedagogy. To expand on the impacts of such testing at its worst, Carter states that the potentially harmful and alienating practices "must be understood as… largely unethical in that they privilege particular contexts, identities, and knowledge while marginalizing others" (2). In her book *The Way Literacy Lives*, she speaks to American literacy education at both the secondary and post-secondary levels, and includes experience teaching at both levels in Texas, making her work specifically applicable in this project. She critically examines the numerous constraints placed on literacy education, advocates for students to engage in literacy as a social and political process, and passionately opposes the testing and accountability culture shaping English curriculum and pedagogy. She calls the binary view of standardized English and its mechanical assessment "a circular journey that defined literacy for us as singular, autonomous, and devoid of any context or purpose beyond separating the 'good' students from those who must be, ironically enough, 'left behind'" (4).

Unnecessary Obstacles Between English and Composition

While some students are left behind either in secondary education or in the transition to postsecondary based largely on their grasp of school-based literacy, those who do make the leap are often followed into English Composition classrooms by similar issues that limited their peers. Carter suggests that "the same conditions that hijacked student opportunities for learning in high school are placing… writers at an even greater disadvantage when they come to college" (10). While the labeling of writers at the

college level may seem gentler than in earlier phases of education, the approach to their remediation is much more sink-or-swim, though the standards to which they are held are much more vague and varied. David Bartholomae explains that students "must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (5). In his essay "Inventing the University," he describes the challenges students face in being expected to speak and write with the expertise of someone established in the academy, despite being very new to it. When the progress of struggling writers is "marked by their abilities to take on the role of privilege, by their abilities to establish authority" (20) as Bartholomae says, learning "becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery" (11).

Unfortunately, imitation is often the way students learn to succeed in primary and secondary education, where pedagogy is largely driven by standardized tests and curriculum is defined by what can be measured therein. This misfocus can only be corrected by "a strong bridge between high school and college writing," which Christine Farris says must "be built on teachers' and students' critical investigation of phenomena and ideas—not just on teaching to a mandated set of outcomes" (441). Her essay, "Inventing the University in High School," is one of four that comprise a CCC Special Symposium titled "Exploring the Continuum . . . between High School and College Writing." She goes on to state that "the failure [or refusal] of higher education to clarify the culture of ideas and arguments that it takes for granted is what hampers the preparation efforts in the secondary schools" (436).

Farris' panel peers, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein-Graff, agree that "the disconnections between [American high school and college] cultures undermines the ability of many students not just to go on to college, but to succeed once they get there" (409). In "An Immodest Proposal for Connecting High School and College," they suggest that the best way "to heal the divide between high school and college, and ease the often confusing transitions that students experience between the academic world's disconnected domains" (410) is to demystify college writing standards and expectations, and represent them with enough consistency, redundancy, and transparency that they might more strongly influence the assessment-driven standards that currently dictate (and thus limit) secondary reading and writing education. In his essay, ""The Nation Dreams of Teacher Proofing: Neglected Expertise and Needed Writing Research," Doug Hesse acknowledges the difficulty of challenging those established standards, as "the kind of evidence that many policymakers would accept trickles through pipette-thin theories of learning, literacy, and life in which the single variable is pedagogy and "real" findings are numbers" (418). His answer also lies in a bridging of sorts, as he stresses "the need for us to produce strategic research that bridges the high school and college years… that can be made meaningful to policymakers in a climate smitten and smirched by benchmarking [and] should inform writing teachers at both levels, too" (422).

Finally, in his contribution to the same symposium, "No Students Left Behind: Why Reports on the Literacy Crisis from the Spellings Commission, the ACT, and the ETS Just Don't Read America's Literacy Right," Baron identifies an important reason that standardized assessments do not actually tell us what we need to know to gauge the literacy of students. He explains that "in focusing our attention on tests, we ignore the

most basic nature of literacy: its dependence on context. Literacy is more than a skill that can be deployed in any circumstance and measured at will" (433). He goes on to state that the best way to ensure that students aren't left behind is to "focus as well on the needs and demands of a real, individual reader [and writer], not those of a supposed or idealized audience" (434), which I would argue includes hypothetical acceptance committees and imaginary potential employers. Remove the pressure and guesswork of high-stakes benchmarks and speculative college standards from literacy education, and start with what the student *can* do.

The existence of the CCC Special Symposium of which many of these essays are a part confirms the necessary connection, however strongly denied, between secondary literacy education and college composition. The latter has, for decades, been the initial stage of deficiency narratives, as recurrent reports fault "colleges for failing to teach students to read and write well enough to meet the demands of the twenty-first-century workforce," who in turn "blame high schools for not preparing graduates for college-level reading" (Baron 424). If we are to change course from pointing blame to pointing out solutions, College English as a field must take a note from Farris:

> Rather than forfeit responsibility, however, for what is becoming a matter of
> increased accountability, we need to take more of a role as a discipline in this
> alignment, sharing what we know in a professional collaboration with high
> schools. (441)

III. METHODOLOGY

The dominant view of literacy in the US is a quantitative one: it is viewed as something that can be standardized, measured, categorized, and counted. However, language is known by those in its field to be fluid, flexible, constantly growing and changing with the world in which it exists– all qualitative characteristics. Thus, I believe the *learning* of language to be a similarly qualitative topic. John Creswell defines qualitative research as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," which embodies "a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of the situation" (4). This makes the issues identified thus far regarding literacy education the utmost in social and human problems, some carrying profoundly individual implications tangled in cultural, social, historical, and economic complexities. As such, I embrace the qualitative approach of narrative Counterstory for the principal parts of this project.

Data Collection and Analysis

For much of the planning, research, and prewriting phases of this project, I intended to pull meaningful empirical data from pre-planned questionnaires, interviews, and round-table discussions with my students. I imagined the rich responses I would collect, to be coded and aligned neatly alongside a rhetorical analysis of educational legislation and reporting. However, my attempt at this formal research mirrored, in its own way, the standardized testing and procedures by which my participants were already so wearied, and they performed accordingly. I found very little of the data gathered from the pre-planned research to be as meaningful as my day-to-day conversations with these same students. Coding and organizing those interactions in a manner suitable to empirical

38

research was not only ineffective, but also proved to be a process of wedging their stories into atomized categories, which seemed like a severe disservice to the candor and vulnerability I asked of them in the process and counter to the very core of this project. With this realization, it became clear to me that a new approach and methodology was required.

Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi suggest that "much of what we want to know about language and literacy is embedded in observable everyday activities and transcribed conversations in the classroom or elsewhere" (75). As such, I turn to my own experiences as a graduate student of English composition and a high school English teacher, drawing on the many informal, spontaneous, often powerfully humbling interactions I have shared with my students for source material. From this, I derived the narratives which accompany the scholarly research outlined in Chapter II.

A Case for Narrative Counterstory

My rationale for adopting a narrative approach lies in the abundant pre-existing body of quantitative data surrounding literacy education, in the inadequacy of that data to describe the problems and suggest solutions for them, and in the ability of a narrative approach to do so in a meaningful and definitive way. While narrative methodologies have been historically discounted by some as insufficiently academic, many scholars from the fields of Education and Rhetoric and Composition argue that it is not only appropriate but necessary for engaging deeply with the realities of others, particularly those existing on any margin of society. This is supported by numerous scholars including Adler-Kasner, who observes that "as a field, composition and rhetoric seems to be turning its attention to thinking strategically about how to shape stories about students

and writing" (*Activist* 2), and Williams, who likewise states a decade later that "in literacy and writing studies research we turn to stories of reading and writing to understand how culture, history, institutions, and material conditions have shaped reading and writing" (37-38).

It is crucial to note here that *story* in this regard does not equate to *fiction*. In this context, the term story refers to a narrative arc that communicates some conception of truth, and that characterizes people, places, or events in a certain light. Be they derived from real-life events or not, stories "give order and meaning to our, and others', lives" (Nash 22), and in that way are inherently personal. Villanueva states that "the personal here does not negate the need for the academic; it complements, provides an essential element in the rhetorical triangle" (14). He goes on to suggest that a narrative approach constitutes a near-complete knowledge, even a vicarious understanding of realities other than our own. Counterstory is particularly relevant in that sense, in that it "allows voices from the margins to become central to relating underserved students' own experiences within the academy" (Martinez, "Alejandra Writes a Book" 56).

Whether or not it is acknowledged, American literacy education is ruled largely by stories already: majoritarian narratives of success and stereotypical stories of failure which have been historically shaped by empirical data and driven by social anxieties in response to cultural, political, and economic events. Rose says such cultural fears "of internal decay, of loss of order, of diminishment" are woven into our assessment and understanding "of literacy and scholastic achievement" (*Lives* 7). Robert Nash suggests that "we need contending truth narratives and perspectives to bump up against one another, so that our own narratives can be kept honest" (40). Thus, I choose to utilize a

narrative Counterstory methodology to confront the majoritarian narratives advanced by our deep history of deficiency discourse because it allows me to balance out and make more authentic and equitable the dominant literacy stories, to humanize the empirical data that governs our approach to literacy education, and turn the margins on which many students exist into "places of transformative resistance" (Solorzano and Yosso 37).

The Counterstory Process

In order to compose the three student-centered Counterstories found here, I pull from the many informal, spontaneous, often powerfully humbling interactions I have shared with my students. They are constructed from real conversations with real individuals, and I have taken pains to ensure that I remain as authentic to the real-life interactions as my memory allows as I recount the details therein. Each part of Chapter IV focuses on a single composite student: Hugo in Part I, and Sam in Part II. There is a loose one-to-one correspondence for them with two students to whom I was close, whose experiences in reading and writing education were particularly poignant, and whose physical attributes are lent to Hugo and Sam. David Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz suggest that "inquiry begins for us when something-- an event, gesture, story-- calls our attention to the puzzlements contained within it" (ix). For me, this line of inquiry began with early interactions with these two students. Their stories of limiting labels and restrictive stereotypes served as my catalyzing event, and epitomized the power of literacy education: how desirable the skills are, particularly for those who struggle to achieve them; how defining that struggle can be in a standardized world where one's worth is tied to those skills; and how enduring the stigma of illiteracy is even when the challenges are overcome. From there, I chose other students whose personalities, struggles, and

experiences complemented Hugo's and Sam's to weave into their foundational narratives. While my approach opens this work up to potential doubt or criticism with ample opportunity for sensationalizing or fabricating these experiences, Martinez clarifies that this composite approach differs from fictional storytelling in that the material for the discourse, setting, and characters is derived from statistical data, existing literatures, and professional or personal experiences for the purpose of "critically examining theoretical concepts and humanizing empirical data" ("A Plea" 37). Likewise, Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso suggest that by combining elements in this way, "one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone… the "composite" characters we develop are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction" (35). As each Counterstory is an amalgam of two, three, or four students, the composite narratives offer a representation of their often overlapping literacy experiences as students of diverse backgrounds.

In addition to Hugo and Sam, you have already met Asia– the student who helped me introduce this project in Chapter I. She equally represents two female students: one Latina and one Black, whose experiences with school-based literacies, approaches to learning, and life circumstances shared remarkable similarities despite them being very different individuals. Some of my experiences with them are also integrated into the two composite characters in Chapter IV. Unlike Asia, both of those composite characters are male students of color, as are the two on whom they are most strongly based. However, the students whose experiences came together to construct these narratives are more diverse. Hugo is comprised of three male and one female student of whom two are

Latino, one is Black, and one is biracial identifying primarily as white. Sam is comprised

of a male, a female, and a nonbinary student, of whom one is Black, one is white, and one

is biracial identifying as both. The students range in age from 15 to 20 years at the

various points of our interactions, as I worked with most of them for a number of years in

various capacities throughout their high school experiences. They represent a vast array

of home and family situations: some lived in multigenerational homes, with blended

families, with strong nuclear families, or some with just single parents. Most of them fell

somewhere in the lower-middle of the socioeconomic spectrum with guardians of at least

some high school education; at the ends of that spectrum were two who came from

college-educated households, and two who were living with guardians who were

unemployed and struggling with mental health and/or addiction issues.

I outline the demographics of these students not only to highlight their diversity,

but to bring into the conversation numerous aspects of their realities that serve as

potential points of marginalization for students. Counterstory has been most prominently

used as an interdisciplinary methodology in Critical Race Theory, focusing primarily on

exposing racist majoritarian narratives and aiming to emphasize the stories and voices of

people of color. However, Solorzano and Yosso state that "majoritarian stories are not just

stories of racial privilege, they are also stories of gender, class, and other forms of

privilege" (28), and that "it is crucial to focus on the intersections of oppression because

storytelling is racialized, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialized,

gendered, and classed communities" (31). Therefore, I bring to light not only forms of

racial suppression in these students' literacy experiences, but also of gender, class, and

other factors that seem to have influenced their literacy learning experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Acknowledgements

As part of my original research plan, the questionnaires, interviews, and round-table discussions described above were expressly voluntary on the students' parts and were approved by the Campus Director/Principal at the time. Having completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative course for Social and Behavioral Research Students, I performed this research in accordance with the ethical principles outlined therein and abided by the codes of ethics of the American Educational Research Association and of the Texas State Institutional Review Board. Students' participation had no impact on their academic assessment, nor did they receive any form of compensation. Many of the participants of this study were minors at the time of research, and all were from socially, racially, and/or economically marginalized groups; as such, numerous safeguards were employed to protect them, including but not limited to approval of the Texas State IRB, signed consent forms from students and their parent/guardians, and pseudonyms in all cases. While my research approach and methodology shifted significantly since the beginning of this project, I still have a personal and professional obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, desires, and privacy of the participants, I continue to implement all safeguards described above.

Additionally, I recognize the dilemma inherent in my chosen approach, as I, a white teacher, relate the stories of my marginalized students. Martinez warns that "marginalized students are the experts of their own experiences and should be the purveyors of their narratives" ("Alejandra Writes a Book" 56), and that composite characters "could mistakenly be read [or written] as overly-stereotyped depictions of certain ideologies and politics" ("A Plea" 39). I was hesitant to adopt the Counterstory

approach for these reasons; it is all too easy to slip into the white savior storyline in these scenarios, and I feel strongly in every aspect of life that all people-- and especially those who have been marginalized-- should have opportunities to be tellers of their own stories, and heros in their own lives. I take Martinez's admonitions to heart as I write, and do my best to avoid any caricatures of these individuals for whom I care so much, and to highlight the many ways in which they worked and fought for their own successes.

On the flip side, Williams suggests that "the people in our memories have their own stories, that can intersect and interact with our own. Our lives are linked to others' lives and the stories we construct from our memories are reminders of those relationships" (46). He also points to "the opportunity for all of us to learn from each other," advising that when teachers take students and their ideas and experiences seriously, "we might learn from the student" (184). That is precisely what this project represents: a fond reminder of the relationships and experiences I shared with those students, and of just some of the invaluable lessons I took from them. It is also why I present the narratives from my own first-person point of view, and not from theirs. I decline to purport any level of omniscience on their behalf, and present to you my experiences of their storytelling paired with the knowledge of their diverse backgrounds gleaned as their teacher, confidante, and mentor. My students play a major role in informing not only my research, but also my teaching practices and personal values. It is because of them-- the resilience, potential, and vibrancy that they exhibit daily regardless of, and sometimes in spite of, their marginalization-- that I am pursuing this line of research at all.

IV. FINDINGS

Part I: Composing Identity

One Friday in October, my English I class and I were working our way through a unit on rhetoric and propaganda, and reading Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The class period was nearly over but we were only halfway through my planned lesson, due largely to the persistent and jeering interruptions of two recent mid-semester transfers. They were friends from their previous school who had carried their smug entitlement and distracting antics over with them, and the other ten students around the circle of desks were visibly annoyed.

"Would y'all shut up? Some of us need to get through this."

The command came unexpectedly from a student on my left, Hugo. He was a quiet kid, older than his freshman-level peers, with a dejected demeanor. When his request only resulted in snide mocking from the two aspiring court jesters across the circle, Hugo looked to me and asked, "Can I just go?" His energy was frenetic and I could tell he was struggling to keep his cool, but I was desperate to reach a reasonable point in the lesson to hit pause. "Stick with me for just a few more minutes, Hugo, we'll get through this," I pleaded, understanding but firm. A few minutes passed before another interruption dragged the lesson to a halt and pushed Hugo to his boiling point. He snatched up his bag and silently walked out. I let him go.

This Freshman English class was not mandatory in our self-directed alternative high school program; it was an optional pull-out session intended for those students who needed either the structure or assistance to progress through the material in a timely manner. That classroom was a site of more than just learning to read and write; Mina Shaughnessy suggests literacy education requires things of both students and teachers

46

which other subjects can get away without--commitment, vulnerability, and learning not

through memorization but through intellectual grappling ("Diving In" 291). Indeed, I

watched some of my students confront topics and assignments that were challenging both

from a skill standpoint and a personal one. They learned to navigate new codes and social

practices, analyzed texts and made real-life connections, and developed competencies

that served them not just in other classes but in other areas of life. This isn't a

commentary on my teaching specifically, but on the nature of English classrooms,

reading and writing labs, and other sites of literacy learning across the nation.

The hyperregulation of literacy instruction might lead us to believe that the

purpose of such sites are to equip students with the standard of literacy that might make

them "more productive works, better citizens, better people" (Carter 34), with the focus

being on vocabulary, proper grammar, and inoffensive sentence structure. However,

Williams suggests that "identity and literacy are inextricable" (11), and John Rouse

agrees that "language learning is the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific

social identity" (1). While literacy is often treated as a basal skillset by the entities which

seek to simplify and make quantifiable and curable sense of it, learning to read and write

is not limited to those academic skills. Sociologist Brian Street asserts that:

> Literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that is always
>
> embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about
>
> knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves
>
> rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. (77)

Students are not simply learning to read and write effectively in these classrooms; they

are learning to think critically, organize thoughts and ideas, make connections, and

communicate with the world. They are learning that they, too, have a story, and where that story fits in the grand scheme of things– or that it doesn't. They are learning to listen and to be heard, and are deciding who to tell the world they are and how to do so. As literacy educators, the challenge of our job is to listen and respond, even when they do not use their words.

When the bell rang later on that Friday to signal the end of the school day, I was in my assistant principal's office confirming that the two boys whose presence so far had been such a detriment to their peers wouldn't be returning to my pull-out session for the immediate future. The students poured from their classrooms in a bustling cascade of backpacks, headphones, and hoodies. Among the bobbing heads was Hugo's. I stepped out of the office and tried to catch him on his way through the lobby, calling his name as I did. His pace quickened as he tried to brush me off, and it occurred to me that he thought he was in trouble for leaving my class earlier in the day. I walked with him, hustling to keep up until I was able to step in front of him momentarily.

"Hey, I just want to thank you for keeping your cool in class today. I know it was hard, it was hard for me too. But I wanted to let you know those guys lost their pull-out privilege for now, so class will run a little more smoothly next week and we'll make up for the lost time."

He stopped abruptly and looked down at me, dumbfounded.

"Oh. Thanks?"

"Anyway, have a good weekend! I'll see you on Monday."

I offered up a fist, and in what looked more like a confused response of muscle

memory than one of camaraderie, he brought his knuckles up to meet mine before

continuing out the double doors.

These gestures of on-level affability– an occasional high five, fist bump, or even

hug– were an absolute necessity for me and my coworkers to connect with our students,

who often came into our system with substantial emotional and historical baggage that

made it hard for them to trust educators and engage in our lessons. I taught at an

alternative school, where all of my students were considered *at-risk*, a sweeping label that

is currently applied to half of public school students in the U.S. (NCES). It is one of

many used to categorize students in labels stamped on their academic records and notes

amended to their report cards, inferring that a student is statistically less likely to achieve

academic success and transition gainfully into adulthood. Alongside terms like *remedial,*

basic, and *developmental,* they describe students who require either temporary or

ongoing interventions in order to be academically successful. Our school, being geared

toward those students, was one part of a "system charged with fixing 'deficient,'

'deviant,' or otherwise 'broken' students" (Carter 25).

At its root, the use of such clinically detached language to describe our nation's

youth has honest intentions: school districts employ labels of this nature to identify

struggling students to flag them for additional assistance or accommodations with the

hope of resolving learning deficits and closing achievement gaps. However, as Lisa

Delpit states, "even when individuals believe themselves to have good intentions, their

own biases blind them from seeing the real people before them" (74). While these labels

and the narratives they inform originated in education policy and assessment– in

administrative offices of educational analysis or committee hearings and reports, where they were likely meant to remain– they have become more commonplace, seeping into campus policies and procedures, and trickling into classroom interactions. Rose explains:

> This kind of thinking and talking is so common that we often fail to notice that it reveals a reductive, fundamentally behaviorist model of the development and use of written language, a problematic definition of writing, and an inaccurate assessment of student ability and need. ("Language" 341)

These designations often lead to hopeless assumptions about the students they describe, and the strong medical origins of this rhetoric construct metaphorical links "to disease and mental defectiveness" (Rose, *Lives* 209). Shaughnessy suggests that often, in alternative or remedial programs like ours, "medical metaphors dominate the pedagogy" describing courses "for young men and women who have many things wrong with them" ("Diving In" 291). While Shaughnessy's work is some of the more dated that I draw on here and her ideas have been variously challenged, her observations about education systems are relevant, and still resonate particularly strongly when looking at the experiences of students like mine.

While the fistbumps went a surprisingly long way in connecting with my students, it was really just a start. In working with marginalized students, we often talk about "meeting students where they are;" unfortunately this is generally applied to where they are *academically*, and not necessarily where they have been historically or where they are coming from on a given day. Williams explains that "too often students get treated as if they have suddenly just beamed into a classroom with no history that is relevant to the teacher. The students are either assumed to have, or lack, a certain level of knowledge

and skill, and the teacher just starts from there" (183). It is a disservice to all to ignore the "effects on literacy of many variables: pupil's' motivation to learn, their values and social lives, teachers' verbal abilities, teacher mobility, and changes in the American family" ("Literacy as a Way of Life" 8). There are innumerable factors that influence a student's academic and literary agency, their ability to focus or their interest in doing so, and their capacity for performing to a scholastic standard, few of which are really considered by bodies governing literacy education.

Despite honest efforts, I was unable to win over the two jokers from my Freshman English class that fall semester; one transferred to a boarding school by the holiday break, while the other, being left with no one with whom to collude, took to sulking in his homeroom. Hugo, on the other hand, was seemingly disarmed by our interaction after his abrupt departure from my class that afternoon. Shortly thereafter, he began dropping by my room on days when he had time to burn between school letting out and his shift starting at the carwash down the road. Sometimes he brought work to catch up on, sometimes he actively avoided that work and instead came seeking a breather. One afternoon he lamented to me about experiences at his previous school:

"Over there, I know most of the teachers thought I was ghetto, that I'm a bad kid. If there was trouble goin' on, everybody just assumed that I was involved, because of the way I look and the way I dress. It was like they couldn't imagine me being good at anything." I listened without response, as he became quietly reflective for a moment. "I just laughed it off when I was there. But I really don't think they thought I could be anything in life, nothing more than a drug dealer."

I thought quietly of Delpit's warning that teachers and administrators might come to "look at other people's children and see damaged and dangerous caricatures of the vulnerable and impressionable beings before them" (xiii), and I shook my head at this real-life example. It must have made him self-conscious, as he pivoted to lighten the mood of our conversation. "But *you*, Miss. You're real white, but you *get* me."

Hugo was a Latino student from a supportive but academically inexperienced and economically disadvantaged household. He was a big kid, at least 5'10" and husky; if I didn't know him, I suppose I might have found him intimidating as so many of his previous teachers apparently had. Despite my 5'2" frame, I didn't. Whether that was thanks to my time spent as a self-defense instructor or my ability to see the teenaged teddy bear inside of the alleged gangster in front of me, I'm not sure. What is certain is that Hugo's in-school persona had been largely shaped by the stories being told about him by his educators and administrators. Creswell describes how "meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (8). The quiet, dejected demeanor that accompanied him earlier in the year had been read as aloof and noncompliant in other more crowded and rushed classrooms. When those characteristics are accompanied by low scores and deficiency labels, that is what majoritarian narratives tell us to assume: that "those who do not succeed in school-sanctioned tasks of reading and writing are perceived as lacking either the innate abilities, or the personal fortitude, to be transformed" by literacy (Williams 3).

English classrooms are often sites ruled by such majoritarian narratives, in which too many students find themselves on the fringe. They are informed by "tropes that…

recur because they are the stories about reading and writing that get told time and time again by parents, teachers, and by popular culture representations of literary practices" (Williams 48). Teachers in traditional classrooms who are often overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of students, hurried by insufficient class periods, and pressured by rigid accountability standards, might not have time or personal resources to actually get to know students and help them unpack the baggage or rewrite the stories they bring with them. Instead, they must rely on majoritarian frames "that both reflect and perpetuate dominant culture values and interests rather than stimulating the development of alternative conceptions and values" (Adler-Kasner, *Activist* 12). When taken in the context of a century-long history of discourse, policy, and regulation surrounding literacy education, we know that these stories disfavor students of diverse backgrounds. Martinez explains:

> A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce. A standard majoritarian methodology relies on stock stereotypes that covertly and overtly link people of color, women of color, and poverty with "bad," while emphasizing that white, middle and/or upper class people embody all that is "good." ("A Plea" 51)

These underlying assumptions inform our academic standards, define "who and what successful– and unsuccessful– readers and writers do" in educational settings (Williams 48), and serve as the "mechanisms by which literacy education perpetuates inequities" (Carter 34). The majority of my students, including Hugo, did not look or behave like "successful" readers and writers by normative public school standards, which is at the root of how many of them ended up at an alternative school in the first place.

By the spring semester, Hugo had turned 18 and was nearing what should have been his graduation date under "normal" circumstances. However, he was still struggling through the second half of his freshman English class, even with my small-group guidance. His frustration with the material didn't add up to me; he kept up with our assignments and interacted in class but just scraped by on the tests, which made up the majority of his grades in our program. Williams points out that "very often we know little more than the fragments we can guess from their clothes, hairstyle, and occasional comments. But… their previous literacy experiences offer important insights into how confident or motivated they feel in a given rhetorical context" (183). So, although I didn't usually make him talk shop on his afternoon respites in my room, I decided to take advantage of his chatty mood one day to ask about his literary hangup.

"What is giving you the most grief about our English pullout? It seems like you get the material. I don't know how to help you struggle less on the tests or with the longer assignments."

"It's just like that for me, in English. I know I can't read or write. They've told me that my whole life," he insisted. "I took a test in Kindergarten, and it said I couldn't read. It was so bad, they made me go to school during the summers to try to catch up."

"You had to attend summer school as a Kindergartner?

"Yeah, since then."

"Hold up," I interjected. "You're telling me you've spent every summer of the last 11 years in summer school programs for reading remediation?"

Hugo nodded his head.

"Based on a test you took when you were, what, five? Six?"

His head bobbed more vigorously, and then he shrugged. "I'm just not cut out for school. I figured I would just drop out when I turned 17, until I found this place."

I was baffled. I had learned that Hugo not only enjoyed reading young adult fiction in his free time, but was also working through his fifth high school science class in our reading-based program at that point– one more class than is required or normal for most students, despite his coming to us significantly behind in all subjects

"You are obviously capable of reading, and at a reasonably high level," I argued. "Hugo, I can see your grades, you're acing your science tests. That takes the same kind of reading comprehension and analysis English does. The writing part will just take a little practice." He looked at me, stunned; no one had leveled with him like that before.

Delpit addresses this situation specifically: "The child who did not come to school already primed with what was to be presented would be labeled as needing "remedial" instruction from day one; indeed, this determination would be made before he or she was ever even taught" (30). This tells us that the experience is not unique to Hugo, but it is shared by students nationwide who fall outside of the dominant narratives of literacy, and disproportionately by those of diverse backgrounds. Winslade and Monk speak to a human tendency to "live our lives according to the contours of a problem story laid out before us" (3), but when that problem story relates to such a foundational aspect as literacy, things get complicated. Rose invokes Heath in his explanation:

"American school-based literacy was identified with 'character, intellect, morality, and good taste... literacy skills co-occurred with moral patriotic character." [Heath 35-36] To be literate is to be honorable and intelligent. Tag some group illiterate,

and you've gone beyond letters; you've judged their morals and their minds. (*Lives* 354)

For students who struggle to read and write in the ways that school wants them to, it would be hard to think of a skill more sought after, especially in their early years. Carter observes that "illiteracy is regularly promoted as a one-way ticket to a life of failure and dependency" (29), and no student, however young, wants that. Terms like *remedial, basic, developmental,* and *deficient* carry weight well beyond their school-based literacy definitions, and that weight is stigmatizing in unique ways: what other single story might infer that a young person is behind academically, lacking in character, and hopelessly unlikely to succeed in life? Labels like these are generally intended for administrative use – for adult eyes only; not to be read, heard, or understood by the students whom they seek to define. However, to think that students would not notice this rhetoric or could not comprehend it is to "seriously underestimate their ability to make sense of language… children make sense of language, and themselves in the context of it all" (Johnston, 77).

Students are quick to internalize the identities which the primary authority establishment in their lives - the school - gives them; as Rose describes, they "take on with a vengeance the identity implied" by their placement within the educational system (*Lives* 29). In this way, the problem story is no longer the student's skillset, but the students themselves. Literary deficiency stories "specify role[s] to be played in a very limiting story that is not a base for competence or confidence" (Winslade and Monk 56). Williams reminds us that feelings of competence and confidence, or the lack thereof, are defining aspects of how we approach literary challenges: "How we feel about a situation is integral to how we will respond. Whether it is confidence... or dismay, we feel things

about a situation before we think through them rationally" (17). Hugo had never logically equated the successful reading comprehension that he achieved in his science courses with his potential to pass an English class. In this way, the standardized reading assessment he took at age six determined his relationship to both his own literacy and school in general for over a decade.

That unexpected conversation in my classroom set Hugo in motion. He spent the following Spring semester flying through over two years' worth of English coursework, consistently scoring A's and B's. He then went on to pass the Texas Success Initiative, the College Board's community college readiness exam that I described as a "mini SAT" to my students. While his nerves got the best of him on his first try and it took him a second attempt to pass the writing portion of the test, he showed a level of resilience and agency that was notably absent in our earlier interactions. "If I don't pass this time, I'll just do it again until I get it right," he told me as we waited together for his results to populate my computer screen. This shift came late in his academic career; he had spent the prior 11 years believing that he was a remedial reader and hopeless writer, due primarily to the diagnostic assessment performed when he was in kindergarten. Nonetheless, his success on that exam qualified him to enroll in our dual credit program for his fifth and final year of high school. He would take US Government and English Composition I that fall.

Williams defines agency as "the ability to respond with confidence and skill" (3), and amends the definition later to include "the perception, drawn from experiences and dispositions, that the individual can, in a given context, act, make a decision, and make meaning." (9). In the context of school-based literacy, it speaks to a mental resilience and fortitude, a willingness keep trying and take risks, and the ability to recover and learn

from failure. While the negative discourses so commonly applied to students of diverse backgrounds limit the literary identities available to them and sap their means to advance and grow, positive experiences and moments of competence can become resources for agency in the future. Williams goes on to explain that "such narratives of agency often become self-fulfilling prophecies where confidence leads to perseverance and success, while doubt and anxiety lead to poor performance or even giving up" (50).

As literacy classrooms are often the sites of not just reading and writing lessons, but of critical thinking and social analysis, they are prime locations to work toward deconstructing majoritarian narratives, to recognize and validate individual and autonomous models of literacy, and explore real-life literacy contexts. These practices can empower students to work against oppressive systems and limiting dominant discourses (Carter 2). In this way, literacy classrooms offer students a unique context in which to "build and try on different identities… they decide not only on who they are in a given context, but also between agentive characters who are active and assume responsibility, and more passive characters who do not" (Johnston 23). Interactions in those sites of literacy learning can offer students options and nudge them toward competent, productive identities. Once they experience those feelings of adequacy and control, they can "come to think of themselves as competent in many ways… So, they act with confidence and enter with enthusiasm into interactions that recognize and foster their talents and abilities" (Winslade and Monk 56). Williams goes on to suggest that if we enable students to view literacy "as a learned, ongoing, social process, we offer them different ways of understanding their literate identities and encourage a stronger sense of agency" (53).

As I began to see with Hugo, students' perceptions of themselves and their literate abilities have a momentous impact on their capacity for progress. Rose says that students will "float to the mark [we] set" for them (*Lives* 26), which is just what he had been doing up to that point. When I offered a higher mark for him, it seemed to both boost his ability to rebound and sanction his higher achievement. Lerner says that this is a testament to the power of literacy instruction, and "that power can, of course, be turned toward the ways that writing can enable students to make meaning" of their own (29).

Midway through that fall semester, Hugo sat in the same chair across my desk in which he had lounged so often, but this time his mood was far more strained. "It's just *a lot*," he said as he removed his glasses and placed them gingerly on my desk. I could see his eyes beginning to glisten. "This time last year, I thought I'd be a dropout. Now I'm in college. Real college. It feels like I went from being a disappointment, to everyone being proud of me and expecting me to succeed. It's... a lot." He ducked his head and crammed the heels of his hands against his eyes, as if they could stop the floodgates he had opened. His black hair fell in thick ringlets around his shoulders as he sat hunched with his head in his hands, trying to pull himself together.

At 19 years old, Hugo was a senior in his fifth year of high school; the "bonus year" as we called it, since so many of our students required the extra time to catch up and complete the curricular requirements to graduate. While he struggled to juggle two dual-credit classes as part of his high school coursework, a part-time job, and his numerous familial obligations, it turned out that his biggest challenge was to negotiate his transition from statistical failure to burgeoning success. Deficiency narratives are so invasive and powerful that they "still have the capacity to embed emotional memories

that cue negative feelings, such as stress, anxiety, and insecurity" (Williams 24), even years later. So deeply embedded were the stories of failure and inadequacy that they continued to weigh on Hugo even after he had overcome substantial obstacles, rewritten parts of his literacy narrative, and achieved multiple successes along the way.

Williams reminds us that "transformation, if it happens, is rarely such a seamless process. Transformation is, instead, partial, recursive, and potentially disruptive to individual lives" (3). Hugo's academic world had changed significantly in just a year's time and it had opened unforeseen doors for his future, but the rest of his life - all the other contexts in which he was known - had remained. Michael Sadowski suggests that students– especially males– labeled at-risk seem "to struggle with reconciling this new high-achiever identity with the low expectations they had grown accustomed to," and must "find the personal resources to forge new identities for themselves" not only as learners, but as people (4). By freeing his reading and writing abilities from their previous narratives, his identity was made more complex - he was still someone who wore baggy hoodies and long hair and worked at the car wash with the same people. Now, he was *also* someone who could not only read and write, but was doing so at a collegiate level. Maneuvering through those contexts while continuing the momentum of his literary metamorphosis proved to be incredibly taxing for the teen.

Hugo's ongoing struggle speaks to the long-lasting effects that a discourse of deficiency can have on a person's literate identity (Williams 21). A year of success was not going to be enough to rewrite his 11 years of remediation, or that defining story of a kindergartner who took a test that proved couldn't read. Winslade and Monk explain that the biggest problem in "constructing an alternative story is the contrast between the

60

fragility of the moments of competence and denseness of the problem story. Problem stories grow over a considerable time and take on lives of their own" (44). The greater peril is that they also take the lives of those they define, reroute them, and limit them long after the story should have ended and a new chapter should have begun. It is for this reason that those of us with the power to name students and frame their literacy experiences must employ those names more mindfully, engage our students' past and future literate identities, and offer opportunities for meaningful competence and growth.

Part II: Revising Futures

Classes had been dismissed for the day, yet I still had a student standing awkwardly close to my desk, and he was not even one of my own. He held out a set of typed papers - 3 pages, single-spaced - as an offering.

"Miss Gary, you're an *English person*, right? I have an essay for you to read."

While it is not at all uncommon for me to be presented with pieces of writing for revisions or feedback, being as I am an *"English person,"* I teach Freshman English and manage our dual credit program for Seniors. This student, Sam, was in sophomore English. As such, I didn't know much about him, other than that he belonged to the homeroom class next door to me. The walls between our classrooms are thin enough that we can often hear the goings-on of the neighboring classrooms, which can be very handy in some cases. In my case, it meant that I had been made indirectly privy to Sam's occasional outbursts throughout the semester. He often sat at his desk wrapped up in a tightly-knotted human ball under his hoodie, but sometimes emerged in unexpected and unsettling eruptions of heated emotion. I had learned Sam's name through these instances of inadvertent eavesdropping when his yelling and profanities leaked into my room, and I

matched it to his face when, on the days of his angry disruptions, I would see him sitting in the school lobby: red-faced, tearstained, frustrated, and embarrassed, waiting for his dad to pick him up.

So on this afternoon, as Sam stood waiting for my reply, I thought, *oh, why me?* "Sure Sam, I'll read it," I said, naively assuming that an essay was for his English II class. "What assignment is it for?"

"It's not, I just wrote it last night," he answered.

I managed to catch him before he reached my door to leave and asked, "So Sam, do you want me to read this for revisions, or read it just *to read it*?"

He sneered, causing his freckles to make new patterns across his cheeks.

"Just… read it," he spat back before leaving.

My dual-credit seniors consistently have a hard time meeting the page requirements of their English Composition assignments; not only is length a challenge, but they struggle to take a stance and support it. Imagine my surprise when, upon reading Sam's essay, I realized I had a sophomoric time bomb reading and writing laps around my seniors, for fun. He began by attacking our curriculum - particularly the biology and social studies texts. We are in Texas, after all, where school textbooks are known more for their whitewashing and religious undertones than for their accuracy, and Sam's critique set fire to the inconsistencies therein with his heated four-letter words. Next, he shifted the focus of his tirade to the inequities of education at the state and national levels, referring many times to the power and glorification of the "old white dude." Finally, he broadened his scope even further to oppression in its many systemic forms and contexts.

The essay was replete with expletives. It was chaotic and lacked transitions, but it had promise. I could see I had on my hands one of Paulo Freire's radicals, "committed to human liberation… [un]afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled" (39). I had two choices: hand it back to him and falsely claim I hadn't had time to read it, or try to talk to him about it without setting off the landmines that I knew hid just beneath his surface. Sam wasn't a big kid, but his temper sure sounded big, and that scared me. But Williams tells us that "at a fundamental level, every person wants to be able to represent her or his ideas to others as clearly as possible, and have them listened and responded to in a respectful, thoughtful way" (189). I thought that, just maybe, Sam had been missing the latter to help him master his ability to do the former.

When my radical returned later that week, he asked, "Well, did you read my essay?" He was trying unsuccessfully to suppress a smug smile that told me he was prepared for this confrontation, and was looking forward to the chance to defend his right to free speech to yet another teacher. I took a deep breath and answered, "I did read it Sam, and I think you're a pretty good writer."

He didn't respond, but screwed his face again, causing another collision of freckles. I feigned confidence and continued: "I mean, your sentence structure is varied which keeps things interesting, your vocabulary is strong, and you're obviously very passionate about these topics. Right?"

"Well, yeah, I mean… yeah." He stumbled, unprepared for the direction of the conversation.

"Well, if you want my advice, I think your organization needs work. You jump around a lot, and that gets distracting to a reader. You're tackling some really big topics -

and they are certainly interrelated - but I bet you could write this much on just the school system, or just discrimination, right? I'd try to focus on one topic at a time in the future."

"Uh, yeah. Okay." He answered. He took the pages from my outstretched hand and shuffled out the door.

I might have more easily lied about having read it and brushed him off, not risking an altercation. Alternatively, this moment could have been an opportunity to assert intellectual dominance by marking every error in red and sending him on his way. However, I am a notoriously poor liar, and my primary goal in that unknowingly fateful interaction with Sam was to avoid a meltdown so editing his paper would not have served my aim, nor was it what he had asked me to read for. Despite being entirely unsure of how to handle Sam, I was so struck with him and his evident potential that I couldn't bring myself to offer him anything less than my honest feedback as an "English person." What resulted was a significant moment of learning and growth for both of us.

Research has shown that "the writing experiences students identify as 'meaningful' often involve a positive mentoring relationship. Such relationships typically involve a person who challenges the student to develop and improve" (Williams 184). Unfortunately such constructive responses to students and their work in school are not common practice. Rose confirms that "one rarely finds consideration of the social context of error, or of its cognitive-developmental meaning - that is, no interpretation of its significance in the growth of the writer" ("Language" 344-345). These interactions are time consuming and emotionally taxing, and they often demand more than educators have to offer in the current teaching climate. While large class sizes limit our ability to connect with students and administrative chores cut into teaching time (the NCTE reports

that "teachers lose between 60 to 110 hours of instructional time in a year because of testing and institutional tasks"), we are most hindered by the narrowing of literacy education to test-focused teaching standards. Such a reductive and error-focused approach sabotages the "process" we preach in writing instruction, and can snuff out any desire for students to learn it. In such conditions, Williams says that writing comes to be defined entirely by the final grade:

> The grade, whether it feels rewarding to the student or discouraging, is often the intense emotional experience that comes at the end of the process. Any potential pleasure or accomplishment that the student felt during the process of thinking about and writing the paper, may fade in comparison to the judgment that comes at the end of the process. (23)

This is particularly true if they come already bearing deficiency labels or do not reflect the dominant idea of a "good" reader or writer. Instead, those marginalized students are most often met with the red pen of doom, which hones in on each grammatical misstep while overlooking the potential for literary agency in the content. Shaughnessy explains that there is "much about the 'remedial' situation [that] encourages this obsession with error" (Carter 25): that the level of error suggests ineducability, that those students are desperate to check the boxes of standardized literacy so that they may move on from the disheartening experience, and that remedial programs often operate under budgetary and bureaucratic pressures. None of this reflects the nuanced reality of literacy learning, wherein Rose suggests we must "interpret errors rather than circle them, and to guide these students, gradually and with wisdom, to be more capable participants within the world of these conventions" ("Language" 358).

Like Hugo, one constructive interaction was all it took for Sam to decide that my room made a quality after-school respite. I allowed it because he didn't have any outbursts in there, and he would most often sequester himself off to a computer desk and type away. Occasionally he would be willing to talk, which was how I learned that he was biracial - something I had somehow failed to note despite his olive skin, prominent freckles, and tightly curled mop of dark auburn hair. I learned that he lived with his two older sisters in a single-parent household. This in itself told me a lot– when a father has gained full custody of three children, we can often safely infer that something potentially traumatic occurred to justify that. I also learned the unfortunate story of how he came to enroll at our school.

"I mean, that's probably pretty obvious," he said in a surprising moment of self-awareness. "But the last straw was with my English teacher last year. She didn't like what I wrote so she had me removed from her class." He paused, then continued: "Like, she called the security guard to remove me."

I was aghast. I've been called names and threatened, I've broken up fights, but calling security on a student just wasn't something that had ever occurred to me to do. "What on earth did you write?" I asked, before considering whether I really wanted to know the answer.

"Nothing *that* bad. I just didn't like what she was making us write in there, it felt pointless. So I told her that– and, yeah okay, I wasn't really *nice* about– but I wrote about things that actually mattered instead." He looked down at his phone. "My dad is here, I gotta go. But I just finished this essay, will you read it?" The printer behind me hummed

to life and spit out another three-pager as he signed out of the computer he had been using, packed his things, and left.

Rose suggests that "it would be hard to think of an ability more desired than the ability to write" ("Language" 342), yet we assume that the majority of students do not want to do the literary work that is asked of them. Many have been conditioned as Shaughnessy describes to regard school-based literacy practices with hesitance, fear, or even contempt, and come to English classrooms with years of deficiency baggage, "bringing negative and dispiriting emotional experiences with them" (Williams 17). Even students who cling to more hopeful and auspicious ideas of education and literacy are easily downtrodden by archaic reading requirements, simplistic assignments, and manufactured writing prompts whose sole purpose is the repetition and appraisal of a narrow set of skills. Delpit suggests that the "sense of being cheated can be so strong that the student may be completely turned off to the educational system" (32), which could easily translate into the near retaliatory essay production I had witnessed in Sam up to that point.

Instead of assuming the fault lies with the student's willingness or ability to participate in those school-based literacy practices, we might instead ask what is lacking from the practices themselves. Williams speculates that "the two biggest obstacles to students' internal motivations are the obsession with grades and students' lack of understanding the purpose of assignments" (185). Like Asia was, students of diverse backgrounds may be resistant to the specific assignments we dole out to them– those that reflect largely white, middle-class values and experiences– because they seem inconsequential to them and entirely removed from or ignorant of their experiences and

interests. However, that doesn't mean that they don't want to perform those skills in more meaningful contexts.

Sam's next essay centered around Russian legislation threatening free speech, and the band Pussy Riot's related imprisonment. I thought, at least he took our last conversation to heart and stayed with one topic. Mostly. Another day, another essay, another careful dodging of a potential landmine.

"It's good," I told him when he returned to collect my comments. I pulled the essay out from under the stack of papers that I should have been grading. "I can see you worked on your organization this time. To be honest, you are more savvy in current events than I am. I will say that I think your choice in language gets in the way of your message in some places."

He huffed a bit and jumped on the chance to argue, referring back to Pussy Riot and how they were in jail for speaking out for what they believed. "You are right. I'm just trying to say that most people would get to your first F-bomb and throw this essay away, which is a shame, because I think you have some really important things to say. It doesn't mean changing your message, it just means making it digestible by the people who you actually want to read it."

I handed it across the table to him and pretended to return to my grading, but watched him over my glasses while he read over his essay with a furrowed brow. It is rare to find a student that age who involves himself so heavily in current events and social justice, and with such fiery interest, and I wondered what on earth had propelled this kid to such a place of voice and action? I started piecing together everything I knew of Sam - things I had learned from our chats, tidbits I had overheard or picked up from

conversations with other teachers. It all fell into place for me: his anger and anxiety, his racial identity, family situation, and obvious intelligence. This kid was navigating a very complicated reality, through a complex identity, and he was dealing with his own challenges while trying to understand and engage with the goings-on in the world around him.

Patricia Bizzell says that "composition studies concentrates on students, not texts. We want to know who our students are" (442). Knowing, as Bizzell advocates, who our students are is essential to literacy education. It is a profoundly personal subject in numerous ways, one being that while we may be teaching the skills of reading comprehension or sentence structure, we are also informing, shaping, and often challenging the medium through which students make meaning for themselves and interact with the world outside of school. Chris Blankenship and Justin Jory describe language as *generative*: "it's a resource we can use to do things, make things, and be things in the world".

Knowing our students also means knowing where they come from. Williams reminds us that there are many factors shaping students' agency in school and the literate (or seemingly not-so-literate) identities they embrace: "from the social– history, material conditions, race, gender roles, semiotics, and relationships– to the internal– motivation, pleasure, narrative, and memory" (4). Literacy education places students and teachers in unique proximity to one another, which should allow for some of those factors to be discovered and considered in the process. Shaughnessy describes the close nature of writing instruction: "that teachers and students cannot easily escape one another's maladies" and are "drawn into closer range. They are obliged, like emissaries from

opposing camps, to send messages back and forth" (234-235). Literacy education is

singular in that it requires things of both students and teachers which other core subjects

can get away without - commitment, vulnerability, and learning not through

memorization but through personal and intellectual grappling.

This "one-to-one painstaking classwork" ("Literacy as a Way of Life" 9) goes

beyond the correction of errors on a page but seeks to understand the root of those errors,

and possibly reconsider whether they are really erroneous or not. Shaugnessy encourages

literacy educators "to stop to explore the contexts within which the conventions of

academic discourse have developed, and to view these conventions in patterns large

enough to encompass what students do know about language already" (236). With very

few exceptions, every student comes into an English classroom with *some* literacy;

whether that is obvious or recognized by academic teaching standards, or whether the

student recognizes their own literacies may be of question. Regardless, they arrive with

years of interacting with their social, familial, and academic worlds through language,

and it is our job to guide them in noticing and utilizing that experience as a valid

foundation on which to build.

This can turn the English classroom from a conflict site between teacher and

student into a contact zone where they work to unpack, incorporate, and build on their

existing individual literacies. Soliday advocates giving students "the opportunity to

explore the profound cultural force language exerts on their everyday lives… [and] to

evaluate their experiences from an interpretive perspective" (512). These interactions are

often messy, off-script, and unexpected; Williams clarifies that such moments need not

always consist of praise in order to build motivation and confidence alongside skill, "but

are sometimes honest, constructive advice combined with an explicit statement of belief that the student can do the work" (187).

The following year, Sam had learned to manage his emotions more effectively for class and picked up momentum on his school work. He continued to drop into my room on occasion, and I had begun to plant seeds of recruitment for dual credit classes once he reached senior status. In part due to the convenience of being in my room already, Sam joined an extracurricular book club that I was piloting that Fall. It was open to all grade levels, so I had to choose literature that was accessible to my less-experienced readers while keeping those like Sam engaged in deeper analysis. We landed on *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*; an apt choice, I thought, for a ragtag group of alternative-school students.

The book lent itself well to our needs, and I was thrilled as students at all levels connected in meaningful and insightful discussion after each chapter. As we wrapped up our third meeting, I reclaimed the conversation: "Okay folks, I want you to think about this as you move into Chapter Six: Why might it be a really big deal for Jacob, who happens to be Jewish, to travel back in time from Wales circa 2011 to Wales circa 1940?"

I could see wheels turning, but no one wanted to risk a wrong answer in front of the group. There were soft murmurs throughout. "War?" "World War… Two?" I nodded encouragingly, knowing they could make the connections if given the time.

However, patience was never Sam's forte. "Because of the fucking Nazis!" he exclaimed, waving his gangly, freckled arms in the air.

Nervous laughter spread through the group, and I had only a moment to choose a response to the unexpected expletive. Much like the impulse to scar his early essay with

red-inked corrections in order to assert intellectual dominance, the urge to address and correct, maybe even punish, the use of Sam's inappropriate language was instinctive. But this wasn't my English class, I quickly reasoned. It was a voluntary book club, and while I didn't want such language choices to become common-place, the book itself included some lesser curses so shutting down the genuine engagement it was garnering felt hypocritical.

"Bingo! World War Two, the Nazis," I said, affirming all the correct answers from around the circle and hurrying the conversation along. "Keep that context in the back of your mind as you go forward from here. I'll see you all next week!"

The students packed up and filed out, but Sam lagged behind. "Sorry, I guess I shouldn't have used *that language*, huh?" he said, a new sheepishness mostly replacing his usually smug demeanor. He was no longer looking for conflicts these days, but for connection. "I mean, I'm obviously not going to call security on you for it," I joked, winking at him. He rolled his eyes but smiled, so I continued, "And I'll agree that it's probably the most accurate way to refer to Nazis. Can we just try to keep it PG-13 in the future?" "Okay," he chuckled as he hoisted his backpack to his shoulder, and left.

I sat in my eerily quiet classroom, wondering if my reaction was the appropriate one, whether I had been too lenient to let the language slide and if this constituted a classroom management failure. As a public school teacher, I was trained in practices and policies that Brodkey says

> produce curricula that justify disciplining all the children, regardless of class, according to some widely received middle-class definition of learning and teaching (cognitive development, cultural literacy, critical thinking), and every

policy implicitly or explicitly also justifies punishing students, parents, teachers,

and administrators who challenge its exclusive authority by threatening them and

the children with expulsion from the middle class (tracking, ranking, flunking,

detention, suspension, expulsion). (134)

We might prefer to think of curriculum and conduct as two mutually exclusive aspects of

teaching, that teachers develop lesson plans and classroom management procedures apart

from each other. That simply isn't the case, especially in English classrooms where

literacy "has repeatedly been defined, taught, and evaluated in American schools as good

manners" (Brodkey 136), while perceived illiteracy "gets defined in very limited terms as

a narrow band of inadequate behavior" (Rose, Language 346) which likely leads to

punishment. As Rouse succinctly posits, "language training is always behavior training"

(3). Similar to the reductive and error-focused approach that narrows the depth of

understanding and mastery of writing, so governing how students *should*, or in some

cases *must* interact with literature diminishes the depth at which they engage in literacy

practices at all. It constitutes a "coercion into literacy" (Soliday 514), and by accepting

these limited terms Green says "we are complicit in devaluing and diminishing our

beliefs about what constitutes literacy and learning" (377). In obsessively mandating,

standardizing, and correcting the language that students use and how they use it, we are

taking part in a persistently outdated behaviorist approach that espouses school-based

literacy with moral decency, character integrity, and work ethic, as recognized by a white

middle class. Heath confirms that "during the last three decades of the nineteenth

century… the strong implication was that those who wrote and criticized well had more

intelligence, morality, and industry than did their fellow students" (35). Lerner argues that

the connection dates back farther: "[the] notion that composition instruction offers a humane educational experience goes back more than two thousand years, to the birth of rhetoric as an academic discipline" (27). The problem with this concept is that it is exclusively school-based literacy which counts as being fundamental to moral and cultural buoyancy, that which reflects largely white, middle-class values and standards of learning.

While I was certainly schooled in those values, neither I nor my students belonged to the American middle class. Additionally, as I had reasoned earlier, this wasn't my English I classroom. It was extra-curricular, and I had an established rapport of mutual respect with almost every student choosing to take part. I hadn't sponsored the book club with an intention of propriety; it was to give students a fun, low-stakes forum to freely practice reading and literary analysis. Street asserts that "engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset" (78), while Soliday implores us to recognize that "something as seemingly natural as learning to [read or] write in school is not a neutral event but is itself a meaningful social drama" (514). The social aspect of literacy learning was playing to our collective advantage as less experienced readers were joining into nuanced conversations with their more experienced peers, learning from their insight to look for subtle clues, and mirroring their excitement as we progressed through the story.

In speaking to the humane aspect of literacy education above, Lerner means it in the sense of cultivating in our students a sense of humanity. However, I think we must also ask ourselves, "Are we teaching them humanely?" Johnston says that "the way we interact with children and arrange for them to interact shows them what kinds of people we think they are and gives them opportunities to practice being those kinds of people"

(79). While that may be true across subject areas, those interactions especially "affect the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power" (Street 78). Language is a primary mechanism of power, and Rouse urges us to consider, through the meaningful act of mediating our students' literacy education, "what kind of person should we help bring into being?" (1)

It didn't take long for my seeds of encouragement to take root, and Sam's newfound motivation and self-moderation skills allowed him to plow through his junior level curriculum in record time. He represented another transformation, though less due to a boon in literacy and more so to a sense of connection, competence, and autonomy. Sam was eager to start dual credit classes, and the Texas Success Initiative readiness exam was the next hurdle to cross. While most of my students took advantage of the ability for the test to be broken into up to three sections, Sam wanted to take all three sections all at once, on an afternoon when his dad would need to work late. He settled into a computer carrel a few feet away from my desk as I logged in and set up the exam.

"You ready for this?" I asked lightheartedly, knowing that he was probably more prepared than almost any student I had tested up to that point.

He shrugged, more mellow than most readying to sit for a high-stakes exam. "As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

While Sam's struggles within the education system were numerous, passing tests was not one of them. His ability to sit for an extended period of time for lengthy tests had been limited until that year by his anxiety and anger, but he generally had the knowledge and mastery to score well. As such, he had been able to approach the TSI with a healthy

nonchalance– an advantage not shared by the majority of his peers at our school. For most, standardized high-stakes assessments are anxiety-inducing and alienating experiences.

Reading and writing assessments are not entirely or innately adverse in literacy education; the CCCC Committee on Assessment acknowledges that "assessments can be used for a variety of appropriate purposes, both inside the classroom and outside" (430). However, the Committee also warns that they can be abused as well, particularly when their "design, implementation, and the generation and dissemination of [their] results" do not align with their primary purpose (431). The National Council of Teachers of English adds that standardized tests become more detrimental when "used for high-stakes purposes such as determining which students will pass or graduate, which teachers are fired or given raises, and which schools are reorganized or given more funding" (1). Many assessments are designed by large organizations with multiple, unfortunately conflicting and consequential purposes in mind. The CCCC Committee advises that "there is no test which can be used in all environments for all purposes" (431); yet in Texas, the high-school end-of-course exams (currently the STAAR tests) are used not only to determine whether a student has mastered that course's subject matter (regardless of the grade earned in that class), but passing scores are also required to graduate high school. Additionally, the scores are used to assess the teachers of those classes, to grade schools on their overall performance (threatening the local institutions with a brand reflective of the deficiency rhetoric already discussed), and to inform state-level funding decisions.

Due to the high stakes placed upon their outcomes, standardized tests are often presented with a sense of deference and urgency that would put any student on edge. This reliance on them to measure so many factors "necessarily assumes that these exams also correctly incorporate and represent the critical intelligence that educators seek to develop" in their students (Adler-Kasner, *Activist* 70), a claim that has been repudiated by literacy educators and their organizations for some time. Not only are their purposes muddied and execution intimidating, but the CCCC Committee argues that such exams are simply not effective in gauging literacy:

> Any individual's 'ability' is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing - even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions - can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions. (432)

This is especially true for students of diverse backgrounds. The NCTE affirms that the effects of standardized tests on different populations of students vary, and that they consistently "lead to significant limits on learning among poor and minority students" (2), just as the CCCC Committee attests that "when used to make statements about student learning, [standardized tests] misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color" (433). At every level, these assessments privilege mainstream knowledge and skills– those most common and expected in middle-class, white populations– and disfavor students outside of those demographics, who have not been raised with those codes.

Sam's experiences in writing instruction had largely supported this theory. After a little over two hours of steady typing and mouse clicks, he pushed away from his desk and turned around to mine. "So, how long before I know if I passed?" he asked, stretching his freckled arms overhead.

I tabbed over to the testing window on my monitor where I could see two of his three scores. Math: 378/390; well within the passing range. Reading: 390/390; the TSI equivalent of 100%. His writing score was pending. "Well, normally it's instantaneous…" I began.

"You mean *you* don't grade it?" he interjected.

"Ha! No, I don't get to grade them. They're bot-scored. The system looks for specific things like transition words, certain levels of vocabulary, and tallies grammatical errors, and it spits out a score based on that."

He looked incredulous. "You gotta be fuc- *freaking* kidding me."

"Yeah, I know," I answered. "Anyway, writing scores are sometimes a little delayed if it's not a formulaic 3-paragraph essay, or if you got creative with your sentence structure. That's when the computer can't make sense of it and a human *does* have to grade it, but it never takes more than 24 hours." As he packed his things to leave, I added confidently: "Usually it's the better writers whose essays get flagged for this, so I wouldn't sweat it."

It can be hard to fathom that an exam which carries so much weight in determining the trajectory of a student's academic life relies entirely on algorithms to grade their hard-wrought and often nerve-wracking essays. Equally puzzling, if not a bit embarrassing, is the fact that such a complex and personal practice as literacy, especially

writing, has been reduced to basal skills that are mechanically measurable. Adler-Kassner warns that the skills required on such exams represent a very narrow range of skills, that they "would encourage formulaic writing used only in testing situations... and that it might lead to a narrowing of writing instruction" (*Activist* 76). The NCTE makes clear their stance on machine-scored tests, particularly for use in writing assessments: "Machine scoring systems can diminish student learning because they tend to prioritize features like mechanical correctness and sentence or word length rather than more substantive dimensions of writing" (2). This stance is supported by the CCCC Committee, which states that "what is easiest to measure - often by means of a multiple choice test - may correspond least to good writing, and that in part is an important point: choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing" (432).

This reliance is in part due to the increasing accountability requirements placed on schools. Rose aptly acknowledges the logistical rationale for such simplification:

> A reduction of complexity has great appeal in institutional decision making, especially in difficult times: a scientific-atomistic approach to language, with its arrendant tallies and charts, nicely fits an economic/political decision-making model. When in doubt or when scared or when pressed, count. ("Language" 346)

However efficient this approach to literacy assessment may seem (and it must to a great many people, just not those of us teaching reading and writing), it legitimizes Adler-Kassner's cautionary concern above regarding the narrowing of literacy education. She further explains that most reading and writing teachers "recognize that these tests are highly flawed and do not in fact represent what they would like to teach or have their students learn" (70). According to the NCTE, the growing focus on skills measured on

high-stakes standardized tests takes away from time they might spend on more productive activities and interactions, requiring teachers to "spend more time on reading rather than writing, usually focusing on comprehension, not higher-order critical reading skills" (2). This has resulted in an approach described by Dudley-Marling as "circumscribed, teach-to-the-test, skills-obsessed" literacy instruction (5), and made reading and writing teachers into "mechanic[s] of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay" (Shaughnessy, "Diving In" 236).

To support this uber-standardization, the focus of both teaching and assessment has turned to error: what skills are performed incorrectly, rather than what appropriate rhetorical choices have been made. The CCCC Committee warns that "the outcome of such assessments is negative: students are said to demonstrate what they do 'wrong' with language rather than what they do well" (433). Error is quantifiable in ways that fit neatly into spreadsheets and equations, but it does not reflect the reality of literacy learning, nor does it serve to aid or encourage students in their literacy practices. Despite my distaste for assessments like the TSI, I recognize they are a part of our current model of education and a necessary part of my students' journeys. Thus, I was more eager than Sam to get his score back, and knowing that it had been flagged for hand-grading only heightened my interest. What I had told Sam was true - it was most often the work of the better writers that got passed on for grading by a human; what I didn't mention was that it was an extreme rarity in my proctoring experience.

The writing scores were two-part: like the reading, a score of 390 was achievable from a multiple choice section that asks students to correct erroneous writing, and Sam had aced that. The other section is the written essay, scored on a scale of one to eight.

When I arrived at school the next morning, the first thing I did was log into the testing system. As an administrator, I could not only view scores but also the written essays themselves. Though the College Board discourages doing so as a means of keeping the prompts secret, my curiosity won out. I pulled both reports simultaneously, and laughed out loud as his score populated. Writing: 390/8. A perfect score.

The prompt, now long-retired, asked whether it was more important to have a job that made money, or one that was fulfilling. True to form, Sam had maxxed out the 600-word limit, and had taken a political route to his answer. He wrote about how American capitalism required people to value income over meaning, and argued that jobs considered to be meaningful callings were systemically undervalued. Then he took a turn I couldn't have foreseen: he used teaching as an example. He pointed to the behavior of students as a lack of respect for teaching as a profession, the low pay for which it is known, and the poor treatment of teachers by "the system." He closed his essay by stating that he intended to pursue a career for himself that was fulfilling, and would make a difference: an English teacher.

I pushed my chair back and choked out a sob of disbelief, not for his score but for his response itself, although in retrospect it was also surprising that a perfect score would be awarded to an essay that still included an expletive. I printed two copies of his score report, filed one for his dual credit eligibility, and carried the other down the hall to his homeroom class, where Sam was standing next to his teacher's desk. I handed him his copy and threw my arms around his shoulders, pinning his elbows to his sides, squealing: "Congratulations, I'm so proud of you! You're down to one F-bomb per page!"

I was fairly new in my teaching career, and couldn't think of a better way to tell this kid, without embarrassing him or risking my own professionalism, that he represented so much more than an improved writer. Sam had challenged me in ways I couldn't have expected, and taught me more about teaching and about meeting students where they are than I had learned in all my teaching preparation courses. I had the honor of watching him find connection, meaning, expression, freedom, and self-control, largely, I thought, through writing. He taught me that literacy could be so much more than reading and writing instruction; it could be an opportunity to foster the growth of character and the empowerment and liberation of a radical spirit who might, one day, change the world.

Part III: Language Barriers

I entered directly into the University of Texas immediately after high school– eight days after I graduated, to be exact– through a provisional admission program. The labels at the college level are more euphemistic than those found in primary or secondary education. While students might be directly called "remedial" or "deficient" at the lower levels, less straightforward are the designations suggesting college writers are "basic," "developmental," or in my case, "provisional." This sugarcoating serves "to protect the integrity of that [university] brand from the uncomfortable reality of student performance," as the idea of the enrollment of truly remedial students is attractive to neither potential students nor donors (Lerner 14). I told anyone who asked that I was just so eager to get out of my small and often backward-feeling hometown and on to college, where I was sure I would belong, that I couldn't wait until August to start. The reality

was that I wasn't quite good enough to be admitted directly to the fall cohort; I was to take three classes that summer of which Freshman Composition was one, and if I performed well enough, I would be allowed to stay.

"That's the class you were supposed to be good at!" my parents disparaged upon receiving my transcript from that summer semester. The grade report read: Art History, A; Precalculus, B; English Composition, C. My parents were right– English had always been my strong suit, and like Brodkey, throughout my elementary and secondary schooling I had been allowed to "trade my words for grades… in what might be seen as the academic equivalent of dealing futures" (529). I had rarely completed daily homework assignments and was plagued with a debilitating shyness that limited my abilities to do things like perform class presentations; instead I got by on projects, tests, and essays, a pattern which would explain my class ranking in the 80th percentile despite having the second highest SAT score in the class. I was labeled "gifted" in elementary school, and had been reminded regularly of what a good writer I was and how capable I would be of success at the next academic level. By the time I reached high school it was generally assumed that I would go on to pursue a college education.

Yet, there I was: lacking the scholastic skill to be accepted forthright, verging on deficient according to my grades, and most clearly so in writing. My challenges were two-fold: first, I was the first in my family to pursue a bachelor's degree. The transition from being a big fish in a small-town pond to freshman at a prestigious state university proved arduous and my family, having not shared the experience themselves, was fairly lost in how to support me. This was new to all of us. Second: I had been told I could write with coherence, employ an impressive vocabulary, and manage the mechanics of

school-based language with near perfection; however, I was completely new to the kind of argument and inquiry that was being required of me at the college level. I was unwittingly a product of a public school system in which students "strain to memorize what they read but never to doubt it," (Shaughnessy 237). Both NCTE and CCCC speak to the potential harm of assessment-driven pedagogy, each stating that it requires teachers to focus on error avoidance rather than higher order critical thinking or rhetorical inquiry. It produces a system in which "form and correctness… often receive more attention than students' engagement with ideas" (Farris 438). I had learned to answer questions well but not to ask them, and I wasn't aware that the rules had changed.

Farris suggests that "access for teachers and students to the rhetorical moves characteristic of academic disciplines, while desirable, is not a simple matter;" she goes on to explain that student work which steps beyond the basic, obvious, or formulaic into deeper intellectual questions and ideas must come from guided participation in "a certain kind of inquiry" (437). That level of thought and inquiry is rarely available to students or teachers at the secondary level as it is neither clearly measurable nor counted nor easily counted– attributes that are necessary for policymakers who "seek remedies for deficiencies in America's literacy that are both testable and quantifiable" (Baron 425). The reliance on standardized assessment for gauging both progress and college readiness "necessarily assumes that these exams also correctly incorporate and represent the critical intelligence that educators seek to develop in high school and college," an assumption which Adler-Kassner calls "enormously complicated" as it is widely conceded by educators that the standards and skills prioritized by such tests do not encompass what

they would like to teach, nor what their students need to learn for future academic success (*Activist* 70).

While I felt at the time incredibly misled by my high school counselors who had assured me I was college material and let down by my English teachers who had clearly not taught me what I needed to be so, I now understand that educators find themselves hamstrung by those accountability requirements with little time or resources left to devote to fostering profound critical thought. NCTE reports that "teachers lose between 60 to 110 hours of instructional time in a year because of testing and the institutional tasks that surround it" (1), a statistic to which I can now attest as a teacher and counselor myself. I had plunged into academia from a system in which "our best and brightest students learn to take tests instead of learning to think" (Baron 428), and I was caught unprepared. This was no longer just about how I wrote, it was also about how I thought, and I was not doing either one well enough to succeed.

The papers from Freshman Composition were returned to me with little guidance on what I was actually doing wrong so I was at a loss as to how to make it right. Bartholomae explains that courses for basic, developmental, or otherwise remedial writers "have failed to involve [their] students in scholarly projects, projects that would allow them to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise" (11), and instead engage them in activities that measure what they do wrong so that it may be remedied. Our instructor that summer was a Master's student, and knowing that she was teaching a section of provisional ENG 309, she approached it like the weed-out class that it was probably intended by the university to be. The course unfortunately lacked the interpersonal back-and-forth that Shaughnessy describes as necessary in writing courses

(234); it was less about us learning to compose, and more about seeing who of us could do so at an acceptable level and who would be released at the end of that provisional summer. Among the pitiful grades handed back to me from that class was one A; it was the final paper, and the one that brought my grade up to passing and thus kept me enrolled. I clung to that paper for dear life over the next few years as proof that, yes, I *could* think and I *could* write. That paper was a hybrid personal essay and research paper on Synesthesia– a neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sense triggers another– and it incorporated my experiences as a synesthete with scholarly investigation. It served as my reminder to keep writing, even though I had no idea when or how I would have the opportunity to do that kind of work again, as every class seemed to require varied but still strictly academic writing standards in which personal narrative was not included.

Adler-Kassner explains the variance in standards, saying that "definitions of 'good writing' are context dependent. What is seen as 'good writing' in one context might not be seen as such in another" (*Activist* 13). However, this flexibility becomes problematic when standards shift not only between disciplines, but from one instructor to another, and the expectations remain vague or uncommunicated. While I had only passed that entry-level Composition course by the skin of my teeth, my writing had earned an A for the Art History class in which grades were also almost entirely based on weekly essays. Graff and Birkenstein-Graff speak to the lack of transparency students face as they move through academic stages regarding the ever-changing expectations of what and how they need to write. They argue that those rhetorical expectations and argumentative conventions "have neither been clearly articulated for students nor consistently reinforced

throughout the high school and college curriculum… [and] it is precisely these conventions that are crucial to academic success but that remain hidden for most students beneath the curriculum's disconnected messages" (415).

The disconnect stems from a concern that the distilling of expectations of college-level writing to be shared with lower levels might somehow discount the knowledge and achievements therein. Farris states that "the failure of higher education to clarify the culture of ideas and arguments that it takes for granted is what hampers the preparation efforts in the secondary schools" (436); yet the desire to maintain the hard boundary between the triviality of *school* and the prestige of *academe* remains. Academic senates "worry that the boundaries between high school and college are eroding" (Rose, "Language" 342) and remain bent on "protecting the academy… from the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong in the community of learners" (Shaughnessy 234). Outsiders like me, who despite every effort and assurance, and regardless of being provisionally accepted, did not arrive with the unspoken and undefined "habits of mind needed for success" (Rouse 5).

My freshman experience was further complicated by my course placement. In a move that seemed advantageous (and necessary for financial reasons), but proved short-sighted, I had entered university with an inordinate number of college credit hours through a hodge-podge of Advanced Placement, Dual Credit, and CLEP. There persists the unspoken but universally understood expectation that in the first year or two of college, students "must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes - to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and an experimental psychologist the next" (Bartholomae 4); essentially developing both a communicative flexibility and a cultured

confidence that aids them in surviving the upper-level coursework to come. Rouse acknowledges "the value of such learning in a highly differentiated, success-oriented culture;" (5) however, the 39 hours I transferred in along with the nine I earned that first summer meant I was spending my freshman year wading through sophomore- and junior-level classes instead of joining my peers in introductory sections. Despite what my transcript suggested, the university experience was still brand new to me.

Bartholomae suggests that students, "in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders' - that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak" (10); and acknowledges the problems innate in this expectation as "speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (5). I had come to the university to learn from instructors far more educated than I was, but was expected to already speak and write with the expertise of someone established in every field of study in which I was enrolled. Rouse suggests that such a "move to an elaborated code is a move toward identity as an organizing concept within experience" (8), but my experience and identity as a college student had not been one of confidence at that point. Even as someone who had been raised with some understanding of the cultural codes of power and knowledge, I found it impossible "to take on the role - the voice, the person - of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research" (Bartholomae 6), while maintaining the vulnerability and openness required to actually learn.

Bartholomae suggests that students must either "learn to speak our language… or to carry off the bluff" (5). Having been conditioned that first summer, as Shaughnessy describes, to the idea that there was something wrong with the way I both thought and

wrote (235), and knowing that my financial resources were limited to only the absolutely

necessary remaining coursework, I was willing to risk little. So, I chose the latter. I kept

my head down, studied each syllabus to understand exactly what I would need to pass

according to each instructor's expectations, and mimicked their styles and standards to

the best of my ability. This strategy got me through years of essays, and in two languages,

no less. As a chameleon of composition, I never quite felt like I belonged in any of the

college classrooms I frequented, but I did manage to earn a bachelor's degree in Spanish

and eventually added a degree in English. It wasn't until my very last English course, a

class called "Gender, Sexuality, and Migration in Literature," that I had an opportunity to

employ the one style of writing that had felt genuine to me– that personal essay blending

ethnography, narrative, and research that allowed me to personalize the work of

established scholars with my own experience. It contributed to the last A of my

undergraduate career, and became the primary writing sample for my graduate school

applications.

I would hardly qualify myself as a student of diverse background. While I came

from a low-income family and worked my way through high school and college, I am a

white, native English speaker who was raised with some sense of the mainstream codes

of power that I would need to navigate the professional world. Though my family was

largely inexperienced in higher education (my mother earned an Associates in Nursing

when I was nearing junior high), they valued education and I grew up with the

expectation that I would pursue a college degree. I was labeled a *gifted* reader and writer

from an early age. If the transition between high school and college was this much of a

struggle for a student like me, I wonder how we can expect students like those I teach–

students of truly diverse backgrounds; whose diverse abilities to read, write, and think has been underrated by a mainstream system; and whose capacity and opportunity for learning has been limited by stories of deficiency– to even imagine the possibility of success within higher education for themselves.

V. CONCLUSION

Ten years after that first provisional summer I enrolled in a master's program at Texas State University. Near the end of my first year as a graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition, I decided to submit my work to the CCCC as part of a panel of my peers on the marginalization of students within writing education. The call for program proposals was produced by Adler-Kassner who served as that year's chair, and spoke directly about "the rapid growth of the accountability movement in K-12 and, increasingly, postsecondary education," and how the related budget cuts, testing measures, and increased class sizes at the lower levels have impacted the "changing higher education landscape" ("Writing Strategies for Action"). I had just begun work for this thesis and was largely focused on the gap between secondary and post-secondary literacy education, and how the language we employ at both sites currently works to maintain that chasm and dissuade already marginalized students. It seemed to me and the rest of my panel like a solid fit alongside their work. The professor overseeing our collective submission, who I had met in passing but from whom I had not taken a class, disagreed wholeheartedly. His email response regarding my work read as follows:

> The fourth speaker is way off and will need major re/vision. Whoever that person is has taken an approach which doesn't, even remotely, center itself on college level students or issues... The CCCC is not about k-12 and never has been; maybe someone forgot to tell her that. I encourage this person to get into a context which operates at the college level, something which is utterly lacking thus far. I of course smell a rat here. Someone's been feeding this person bad dope. I hope this

person can find a way to rehabilitate herself and understand that she's barking up the wrong tree.

I was immediately slung back to that provisional summer ten years before, to my first real taste of being on the outskirts of academia. Here was confirmation in print of what my struggles had been telling me for a decade: despite being legitimately accepted this time, I still didn't belong. I was not operating at the college level; I was a rat, fraudulent, utterly lacking. I was barking up the wrong tree, and needed to be *rehabilitated*. His language, crude and unhelpful, also reflected what Rose calls the medical-remedial paradigm of literacy education in which we "talk of writers as suffering from specifiable, locatable defects, deficits, and handicaps that can be localized, circumscribed, and remedied," and which "carr[ies] with it as it does the etymological wisps and traces of disease, serves to exclude from the academic community those who are so labeled" ("Language" 352). It provided no constructive guidance on how I might reframe my work to be more applicable to the prompt, and instead suggested that my very act of submission was somehow deceitful. The problem again seemed to be less about how I was writing, and more about how I was thinking.

Confused and disheartened, I promptly pulled my abstract from the panel's submission, but continued my work on the project for the sake of this thesis. I struggled to situate my arguments about literacy appropriately, to make them *matter* to the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Along the way, I realized the professor's response epitomized my biggest obstacle. "The CCCC is not about k-12 and never has been," he had said, apparently ignorant to the fact that his students were learning to read, write, and think *somewhere* before they arrived in his classes. The CCCC *is* focused on college

composition, but to pretend that composition begins when a student enters college, and that it doesn't rest on the foundation of literacy they have been building for years prior, is to fail in Bizzell's call "to regard even the most struggling undergraduate writers as agents, operating among intersecting and competing discourse communities" (442).

Dudley-Marling suggests that "when we view literacy as a social practice, it becomes clear that people do not learn to read [or write] 'once and for all' as much as they learn to read particular texts in particular ways appropriate to the social and cultural context" (3). Literacy is a lifelong practice, and it would behoove us all to not only accept it as such, but to circulate that idea outside of the fields of education. While literacy is primarily thought of as the responsibility of primary and secondary schools, much of the current and historical deficiency rhetoric from government, industry, and business is aimed at colleges and universities and trickles down from there. Those narratives– to which colleges and universities are contributing– shape the policies which dictate primary and secondary literacy education, where students are being "prepared" for postsecondary education. This is why this project– the stories about my high school writers and their literacy experiences– is applicable to our field. Despite the tendency and desire for post-secondary English to maintain their distance and superiority to the lower levels of literacy education, it must be acknowledged that this is, in fact, their fight too. If colleges and universities wish to welcome increasingly larger and more diverse cohorts, who are also prepared to engage in advanced critical inquiry and to write with both mechanical *and* intellectual rigor, they must work with those individuals and institutions who are doing the dirty but necessary preparatory work. By doing as Rose suggests to fully "embrace the teaching of writing" ("Language" 359): by engaging with and on

behalf of earlier educators to champion literacy's relationship with argument and inquiry and insist on its importance not just as a basal skill but as a craft, we might begin to shift the story of reading and writing education at all levels from one of quantitative deficiency to one of incommensurable possibility.

It remains as abundantly clear to many of us learning and teaching now as it was to Heath, Rose, and Bartholomae in the 1970s and 80s; and to Graff, Jones, Hesse, and Farris in the early 2000s; that the academy at large, and more specifically college English instructors, have two options. They may continue to lament the literate and intellectual abilities of college students, punt the blame for their issues to beleaguered public school teachers, and remain safely removed from the dirty but necessary job of literacy education. Alternatively, they can join the cause. They can, as Green suggests, "take an active role in framing the terms" of what literacy is (369), how it is measured, and of its value in education and society at large.

Implications

The stories explored in this project, though built of composite people and experiences, are real in that the dialogue, the interactions, and the core events happened. I hope this gives them credence to make valid points about the literacy-learning experiences of students of diverse backgrounds from which we as individuals, as fields of education, and as a society, can learn. In retrospect, this project and its stories represents just that: the micro moments in which I learned the most from my students about teaching reading and writing. It reminds us as educators to be open to understanding how students experience the various aspects of their education, and to shifting our approach when those experiences do not align with what we know about effective learning. Adler-Kassner says

that the larger stories told *about* these students, their experiences, and their abilities are rarely accurate, despite coming from the system in which we work: literacy educators "are always part of larger bureaucracies... underscored by long-entrenched assumptions and approaches that form the conceptual underpinnings of school and forms the roots of every decision from how a schedule is made to what subjects are taught to what counts as learning" (37). Our systems rely on demographic data and standardized test scores allow us to see patterns and correlations, but can't truly identify causes of students' struggles and are inadequate for describing the complex realities in which students of diverse backgrounds live and learn. They also rely on a rhetoric of deficiency, focusing on what students cannot do from a mainstream perspective instead of what divergent strengths and abilities they do bring with them, and perpetuates negative designations of these students at disproportionately high rates. These labels and the assessments from which they are borne pay little heed to content or context, and do not actually reflect students' ability to learn or their potential for growth. This language has built a narrow and careless discourse used to talk about literacy education, its students, and its instructors; and Rose implores us to call out this reductive language model and shift the story. He likewise says that "we must also rigorously examine our *own* teaching and see what model of language lies beneath it," and ask ourselves "what linguistic assumptions are cued" when we face students who fall outside of the mainstream idea of literacy achievement? ("Language" 357)

This project opens the door for other, more nuanced conversations about literacy education beyond what is directly addressed here, such as class and school sizes which have grown considerably over the last several decades. Do smaller, more intimate

environments result in greater connection and deeper learning? It is most often the moments in one-on-one or small group settings that my students experience the most growth. What about the value of learning opportunities that are academic but explicitly not geared toward evaluation– where students can learn and practice skills in low-risk situations, maybe even for fun? The stories herein would likewise point to the benefits of such programming. Speaking of evaluation– how might students and teachers benefit from a shift away from a grade-centric, stratified system, and towar a focus on individual progress? These narratives raise questions and suggest implications about these and other related topics that are well worth deeper exploration.

Additionally, there is a long history of deficiency rhetoric in academia and education policy that, when analyzed alongside a national timeline from independence and reconstruction onward, suggests factors contributing to the development of a false linguistic hierarchy and reveals clear patterns of an ongoing literacy "crisis" shaped by cultural, political, and economic events. This history feeds into the current discourse and is greater than could be included in this work. There is also a world of valuable scholarly work from the field of Reading Education on which I have only lightly drawn. Although it is important and much of it would align with this project, deepen the impact of the points I have worked to make, and fit lock-step with the research pulled from English Composition, I simply couldn't fit it all into these ninety pages. That field works to make the best of the accountability measures by which it is largely governed, and as I have incorporated some of that coursework into my graduate studies, I understand that those measures– the testing, the data, and even the labels derived from it– are not inherently nefarious but come from a desire to improve. The issue is not with assessment itself, but

with what it purports to prove and how, and with the high-stakes uses of those flawed outcomes.

I realize that in writing this for those existing in the fields of reading and writing education, I am preaching to a proverbial choir. While the stories shared here are meaningful in their own right and might be easily recognized as such by those audiences, they are at best anecdotal to others who require hard data to make meaning. Hesse has a strong point in suggesting that we've bungled our responses to external factors governing literacy education, that "our responses to calls for evidence have been stubbornly critical, at best theoretical rather than empirical" (417), and that while "we're well justified in our reluctance to feed this kind of informational beast... critique alone can't do us enough good, [and in] hewing only to it, we violate a core principle of rhetoric, ignoring external audiences" (418). However, for this project I stand firm in the belief that we teach in an environment of surplus quantitative data, and as my aim has been to humanize it, I will refrain from attempting to empirically prove correlation between that data and the stories herein. If I *am* to speak in terms more likely to be valued by those external audiences, I can say that the impact of this study, the insight it provides, and the approaches it suggests could be significant on a large scale. At-risk students are labeled as such because they are statistically less likely to achieve academic success and transition gainfully into adulthood, and the influence of teachers' interactions with these students cannot be overstated. If those interactions perpetuate the social and cultural patterns which may lead students to drop out of high school, they become more likely to continue the cycle of their problem story, while the encouragement of at-risk students to see beyond the narratives that statistically and systemically define them could guide them away from

identities in which their futures are severely limited. This could result in major social and economic implications in our country; if these students reverse the cycle of underachievement en masse to reach beyond what is expected of them and aim to achieve at higher academic levels, it could result in a more resilient and qualified workforce, a more economically stable and self-sufficient class of consumers, greater social and economic equality, and a more broadly educated voting base. Thus, teaching students– not just those who achieve in traditionally mainstream classrooms, but all students– is "not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (Shaughnessy 297).

Johnston best articulates the significance at the core of this study when he speaks to the education of students not just for academic achievement but for positive identity development:

> For us, it is at least about the society we wish for our children and who we wish our children to become. The possibility of an evolutionary democratic society depends on children's understandings of who they are (and might become), their epistemological understandings, what they take to be normal relationships with others, and the narratives they can imagine for themselves. We can keep tests and other potential distracting elements in mind, but we have to keep our heads up further than that as we deal with the moment-to-moment interactions with students. (85)

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