"JUST BECAUSE SOMEONE IS NOT GOOD AT SOMETHING, DOESN'T MEAN YOU DON'T GET PICKED": 
IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN AN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

By
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B.Ed. University of Victoria 1993

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# APPROVAL

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Date: April 19, 2004
This thesis is the study of identity practices of a Grade 3 and 4 split grade classroom. It examines the discourse of the weekly class meetings, a classroom routine that allowed for students to discuss social issues and solve problems in a collaborative manner. The students described classroom identity practices that positioned them as particular kinds of identities or types of students. All identities were referenced according to the activities of school. The data also revealed the possibilities for student agency and the strategies they used to affect their position or how their peers perceived them.

Particularly relevant to my investigation were the studies done by Kelleen Toohey (2000) about the positioning practices of school that organize for particular types of identities. I was also found Karen Gallas' (1998) work on gender and classroom practices relevant, as she examined her own classroom practice and the discourse of her Primary students. In my analysis, I use Varenne and McDermott's (1998) concept of school discourse and the organization of particular identities of success and failure. In my analysis of agency, I draw from the work of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) and their identification of improvisation, resistance and carnival as strategies for agency. As I draw theory and practice together, I hope to illuminate teaching practices that help students to understand positioning practices and to create "permeable" (Dyson, 1997) classroom spaces that facilitate agency.
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Chapter 1

Labels, Categories and Classroom Practices

All actors, initially, are not particular kinds of persons even though they have at their disposal the resources of the personae others let them claim. The qualities of acts and persons are not intrinsic to the act or the person. They belong rather to the sequence of acts, and to the group of persons, within which acts and persons are found.

(Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 7)

Introduction


This common language alludes to the possible identities placed upon students within the elementary classroom. Students are seen and described by both teacher and classmates as a particular kind of person based on tacit perceptions of their abilities or tendencies. A teacher might use this labeling language to describe a student; likewise, students might use these terms to think about or describe themselves. This language is not new or invented; it is part of the socihistorical discourse of the classroom (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). This discourse of the classroom is institutionally choreographed, framed by the activity of school. The choreography and the participants come together in their various roles. In these roles, the teacher needs to ensure that the successful students and difficult students are identified and labeled for the awareness of
other teachers and future institutions. Society expects school to identify both success and failure, for the expediency and efficiency of a competitive world (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). The students come to school and depending upon the interpretation of their behaviours and their physical attributes, they come to understand what their role will be in the institutional setting. You are "good", "smart", "noisy", "attention deficit" or "language delayed". As Varenne & McDermott (1998) the analysis stops once the label begins, at which point, we no longer see the constraints and mechanisms, which brought us to the decision to "identify" the student in the first place.

This study is situated in my work as a classroom teacher. As a teacher, I have participated in the institutional language and identity construction of students. I have used terms like "slow learner" or "poor reader". At other times, the work of identification was subtler, such as simply chastising a student who does not pay attention. Depending on individual circumstances and repeated chastising, the student became known as a difficult student or attention deficit. As a teacher, who has been an "identifier" as much as I have been "identified", I am not sure about the labels and identities I ascribe to students in my classroom. I, too, worry when my inquiry stops.

Through our daily teaching practice, identities become "alive" in the tasks and activities in the classroom and acquire children through the discourse and interactions of everyday school. Though I may wish to make my own classroom
a warm, safe and engaging setting for students, I am still mandated by the institution's need to identify, sort and rank students (Foucault, 1988). I find myself, then, in a dilemma, knowing that as long as I let the labels stay alive in my classroom, students will continue to be labeled; at the same time, I am constrained by my role as a teacher in the educational system. Our institutions rely on teachers to label students in order to maintain discursive patterns of power over those who do not fit into its mode of ruling (Smith, 1999).

McDermott (1993) makes note of this scenario for "learning disabled" children. "LD exists as a category in our culture, and it will acquire a certain portion of our children as long as it is given life in the organization of tasks, skills, and evaluations of our schools" (p.271).

My study is an examination of how my students understand daily classroom identity practices, i.e. how do we create and maintain classroom identities when we pass the ball in gym class or wear glasses? My data comes from transcripts of our class meetings, which were held once a week. Here, students discussed classroom practices and their questions about the effects of these practices -- for example, they discussed the way the teams in gym class are determined. Our class meeting discussions became a way for students and teacher to discuss and articulate how classroom practices affected how we understood each other and ourselves.
In one exercise, I asked students to write an end of the year reflection about their accomplishments during the school year, the goals they met and their feelings about their accomplishments. In response to the question, "What did you learn about yourself this year?" a few students answered as follows:

Alicia: Learned handwriting. I was very excited to learn how to handwrite.

Robert: I need to work on multiplication.

These descriptions are framed in relation to the activity, language and expectations of schooling; they demonstrate the ways the students understood themselves in school. Alicia entered our school as a new student whose capacities were identified as "low". Initially, she was placed in another teacher's Grade 4 class. This teacher began the school year with a speech about her expectations for Grade 4 students, which included that they could write and read handwritten script already. As a "low student", Alicia could not read the teacher's handwriting, and her anxiety about starting the year already behind caused her to cry. Subsequently, Alicia was placed in my Grade 3 / 4 split class on the second day of school. Due to the differing capacities of students in my split 3 / 4 class, I did not emphasize handwriting. Alicia then learned handwriting with the rest of the class. From the context of her story, I know why it was important for her to relate that she knows how to handwrite.
Robert’s comment also reflects his story. Robert writes that he needs to learn multiplication. This is significant in that he had a stroke during the school year when multiplication was taught. The stroke affected his motor control of his right side and his ability to manage extreme emotional situations (stressful or happy circumstances). Before his stroke he was a “high” achiever and did not have difficulty with school curriculum. After his stroke, he had difficulty with new content and understanding the content he missed. This caused him great anxiety and he would frequently cry and become anxious at math time. His one difficulty with multiplication made him see himself as “having difficulty” in math and made him doubt his abilities.

How these students came to “know” themselves evolved through a complex interplay of discourse, socio-historical practices of schooling and subtle agency amongst the participants, parent, student, peers and teachers. The constraints of the institution, the community, the very roles of teacher and students, suggest that there is a particular language for students' self-understanding, as well as, for how each student understands other participants in the school setting.

Chapter 1 begins with my own problematic participation in the school setting, a brief description of my study and my methodology. In Chapter 2, I will survey the literature on identity and discourse. I will also look at how agency manifests in practice. Chapter 3 and 4 are close examinations of my classroom practices, student identity and agency through our class meeting dialogues. Last, I discuss
how classroom teachers can affect positive student identity construction through their daily classroom practices.

*A metaphor for culture: the rooms in a house*

Varenne & McDermott (1998) view culture as the rooms of a house. The culture a child grows up in is a house where there are various rooms -- classrooms, outdoor rooms and other social places. In the same way that we use particular rooms of a house to facilitate eating or resting, each cultural room specifies a particular way of positioning, interacting and speaking. As a child moves from room to room, they are “labeled” or recognized as particular types of children based on the activity and shape of the room. The “shared endeavors” of a particular “room”, such as school, mean acquiring particular desirable skills and specific identities for life (Wenger, 1998).

The house metaphor helps me to understand the fluidity between societal positioning and "rooms". As children progress from grade to grade or context to context they may be seen as particular types of children. The child who is seen as hyperactive and difficult in a classroom, may become a "gifted" and "talented" soccer player once on the field. The rooms do not dictate the identity and subsequent actions of the participants; however, the rooms provide the reference for making meaning of particular actions and conversations. In this way,
identity shifts fluidly with the space that the child occupies and the relationships that take place in that space.

This way of looking at identity in school settings contributes to my understanding of school as a socially-historically constructed space, which reflects relationships of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977). The institution requires certain behaviours and discourses from teachers, which by the inherent nature and routines of the organization produce actions and discourses from students in return. Thus, we come to Varenne and McDermott's (1998) description of a child known as Adam and his identity of learning disabled in the school context:

The shape of the rooms...[was] the product of an institution, the School, that none of the people involved could be said in any way to control. None of them had participated in the construction of the School, although a few had helped shape the particular school Adam found himself in. (p. 45)

Similarly, the data I collected is not the product of any child’s or my own design. Our conversations were situated in school and the meanings we found were created by the four walls of school. In turn, the effects of my conclusions will be interpreted and continued in the context of school. However, no construction is a static object. The cultural house metaphor allows us to understand the “how” and “who” of identification practices. Practices can and do change. The configurations of rooms are not static and do not necessarily completely
constrain the actions of the participants. There are opportunities for the
participants situated in the rooms to interact and play with the arrangements of a
particular space. As Varenne & McDermott (1998) note:

The very fact that such a difference was noticeable demonstrates
that people in particular rooms (situations within large, complex,
culturally organized fields for social action) are not determined or
even absolutely constrained by their conditions. People are always
active, always transforming, if ever so slightly, their most local
conditions without abolishing the more general constraints. (p. 46)

How I found myself located by teachers and peers within school culture drives
why I wish to make change for students within the four walls of my classroom.

In the next section I look at my own history and participation in school. Here, it
becomes important for me to ground my perspective, current practices and
theories within my own living story as a mixed race woman who did not like
school.

The teacher does not like school

Millat] ... knew that he was a Paki no matter where he came from;
that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people’s
jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave jobs to his
relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop owner or a curry-
shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back
to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he
worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked
like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. (Smith, 2000, p. 202)

I, myself, found my own location and identification within school culture problematic. Much like Millat in Smith’s (2000) novel “White Teeth”, I learned that my identity, my name, my race, my gender and my class did not fit the norms and expectations of the institution. The "social imaginary" (Ibrahim, 1999), the expectations of my identity and what I "could be", were based on the norms and expectations of school and of the white, middle-class suburbs where I grew up. I understood myself according to the discourse and expectations around me. Those expectations and discourse positioned (Weedon, 1997) my difference.

I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood, where children had names like Robin and John, and there were very few reflections of my experience in day-to-day school life. Due to my mixed-Asian ancestry, I was called “china girl” or other derogatory names. On his first day of Grade 1, bullies assaulted my brother for being a “chink”. These racial slurs confused me, because we were of mixed ancestry and these slurs did not acknowledge that we were also of white ancestry.

What I remember of school is that I was excluded and I was on the periphery of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). My everyday experiences in elementary school told me that I did not fit in. My school lunches were ridiculed and I did
not have anyone to play with, so my mother would pick me up from school and I would go home for lunch. Looking back, there were many possibilities for my exclusion, such as my racial difference, my low-socioeconomic status, or perhaps the fact that I was a high-achiever in school. My problems might have been made worse by leaving at lunchtimes when I could maybe have made friends to play with if I had stayed. My exclusion could have been a combination of all these.

I had an ambiguous relationship with school. I was successful academically and excluded socially. The teasing from other children, my teacher’s questioning me about my ancestry in front of the class, and playground alienation all contributed to my own understanding of my difference. The interactions and discourse I experienced at school became a part of the way I thought about myself. My interactions within the institution have contributed to my understanding of my identity. Because of these interactions and discourse, I came to understand myself as “different”.

As I went on to become a teacher, my own experiences in school settings continued to be difficult. In the everyday participation in school, I react as a teacher and as a child; I remember what was done to me and bring the past into the present. Perhaps all teachers do this and we recreate or discontinue practices that excluded us. For myself, I wish to question my everyday practices because I do not want to replicate the discourse and identity practices that subordinated me. If they affected me this way, I wonder about the experiences about children
in my class. I believe that as a teacher there is a way that I can facilitate classroom dialogue so that children who are labeled with negative identities can find the space to answer back. Perhaps if I make this space, then, the excluded child can find opportunities to tell his or her oppressors that those behaviours are hurtful, and can have their voice advocated by those with power.

As Hodges (1998) explains, a person who is “accommodating in the participation and yet is experiencing an exclusion from any ‘normative’ or unproblematic identification with practice” (p. 273) can re-invent practice because they do not wish to perpetuate the practices that locate their difference. Hodges found that her identity as a woman working in early-childhood education and her identity as a lesbian and an intellectual alienated her from the considered norms of her practice. She described this as “dis-identification” --where a person rejects the “identity connected with the practice and is yet constructing an identity within the context of conflict and exclusion” (p. 273). The problematic practice interfaces with the participant and in that agitation, the participant invents other practices and identities.

I want to challenge the social, intellectual and political activity of teaching. I believe as Cochran-Smith (1991) describes, that I can “teach against the grain”. I made a choice to work within the constructs of school because, as Cochran-Smith writes, teachers need to understand and work within the culture of teaching and politics of schooling. As a teacher, I do not wish to replicate the practices that
alienated me or others like me. I wish to hold back the pressures of the discourse and make space, even if it is for a second, for a student to say “I do not like this.” This opportunity alone, is where I believe change can happen.

**Identity discourse in the staffroom**

The pictures are not objective and complete. Individuals in their interaction have skewed and partial ideas of the other that are laden with illusion and ignorance as a precondition of the association. (Murphy, 1971, p. 131)

Looking at the metaphor of culture and rooms in a literal sense, I find the staffroom to be problematic in my day-to-day teaching life. The staffroom is a significant room in the institutional practices of school. It is seen as a place of respite from parents and students, and a place that signifies (and requires) membership in a particular group. I find that this room has been a place that locates my dis-identification with my colleagues. Murphy (1971) says that in all of our interactions we misunderstand one another as a "precondition" of the relationship. I misunderstand my colleagues, as much they do not understand me. However, I have always struggled with ways and opportunities to communicate my perceptions to my colleagues, due to my lower status of inexperience and younger age. In the staffroom, I find it difficult to answer a discourse that repeats and proclaims accepted norms of financial affluence,
behavioural and intellectual norms and "appropriate" parenting. I find it difficult because the discourse of the staffroom does not reflect my experience.

I returned to public school teaching after a four-year hiatus from the school during which I had worked in School District administration and as a Faculty Associate at Simon Fraser University. This is also the year I began my study. Here, I was returning to teaching in a new district, a new school, and in a new position both as administrator and a teacher. As a new staff member, and as an administrator, my job was to listen to the opinions of old-timers and to understand the history of the school, the students, the parents and the district. One early conversation is significant in my mind and relevant to the ways a teacher might identify and look for difference.

In early September, one of my "new" students had captured the attention of the staff room. Jenna was a new student to the school and would wander the courtyard, by herself. The staffroom faced the courtyard. The children, who wandered there, were frequently the topic of conversation. Her alone-ness was in plain sight of the other teachers and students. Students who did not have friends by late September were worried about in case they were abnormally asocial. If Jenna was not wandering the courtyard, she sat by the door blocking access for teachers or students and she wasn't always cooperative if you asked her to move.
One teacher, who had taught at the school for 20 years and was highly regarded, casually asked me about Jenna, “Is she normal? She looks so odd. Does she have Down’s Syndrome? Her eyes are so strange. She didn’t even answer me when I spoke to her.”

The other teacher thus presented me an invitation: Talk about your student. I was new, was I going to corroborate her judgments? Did I know what I was talking about? I answered, “Jenna is actually really smart. We were writing for the first time today and I couldn’t inspire the rest of the students to put their thoughts down. She read her story and inspired the rest of the class to write. But she hasn’t found any friends yet.”

I can remember the silence from the other teacher. The conversation went no further. Although I knew the social cue was to corroborate the teacher’s assessment of Jenna -- she was strange and different and would I inquire and make conclusions about her difference -- the invitation to co-investigate Jenna’s apparent difference, made by "senior teacher" to "junior staff member", was not met with cooperation. On paper, my response might seem like I was clear and forthright, but I remember the difficulty I had and continue to have as I challenge my colleagues. My voice is quiet and tentative when I answer; I try to not directly challenge, but I try to make it clear that I do not agree.
This is an obvious example of "teacher talk" when discussing student identities.

The conversations over coffee discussing staff meetings and "troubled students" is where we hear, learn and co-construct the identities of students with colleagues. We commonly enter relationships with colleagues assuming that we share a common background. At these tables, I listen to and surmise what the teachers must have sounded like as they discussed my life and my family as a child. The stories I hear are full of speculation about why particular children behave in particular ways and often these conversations are riddled with labels and assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, ability and class. There are stories about "bad kids", "poor kids", "mothers who keep too many cats", students who "refuse to speak English" or students who resist learning despite the teacher's efforts. These conversations are potent and over time sediment into the historical identity of a child at a school. Gale & Densmore (2000), describe the impact of teacher beliefs about students with "fairly stable background" and other students who have "problems at home". These conclusions, based on student background, affect the expectations the teachers have of students.

The study and the methodology

This investigation took place in my classroom. I taught a Grade 3 and 4 split-class. The students were between 8-10 years olds. The school was located in an affluent neighborhood, located in a suburb of Vancouver. I had a class of 16 Grade 3 students (5 girls and 11 boys) and 6 Grade 4 girls. My class composition
was seen by other teachers "to be average, to above average" in ability. They commented that I did not have the "problems" (social, academic) that other classes seemed to have. Many of my students' parents worked in downtown Vancouver and commuted to work. Most of the parents were married and living together in the same house. There was strong parent participation and most mothers helped out in the mornings, usually checking planners or helping students edit their work. I often heard the term "WASPY" from parents and teachers when referring to the socio-economic make-up of the school. There were also children of Black, Chinese and Indian ancestry, but in the conversations at school, they were rarely included in discussions about our school population.

This study focuses on the discourse among the students and myself during class meetings. It is an inquiry into the conversational interaction of the classroom and an analysis of the greater discourse of school. Initially I planned to investigate how my own (teacher) language constructed particular identities for my students. I taped conversations between the students and me (during instruction, one on one conferences, class work times etc.). After analysis of my data, I noticed a consistent theme emerging -- the conversations between the students and me were referenced to the norms and the activities of school. Who were we in relation to school? During class meetings, we wrestled with the notions and practices of school. Do we like the expectation that in Gym class, you have to win? Is it okay to wear glasses? We interrogated the discourse and
expectations of what was said to us, what we did to each other and how we came to be known.

The study is critical in orientation as it looks at the power and authority that is framed by the activity of school and the discourse of being a student and being a teacher. It is intended not merely to be a critical analysis of the identity conversations between the students and myself, but to offer hope as I look for examples of student agency and times the students “talk back” to the teacher, to their classmates or the institutional practices of school. This study will use discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) to investigate the relations between discourse, the socially situated identity and the agency of participants.

**General methodology**

Parent permission forms were sent home to each of the parents in my class. The letter and the signed forms are attached in the appendix. I assured the parents that the instructional conversations recorded would be routine instruction and that I would change the student’s names, in order to protect privacy. I analyzed the transcribed conversations in the summer, when the children would no longer be my students and my teaching could not be influenced nor was routine instruction disrupted.

I taped instructional conversations among the students and me in my class. I recorded one-on-one assessment conferences, classroom meetings and classroom
instruction. Before I began recording, I asked the group's permission to tape our conversation. This allowed students to give me permission to record some conversations and refuse on other occasions where they did not wish to be recorded. Before I began to tape the conversation, I recited the following script:

I would like to tape our conversation for the purpose of my Master's research. I am researching my conversations with students. You may agree to be recorded by saying 'yes' or you may refuse to be recorded by saying 'no'. Do I have your permission to record our conversation?"

Students replied "yes" or "no", as they felt comfortable. (I ensured that I recorded the request and the permission, as part of the data collection.) I also ensured to change the names of all participants and the staff mentioned in the class meeting.

Class meetings

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to focus on the class meetings. Class meetings have been a practice of mine for the past 10 years of teaching. I have found class meetings to be a powerful classroom practice in which students can deal with issues such as bullying, ability, and name calling (Wolk, 1998). I originally began the practice to help my primary class solve issues and problems as a group. Students would record agenda items on the board. As the data later shows, some students used this practice to "get back" at other students for what
they considered "un-fair" treatment at lunch. Sometimes I would come in after
the lunch bell and find crowds of children around the Agenda, arguing about
whether an issue should be erased because it was already "solved".

Class meetings were enacted in the following ways. First, the student-leader
would greet the audience, with Good (insert time of day)
everyone", and the students would answer back. Sometimes the leader chose to
say a contrary greeting, such as "Good night everyone" (if it were the daytime).
This greeting would be followed by an open sharing time. Students brought toys
in, shared the results of Soccer games or reported new events. Students listened
attentively at these times or sometimes there would be a low murmur of voices
as the student shared his or her item. I found it painful when a child shared an
item and there would be no audible show of interest from the group. Implicit
within this seemed to be the message, "We're not impressed with you or your
stuff."

Then we proceeded on to the class meeting agenda. The leader called each item
up in turn. The person who brought the issue forward then explained what their
issue was, and then s/he asked for suggestions how to solve it. Children put up
their hands to give suggestions, but more often the other students corroborated
the issue as a problem and explained how something similar had happened to
them. At this point, I would remind them to give a suggestion, too. At first the
topics went around and around as students debated and added to the discussion.
The meetings seemed to be going past the 3:00 dismissal bell and parents would look into the classroom while they waited for their child (sometimes they would ask to take their child if we went on “too late”). So I began to have the students ask for 3 suggestions and then summarize a possible conclusion. This generally meant that the students stopped their discussion quickly and the person who originally brought it forward had a lot of power, because they could re-state in their own words. I noticed that I played a large part in the summarization.

The students generally chose my suggestion or my phrasing to explain what they would do to try to solve the issue. This was done for efficiency and it was also understood that if the solution did not work the issue could be brought up to class meeting again. Constraints such as “three suggestions and then summarize” are helpful to the teacher, in terms of keeping to a schedule. This “rule” kept our conversation focused, but it limited our exploration. In the following year, I asked the students if we should keep this practice as I noticed that the students did not seem to be engaging in the same way they had the following year. They all agreed that we should talk about issues as long as the person who brought the issue up felt they had enough information to summarize.

What became more and more interesting were the ways in which the students discussed and contested identities in class meetings. The students brought up the same issues over and over (sometimes the class groaned as the issue was
raised again). However, as we re-visited issues, we adjusted and contested former practices. For instance, the students debated whether it was appropriate to name the people whom they were discussing in a class meeting, or if it was all right to go on the couch if it was not your "couch-day". As Greene (2001) explains, "we come to know by means of linguistic formulations over time" (p. xvi). In the case of the class meetings, the students came to know each other as they debated and contested issues and practices.

_Treatment of the data_

I taped Class Meeting conversations using a digital recorder. I transcribed the day's recordings on the following evening and added observations and notes. Other socio-cultural studies have presented data regarding identity and discourse in a similar way. Toohey (2000) used transcripts from videotaped and audiotaped observations to look at the identity practices of classroom discourse. Lensmire (2000) used a similar approach from a Bakhtinian perspective to analyze how students were located within the practices of the writing workshop. Both these researchers observed classroom life as university researchers. I was inspired by their research, but as a teacher collecting data in her own classroom, I was personally involved in the data. As I analyzed the data, I was very aware of my own personal involvement, as teacher who directed and maintained the power practices of my classroom.
For that reason, I took inspiration from Karen Gallas' (1998) work. Gallas is a teacher researcher who used classroom transcripts from her own classroom to investigate gender practices of her classroom. She situates herself in the data and looks at her role and questions her interference. As you look in the data of this study, you cannot forget that I am participating in the discourse. I identify myself by my first name "Gowa", and the classroom conversations walk a line between respecting the teacher position, teasing and ridiculing it, yet maintaining respect. I participate in the classroom discourse as teacher and as a child with a history of exclusion and marginalized identities. I am "teacher", "poor", "Chinese" and "excluded" all at once based on my own experiences as an educator and my history in person; the work is "personal" (Lensmire 2000). I would argue that all teachers act from a personal stance and they facilitate classroom interaction. The ways they themselves were privileged or excluded as children have implications for how they facilitate these discussions.

Gallas (1998) found her analyses and writing to be "painful" as she noticed that "...the children [she] had loved and observed so closely suddenly became symbols of every social problem that [she] personally found troubling" (p. 5). I had a similar experience. In my analysis I am a teacher who loves her students, who cringes when an identity practice is laid bare, when I hear the students discuss their "pain". I notice in my later analysis that I might have misinterpreted a child's action or utterance at the time of its occurrence. I could write an entire study about ways I might have handled a situation more
sensitively, but for the purpose of this study, I will focus on the ways students describe our classroom practices that position and organize their identities. I will try to allow the discourse to teach the reader what the students have taught me. I have tried to include as much of the conversation as possible, so that other readers can understand our struggle. On other occasions, I have selected data in parts and highlighted them as they relate to themes.

Before I share and analyze my data, I will summarize relevant notions of identity. I will explore the primary research of identity in discourse (Foucault 1972; Bahktin 1986), identity constrained and defined by institution (Foucault, 1979; McDermott, 1993) and identity in activity (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Chapters 3 and 4 will specifically link the discourse of the data to theory. Chapter 3 will explore how the students describe institutional positioning practices and student identity. This chapter will analyze the ways identity is related to space and materials, knowledge classroom routines and practices. As the students describe, they dispute the practices and in turn develop a sense of agency that can affect their position. In the middle of my students' disputes over issues and the way they sometimes resigned themselves to unfair practices, they also boldly or quietly contested the practices of their classmates and their teacher. Perhaps, in these moments where we dispute, we find new ways of inventing practice. Chapter 4 will look at the avenues for agency that were provided for the students through the class meeting. Students exercise agency by disputing a practice, making fun of it or inventing a new one. Chapter 5, I
will articulate what the students have taught me about socially just identity practices and my role as a teacher. I hope to communicate some tangible practices that allow for students to find reprieve from the inequities of school identity practices.
Chapter 2

Research Review: Notions of Identity

Student experiences and their interpretations of them are the building materials used to construct versions of who they are.

(Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 230)

Alicia’s identity

Alicia: In gym, I’m not really good at sports so I slipped and couldn’t pass the baton and people started yelling at me because I’m not good at sports. When we got back, people said she’s the worst player. (Class meeting, May 2\textsuperscript{nd})

Alicia brought this issue forward to the class under the agenda item titled: “yelling”. Alicia’s statements are an example of how an experience in a gym class might contribute to how an individual understands his or her identity within the group (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Alicia tells the class that she understands that she is “not good at sports” in gym. When she fell and could not pass the baton, the other students yelled at her and told her that she was “the worst player”. This is an example of the coming to know your identity, within the interactions between an individual and the group; the group tells you who you are and you tell yourself and the actions and interpretations follow. As Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte & Cain (1998) explain, “People tell others who they are, but
even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they say they are” (p. 3). In this particular case, what is interesting is that Alicia does not like what she is told about herself, and she brings the issue up at the class meeting. As the transcript later details, she explains that the group does not see her dancing as a sport. She lets her classmates know that in other contexts she is good at something physical and she contests their ideas of her.

There are two possible arguments for how Alicia came to be understood as “not good at sports” (Hall, 1990). Was she “not good at sports” because of some fixed truth about her body and her person? Or was the interpretation of her identity subject to “history, culture and power” (p. 225)? Alicia did not have a lot of power in the classroom. She attended Learning Assistance and the other students knew that she struggled with the academic tasks of the classroom. The other Grade 4 girls in the class excluded Alicia from some of their games. In terms of positioning, Alicia did not have an esteemed position in the class, according to the tasks of the gym class and the academics of the classroom. Hall (1990) argues that identity is not the essence of an individual, but a matter of “positioning”. In the previous data example, Alicia is positioned both by the interpretation of her performance and by the ideas that the students have of her. I will return to these ideas later in the chapter, after I explore the concept of identity within a community of practice.
I use this example to ground the theoretical framework of this chapter. I have used Gee’s (1999) concept of Discourse and how it “involves” situated identities as a means to bring together many theories such as: discourse (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986). The later chapters will look at how the students discuss identity practices of the classroom, framed by the activity of the institution. The Discourse, or ways students were coordinating or were being coordinated by the language or practices of the classroom, contributed to their ideas of themselves (Gee, 1999).

For the purpose of this chapter, I will begin with Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of participation in a community of practice. Within this context of a community of practice, I will review Foucault’s ideas of discourse (1972, 1977, 1980) and power relations situated within the institutional frame of school. I will also look at the theory of speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) and how they relate to Foucault’s (1972) idea of discursive formations. I will conclude with a review of Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of agency within socio-historical constraints. These theories will help my later analysis, in which the students refer to the institution, its practices, social constraints and their own personal agency.

Communities of Practice: Situated Identities

Collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These
practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities, communities of practice. (Wenger, 1998, p. 45)

Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) explore identity and learning within a community of practice. For them, a community of practice has shared enterprises or activities and they examine how newcomers to various communities learn to become adept at community practices: examining in particular butchers, tailors, midwives, alcoholics and quartermasters. The ethnographies detail the ways the participants moved from the periphery of participation to more mature positions of legitimate participation. As a participant learned and acquired new skills, she came to be known as a particular type of participant.

Lave & Wenger (1991) explored the sociality of learning, where learning takes place in a social framework and not just within the individual. Toohey (2000) explained their view as it related to her work on students learning English in a primary classroom: "Communities may provide more or less desirable, powerful or equitable positions for participants within them, but -through the practices in which participants engage- all participants learn" (p.15). A large part of what you learn is your role or position within the community. Gender, class, ability, race or sexuality might determine to some extent the position a person is afforded in a community. As Wenger (1998) elaborates in a later work: "Theories
of identity ...address issues of gender, class, ethnicity, age and other forms of
categorization, association, and differentiation in an attempt to understand the
person as formed through a complex relation of mutual constitution between
individuals and groups" (p. 13).

As I applied Lave & Wenger's theory of communities of practice, I saw how some
of the conversations of the class meetings were about the ways in which the
students related to and were affected by the practices of school. Alicia
complained that she was not afforded a good position in gym class because no
one can see her proficiency in dance class. Her performance positioned her at the
periphery of participation in sports. If one were known to be "not good at
sports", then other people do not pass the ball to you or allow you opportunities
to be a full participant. As Lave & Wenger explain:

To become a full member of a community of practice requires
access to a wide range of on-going activity, old timers, and other
members of the community; and to information, resources and
opportunities for participation." (p. 101)

This quote speaks to the importance of having access to people and materials. I
will address this issue in the third chapter, where I look at instances where
students discuss access to materials and people.
Speech genres and discourse: activity and meaning

If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written or done. (Gee, 1999, p. 13)


Bakhtin (1986) used the term speech genres to define the everyday situations and structures of speech; these could range from greetings to formal business meetings. Speech genres evoke the constraints for conversation and shape discourse (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1998). As Bakhtin (1986) explains: "In the genre the word acquires a particular and typical expression. Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and consequently, also particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain circumstances" (p. 87).

Bakhtin refers to speech genres as having particular forms and meanings that refer to specific situations. As I looked at the class meetings, I believe we developed a type of genre that implied particular meanings. The utterances were performed in a routine, in which who, how and when one could speak or
answer another speaker, were determined by roles and positions. Within this
genre, the meaning of the utterances is suggested. Holland et al. (1998) explain
that these forms or genres of meaning organize experience:

Utterances ... are constructed by socially related and thus
positioned persons. Since utterances organize experience (of the
source of the psyche itself), we are strongly affected by the position
we are cast into within interactions. (p. 188)

Speech genres help the participants make meaning of actions and language. The
context suggests the meaning or as Wertsch (1998) states the genres allows for
"guessing" the meaning even from the first words. For instance, a student might
know that a Math lesson was about to begin when the words, "Please open your
Math books" were uttered by the teacher. These meanings are not neutral, but
suggest the structures and power relations of the participants. In order for a
person to make sense to another person, they have to understand the position
from which the person speaks. The position of the person determines the
"intention" of the utterance.

Bakhtin (1981) stated that these "intentions" are obvious:

All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a
party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age
group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and
contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and
forms are populated by intentions. (p. 293)
When I looked at the data, the meanings of the words and discussion are not obvious on their own. One can only gain meaning from the data once it is framed by the activity of school and understandings of teacher and student roles.

Bahktin's work did not focus on the specific power relations of the "socially charged life". Foucault's (1972, 1977, 1980) concept of discourse looks at the aspect of power relations or "governmentality" of discourse. Foucault was concerned with the ways the systems of language facilitated surveillance for normalization, which means the "measurements, hierarchy, and regulations around the idea of a distributionary statistical norm" (Ball, 1990, p. 2). Discourse reflects the measures of what is normal and what is abnormal. For Foucault, power relations of discourse produce subjects. As Foucault (1979) describes in his analysis of the prison, normalization takes place within societal organizations or "disciplines". The techniques of the "discipline" include the evaluation and observation of subjects, methods adopted by institutions of the Western world (Ryan, 1989) in the 17th and 18th centuries. Foucault (1979) describes how these forms of control emerged as means of forcing individuals to accommodate industrial change and growth. Within each institution, the individual is subjugated by the identity assigned to him or her. According to Foucault (1979):

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life, [...] categorizes the individual, marks him [sic] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of
truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (p. 212)

Knowledge-power relations (Foucault, 1979) are achieved by the construction of "truths" about the social and natural world. These truths are upheld within the discourse of particular institutions.

_School discourse: naming and labeling_

Foucault (1979) explored institutional practices of sorting, naming and categorizing. Through naming and sorting, various identities come to be known. Socio-cultural theorists Mehan (1993), McDermott (1993), and Varenne & McDermott (1998) have examined how these institutional identities are revealed in the language of school. Mehan (1993) contends that the language reveals the stabilizing features of the institution, meaning the ways power relations and practices maintain the status quo of what is considered normalcy.

Wenger (1998) argued that communities of practice reify particular abstract qualities. This reification of abstract qualities is most evident when we look at the act of evaluation, where qualities such as creativity or thoughtfulness are described and measured in ways that make them seem concrete.

The evocative power of the reification is double edged. Classifying under broad categories can focus attention on a kind of diversity,
but the reification can give differences and similarities a concreteness they do not actually possess. (Wenger, 1998, p. 60)

We might not be able to find a concrete entity such as intelligence within the classroom, yet we (teachers) discuss this idea of intelligence as if it were a real entity. Teachers also reify the abstract ideas of persistence, fairness, and bad student, as if they were real, observable and concrete. Reification of qualities have great effects on the individual.

The language of school reifies a student’s qualities and describes to her a particular identity or aptitude. The impact of being designated a "success" or "failure" can impact a student's future access to further schooling or economic opportunities. These reified qualities can be seen as "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991), where the reified qualities give a student access to other figured worlds (Holland et. al., 1998). The authority of the institution can determine the possibilities a student might have. Bourdieu (1991) looked at the connection between authority of the institution and the “naming” practices that affect the individual:

[N]aming... belong(s) to a class of more or less socially based acts of institution ... through which an individual, acting in his [sic] own name or in the name of a group that is more or less important in terms of its size and social significance, indicates to someone that he possesses such and such property, and indicates to him at that
time that he must conduct himself in accordance with the social
essence which is thereby assigned to him. (p. 105)

Classroom identity practices frame and position students; these practices are set
by social and historical expectations that North American society has for its
young. These classroom practices rely on language and shared meaning to
quickly communicate ideas. This is unfortunate because in the valuing of
brevity, we can overlook the complexity and contextuality, and construct limited
identities.

When I consider my own intentions as a teacher, my goal is to look for all the
diverse ways students understand and participate in the classroom. However, I
have a few short months to assess hundreds of outcomes to meet and 32 students
to teach on a daily basis. This means that allowing for diversity and allowing
students to learn at their own pace are abbreviated to what I can check off on a
checklist, document with work samples and "conference' with a child in two
minutes. With the professional expectations of my job I have little time to be
specific and notice all the ways students can surprise me. Holland et al. (1998)
elaborate further:

Even in situations where all students are admitted to an arena of
learning, learning is likely to become unevenly distributed in its
specifics. Teachers will take some students' groping claims to
knowledge seriously on the basis of certain signs of identity. These
students they will encourage and give informative feedback.
Others, whom they regard as unlikely or even improper students of
a particular subject ... are less likely to receive their serious response. (p. 135)

The power relations of school are clear, from the first time a child must raise her hand to speak, to being chastised for speaking out of turn. Students learn quickly that the point of most classroom talk is to answer the teacher (Cazden, 1988). If one cannot speak when one wishes, then one soon learns that talk is for the teacher. The discourse of school is framed in the power differential of student and teacher. The very relations of student and teacher affect a relation whereby the teacher informs the student about him or herself. Therefore it is possible that the teachers' talk can be binding and overwhelming. As Bahktin (1981) states:

[The] authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the word of the father, of adults, of teachers, etc.)... demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it may have to sway us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused in it. (p. 342)

The unique institution of school has many expectations of its participants. One expectation is that adults will identify who is successful and who is not. McDermott (1993) examined how school positions and organizes identities of students according to the definition of school success or failure. He investigated the school experiences of a child named Adam and how the school organized his behaviors to acquire for him the label of “LD”. Adam participated in a “scene
well organized for the institutional designation of someone as LD” (McDermott, 1993, p. 274). The discourse of schooling defines the intended outcomes of school and then we learn about each other in relation to those outcomes. And as McDermott (1993) explains, we must not necessarily look at what any one student has learned, but what is around to be learned.

Schooling discourse demands particular ways of communication about the identities of students. There can be only so much room for permutations and unique behaviors in the “learning machine” (Foucault, 1979) of school. The “machine” needs to run efficiently and therefore needs to function on generalities and general metrics to function. School requires compliancy, and general measures that act as a quick means to rank and sort students.

Identity and Agency

Even though the meanings of utterances are situated within power relations, Bakhtin (1986) offered hope in terms of opportunities for agency. He wrote that listeners always have opportunities to answer back:

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of
listening and understanding, from the very beginning – sometimes literally from the speaker’s first word. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. (p. 68)

Within institutional constraints, where identity is produced in discourse, Wertsch (1998) contends that there is “irreducible tension” (p. 77) between the agent and the mediational means, the language and practices by which one conveys meaning. This tension allows for agency and improvisation. The activity is never just an “application... of a pattern; new speakers appropriate the words of others and add new intentions to the meanings” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 77). The speaker ventriloquates utterances, which have previously come from other speakers' mouths, and uses the utterances for her own purpose. Morson & Emerson (1990) discussed how this act could provide opportunities for social agency, where the taking on of different utterances lends itself to improvisation: "Genres carry the generalizable resources to accomplish new purposes in each unrepeatable milieu. Each utterance, each use of genre, demands real work: beginning with the given, something different must be created" (p. 291).

This idea of creating something new for a new purpose is relevant to the class meeting because in the discussion we brainstormed new ways of answering or saying things. The class meetings allowed students to take on discourse that they might not usually be allowed in instructional speech genres, which rely on teacher initiation and student response. In a class meeting the students could
challenge, question or even make fun of the structures of school, as well as mock the ways school made them look like particular kinds of students. My students and I struggled with our identities within the classroom. Within practices such as class meeting, where we discussed issues that arose in the classroom (such as teasing) we struggled to make meaning of our actions and negotiated my role as a teacher, who ultimately had the final say. You can hear the struggle within the data.

The next two chapters analyze the data in light of institutional constraints. In chapter 3 I look at the positioning practices of school and how the practices construct particular identities. The children describe issues of “blaming”, being positioned based on "what you know" and the way students and teachers use materials and space to position other participants. In Chapter 4 I look at how the students and I answered institutional constraints of school through a process of dialogue, as we contested the identity practices of the classroom.
Chapter 3

Positioning: The Students Describe Practice

I have described a world lived and participated in, but that world was limited and a particular one, and the "moves" each of us made in building our social identities and awareness can never be replicated. (Gallas, 1998, p. 140)

Introduction: learning your position

In this chapter I examine what the students said in class meetings about school positioning practices. The students brought up issues that they perceived to be unfair, such as "budging" in line or not passing the ball in gym class. The discourse reveals the ways the students saw power and positioning in the arrangement of the classroom (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). The students candidly discuss their personal location within the room. The small practices or "micro-technologies" of the everyday classroom helped students learn their position in relation to the others in the classroom and the needs of institutional activity (Hoskin, 1990). As Luke & Freebody (1997:3) state, a person "is tied to institutional projects of discipline and power". As the students and I discussed "the relationship of power and meaning in education" (Apple, 1999, p. 173), we found ways to re-invent the practice or to change it slightly. Returning to the
metaphor of culture as a room, we found ways to "move the furniture" and reconfigure our positions.

Inspired by Gallas (1998) and Toohey (2000) I sorted the data into general themes. In the first section of this chapter, I examine how general practices affect a person's participation. Then I elaborate and describe three positioning practices, based on:

1) What you know

2) Using materials and space

3) What other students say about you

As I have already discussed, the economy of the culture and power relations make subjects out of children. As the students and I discussed and described the school practices we found that positioned us, I found that there were various ways a position or rank could be learned. In this next section I discuss how positioning and knowledge are related in the classroom. Here, I will highlight different excerpts of class meeting data in which we discussed the positioning practices that used proficiency and knowledge as the means to sort and classify student identities.

1. What you know

Just as there is a social distribution of cultural capital in society, so too is there a social distribution of knowledge within classrooms.
For example, different 'kinds' of students get different 'kinds' of knowledge. (Apple, 1979 p. 50)

a) The Ability of "15 Turkeys": The Classroom Practice of Ability Groups

In this classroom meeting, we were originally having a discussion about choosing partners, but we started to discuss how "groups" could form and a person could be excluded. The students and I were discussing how groups could be "bad". As an example of this, they brought up the math ability groups in their previous Grade 2 class.

Teachers often divide students according to ability so that curriculum material and activities can be designed to meet their perceived "deficit" or level of acceleration. Mrs. Unger's practice was to separate the students who could answer the questions from the math textbook easily and quickly place them in an accelerated math group. This group of accelerated students became known as the "Fearsome 4". Later the group was expanded to 7 participants; they were called the "Scary 7". This group worked on "math challenges" which usually allowed the students to meet in their small group and use hands-on materials to solve math problems. The students who were not in the accelerated Math group were known as the "15 Turkeys"; this was a title used by the class. The students came up with this name and the Grade 2 teacher did not know about it. The "15 Turkeys" continued to work with the math textbook. Now in my Grade 3
classroom, they explained how the simple practice of ability groups made them understand their positions of "smart" and "dumb".

Adam, James, Ali and Markus raised this topic. They were the students who, I would say, had the most power in the classroom. They were the ones who felt the most free to talk. None of the “15 Turkeys” spoke up at this time. My conjecture is that the “15 Turkeys” were in a powerless position and so they did not feel that they could comment about it. The “15 Turkeys” did not get to “do the math” with measuring tapes and cubes; instead they worked passively in their notebooks. Being one of the “15 Turkeys” was not an active, nor a speaking position. I did not invite them to speak about it, since I did not want them to feel like they were “put on the spot” to speak about something that was a difficult situation for them.

The transcript begins halfway through the class meeting conversation since I was having difficulty with the recorder. So the transcript begins mid-way through the conversation.

(1) Gowa: Partners is one thing. Do you think it’s wrong to be split into groups of people that are the same?

(2) Students: (yeahhhhh) the 15 ...

(3) Gowa: What was it again? (Students chatter over me and yell “THE 15 TURKEYS”) one at a time, please. What was the Scary 7?
Me, you [Adam, Markus], David, Tannis, James.

There was a whole lot in Scary 7. It was for smarter kids.

The Fearsome...

We were originally the 4 and then the Scary 7 added.

Then they turned it into the 15 Turkeys.

And then who was left over?

Everybody

It was kinda bad.

Why was it bad?

I was the only girl in the group and I wanted my friends to be in the group.

Did you feel funny about it?

Yep

You know what’s funny for me? As a teacher...(kids chatter, then they are quiet) one thing I know about kids, is that on some days they do things perfectly (student: yeah) and some days you make a mistake (student: yep, giggles). It's not like everything is the same all of the time. Some days things are like this and other days they are like that (I hear giggling in the background). So it’s really hard ... James... to say you are always smart or you are always dumb.
Tannis comments that she thinks that the practice of ability groups made the "15 Turkeys feel bad". This is a common classroom practice and this was of course not Mrs. Unger's intention. However, I argue that a product of learning a lesser position is that you can "feel bad". The "15 Turkeys" understood that the teacher, the person in power to set practice, did not think that they had the ability to master more difficult Math. Their abilities were seen as inferior. As a teacher, I think we need the cooperation of subjects or students so that they see our judgment as binding and "true". Perhaps, the very act of making a subject "feel bad" makes him or her more compliant. However, when a subject "feels bad", he or she could also become angry, resentful or aggressive.

This data also illuminates one of the more obvious positioning practices of the classroom -- where teachers sort students into ability groups. In school the achievements of power and greater position is acquired by your perceived facility with the valued skills and knowledge of school (Apple, 1990, 1999; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Toohey, 2000). I do not believe teachers organize ability groups as a malicious practice, nor do they intend to make students feel bad. I believe that it is a systemic practice, which comes from the societal need to sort and rank students. Which begs the question of where does learning occur? Is it actually in the heads of the students, ready to be measured and ranked? Or
is it in the interactions we have in the classroom and the judgments of the participants, especially the judgment of the teacher? McDermott (1993) says:

Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads ... learning is not in the heads, but in the relations between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance... Learning does not belong to individual persons but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (p. 292)

In the conversations of the classroom, the interactions set up students to be recognized as particular sorts of students and in the process they become particular kinds of students (McDermott, 1993; Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

Toohey (2000) also describes ability grouping in her research. She describes the effects of students' peripheral participation in groups and subsequent access to knowledge:

If Surjeet were continually subordinated by her peers, and excluded from, say, the imaginative play episodes that appear so facilitative of language learning, could she get enough practice to get better at using English in those practices? If Harvey continued to be sidelined to a less central position in play activities, he would not appropriate the language of the powerful, centrally located players. (p. 74)
In the next few examples the students discuss Toohey's ideas as they explore access, position and taking time to learn and not be judged.

b) Being "Perfect": Making Mistakes

Competence and successful demonstration of skills is an important aspect of classroom life. When most activities are set up so that you can show that you know particular skills, students are positioned into "knowing" or "not knowing".

In the next piece of data the students describe how "making a mistake" can be a problem. In the next group conversation, Amir brings up an issue for class meeting under the title "perfect". He is concerned because students have been yelling at other students who make mistakes or are not as "able" in Gym class.

(1) Robin: Perfect, Amir

(2) Amir: Usually when we are playing a game in PE a lot of people don’t want to make mistakes. So when they make one they start yelling at other people. Pretend that they were making a mistake and they always go "you didn’t pass the ball" and they were just standing there and the person was yelling mine, mine, mine. Ms. Kong

(3) Gowa: I know when I play on my team I don’t like it when people tell me I should “throw higher”, or “keep your hands down”

(4) Tannis: That’s sort of bullying.
(5) Gowa: So what I usually do is go to them and say "I know I am doing this wrong, I am trying to learn. Thanks"

(6) Tannis: You're learning.

(7) Gowa: So that's what I do, I go to the person and talk to them.

(8) David: If someone does that to you, you can go over and say like "sometimes you do that, too."

(9) James: Or tell Mr. Brown.

(10) Kristina: People think this is the championship game and if they don't... they're going to go down. They think it will count in their future life just because they lost a game.

(11) Chris: It does... it does...it does for me.

(12) Kids are laughing and some are saying "no, no, no"

(13) Jaspreet: It's not the world cup.

(14) Kristina: It's just like a game. It's "physical education". (she uses her fingers as quotation marks and says the word education loudly)

(15) Chris: It's not just the game; it's the whole thing.

(16) James: I like winning. When I am losing I kinda get angry. So I keep saying to myself it's just a game.

(17) Chris: I curse and swear in my head.
(18) James: So that's one way, if you make a mistake like, don't yell at other people.

(19) Gowa: Could you please summarize for us, Amir?

(20) Amir: Just talk to the person and tell them not to yell.

("Perfect", June 6th)

P.E or Physical Education class was a frequent topic in class meeting. I am not sure if the students brought it up because it was a subject that I did not teach and then they felt they could critique it easily or if the values and practices were different from the classroom so they needed to discuss it. In any case, issues about performance and inclusion were a consistent topic.

In this particular case, when Amir mentions how students yell at others when they make a mistake he is also describing another situation (see line 2). He is trying here to describe some fairly complex events. I believe that he is recounting a game during which a player makes a mistake and then tries to cover the mistake by yelling for the ball. He describes another player's reluctance to return the ball to the person who made the mistake because they are "standing still". In many sports, if you stand still or do not demonstrate that you are capable of continuing the play (e.g. passing to the next person with a capable throw or a kick) you do not get the ball. You have to be understood as capable before you get included. Your participation depends on what your identity is to the group and how well others think you can participate.
As with most class meetings, students brainstormed ways to answer the person who was yelling or "positioning" you. The students highlight that learning means you get a chance to make a mistake:

(13) Jaspreet: It's not the world cup.

(14) Kristina: It's just like a game. It's "physical education".

The students did not think it was fair to be noticed or labeled while they were learning. Tannis brings up the idea that "you're just learning" and Kristina in her own way by emphasizing the "education" of Physical Education, makes the point that learning is a process and you are vulnerable as you practice and try to learn the skills. The students mention this a few times throughout our class meetings. For them, it is important to give people a chance to practice and try before you decide what their abilities are. I find it remarkable that students would be advocates for this. However, I found it difficult for all of us to maintain this value in the face of academic tasks that focused on "doing your work" and finishing it within a set amount of time.

c) Asking for Help: Letting People Know that You Do Not Know

Even though the students and I discussed the idea of the importance of withholding judgment about a person's ability while they were trying to learn, we found it difficult to be consistent. In the next piece Amir brings up his irritation with another student. This student is having difficulty with his work and is seen by the students who sit at his table to be a hindrance. This discussion
helped me see the tension of classroom community and of asking for help. Like most teachers, I emphasized that it was important for children to help one another with schoolwork. However, when a student asks for help, he lets others know that he lacks the skill or knowledge to participate.

Amir brings this idea up under the agenda item titled "disturbing". As we discuss the topic, we learn how difficult it is to ask for help, since it lets others know that you have difficulty with the schoolwork. The "helper" is also placed in a difficult position since he or she might not be able to complete his or her own schoolwork on time.

(1) Chris: OK. Agenda. Not disturbing, Amir

(2) Amir: Whenever I am working, somebody at my table, someone [who] doesn’t pay attention to anything that you say. That Ms. Kong says and um... so right when I get back to do my work, he says, “What do you do? What do you do? What are you suppose to do? What do you do?” (he says this in a pretend, silly voice, acting it out) and I try to ignore them and this person says (he scrunches up his face, kids giggle) “What do you do?” (students giggle at Amir’s performance)

(3) Gowa: ok.... (I say in a ‘threatening tone’. I look over at Cam and he’s not making eye contact. His eyes are darting all over the place) ...actually... kay ... Adam move over there... you need to calm down.
Thanks. Ok... if you move there Adam can sit there and that’s fine. (I move students away from each other so they cannot "be silly" together). You are looking for suggestions today... Class Meeting goes on too long; let’s stick to suggestions.

(4) Amir: Ms. Kong

(5) Gowa: One suggestion I have for you is sometimes that people don’t understand the first time when they hear them. They need to see. That’s the way they learn. And soooo I understand it can be frustrating and you need to talk to that person and say to them, “Could you ask somebody else, because [I] need to work on my own.” That’s just a suggestion.

(6) Amir: Um, um, um, Chris.

(7) Chris: I think I know who it is, but they can just ask me. Especially if they need it. Like Lauren and Jaspreet didn’t have a clue what to do and then Cam needed some help and then I helped them all but I got my work done sometimes. So I am happy to help.

(8) Gowa: Yep, yeah (over him) ok, thanks for putting that out there. (I giggle)

(9) Alicia: I know that can get really annoying, because that happened to me last year. I just told that person to listen because they were laughing and playing footsie with the person across from them.

(10) Students: Ohhhhh
Gowa: That's different than having difficulty understanding, that's actually fooling around.

(Not disturbing”, May 4th)

In this case, I believed that Amir was complaining about Cam’s asking for help. Cam was having a difficult time in Grade 3. He was new to the school that year and did not have many friends. I orchestrated the seating plan so that Cam could sit by Amir and Chris. Cam had told me that these were his friends in the class and that he wanted to sit beside them. In the data you will note that it is Amir who complained about having to help [Cam] and Chris who says "I think I know who it is, but they can just ask me" (line 7).

Cam had tried many strategies to make friends in the class. He brought an address book to school and spent time recording student phone numbers. In this community many social ties were made through sports teams. Most of the boys played on the same soccer-team, but Cam did not play after school sports. He took hip-hop dance lessons and was known in the class as a good dancer. When we played music in the classroom, the students requested Cam demonstrate a few dance moves.

It was known in the class that Cam was having difficulty with academic subjects. He did not share the stories that he wrote and he did not raise his hand in class discussions. During independent work time, I would sometimes find him sitting quietly with very little written on the page. Sometimes, I would try to help him
and show him what to do or ask him questions to help him get started. He would answer all of my teacher talk with "m-hm, m-hm". I took this as a signal to leave him alone; I did not want to embarrass him further with teacher attention. So I depended on his tablemates to help him with his schoolwork. Perhaps, asking other students for help lets them know that "you don't know" and positions you as a "dumb" student and a "pest".

I would like to return to the first section of the data where Amir makes fun of the person asking for help (line 2). He uses a silly voice and implies that the person is stupid and "whines". The class laughs and I feel I have to quiet them down. There is a pressure in classrooms to do your own work. Even though I tried to encourage a class community where you could ask for help, I am sure that past classroom experiences and my own inconsistencies still reinforced the rush to finish work on time and on your own. As I mentioned earlier, one of my students had a stroke that year and came back to the class after a few months in the hospital. I placed him near a boy who seemed to be patient and would not mind helping him, but after awhile the student complained that helping Robert was too difficult and he couldn't get to his own work. So perhaps even though I encouraged students to help one another, I still placed the pressure of getting your own work done. Early finishers were rewarded with free-time or special jobs (such as feeding the class pets). Students could not do that if they were helping others. My efforts notwithstanding, school is an independent endeavor, and the point of it is how much you can do on your own.
So when Amir complains, he is making fun of Cam, but also complaining that he cannot get his work done. Chris offers to help and admits that he does not really care if he finishes his work. I laugh, because I am proud of him and his bravery. He is saying it is okay not know how to do something and he will help (line 9 and 10). Chris comes to be Cam’s advocate saying, "I will help you. No problem". I answer by giving him recognition for helping another student. My participation in this discussion is inconsistent. In one instance I am defending Cam as the kids laugh at Amir’s imitation of him (line 3), I also excuse kids from helping another student (line 7) and I recognize Chris’s public attempt to help him (line 10). Is it obvious that I am unsure what the fairest practice is? Somewhere I think the students’ dilemma represented my own. Is my classroom practice sustainable? How can I continue to advocate a community where we help one another and apply inquiry to our judgments and at the same time grade, rank and praise individual achievement?

2) Using space and materials

In this section, I will discuss classroom identity practices in relation to space and materials. The students’ discussions illuminated how space and materials govern the economy of the classroom and a person’s position.
a) Budging: Being next to "this person, or this person, or this person"

In this first example, students discuss “budging” when a student cut in front of another student in line. When it was time to change activities and go to another classroom (such as the gym or the music room) the students would jostle and rush to get to the next classroom first. I thought these were innocent competitions, to race and be the first one there, but the students taught me otherwise.

(1) Jason: Budging, Jaspreet

(2) Jaspreet: Some people want to be next to this person or this person or this person or their friend but I don’t care (Adam laughs)... or I don’t know... so they like budge and they say, “Oh yeah, I save my spot here. I saved two spots... but I saved you a spot here as well and here, as well”.

(3) Gowa: Then you’re stuck at the back of the line.

(4) Kids: (laugh)

(5) Jaspreet: And they keep budging.

(6) Student: Or some people want to get somewhere before other people.

(7) Gowa: Yeah, to get there 10 seconds early

(8) Kids: (laugh)
Amir: That usually happens because they think it's like a race and people want to get to music. Then you say, no running in the halls and they say "I'm speed walking, I'm not running" (in his pretend voice), so I think you should just normal walk not power walk. Just walk in the halls.

Gowa: I agree with everyone. You should walk it's not a race. If you are trying to be near a certain person, don't worry. I don't think an extra 20 seconds in the hallway is going to make a difference. Chill out, line up, walk slow.

Student: Chill out, man.

Jaspreet: I think, like there should be no budging.

"Budging", May 6th

Why did the students care if they got there first? Or stood near a particular person? In later discussions, the students discussed how Mrs. Smith, the music teacher, had students sit on risers in the order they came in. Therefore, where you sat would dictate whom you worked with in class time. Jaspreet mentions that the reason why people budge is to be near other people:

Jaspreet: Some people want to be next to this person or this person or this person or their friend but I don't care.

Students told me that it was important to stand near the front or near particular people for group organization and partner activities. If you come in last, you
might not hear the instructions and you might get partnered with an undesirable partner. The materials and space of the classroom could be used to position or allow for particular access to activities. Where you stand, what resources you have access to and how you control games all determine your classroom position and identity.

I learned how crucial this was when I was training for the Canadian World Ultimate Frisbee Team. During practice there were several activities in which you needed to work in partners or small groups. I was a newcomer to the team, and I was still learning some skills. I wanted to be careful whom I worked with, because I did not want members of higher status to know that I had not mastered a particular skill yet. I made sure that I stood near people who were learning too, so I would feel comfortable making mistakes. I did not want to partner with people who were captains or higher ranking because I was not ready to display my discomfort with my lack of skill.

I realized for partner activities it was important to stand near someone with whom you wanted to work. You had to stand near a possible partner during the instructions. This is relatively easy for an adult, where you can wander and choose the place you sit or stand. In classrooms, teachers often dictate where you can stand or sit. It is very difficult to give instructions if students are moving around. So often teachers assign seats or tell students to stay in one place (such as a seat on a riser or a particular spot in the circle). That is why the students
"budge" in line to get a spot near a person they want to work with or rush to the next classroom to choose the spot where they will sit.

b) Couch: "They Only Keep the Cool People"

In the next example of using space and materials to position, students discussed how other students could use the couch unfairly. In this case the students were using "turns to sit on the couch" as a means to exclude or include students depending upon how cool that person was. When I brought the couch into the classroom, the students created a system in which each day of the week was a new person’s turn to sit on the couch. Your turn meant that you got to sit on the couch to read and at some instructional times. If a student finished her work early, she could read or do other activities on the couch. We did not have strict rules about sharing the couch when it was not "your day", and sometimes students would invite their friends to sit on the couch.

(1) Jason: Couch

(2) Seanna: It’s not really fair that people say it was their day and other people say... it was Eddie, Chris, Shelly, Jasmine’s day.... then Amir, Tannis, Jaspreet, Eddie are on it... it wouldn’t be fair like...

(3) Tannis: Then people kick them off. Then, say Amir came and kicked me off and left the other 3 people.

(4) Shelly: When someone kicks you off they think... oh you don’t like me and they only keep the cool people.
(5) Seanna: Any suggestions? Ms. Kong

(6) Gowa: I suggest we go back to being very strict. You only sit on the couch if it is your day.

(9) Chris: I think... I think

(10) Jason: Get your hand up

(11) Seanna and Tannis in unison: Chris

(12) Chris: I think it might be ok to go on like this cause, what if your day is like Thursday instead of like Monday (kids: noooo) well it can go on. Don't make a big deal about it.

(13) Tannis: The thing is Chris, is what if... 3 people it isn't their day and kicks one of the people off and they like one of the people more.

(14) Seanna: And you kick the people you like off. Kristina.

(15) Kristina: Well, if one of those people... it's not their day and say they are done their spelling and somebody who is on the couch and it isn't their day said... like "don't kick Julia off" and stuff like that... it's just an example.

(16) Gowa: Yep, yep. Seanna could you summarize?

(17) Seanna: I think we should use Ms. Kong’s idea.

(18) Shelly: I think we should have our own.

(19) Jaspreet: I think it should just be the people’s on the couch day.
Kids laugh and say in unison: That’s Ms. Kong’s idea!

("Who’s cool", May 6th)

In this practice the students reveal the hierarchies of the classroom. Gallas (1998) imagined that some of the more dominant boys in her room have a:

...giant hierarchical diagram of the children in the class (and the teachers), and each day they reconfigure it, depending on who they perceive to be standing at the top, or, to put it into my framework, who orchestrates the best performance. (p. 97)

In this case, I had no idea that the couch was being used as a space to recognize “cool” people. I did not know that other students were allowing “cooler” students to remain on the couch and asking students with a lesser position to move. When Shelley states, "When someone kicks you off they think... oh you don’t like me and they only keep the cool people (line 4), " it shows that whether you were asked or not depended upon your status.

Chris wanted things to stay the same and "not make a big deal about it". The kids were adamant that this would not do.

(12) Chris: I think it might be ok to go on like this cause, what if your day is like Thursday instead of like Monday (kids: noooo) well it can go on. Don’t make a big deal about it.
(13) Tannis: The thing is Chris, is what if 3 people it isn't their day and kicks one of the people off and they like one of the people more

I also wanted the practice to stay the same and I did not want to over-regulate. Over-regulation went against some of my "progressive" notions of allowing students to work things out for themselves. However, the students taught me that the default practices often fell in favour of more powerful students.

3) What other (kids) say about you

In this section, students describe situations in which other students used discourse to describe and identify each other. I present two specific instances in which students describe discursive positioning practices: "naming names" at class meeting and using "blame".

a) Naming Names

A tension arose in the class when students debated whether it was all right, in a class meeting, to name who had done something "wrong". For instance, if a student was being unfair at a 4-square game, was it appropriate to name the offender in class meeting? The students were upset that other students could name them and use the class meeting as a means of "getting back at them":

(15) Alexi: Say they hurt you and you walked away so you didn’t get in trouble.
(16) Gowa: Then you bring it to class meeting so they get in trouble (teacher mocking voice) “not naming names but...”

*(May 2nd class meeting)*

So instead of hurting the person physically and possibly getting in trouble, you could bring it up at class meeting and let other people know what that person did. This was a passive aggressive way of dealing with issues. It was a safe way to “hurt someone’s feelings.

In the next excerpt, they say that it does not really do any good since you never deal with the person who did “it”.

(1) Kristina: Naming names, Alicia.

(2) Alicia: I don’t think it’s fair [to name names during class meeting], because what if it’s just a rumour. What if they didn’t do it and...(Markus interjects: it’s a rumour). And they just heard it

(3) Shelly: It makes that person feel bad and they didn’t want to come to school.

(4) Jason: I agree, you’re afraid

(5) Kristina: Only if that person really did it. If you are spreading a rumour there is no point in naming the names, because that person didn’t do it. I think you could only say it if it is a problem.
(6) Alicia: But still you know how you said you can't bully a person. What if they are using it to bully that person?

(7) Gowa: Good question

(8) Jason: But if you don't name names they keep doing it and then it won't make a difference.

(9) Gowa: hmmm

(10) Chris: What Jason is basically saying if you don't name names it's good not to name names but it's bad not to. Like what if you think someone did it and they say "No it's a different person". That's their opinion because they might have saw who really did it. You just thought they were the closest to what happened, they must have done it.

(11) Gowa: I wonder why even though we say in class meetings "not naming names" but everyone knows who it is. It's like naming names (kids "yeah"). I want to know what is the importance of blaming.

(12) Student: To make the person feel bad

(13) Gowa: To make a person feel bad.

(14) Student: Yeah, to give them hurt feelings.

(15) Alexi: Say they hurt you and you walked away so you didn't get in trouble.
(16) Gowa: Then you bring it to class meeting so they get in trouble (teacher mocking voice) “not naming names but...”

(17) (Kids chant not naming names but not naming names, not naming names... chatter agreement)

(18) Gowa: They do that? (students chatter)...Chris is patiently waiting, all the commotion made me forget.

(20) Chris: But like if ... you’re not going to name names you can’t really solve the problem.

(21) Jason: You have to figure out who did it.

(22) Chris: And basically if someone hurts you, you want to get them back, you don’t want to hurt them physically and that’s probably why they are doing it at the class meeting they want to get back at them. They really hurt them so they are looking for trouble.

(23) Gowa: Seanna, could you choose one more person.

(24) Seanna: Kristina

(25) Kristina: I think it’s bad to name names because that person acts like that person was at a crime scene.... and that person came “you name the names” (she says in a silly voice)

(25) Gowa: I want to say one thing as a teacher, I have a suggestion that instead of bringing things up at class meeting that you go out and talk to that person in the hallway and no one will need to
know what the particulars were and it will be you and that person solving it.

("Naming Names", May 2nd)

The students have astutely summarized the advantages and disadvantages of "naming names". For students who do not have a lot of power, you could name the student in class meeting and then let the rest of the students know what sort of unfair practices are happening to you. "Naming the name" was significant to the person who was identified because your actions were made public to the community. Some students were genuinely scared of being isolated and identified in any sort of manner. Nobody wanted to be blamed and thus they worked hard and took on various practices to avoid a particular identity. The key idea being, that one would not want to be known to the group as a "particular type of student". At the same time, if you did not name the person who wronged you, the problem would be inadequately addressed. The person could continue what she was doing protected by anonymity.

In the same discussion, students bring up the use of "rumours". Rumour spreading is a powerful tool to position other students and exert power. The students briefly discuss this early in the meeting. They point out that rumours and fear can be tools used to position (see lines 2-5). More powerful students, who feel they have the position to speak, can tell other students about you. How many opportunities do you have to answer the rumour or the person spreading the rumour? I introduced the rule of "not naming names" so that this exact
situation would not happen. I did not want class meetings to become occasions where students embarrassed or publicly complained about others; however, this practice emerged in any case:

(11) Gowa: I wonder why even though we say in class meetings “not naming names” but everyone knows who it is. It’s like naming names (kids “yeah”). I want to know what is the importance of blaming.

As the students discuss, the class meeting can be a space where you can "hurt people" without physically hurting them. However, Chris is not satisfied with this and feels that you cannot solve things or stop people if other people do not know whom the perpetrator is (see lines 20-22). Jason and Chris argue, that it is important to know who is causing the problem so it can be stopped. Possibly the person might feel chastised and then discontinue his or her behaviour. Being labeled, identified or threatened with identification might be enough to make a person discontinue his or her behaviour.

There are not many possibilities for dealing with children who hurt other children. If a child hits or hurts them back, they get in trouble as well. My students and I had agreed to various creeds in the classroom: we don’t hurt people, we won’t make them feel so bullied so “they can’t learn or come to school”. The one sanctioned practice was to bring the issue up at class meeting.
(25) Gowa: I want to say one thing as a teacher, I have a suggestion that instead of bringing things up at class meeting that you go out and talk to that person in the hallway and no one will need to know what the particulars were and it will be you and that person solving it.

In my suggestion, I have made the solving of problems a private one. This is one of the occasions I stepped in as a teacher, to arrest the practice and take away its power by making it private. The power of the practice was that it was public. The more people who knew what you did, the more people could think of you as a "bad" person. I felt that the children were disappointed by the idea of going in the hallway to solve the issue. Somehow it was not as satisfying. The number of times I saw or facilitated problems in the hallway did not correlate to the number of times students complained about other students in the class meeting.

b) Blaming

The students also talked about "blaming" where it was important to identify and know whom the perpetrators were for wrongdoings in the classroom. The students used this term on many occasions. It would appear on the Class Meeting Agenda with great frequency. Some students would list it if they wished to address being blamed for something falsely or to discuss students chanting or pointing out mistakes in Gym class. The children used the term to discuss incidents where a person or groups were identified as having "done
something”. You could have made a mistake in a game or instigated a situation that caused some sort of “trouble”. It was significant because your identity and your actions were made public to the community. Some students were genuinely scared of being isolated and identified in any sort of manner. Nobody wanted the blame and thus you worked hard and took on various practices to avoid a particular identity. The key idea being, that one would not want to be known to the group as a “particular type of student” who caused trouble or made mistakes.

One particular incident was especially troubling. This incident involved Alison who was a student who did not typically get “in trouble”. I came back from lunch and found all of the students distressed. During lunch, Alison had changed my list on the board. It reminded me whose turn it was to be the first person to be served food on Food Days. This was a major issue since children who were at the bottom of the class list received their food last. We solved this issue by making a note on the chalkboard whether we were starting from the top or bottom of the list the next time. After the food was handed out, Alison had changed the teacher note and marked that we were supposed to start at the top next time. During lunch, I stopped in to see how the class was doing. I noticed the note on the board had been changed. I asked who did it and why. The girls explained why it was changed; I said it was a “good idea” and left the room.
When I left, James had told me that he had asked everyone to put their initials on the board so the class could find out who changed the note. The note was put up by the teacher, was it allowed to be changed by a student? Alison went to the washroom and cried. The girls followed to console her. I was not sure why the incident became such a big deal since I, the teacher, did not see it as a problem nor did I feel the need to "get anybody in trouble".

The transcript below is the debriefing of the incident. It was an "emergency" class meeting to discuss the particular incident. In this case I was the leader of the discussion instead of one of the student-leaders.

(1) Kristina: Then someone said, "Write up on the board and put your initials". [In order for the handwriting to be matched] Cause you said it was ok I don't think there was any reason to blame someone.

(2) Gowa: Exactly.

(3) Shelly: They wanted to identify them so they could blame them.

(4) Gowa: The purpose of identifying someone would be then...this is my idea, you have a ...

(5) Alexi: Blaming person.

(6) Gowa: Yeah and you want to blame somebody and have a victim, but there wasn't really (student says, "I know") anything to blame anybody over.
(7) Shelly: They wanted to identify them so they could blame them.

(8) Gowa: The purpose of identifying someone would be then...this is my idea, you have a ...

(9) Alexi: Blaming person.

(10) Gowa: Yeah and you want to blame somebody and have a victim, but there wasn’t really (student says, “I know”) anything to blame anybody over.

(11) Student: It was a teacher’s note. It was to the teacher, so that next time we start from the bottom.

(12) Tannis: But some people thought it was one person and then when the one person said “I did not do it” and that people thinks that she more did it [sic] and she didn’t.

(13) Gowa: And really that’s not making the person feel good and what would you count that as? I have a word for it.

(14) Students: Bullying? (3-4 students say it at the same time)

(15) Gowa: I have a word for it “harassment”.

(16) Kristina: Yeah, making it so that person doesn’t want to go to school.

That person said to me and all of the other people in the girls’ washroom that that person didn’t want to go to school. She was going to move right away to a different school.
Gowa: Was she worried about people coming to her and saying, "you did it, you did it" right?

Kristina: Yeah

Gowa: Someone could worry that they can't come to school. They would worry that they will be known as a certain kind of kid.

Markus: Like oh "that's the person that did it"

As the students have described before, the reason you identify or blame someone is so they "feel bad". The students also called this "bullying", which was a term I used, so the person "would not want to come to school anymore". This relates to earlier discussions we had where certain actions make people feel like they "do not want to come to school anymore".

Kristina: Yeah, making it so that person doesn't want to go to school. That person said to me and all of the other people in the girls' washroom that that person didn't want to go to school. She was going to move right away to a different school.

Gowa: Was she worried about people coming to her and saying, "you did it, you did it" right?

In the week that followed, 'blaming' continued to be an issue. I proposed that we write about 'blaming'. I was hoping to investigate this with the students so
that we could, I hoped, get to the bottom of the issues. In a sense if we could be aware why we do it, it might happen less often.

c) Writing about Blame

In the next transcript we are reading and sharing our writing. We went around the circle and each shared our writing about "blaming". In the process of me sharing my writing, the other students start to share what their experiences have been. Lauren begins by explaining how blaming is used as a means to protect yourself and get back at others. Chris confirms this later on and explains how blaming or “tattling” can be used as a means to have people focus on someone else and avoid being identified yourself. The identifier does not become the identified and therefore maintains power in the situation.

In this next transcript, I am sharing my writing and the students are responding to my written piece.

(1) Lauren: Well, I have two things: one time I blamed something on someone just to get back at them, but I didn’t. They did something to me. They hurt my feelings, I felt like I did not want to go to school. I think we should make some rules about blaming.

(2) Gowa: Really

(3) Chris: Groundrules (Groundrules are the class "rules" for how we treat each other and interact)

(4) Gowa: Can you put that up? Groundrules for blaming. Thanks, Chris. (He writes it on the board, under
the class meeting agenda. We will discuss this later and add new rules to our Groundrules)

(5) Gowa: Ok. (I return reading my writing) We are writing about blaming right now. The kids are openly saying that they want kids to know certain things about each other. I can remember being petrified when I was little about being tattled on or blamed. It got so bad that I did not want to be known as the bad kid. It was so bad that sometimes I didn’t speak or do things because I was really worried about being known as a kind of kid. I think it stopped me from being a risk-taker. I think stopped me from learning or trying things.

(6) Chris: Yeah that happened to me. When I was a little kid I never ever did stuff. I tattled on other kids instead.

(7) Gowa: You did?

(8) Chris: Yeah. I tattled on everyone and no one tattled on me.

(9) Gowa: So you tattled on everyone so they couldn’t tattle on you?

(10) Gowa and students: Ahhhhhhhhh! (Said all together in amazement)

(11) Gowa: What a good idea. (Students chatter)

(12) Gowa: When you do this? You make someone else excluded so you get to stay included.
Students: Ohhhhhhh

Gowa: Does that happen, too?

Students: Yeah

Robin: That happens a lot to me

Gowa: You end up being the kid that no one wants to play with. So the other kids get to stay included. That’s interesting. (I continue reading) “I think... I saw how the bad kids got treated and I did not want to be that kid. I didn’t want to get yelled at. I didn’t want a chalk brush thrown at me. I didn’t want to be made fun of, so the best thing was to be the quiet person” (Alison and I make eye contact, we smile).

Student: Who’s quiet in this room? Laughter

Student: Ms. Kong was quiet? Impossible.

(ohhhhh... hahahaha ...laughing)

Gowa: I’m quiet.

Student: Oh, you’re an excellent student. You’re quiet.

James: You’re not a very quiet teacher. So you’re not an excellent teacher. That’s what the paper said from the printer. (This refers to another incident, which I explain in Chapter 5)

(Writing about Blame, May 3)
I find it interesting that two students explain that sometimes you do something unfair to other people so that you can protect yourself and your own position. Chris points out that the tattler never gets told on. The object is to tattle enough, so you never get told on. To exclude so you are not excluded (line 6-8) Robin admits that sometimes she is the one who gets excluded so other kids can stay included (line 16).

I am always astonished by the vulnerability of the students and what they admit to the class and me. If you admit you get excluded, what happens? Do they stop excluding you? Do the students feel guilty? Or is this just a statement of the way things are? The students explain that these practices that identify and "blame" others can be paralyzing. You do not act, because you are afraid to be known as a type of student.

Discussion

[L]earning to become a 'student' entails not only learning attitudes and behaviours that serve as a foundation for the years of schooling to follow, but further entails learning social categories, definitions that serve as organizing principles to provide a foundation for one's success in school and subsequently in the workplace. (Hudak, 2001, p. 15)
Subjectivity does not exist in isolation. Each of us are who we are from multiple socio-cultural influences... I do not exist as an individual, but as a subject construction. I have been socialized more so than individualized. (Berry, 1998, p. 31)

Learning is important to them, but finding and maintaining a place in their social milieu, gaining the attention and respect of their friends, is much more important. (Gallas, 1998, p. 13)

**Context of School**

The students discussed and described how they felt about their positions as a consequence of a variety of classroom practices. Apple (1999) argues that the institution of school configures relations of power, meaning and identity within it. School is a place where what you know and how well you demonstrate it affects the ways others understand you. Varenne & McDermott's (1998) main thesis was that the "characterizations" of school, primarily organized identities of who was successful and who was a failure. They wanted to look at the circumstances of the positioning and the "legitimate consequences" (p. 5) of such positioning. The language of positioning relates to language that summarizes or categorizes the relations of power.

The discourse from our class meetings helped us understand the subjectivity of our own identities. Who we are is a socially constructed condition, affected and influenced by notions of power and place. The conversations took place within
the constructs and boundaries of an institution - school. As Luke & Freebody (1997) explain, institutions are related to the means of economic production:

Our position is that institutional context is not benign or neutral, but rather must be seen as informed by social contracts and historical projects for molding, making, and disciplining human subjects, populaces, and communities - and for shaping and distributing cultural and material resources. (p. 3)

School practices and their effects are not direct reflections of adult hierarchies, but perhaps nuanced reflections of the needs of the institution. Are you successful? A failure? As the students take up practices, such as spreading rumors, they show the internalization of the culture; a culture that needs failures to function (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

Categories, rankings and sorting: doing recognition work

The institution of school names and categorizes for success, failure, English language proficiency, gender, race, class and sexuality as several studies have detailed from a socio-cultural perspective (Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Toohey, 2000; Gallas, 1998; Lensmire, 2000; Dyson, 1997). These social categories are determined by perceived differences from social norms. In our class meeting discourse the students categorized and are categorized in other ways: Are you cool? Do you know anything? Do you wear glasses? Are you good at sports? Questions such as these, framed the meaning of our interactions and as some students stated, it "makes you feel bad". The students "see with the eyes of the
institution" (Kaufman, 2001 p.48) and noticed the differences and categories of the institution.

These institutional identities or "positionings" (Toohey, 2000) involved what Gee (1999) termed "recognition work" wherein identities are made visible to others.

The key to Discourse is 'recognition'. If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) then you have pulled off a Discourse. (Gee, 1999, p. 18).

If the speakers understand what is happening, then Gee (1999) contends that a Discourse has been "pulled off". Each action must be similar enough to prior "performances" (Gee, 1999) in order to be understood. So the practices of our classrooms come from repetitive practices and Discourses of school, so the participants understand what is happening. These social forms or Discourse rely on ideas of power, success and failure.

Gee's argument entitles the individual a certain amount of agency to affect how she is perceived; as long as how she answers the practice is similar enough to the Discourse. However, as many theorists have discussed (Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Foucault, 1977; Apple, 1979) access to "language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places" (Gee, 1999) are determined by the relations of power and knowledge. If the students were to answer a practice or
suggest changes to a practice, they needed to answer within the confines of the Discourse.

In this recognition work, identity does not come from "being"; it is an "achievement" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). A quality cannot be recognized on its own, for it needs the participants to recognize it. In my data, the students discuss ways their identities are recognized in the relations of the Discourses in which they participate. Within the relations, identities ensue; these identities are related to the Discourse. The identities of the classroom participants exist outside of the participants (Varenne & McDermott, 1998); the knowledge and categories inhabit the language of the institution and "acquire" students in the practice. As Varenne & McDermott (1998) state, "...seeing how the participants themselves reveal... that which they cannot escape in a particular setting, that which is already there when they start and remains when they end" (p.16).

The processes of being acquired by an identity have real effects. As I have stated before, those categories and economics of practice can determine students’ access to knowledge and other resources of the culture such as "language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places" (Gee, 1999, p. 18). Varenne & McDermott (1998) describe the interpretation of school behaviour in three stages:

First, a child reads; second, someone gives this reading a place within a particular symbolic system that transforms the act into
"success" or a "failure"; third, someone delivers the consequences of the placement. (p. 6)

In our class meetings, this was illustrated not in relation to reading, but in relation to sports or math.

**Being identified and learning your "place"

In daily activity, students conform and learn to modify to the needs and values of the school arrangement: be smart, be athletic and identify those who are not. Vareme & McDermott (1998) discuss how the students knew how to "hide" or to "look":

... [S]ome kids simply knew how to look like they were learning, that others knew how to hide from getting caught not knowing something, and still others could spend their day picking their spots and strategizing when they should take risks with the cultural currency of the classroom and when not. The cultural currency of the classroom, of course, grades children by how much they look smart or dumb. We also had a growing sense that when the children were not overwhelmed by these strategic concerns, they seemed to be more happy and accomplished people. (pp. 38-39)

Gallas (1998) also points out how students modify behaviour according to risks:

Children alter their behaviour or assume public selves as a result of very subtle encounters in their world. In some cases, their behaviour changes to tolerate more risks as a social being; in others,
it changes to minimize risks as social being; in others, it changes to minimize risk. (p. 102)

Both theorists comment about the idea that students are aware of the social risks of the classroom economy. Gallas (1998) argues that all children alter their "public selves" in order to be safe and can gauge particular social risks. It could be that all students do make choices to minimize or maximize particular risks, but that at the same time each position has a particular range of choices for risk and that the particular range is specific to the position. The student that is perceived as "the smartest" has a certain spectrum of options as compared to the child that has the position of "language disabled". The "smarter" child can choose to display her knowledge by raising her hand when she knows an answer and the "language disabled" child can choose to avoid eye contact when the teacher asks a question or simply not give an answer.

Varenne and McDermott (1998) described this positional classroom economy, where some students had positions where they "simply knew how to" look like they were learning and for others it is a somewhat stressful activity of choosing "spots" to hide or look like one is knowledgeable or able. Depending upon what position a student has been afforded in the classroom, will determine what her perceptions are of her own particular risk and their range of options to affect the classroom perception.
For each action in the classroom, there is the "risk" of being identified as a particular type of student. It is a risk to do certain things, such as change a note the teacher made on the board or to sit beside a more powerful student who will notice your lack of knowledge or skill. These risks and maneuvers take place throughout the orchestration of the school day.

All of these risks involve the possibility that someone will point out your difference to the group and make you "feel bad". Some theorists have noted the ways students react in seemingly unkind and cruel ways to one another (Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Toohey 2000, 2001; Gallas 1998). Toohey (2000, 2001) noticed how Surjeet and other students from minority language backgrounds were yelled at or spoken to in a harsh way in disputes over materials or when she attempted to initiate conversation. The students in my class also comment on the use of blaming, rumours and insults as a source of control and pain. The consequences of perceived differences meant that students could speak harshly to other students.

As Hudak (2001) explains, the process of naming the world through a process of sorting and differentiation is the way human beings make meaning; however the process of differentiation can be "toxic in that they do not allow a person to be fully human" (p. 14), especially when individuals do not have "full control over the production of images of themselves" (p. 14). What is perceived as different can also be perceived as inferior (Green, 2001, p. 25).
Hudak & Kihn (2001) argue that the way to fight the effects of positioning and identity practices is to form community. The class meeting worked towards building community, it allowed a relatively safe environment, where the expectation was to describe and challenge the practices, which located our difference and hurt us. Class meeting was a dialogic community (Toohey, 2000) where the community changed in response to "the social and personal agendas of the children" (Gallas, 1998, p. 19). Throughout each discussion I was in awe of the way the children described and answered back. Some students addressed their allotted identity and asked questions. Of course, many voices are absent from the data. It could be that not all students felt that they could speak or participate in the class meeting. I wondered about that as I was recording the transcripts. I think that looking at their absence in the data and the reasons why they are "silent" are beyond what I can address in this study. The data only looked at our meetings and did not encompass our school year and their past histories in school. However, the data suggests that some students [not only the most "popular" or powerful, but also students who had lesser positions] learned about the mechanics of the identity practices; they learned how to maneuver the discourse and practices to affect their position and thus relieve the pressures of the subjectivity.
Chapter 4

Agency: the Students Resist and Reinvent Practice

Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming - to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person. Even the learning that we do entirely by ourselves eventually contributes to making us into a specific kind of person. We accumulate skills and information, not in the abstract as ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity. It is in that formation of an identity that learning can become a source of meaningfulness and of personal and social energy.

(Wertger, 1998, p. 215)

This is our objective here: to respect humans as social and cultural creatures and therefore bounded, yet to recognize the processes whereby human collectives and individuals often move themselves- led by hope, desperation, or even playfulness, but certainly no rational plan-from one set of socially and culturally set subjectivities to another.

(Holland et. al., 1998, p. 7)

Agency: potential of teaching

The preceding chapter described the dynamics of some socio-cultural positioning practices within a classroom setting. The students described the mitigating practices that determined whether a student was seen as successful, unpopular or smart. As a teacher, it is helpful for me to see the mechanics of both the overt
and covert practices that can affect the identity of a student. In my analysis of
the discourse, I also learned how the participants in the classroom could exercise
agency. As Holland et. al. (1998: 7) explain, whether "led by hope, desperation,
or even playfulness, but certainly no rational plan" the students were not merely
subjects to the powers of school practices.

Returning to Varenne & McDermott's (1998) metaphor of culture as a room, in
class meeting the students described their positions and the implications of these
"rooms". However, here it is my contention that agency was being exercised
simultaneously. As the students described the mechanisms of positioning, they
also found new opportunities to invent new practices, to protest a practice, to
answer a practice back or to poke fun and laugh at it. In a way we learned how
to move "the furniture" of the room, so that the configuration of the room was
more pleasing or just. Some participants knew that it was possible to change the
room around again just by asking questions or raising an issue.

As a teacher reflecting upon their conversations, I am struck by the means by
which the students could exercise agency even within the socio-cultural confines
of school practice. There are means by which a person, even an 8 or 9-year-old
student, could affect their subjectivities. The actions exercised might not be
revolutionary or cause incredible change. The changes are small. In the act of
protesting gym class practices or "turns" on the couch, it could be that a tone was
set where students could question socio-cultural boundaries and see how identity is tenuous.

The students were conscious that the perception of their identity could change from day to day. Chris points this out in the next excerpt of data. This is a continuation of a conversation I highlighted in the last chapter. The students were discussing blame and how the group's idea of you can change from day to day:

Chris: It [what you did] might all change tomorrow.

2) Markus: Like on Monday, worrying that everyone will forget about it.

Chris: Cause they have stuff in their mind.

Chris: No point. It's like after you go to bed, it's a nice new day.

Gowa: Lots of you know that sometimes the next day isn't better, sometimes the next day, it's ... ("worse" they all chime in)

Students: yeah, yeah, yeah

(Things can change: April 26th)

Some of the students could see how fleeting your identity could be in the classroom. It is interesting to note that the students chime in together and say there is a potential for things to "get worse". I believe the students were agreeing
with my observation, that how you are perceived can improve or "get worse" depending upon who has said particular things about you and who remembers and perpetuates notions of your identity. If a student with a higher position of power decides to perpetuate "rumours" about what you did or your ability, your identity and position in the room can be a difficult experience.

In the next section I will look at the classroom data and highlight how the students found possibilities for agency. The final section is a discussion of some initial notions of agency and how it takes place within the boundaries of socio-cultural context; then I will discuss the possibilities for and complexity of facilitating classroom agency.

1. Answering Back: What do you say?

The dialogic perspective is a helpful notion to understand one potential for agency. Bakhtin (1984) saw language as a chain of communication, each utterance linked to the other. Speakers ventriloquate utterances that they hear and eventually come to their own voice, wresting meaning from other's mouths until it inhabits their own mouth, with their own intentions. As Toohey (2000: 13) states: "Dialogicality for Bakhtin is how speakers get past ventriloquation (using other people's language) in order to enter the communicative chain, for in finding words to answer another speaker's utterance, a person finds an expressive voice". The meaning is within the relations of the speakers. So as
speakers speak there is an utterance chain that occurs: Holland, et. al. (1998) also state that:

[i]t is not only being addressed, receiving other's words, but the act of responding, which is already addressed, that informs our world through others. Identity, as the expressible relationship to others, is dialogical at both moments of expression, listening and speaking. (p. 172)

The idea that children needed to ventiloquate was an important idea to me. The class meeting was a place where we sometimes brainstormed clever comebacks or protests to people we felt had "wronged" us. In many of the excerpts the students come up with phrases to say to transgressors. The circle of class meeting became a rehearsal and the students were given permission to answer back. However, they did not have to answer back in a passive role, they could rehearse other phrases.

a) Rehearsing: "That's my friend, I think she's fine"

The next piece of data is a brief example of the ways the students did this, although the occurrence of "rehearsal" and "answering back" is evident in other examples.

(1) Gowa: What should you do? Adults do this, too. They come up and say "so and so is wearing a...pin shirt". And you're supposed to go "wow". (I am imitating a woman whining).
Students: laugh

Gowa: You know what that’s called? That’s called gossip. What do you think an adult’s supposed to do when they hear gossip? When I hear gossip about my friends, what do I do?

Tannis: You say "Soooooo"

Laughter

Students chatter

Kristina: You could say why are you spreading that rumour?

Gowa: Exactly

Students mutter and gasp in background.

Kristina: That’s my friend and I think she’s fine.

Chris: Well maybe she was just trying it on.

Markus: You could do what my mom sometimes does. At work, someone like “so and so spilt ink all over her desk”. And then my mom walks away and it makes the person who’s spreading it feel like an idiot. They usually just shut up.

Seanna: You could say: “I don’t really want to know this” and walk away.

Students chatter
(15) Gowa: And shhhhh (pause) I’ve said “Ohhh everyone makes mistakes. There are lots of times they don’t do things like that”.

(16) Jaspreet: If someone says that “So and so, you’re wearing pink, because inside your body it’s pink. You wear pink everyday. You have pink lips.” (She points to me)

(17) Gowa: I have very pink lips.

(18) Students laugh, one says, “You have lipstick on”

(19) Gowa: Could I have your attention? Is the problem solved?

(20) Chris: I’m not really sure.

(21) Gowa: If gossip happens again...

(22) Markus: Say who cares and change the subject...

(23) Gowa: So ...

(24) Student: Yeah

(What do you say?, April 26)

This is one example of "rehearsing" our reply. In this case we were discussing gossip and rumours. I am beginning the conversation, pointing out what I would do. Markus follows suit and explains what he thinks his mother would do. I point out that everyone can make a mistake. I also want to point out that observations or identity statements are inconsistent, that performances change and perhaps we do not have a right to say people are a certain way all the time.
Gowa: And shhhhh (pause) I've said "ohhh everyone makes mistakes. There are lots of times they don't do things like that".

Jaspreet: If someone says that "so and so, you're wearing pink, because inside your body it's pink.

Jaspreet's comment is a common retort the students come up with "so what, you do that too". In much the same way that the students rehearsed their retorts, they also used class meetings as a venue to protest against particular practices.

2) I don't like this: telling people to stop

... actors do not follow scripts imposed on them or simply repeat scripts they have become habituated to and learned. They improvise, play, resist, and they laugh. At the end, they may find themselves having reproduced their position as the product of their activity is placed on a different stage. (Varene & Naddeo, 1998, p. 63)

In this section, I will look at data that shows the ways students protested particular practices. Often these issues were brought up under issues of fairness.

I was surprised about which students felt free to protest in a class meeting. Sometimes these were students who were "not popular", but perhaps the class meeting venue was a safe place to say that you didn't like something. The teacher supervised the space and therefore it would be safer than protesting in front of just your peers.
These "lower" positions are not without potential power. De Certeau (1984) argued that people do not always comply with the dictates of the institution, but have small spaces to resist and operate according to their "own desires" (Kumaravadivelu, 1999: 461). These positions of "weak" or subordinated are never without power. De Certeau (1984) argued that there are possibilities for using "tactics" to resist the more powerful:

... it is an art of the weak... clever tricks of the "weak" within the established order of the strong, an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf ... the space of a tactic is the space of the other. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 40)

a) Resisting Treatment: "My dance is a sport"

In the next excerpts I will show how the students resisted practices that they felt were wrong and unfair. In the next piece Alicia explains that she does not like her treatment during gym. She tells us later that her physical skills are not recognized.

(1) Kristina: “Yelling” Alicia

(2) Alicia: In gym I’m not really good at sports so I slipped and couldn’t pass the baton and people started yelling at me. Because I’m not good at sports. When we got back, people said she’s the worst player.

(3) Student: What? (whispers)
(4) Gowa: So what do you want to say? Do you want to say “please, don’t say that”?


(6) Gowa: I don’t know, how you know you are not good at sports. You’re only 9. You might be good at sports later.

(7) Student: You’re learning

(8) Alicia: I know, but no one knows that my dance is a sport

(9) Gowa: But Alicia, I wouldn’t say you’re not good at sports, because we are all learning.

(10) Chris: Maybe some are talented at sports and lots of people aren’t, but it doesn’t matter. You can’t be good at all things.

(11) Tannis: You shouldn’t be offended

(12) Gowa: You shouldn’t be offended?

(13) Tannis: If people say you’re not good at sports, I don’t like you. It’s like bullying. Also the people can like what they want.

(14) Kristina: I have a question to Tannis, but everyone is not good at everything.

(15) Student: Yeah, I know (chatter)

(16) Chatter... Adam: I’m good at sports

(17) Gowa: Do you think Tannis is right? Is it fair not to be good at everything?
Students: yeah ...chatter

Kristina: You’re not good at lots of things.

(she means me)

chatter... laughing

Alicia: They were just yelling at me because I was on their team and they were good at sports they were yelling at me.

Gowa: And they didn’t get to win the million dollars at the end of the race.

Students: chatter, laughing

Student: It was for fun, we were practicing.

Student: We want to win... yeah

(I’m not good at Sports, May 2)

Alicia always amazed me with the way she resisted the identity practices done to her, whether it was complaining about people not playing with her or contesting her position in gym class. This was one of those occasions. I did not teach the Physical Education class (P.E.), the principal did. He took them three times per week to give me a chance to tend to my administrative duties. I was not there to intervene or monitor their treatment of each other at those times, but I often heard about situations afterwards. P.E. was a constant topic during class meeting.
So in this transcription, Alicia is saying that she was upset at people yelling at her because she tripped and fell during a track and field relay. They were mad because they did not “win” (line 2). She was also upset that her dancing (line 8) was not seen as a sport. The teacher did not provide opportunities for dance and therefore the other students did not get to see her proficiency at dance. Thus they did not know that she could be good at something physical. The context and the demanded performances determine the ensuing identity. If your parents put you into after-school soccer and then you play soccer at school, you are going to look more able. The same can be said for learning to read or having an understanding of the literacy practices of school. The closer the match between home and school culture the more likely the chance that one will be viewed as proficient.

Afterwards Tannis replies in a way that perplexed me at the time: she told Alicia not to be offended and this seemed out of character for her. She was usually the child who intervened for other students. But as I look closer, she seems to be saying that’s it’s ok not to be good at everything. We shouldn’t expect that of everyone:

(11) Tannis: You shouldn’t be offended

(12) Gowa: You shouldn’t be offended?
(13) Tannis: If people say you're not good at sports, I don't like you. It's like bullying. Also the people can like what they want.

(14) Kristina: I have a question to Tannis, but everyone is not good at everything.

(15) Student: Yeah, I know (chatter)

(16) Chatter... Adam: I'm good at sports

Adam adds in that he is good at sports, but later Kristina chides me that even I am not good at everything. Maybe if the teacher isn't good at everything that makes it ok? We later discuss that fact that as students they are learning and the identity of not being good at something isn't fair because you are learning. This concept was brought up by me and was a recurring theme.

b) Stopping ridicule: "No More Insults"

In the same theme of "telling people to stop", Adam brings up an incident in which Jason was teased about his glasses.

(1) Markus: Those two, insults.

(They argue who is going to go first 'after you', 'no you'. We all laugh. Lauren yells "Time to go home").

(2) Gowa: Do you want to say it or not?

(3) Adam: Ok. When we were making our bug costumes, someone got this thingamajiggy they made it into two thingeys and were walking around saying
"these are my glasses." And then they were passing them around to all people, who passed them around and were wearing them. Then it's not really nice to the kids who need glasses or contacts.

(4) Gowa: Well what do you think?
(5) Jason: (who wears glasses, puts his hands on his hips and says in a silly, mad voice) That's mean.
(6) Students: giggle
(7) Gowa: What does the class think?
(8) Lauren: NO MORE INSULTS (she yells)
(10) Markus: No more insults or strike, strike (students laugh)
(11) Amir: I don't think they're trying to insult people. They're trying to be funny (Jason: But they are).
(12) Adam: The joke is going too far... like to Africa.
(13) Jaspreet: I don't think they should insult them. Just think how would you like if someone did that to you?
(14) Gowa: Maybe we should check with the people who do wear them and see how they feel. I wear contacts and glasses and don't really feel bad about it. I used to when I was a kid and in fact I wouldn't wear my glasses to school. I just would squint to see. I can understand about feeling bad about that.
(15) Tannis: Last year Jason was ok with it, because everyone liked his glasses, because he kept on getting new ones (kids giggle).

(16) Jason: (in a baby voice): I don't like it this year.

(17) Gowa: Markus does it bother you? (Markus: Sometimes) Eddie does it bother you? (Eddie: mmmm... I don’t know). If it bothers one person in the class we don’t do it.

(18) Adam: I think some of those people thought it was funny because they did it too.

(19) Tannis: People wearing glasses were doing it.

(20) Jason: I don’t care. I didn’t do it.

Students chatter.

(21) Gowa: Can you summarize?

(22) Adam: Don’t insult people wearing glasses.

(Insults: June 20th)

Students who wore glasses had difficulty at the beginning of the school year. In September, Jason's mother came to let me know that Jason was getting bullied at lunch by Adam because he wore glasses. Also, Markus would not wear his glasses to school, because he was worried that he would get made fun of.

Wearing glasses was one of the reasons you could be bullied. In response, I spoke to the class about making fun of glasses. I said that the teasing was "getting in their way of learning". We discussed how it was everyone's right to
learn and they needed to feel safe and be able to see. If they felt bad about wearing glasses, they would not wear them and they wouldn't learn. This concerned the students quite a bit. Now, in June, Adam is the one bringing forward the issue of teasing and glasses.

Eventually Jason stopped being bullied by Adam, and Adam became an advocate for bullied kids. He frequently suggested that we have an 'inclusive' goal each week where we set a class goal to play or work with everyone in the class. The kids kept track with a checklist on their desk, and ticked the person's name off if they played with someone. The goal was to have everyone's name checked off by the end of the school year. This excerpt of data suggests that it is helpful to have an ally in order to resist practices.

3. Inventing a New practice

Even with grossly asymmetrical power relations, the powerful participants rarely control the weaker so completely that the latter's ability to improvise resistance becomes irrelevant. (Holland et. al., 1998, p. 277)

A person has no choice but to live with these imperatives but can nonetheless confront them on every detail. (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 9)

a) Inventing Rules for 4-square: "King can't call when he is not out"
In the next excerpts, the students bring up practices that are unfair or exclusionary and the class improvises or creates new practices. They know that each practice can be changed if it is not fair or is being used to exclude. In the next excerpt the students do not like that the King of 4-square can make the rules. This game is played in 4 squares and players try to pass the ball to each other according to the King’s rules. Some Kings would try to keep his or her friends in the game and force out the others. It was a game that excluded. As we learn later, the students did not like this and developed some other rules. Alicia and Hanna, two Grade 4 girls who were not as popular as the others, brought this issue up to the class.

1) Amir: Rules, Alicia and Hanna

2) Alicia: Some people, when we play Four Square (Alison “mhm... except they are not here right now”) they like... Kings... like... Kings bounce in their square and go away and they say “time out... I’m talking to someone”. So then they talk, then they bounce it in your square and say you’re out. Then they say “I’m talking to someone”. They say, “you’re out, you’re out”. If you say “no”, they get their own ball and play somewhere else.

[Alicia is talking about the game of 4-square, where the "king" of the game can bounce it in your square to "get you out" or call time-outs for an unfair advantage.]
(3) Robin: And when you’re doing something and someone sees it from a different angle. Like... say I’m Knight and um... and someone says the Jack bounced it on my foot and I hit it, and uh... people are calling this and not letting the King call it.

(4) Amir: Sometimes the King just wants their friends, too.

[Amir is referring to the fact that sometimes the King wants to only play with her friends and will get all of the others out]

(5) Chris: Sometimes, sometimes the person... who’s out...

(6) Tannis: (Whispering) Can you pick me?

(7) Alicia: Tannis

(8) Tannis: I just have one thing to add. That they should... the king wanted to start a new game, that was [one] of the reasons because they came up to me and Alexi and she said ... the person said... "We’re going to start a new game and so and so won’t be able to play"].

(9) Adam: No Excluding (he says in a sing song voice)

(10) Tannis: And then I said “No I don’t want to play that” (Gowa: very brave) and I don’t think that ummm they should do that.

(11) Markus: Ms. Kong sometimes ... they say King calls... they call it when they get out. So King calls is actually a
bad rule. Cause the King always says “line ball” or redo.

(12) Chris: I did that this morning.

(13) Markus: Chris...

(14) Gowa: Kay, just ignore him.

(15) Tannis: Chris, there is a balloon under your hand.

(reminding him to raise his hand)

(Students are getting upset with Chris’s propensity to call out his ideas, they are reminding him to raise his hand)

(16) Alicia: I was King (students laugh as Chris pretends to raise hand with a balloon under it)

(17) Gowa: Can we get back to the suggestions?

(18) Hanna: King can’t call when he is not out, when he really isn’t.

(19) Robin: It should be fair.

(20) Robert: I have one more suggestion. King calls every other shot except the ones in his square. The other people call it (students: yeah)

(June 20th using games to exclude)

The issue ends with a final rule being re-written. In this quick interplay, the students have told the girls who exclude that they do not like it. The games were being used to exclude or include different students. And if the students did not
cooperate with the King, the player with the most power they go and play a new
game. Tannis was asked to play the new game and take the ball away (line 10).
Tannis, even though she was a Grade 3 student, had a high status in the
classroom. I noticed with my encouragement, she repeated that she did not want
to do that. Can a teacher's power have that much to do with student actions?
Other times I felt powerless to change things. Adam reminds the students, in a
loud manner, of the "no excluding" rule. The values of the class are to "be fair"
and "don't exclude". The class uses these values to resist unfair play.

The next excerpt is interesting because a higher status child, Amir, challenges a
practice that benefits two students who are new to the school and relative
outsiders to most of the play. Amir challenges our Joketime routine. The class
leader ran Joketime and chose whose turn it was to share jokes. It was a valuable
time where students who were on the periphery of participation, could join in
and display knowledge or skills. This activity was not heavily supervised, so the
students used it for an opportunity for carnival (Bakhtin, 1984b). I often came to
join Joketime at the tail end of some very high and loud laughter, only to have it
quiet down suddenly as I joined the group. I am sure that many inappropriate
jokes were told at that time.

(1) Amir: At joke time and stuff... Markus and Cam always
have funny jokes... I don't think it's really fair...
usually the vice-teacher never picks anybody else
but the people who have funny jokes. Yeah... like
Adam has his hand up and nobody picks him. Any suggestions?

(2) Adam: yeah, once I forgot my joke... I waited so long.

(3) Lauren: Because we usually have some good girls ... what does that matter? You should still pick girls.

(4) Amir: I think Robin gets picked a lot (Robin smiles at me)

(5) Ally: but no other girls do

(6) Amir: Markus

(7) Markus: Well most people just pick the people who have funny jokes. Cause they want to hear a funny one and they don't want to hear a groaner ...and um... and um... at the start of the year that happened to me? Because usually Cam got it so...um... he has really, really funny jokes.

(8) Amir: Kristina

(9) Kristina: They usually ask the person who has a joke book or are really funny. I don't think that's fair. I think they should pick girls AND boys (Gowa: alternate?). Everybody. You have your hand so high for a really funny joke and everybody thinks it's really bad.

(10) Gowa: Amir could you summarize what you think we should do?

(11) Amir: Well, actually I think Jason and Kristina are laughing because it was them.
(12) Gowa: Oh. Let’s give Jason and Kristina a chance to talk about what we should do.

(13) Jason: Yeah well some people are really good and they don’t really get picked. Just because someone is not good at something doesn’t mean you don’t get picked.

(14) Gowa: How are they going to get good?

(15) Jason: Yeah

(16) Amir: Well I think that when you go boy, girl. It should be that the special helper is boy, [he] goes “I pick Cam” and the girl goes and then they pick Cam again and then another girl goes and they pick Cam.

(17) Gowa: pick one, pick one

(18) Students chatter:

One voice rises: and says: “I think we should go around the circle.

Yeah, go around the circle.”

(19) Gowa: Ok, ok

(20) Amir: We’ll try and go around the circle tomorrow.

("Being Funny", May 6th)

In this excerpt, Cam and Robin are known for being good joke tellers. This is one area of school where they shine and are known for doing something desirable. I was a little bit uncomfortable with the fact that the more popular kids were mentioning their names and trying to change the practice. In lines 3-5 Lauren
brings up this issue and assents that it is an issue of gender. The girls do not get picked at all, except Robin. Kristina then suggests that they alternate, but as the boys point out it will only be a girl then Cam again since he is the "funniest" boy.

(14) Gowa: How are they going to get good?

(15) Jason: yeah

I am trying to communicate that in order for everyone to have a chance to learn and "get good" they need a chance to practice.

My question (line 14) is the usual question we ask seems to be a consistent theme: how were students supposed to become "good" at things if a student does not have a chance to try or practice without judgment? The students parroted this and frequently said things like "you’re just learning" or "It's our education".

(13) Jason: Yeah well some people are really good and they don’t really get picked. Just because someone is not good at something doesn't mean you don't get picked.

Jason seems to be articulating a class value that everyone deserves a chance to try because "how are going to get good".
4. Carnival: playing with identity

From its very abstraction and mimicry, which make representation itself thematic and thus ironize everyday usage, play moves these identities and figured worlds in which they are embedded closer to consciousness. (Holland et. al., 1998, p. 237)

In most of the excerpts of data there are elements of carnival (Bakhtin, 1984b) in which the students make fun of the structures and expectations of power. They respectfully poke fun at the notions of the teacher as perfect and challenge the commonly held ideas of school. Bakhtin (1984b) described instances where the village would have a carnival and parody the authority figures of state and religion. These occasions were necessary events in order to "disturb the conventional relations" (Holland et. al., 1998, p. 238). In these times, the regular routines of power are arrested and unlearned and there are new possibilities for identity.

a) Making Fun: "Who's an excellent student?"

In this next excerpt, the students found an interesting piece of paper in the Computer Lab and brought it in to the class meeting to share. It was written by a student, and detailed how to be an "excellent student". The students brought it to class to laugh about. It challenges many of the notions of successful school participation.
(1) Gowa: (I am reading the paper) "There are three things that make an excellent student". Let's read it and see how many times it says not to talk:

"Students should not talk, not talk out loud and listen. An excellent student would not talk while a teacher is talking (kids giggle). That would disrupt the class. When someone else is talking they wouldn’t talk out loud. They would raise their hand instead (kids laugh). Finally, an excellent student would listen when other people are talking. They wouldn’t... so I conclude an excellent student would do the above".

(3) kids yell “five” four”

(4) Gowa: It's very interesting. What Amir and James have talked about? Please give your comments to Tannis please

(5) Alicia: Amir’s brother always gets a DT [detention] for not talking and the whole class does. So maybe it’s them.

(6) Amir: Yeah, Ms. Fenton’s class

(7) Gowa: Do you think an excellent student doesn’t talk?

(8) Kids: Nooooo

(9) Lauren: An excellent student is a joker

(10) Gowa: Oh really? Then you are the champion.

(11) Students laugh
(12) Chris: Lauren, you should count how many times you can't talk.

(13) Lauren: 16 times (she says with a giggle)

(14) Gowa: So all of us in this class would be in trouble

(15) The students open and close their mouths in comical fashion and silently mumble words.

(16) Gowa: Don't you think [being] an excellent student means you don't talk?

(17) Kristina: If you can't talk then you can't ask questions, then you can't ever get what you are doing. And if you can't talk then you can't cooperate or do anything.

(18) Students call out together: You don't learn...

(Are you an “excellent student”?, May 2)

There are many interesting scenes here. I am taking another teacher's assignment and critically looking for the issues and identifiers of a good student. This was obviously written by a student, and made for a teacher and class to read. The kids are poking fun, (line 9/10) and questioning who does that and what the problem is. Kristina points out how silly it is, because you cannot answer questions or cooperate, she mentions that you couldn't “learn” and interact. Filax (1997) says that students should parody and play with notions and categories of identity. It is my major contention that unless a teacher leaves herself and the institution of school up for playful critique, the students will not be able to understand the full potential of their agency.
Discussion

...technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

(Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

Overview of agency

Foucault's (1988) discussion of the "technologies of the self" has been a very powerful idea for my work. As the students struggled to and located spaces for agency, I began to see the possibilities for teaching. In a way I could teach or illuminate the "technologies of the self" in order for them to employ greater agency in their lives. Foucault's (1972, 1979) earlier works looked at discursive practices and the relation of power and knowledge production. It is interesting that Foucault (1988) began to write about these ideas of agency after exploring the means of power, knowledge and discipline. In my own work, Foucault's conception of discipline, power and knowledge helped me understand the underpinnings of my work as a teacher, but I was discouraged by the determinacy of the socio-cultural constructs. However, much like Foucault I could see that there were opportunities for agency.

Continuing with the idea of the technologies of the self, Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom (1993) explain agency as "beyond the skin" and as involving "cultural
tools" within a socio-cultural framework. They describe that an appropriate unit of analysis would be an "individual(s)-operating-mediational-means" (p. 342) and therefore all agency is mediated agency, by virtue of the mediational means employed (Wertsch, 1998: 24). All action and the subsequent meanings take place within in a social construct. The actions have to be similar enough to the social constructs of understanding in order for meaning to transfer. As Gee (1999) states, "Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses" (p. 18).

The mediational means that an individual has available to them are defined by the positions of the institution or context. With regard to language, what you get to say, to whom, and what actions you are allowed, depend on your social position. How a person acts or how their performances are interpreted are defined by the "group's expectation of performance... as it is the group that provides the locus of evaluation" (Wertsch et. al.: 339). Sizer and Sizer (1999) discuss the effects of the group as well:

A students' sense of ... agency is often dependent on her sense that there is something she can do, which is valued by others. Not just other kids, but adults as well (p. 71).
This quote is very powerful because it speaks to the relations and the effect the relations can have on an individual's sense of agency. The data speaks to a sense of care and affection that the class had towards one another. I believe it is only within this dynamic that the students can explore multiple means for agency. There needs to be safety. There needs to be intimacy and space for play.

In a class meeting, most practices were discussed and held up to scrutiny. If you did not like something, you could say so. The premise was that if something was making you "feel bad", you could bring it up for the group to discuss. We might change what we do or we might continue, but with a new understanding. I am not saying that it became a site where we entirely usurped all constructs, but we did manage to find small spaces to struggle and change. Berry (1998: 31) felt that it was essential for students to have "...opportunities and environments in which counter-hegemonic practices are modeled, expected, and allowed without rudeness or danger to the young child's critical literacy".

Possibilities for agency in a classroom

Agents can find agency as they learn how the social environment positions them. Filax (1997) refers to this idea of recognizing how the limits that "construct subjectivity" can be transgressed by becoming aware of the "ways in which limits frame one's life" (p. 265). As the students learned more about the practices and discussed how the practices affected them, they were able to make change.
These positional identities are not infinite and enduring. As Holland et. al. (1998) state:

Yet positional identities are not without their disruptions. The same semiotic mediators, adopted by people to guide their behaviour, that may serve to reproduce structures of privilege and the identities, dominant and subordinate, defined within them, may also work as a potential for liberation from the social environment... people sometimes focus upon the objectifications of themselves that they find unacceptable. These objectifications become the organizing basis of resentment and often more active resistance. When individuals learn about figured worlds and come, in some sense, to identify themselves in those worlds, their participation may include reactions to the treatment they have received as occupants of the positions figured by the worlds. (p. 143)

As the students learned about the "semiotic mediators" that reproduced the identities that subordinated them, they gained power. It is interesting that at this point of subordination there is power, if the agents are aware of how the constraints affect them. Foucault (1979) described this critical coexistence with power and the potential for resistance:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It
exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence like power, resistance is multiple. (p. 142)

The idea of resistance existing within multiple sites and being the property of multiple agents is remarkable. Once the students knew that the roles and positions of the classroom could be laughed at and questioned, the possibilities became exciting. Students could pose ideas that they were "sweet and sour" or "girl-boys" [these quotes were from a conversation we had about gender]. Both the teacher and the students could be liberated to affect one another and make change.

Wenger (1998; 215) proposes that there is an "unrealized wisdom" to be gained from understanding positions of nonparticipation. As the students discussed the why and the how of their subjectivity, we could take time to re-invent, answer or arrest exclusionary practices. In the discussion comes a new practice and a new "locus for evaluation":

Learning communities do have a strong core, but they let peripheral and core activities interact, because it is in these interactions that they are likely to find new experiences and new forms of competence necessary to create new knowledge. (Wenger, 1998, p. 217)

The class meeting allowed students to make worlds "through serious play" (Holland et. al., 1998: 235). With play the students could "experiment with the force of our acting otherwise, of our projectivity rather than our objectivity"
(Holland et.al., 1998, p. 236). In the experimentation and improvisations one constructs new meanings and new possibilities. Gallas (1998) discussed her own observations of play in the classroom. She comments about her observations of her students creating plays in the classroom:

Thus I saw children as both in and outside their bodies, perceiving different realities in the world around them, identifying different social roles that were open to them, and experimenting in the social milieu of school with those roles that attracted them and seemed to "fit" within their present world (p. 6).

This is important as students "parody the limits of identities" (Filax, 1997, p. 266).

Play draws upon recognized speech genres, yet is able to take the participants beyond the immediate context or setting. For instance, the students might use the patterns and speech formations of the class meeting to communicate, play and revise the immediate context of which they speak. The students could "create other worlds by recombining elements" (Holland et. al., 1998, p. 237) from what they already knew.
Chapter 5

Implications for Practice: Being the Teacher

The difficulty of constructing knowledge about race and teaching was more akin to building a new boat while sitting in the old one, surrounded by rising waters. In this kind of construction process, it is not clear how or if the old pieces can be used in the new “boat”, and there is no blueprint for what the new one is supposed to look like... And of course while one is trying to build the new boat, one is stuck inside the old one, struggling to negotiate tricky waters...and unpredictable currents.

(Cochran-Smith, 1995, p. 553)

Introduction:

In the previous chapters I looked at notions of identity and socio-cultural theories of positioning and agency. I also described and isolated data from class meetings that illuminated the positioning practices of our classroom and the possibilities for agency within the constructs of our classroom practices. I feel fortunate to have captured a fleeting glimpse of positioning and agency told from the point of view of children. In the process of describing identity practices and their effects, I learned how we could change aspects of classroom practice and relieve the pressures and confines of identity practices within the classroom. In conclusion to my thesis, I will summarize the characteristics of teacher practice that could allow for children to negate and resist positioning practices of school.
Limitations of this study:

As with most teachers completing their graduate studies, I have written this thesis on weekends and evenings after working 10-hour days and spending my Saturday marking assignments. My life as a teacher is busy and all encompassing and leaves me with little time to reflect. I go to bed with my head full of stories and worries about the students and my practices. I do not feel competent enough to tell others what to do. All in all, my study is a brief "snapshot" of what happens all the time.

Everyday students find themselves positioned by particular practices and resist them as best they can. As I walk around and supervise recess breaks, I witness students resisting and exercising agency all of the time on the playground. I see children getting the attention of another by twisting his arm or standing in the tether-ball line-up whispering about another student. Those are occasions for agency, which the children invent in the spaces they are allowed within the practice (Holland et. al, 1998).

I believe that class meetings and my skepticism about teacher identity allowed a safe venue for children to describe positioning practices and exercise agency with the aid of a teacher or more powerful adult.
However, I cannot generalize what has happened in one year and recommend particular practices to other teachers. Each class, each year and each location is unique. Gallas (1998) also described the unique situation of each class:

Thus, to my mind, when a teacher considers what it means to truly inspect the cultural and political boundaries of the classroom through the research process, there are two notions that must be held constant: first, each class is a unique, living community; and second, each individual within that community represents an evolving consciousness. In other words, the research setting is indeterminate, unpredictable or... unfinalizable. Nothing that has happened before can be expected to happen again in the same way, and everything that has happened before is absorbed into the body of classroom life. (p. 146)

I feel the best I can do is locate the stances that I took to facilitate the children's rich inquiry into their locations and constructions of identity.

There are limitations to my own point of view. I chose the selection of data and I wrote the analysis. The study is from my perspective as a teacher and that analysis is limited. After reflecting on my study, I find the voices and perspectives of the students are missing from the study. In retrospect, it would have been interesting to collaborate with students and have them select the data and contribute to the analysis. In the data, there are a few instances where I am not sure what a student meant when she responded to another student. It would
have been helpful for the student to explain what she meant, and then explain what she thought was occurring.

There are times where I describe how I think other students perceive a particular child. In those cases, it would be helpful to see what she thinks about her position or identity in the classroom. I tried to be tentative in my descriptions of students' positions or qualities. I have tried to communicate how tenuous identity is to my students, and because of that I did not think it would be consistent to write elaborate descriptions of each child's identity.

In the class meeting, the students described what was happening to them. Only a few of the students are captured in the data. Perhaps the students who spoke were the ones who felt they could speak, by virtue of their more powerful positions in the class or perhaps the class meetings actually enabled students who would usually be silenced an opportunity to speak. It was not everyone. It is difficult to know what was happening for the children who did not speak, since the digital recorder only captures the speakers. My data and my analysis are limited by the technology that was available to me. Using a video camera would have been a better approach, but was complicated by the fact that I was teaching at the same time and needed to be available to teach and not be behind a camera recording the children. Because of this, I cannot even begin to explore the silent children.
Despite the limitations of my research, I used what I learned in my reflection to change my own teaching practices. In the next section, I share a story about the following year, after I recorded the data for this thesis. I describe my perspective of a child "with" autism and how he found inclusion and acceptance in the class. Then I will look at the role of the teacher and the role I feel teachers play in facilitating activities which pro-actively and methodically allow for children to resist and re-invent practices that marginalize and hurt them.

*The story continues: the following year*

I kept many of the Grade 3s the following school year in my classroom as I moved on to teach a "straight" Grade 4 class the next year. I was interested to see how the "old-timers", my former Grade 3s, would welcome the newcomers, the other Grade 4s. *How would this community, which had experience discussing unfair identity practices and making changes, incorporate the newcomers?* *How would we re-invent our "rules" about inclusion as we reorganized the confines of our community?*

One of the "new" Grade 4s was a boy named Jacob who was identified as having mild "autistic-spectrum-disorder". I wondered how the students from the previous year would welcome Jacob.

Jacob showed sensitivity to loud noises, certain textures or touches or changes in routine. He showed his irritation by yelling or sometimes striking his hand at you. When I was giving instructions, he would "heckle" me as he shouted his responses and remarked about my teaching. He usually yelled, "What do you
mean? when I would be in the middle of a long explanation and he did not understand. He liked to rub and hold Michael, his aide's, head as they read instructions together. If a joke was made he laughed harder and louder than the rest of the children. These behaviours were different than the "normal" behaviours of school.

At the beginning of the school year, his classmates would exchange knowing glances at his behaviour. The students looked at him as he reacted and screamed. He was the last one chosen for partners or group activities. I interpreted their glances as corroborating an old story: "There he goes again. Jacob is different". Subsequently, Jacob did not have anyone to play with at recess or lunch. He told his mother about the ways he would hide from bullies at recess and lunch break.

One afternoon, he walked her around the school ground and showed her all of his hiding places.

So in consideration of the research I had learned last year, I sought to change this. I knew better. My students knew better. A community of children can change the way they treat, observe and discuss difference. As I tell this story and describe the ways this class of students accepted and included Jacob, I do not want to come across that these responses were pre-meditated and mechanistically applied. I maintained the values of inclusion and inquiry. The other children, who had been in my class the previous year, modeled and maintained these ideas.
I began with myself. Jacob liked to stand close to a person as he was talking to him. I let Jacob come and lean on me or touch the zippers on my jacket.

Eventually, he liked to press his cheeks and his eyes to mine, if I had something intimate or serious to tell him. Michael did the same, we allowed Jacob to express himself, as he needed to. We did not react or correct his preferred ways of communicating. I found that his "heckling" stopped because I had explained to him that it was distracting (of course, we had this conversation cheek to cheek).

Jacob developed affection for one boy in the class, James. He was a boy from my previous class of Grade 3s. He held a lot of power in the room. He initiated and planned the games at recess and was known to be academically proficient by the rest of the class. James enjoyed writing and liked to read his stories out loud to the rest of the class. We laughed at each new story and Jacob laughed especially loud. When it came time to choose the new seating arrangements, Jacob always chose to sit next to James. James did not make fun of Jacob. He included him in the outside games and chatted with him while they ate lunch together. He listened to Jacob's ideas and laughed at his stories. James included Jacob and because he did this, the rest of the class included Jacob.

James loved to share his stories with the rest of the class and make everyone laugh. During Writing Celebration, he would dramatically act out his stories and Jacob would laugh very loudly. James liked to spend his free moments in class
writing and Jacob decided that he would also like to do this. This was a change. I followed Writing Workshop practices, which allowed children to choose their own writing topics and then edit, revise and share with the help and support of their peers (Calkins, 1994). Jacob at first disliked and complained about having to choose his writing topic. He would throw his pencil at writing time and tell Michael he thought the teacher should tell him what to write. One time he yelled, "Is she out of her mind?"

After sitting with James, Jacob decided to impress James with a creative piece of writing (he told this to Michael privately). So Jacob wrote a comic about himself. This was similar to some private writing he has done with a therapist that explored his autistic tendencies. In the writing he listed all of his likes and dislikes. He portrayed himself as a very sarcastic stick figure who shouted his ideas in capitals.

After his story was complete, he wanted to share it with the class, just like James did. So he raised his hand during "Writing Celebration" and asked to be the next person who shared. Michael and I shared tense glances. We knew that Jacob would explain his "autism". So Jacob came and sat in the author's chair. He read his story. The students laughed at his jokes and the remarks of his character. Then at the very end he said the last sentence, "I'm autistic. So what!" I waited for the students to react to his proclamation with cold silence, but
instead they proceeded to give him "question or comments" about his writing, just like we always did after students shared their work.

From our class-meeting discussions I impressed upon the students the importance of noticing when others were excluded and that it was the job of the "powerful" (a word I used with my students) to include and defend other students. Slowly, Jacob grew to have a wider group of friends. He learned how to bring up issues at class meeting and tell others how he needed to play at lunch and wanted to play 4-square. The students told him how to join into their games and where to meet them.

As the year proceeded, Jacob found more friends and more opportunities to "fit in". The school year ended with a field trip to the beach. When we arrived, the students ran to the water, ripped off their shoes and socks and proceeded to wade into the waves. Jacob stood along the edge watching and the other students called for him to come and join them. Jacob said that he could not because the rocks bothered his feet. So Michael helped him to remove his shoes and socks and carried him across the pebbles to the water so he could join the students who were waiting for him. He joined in their chasing game and screamed with the others as they splashed water on each other.

Later, his parents came to pick him up at the beach. They waved to him from the parking lot. Jacob grabbed me by the neck and I lifted him to carry him across
the rocks. He giggled, waved and called to his parents, as I struggled to carry him across the rocks (that were also hurting my feet). His parents walked toward us and they called to Jacob in astonishment; they could not believe that he was comfortable with being carried by his teacher or that he went into the water with his friends. Before, he would have complained about the embarrassment and the water. His Father took me aside later and said that that moment was significant to them, because Jacob was not scared of the other kids' reactions and trusted Michael and me to carry him across the rocks. They would have never guessed that Jacob could be so accepted and feel so safe.

Of course, as I have retold this story I have summarized and left out some of the more salient details of Jacob's participation. I hope to impress upon the reader that a class community that upheld values of inclusion, discussed classroom positioning practices and exercised agency with the aid of a teacher can be a community which accepts differences of a child "with" special needs; they call to him and ask him to play in the cold, ocean waves and he grabs the neck of his teacher to be carried to join them.

Role of a teacher

Being a teacher" is not a quality of a human being. It is a quality of a culture that requires at certain times, and not at others, that "teacherliness" be displayed, a display that involves making success and failure documentable. (Varenne and McDermott, 1998 p. 17)
As I have related in a previous chapter, with my experience of exclusion and marginalized identity, I do not feel like I can inhabit the role of a teacher in a convincing way. Most of the teachers whom I knew in teacher training or in the staff room, seemed to have white and middle-class identities. I did not feel that I had to take my role as a teacher seriously, because the role did not seem to fit my identity and experience.

In my role of a teacher, I feel conflicted and at odds with what I am supposed to do. I allow most things and then sometimes invisibly put on the teacher coat and begin to direct the conversation or the practice. Sometimes I direct children for what I perceive is for their own good. I give them tips about why you do things. Sometimes the teacher coat is a majestic coat with lots of pockets. More often it is a smelly bathrobe, like the one my mother would wear when she bossed me around. When I boss my students around, I call myself the mean teacher. This is a cue for my students to pretend to yelp like bad dogs. We are playing.

In the data, there are times I choose to relate as a teacher or I ask the students if they wish to act as a teacher at this moment. We learn how to use the teacher role to suit our needs of the class. That might mean the teacher making a rule of inclusion or it might mean intervening on behalf of a student who does not feel comfortable telling another student to stop.
The students' feeling of safety and comfort is necessary in order to interrogate the current practices of school and the identities of being a student and a teacher. They have to feel safe and see that the role of the teacher and the students are exactly that—roles. The students need to have a chance to not take me seriously.

There is a particular air of chaos or carnival that begins to happen when a teacher allows the students to do this.

Gallas (1998) relates a story of the students tying her shoes together. When the students are allowed to play with the constructs of authority, it can leave the teacher feeling vulnerable and on the edge between chaos and the usual behaviours and outcomes of school.

For some reason I found them difficult to control. There was an air of chaos they create while I was teaching. It was not the air of direct challenge to my authority ... but was rather mischievousness. For example, it was not unusual for Sophia, who sat right up front by the teacher as a rule, to very slyly pull a prank while my intern or I were teaching. On more than one occasion, I finished a lesson only to look down and see that Sophia had tied my shoelaces together. It was funny, I had to admit, but extremely undignified, and on its own level it represented a very direct challenge to my authority. I was definitely learning something new about power. (pp. 143-144)
I find the idea of students feeling comfortable enough to touch or play with the teacher fascinating. In the usual practices of school, the teacher is the authority and to touch her shoelaces would be too intimate of an act.

I had a similar experience. I would wear open-toed sandals in the summer. Jenna started a behaviour trend in the last month of the school year. She noticed that if she put her fingers between my toes I would let out a little cry of surprise.

The other girls realized that this could be fun and would wait for when I was distracted by giving instructions and then they would put their fingers between my toes. They would laugh at my cry of surprise. They thought it was great fun and would not stop even if I pleaded.

On one particular day, they took special joy in surprising me. It was the opening Sports Day ceremony. As the Vice-principal I had to give a short speech to the school. I was also tending to my class, so I had to speak from where we were sitting in the courtyard. As I was speaking to the school, the girls stuck their fingers between my toes and I let out a "yelp" in front of the school. They laughed and I laughed, but I worried what my colleagues might think. The students were touching me in an intimate and unconventional space. Who has ever touched their teacher's toes? I can remember the most intimate I ever got with my teacher was getting my work marked at her desk as noticing that she had lipstick on her teeth or that he had a hole in the collar of his shirt.
I find these interactions to be crucial in order to explain the phenomena of what I have learned from my students. In order for children to describe what the identity practices do to them and find liberation from the hierarchies of power that govern and rule the classroom, the students have to realize the humanity of their teacher, interrogate the role of student and teacher and the usual practices of school. The power or authority does not belong to the individual teacher, but to the constructs of institution. The children and the teacher have to see these ideas of authority and power as constructs and they have to feel comfortable enough to touch them and reinvent them.

**Using your position: agency by design**

On one hand, they were upholders of the status quo, representatives of the institution whose actions were constrained by, and at the same time served to continuously renew and recreate tracking practices at the school. On the other hand, they were autonomous individuals who were capable, through their individual interactions and daily experience, of casting themselves as student advocates and, in doing so, of creating variation in and exceptions to institutional tracking practices. (Harklau, 1994, p. 359)

...[T]o view the world through a critical lens or already viewing the world this way in order to help our students do the same. With that in mind, when issues arise in the classroom, part of our role as teachers is to help bring those underlying issues to the surface, and
the conversations we have that help to do that. (Albright, Church, Settle & Vasquez, 1999, p. 151)

The teacher designs and plans the activities and routines of the classroom. It is part of the role. The class meeting was a carefully planned venue for students to change the practices. The opportunity was a safe place for students to critique and change practice. The practices set in class meeting translated to other activities. For instance, in gym class or during a language arts lesson students would comment that maybe a practice would make other students feel "left out" or "bad, because they're not the best ones". As Berry (1998) relates

Teachers ... are responsible for providing opportunities and environments in which counter hegemonic practices are modeled, expected, and allowed without rudeness or danger to the young child's emergent critical literacy. It seems that teachers, in many cases, take counter hegemonic statements from young children as disrespectful, disruptive, and misbehaviour. (p. 31)

In the beginning of my teaching career, I felt that I needed to be able to direct the class and have the students cooperate without questioning or challenge. The class meeting helped me see that I need to be consistent and allow students to interrupt practices and critique, as we are mid-way through a process.

In order for students to apply inquiry and invent new practices they have to be able to see where the constructs are permeable. Dyson (1997) refers to this as allowing activities to be open to "children's language and experience". Dyson
explains that permeability raises its own sort of tension, in that as children explain their sense of things the adult has to think how they will respond. The class meeting became a place where students brought "diverse perspectives to bear on familiar worlds, that is, [it helped] them imagine and re-imagine varied ways of being" (Dyson, 1997, p. 76).

What I saw my practice do was allow children to respond to the forms and practices of the classroom and bring new perspectives and invent new ways to be in the world. At times, I felt like I was laying the culture and power structures bare. If the kids could understand what was valued and needed from them, perhaps they could answer or manipulate practices to their own needs. Leland & Harste (2000) discuss this in a body of research that has emerged called critical literacy. The idea behind this is to focus on the Language Arts curriculum and texts and how it describes marginalized identities.

A goal that generally receives much less attention focuses on encouraging children to think critically about what they read - pay attention to what a particular text is doing to them, how it is positioning them, and whose interests are being served by how the text is written... a curriculum that highlights diversity and difference while calling attention to how we are constructed. (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 3)

In much the same way that Leland & Harste refer to text, the class meeting allowed the children to look at actual classroom practices and incidences and
have the students interrogate them to see how the practices were impacting and constructing them. My hope is that teachers could use the class meeting or other discussions to have children discuss and describe the positioning practices and how they are being affected.

However, as Berry (1998) stated earlier, a teacher cannot be invested in her role as authority figure. The students have to be able to critique what is happening and even critique the teacher. This can be a difficult thing for teachers it might mean muting your own voice in order for the students to take action (Boozer, Maras & Brummett, 1999)

I have often said that I want to change the world and I want to change school practices that I find demeaning or marginalizing. I see the power imbalances of school and I wish to recreate the practices. However, I feel that at times my lenses as a teacher cloud my vision and I am not able to see the impact of the powers practices that I take for granted. I have found that giving the children a regularly scheduled and structured space to for conversation and inquiry into practice has helped relieve the pressures of classroom positioning practices.

My practices are based in my understandings of the past. If, we, as teachers took a moment to inquire into the socio-cultural constructs that position and constrain student identities we might see the past recreating the present. For action and reflection to effectively bring social change, teachers need to open up to the
diversity of experiences in this world and also have a full compassionate understanding of those of us who sit outside the norm.
References


