

Embodying exclusion: The daily melancholia and performative politics of struggling early adolescent readers

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ABSTRACT: Examining the body as a site and product of various ongoing discursive processes can provide insight about how identity impacts students' learning and understanding of their classroom experiences. This qualitative case study investigates how two, urban, eighth-grade students responded to being identified as struggling readers, concentrating specifically on their embodiment of those responses while reading. Drawing upon socio-cultural theories of literacy, performance theories of education, and psychosocial qualities of identity, I argue that the struggling reader identity – which often labels and positions students through deficit lenses rather than recognises and builds upon the strengths or multiple ways students make meaning of printed text – is felt, lived, and embodied as part of students' daily interactions in schools. Findings show that the embodied performances of both students revealed a deep, internalised sense of loss, grief, and exclusion in the classroom while reading. Yet, both students also attempted continuously to rewrite their identities as readers through a variety of other embodied performances with texts.

KEYWORDS: Struggling readers, identity, embodiment, reading performances, middle school.

On the first day back to school from the winter vacation, Raquel¹ pulled a young adult novel from her backpack and opened to the page she had last read. A quiet, petite African American girl, Raquel often blended into the background of her ethnically diverse, eighth grade (ages 12-13) English Language Arts (ELA) class. That day, she sat near a back corner of the room, obscured from sight behind many of her larger classmates. Folding her hands on the table and resting her chin on them, Raquel read her novel in that position for a few minutes as the class settled into the routine of independent reading time. When she saw that her teacher was across the room working with another student, she sank lower into her chair, let her head fall to the side, and closed her eyes. Her book remained open on the table before her. Raquel held that position, undisturbed by classmates and unnoticed by any adults, until independent reading time was finished.

Across the room, her classmate Omar was less fortunate in escaping detection. A small boy of Middle Eastern descent, Omar caught the attention of his peers as soon as he extracted his book from his backpack. He had pulled out a tall, slim compilation of comic strips based on the television cartoon series, *The Simpsons*, along with his notebook. Another boy, who sat at his table, lowered the novel he was reading and called to Omar, “Yo, let me see that book.” Omar slid it to him only to have his

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

classmate laugh, point to the book, and ask, “What level is this? G?”² A female classmate then teased him that he was reading “baby books” in class. Omar lunged across the table, retrieved his book, and explained that he was “just reading the book for fun”. He then left the book unopened on the desk before him and twisted his body around to see what other classmates were doing. He kept looking around the room until the teacher approached him.

Though Raquel and Omar drew different kinds of attention while reading in the classroom, both students were officially regarded as struggling readers by teachers who currently taught them or had taught them in previous grades. In this article, I describe how Raquel and Omar responded to being identified as struggling readers, concentrating specifically on their embodiment of those responses. Considering the body as “a site for knowledge” and “an object of practice in students’ and faculties’ daily pedagogical lives” provides a fresh lens through which to view the social dynamics and experiences within classrooms (Hamera, 2005, p. 70). Thus, I present how Raquel and Omar embodied those identities as struggling readers, both in support of that identity and in response to the ways they were treated and positioned as readers.

I argue that the struggling reader identity – which often labels and positions students through deficit lenses rather than recognises and builds upon the strengths or multiple ways students make meaning of printed text – is felt, lived and embodied as part of students’ daily interactions in schools. Reading identities are the accumulation of beliefs, characterisations and official documentation of what students can and are willing to do while reading printed texts. To this end, personal, social and institutional values combine through discursive norms to produce one’s official reading identity in school. Scholars have contended that the struggling reader identity is often not necessarily constructed on students’ abilities, but on their adherence to school norms for social behaviour (Alvermann, 2001; Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006) and even on teachers’ personal beliefs about students’ non-academic backgrounds (Triplett, 2007). Examining the body as a site and product of various ongoing discursive processes can provide important insight into student learning and understanding of their classroom experiences (Warren, 2005).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Socio-cultural perspectives of literacy

The notion that literacy and literacy learning are socio-cultural and contextually situated complicates traditional views of literacy as autonomous and purely cognitive processes of making meaning of texts (Collins, 2000; Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). This understanding applies not only to the social context of the classroom space, but also to the individual stances of each person within the context based on their social and cultural experiences beyond the classroom. Scholars have produced much research documenting socio-cultural disconnections between students’ and the classroom’s understanding of literacy – in particular, the reading of printed texts –

² The school used the Fountas and Pinnell (1996) Guided Reading Leveling System to determine students’ reading levels. In this system, books were categorized from A-Z, with A being an emergent reading level and Z being an adult reading level.

including differences about the texts that are valued and ways of responding to texts (Albright, 2001; Alvermann, 2001; Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Lewis, 2000; Wade & Moje, 2001). To identify a student as a “kind of reader” in school (for example, “good reader, “avid reader” or “struggling reader”) thus invokes certain values about reading and learning in that context. Moreover, to gain classroom recognition as a good reader, a student must align his or her performances with texts with classroom norms and values about reading.

Performance theories of education

I combine socio-cultural views of literacy with performance theories of education to challenge traditional ways of understanding students’ reading work and investigate the everyday experiences of so-called struggling readers. While conventional, staged perceptions of performance often convey notions of rehearsal, fabrication and entertainment, performance theories of education contend that teachers’ and students’ everyday social interactions and physical behaviour are central to teaching and learning. When repeated over time, those performances become “invisible”, “normal”, “natural”, and expected (Alexander, Anderson & Gallegos, 2005; Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2006). Butler (1990) refers to the ongoing iteration of such performances as *performativity*.

Performativity thus refutes the notion that we are born with a set identity; rather, who one “is” in a certain context is a temporal performance based on the everyday social activity, language, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that comprise learning (Lewis, 2001). It is the recurrence of these performances throughout students’ years of schooling that work to inscribe students with particular kinds of reading identities – identities that seem to essentialise and limit all that a student can do with texts.

In this regard, performance theorists build upon the poststructural notion of subjectivity, which emphasises an understanding of identity as contradictory and continually shifting (Davies, 2000). Students perform temporal subjectivities rather than static identities in response to the ever-changing social dynamics of the classroom. That is, discourses that constitute the structure of a social space also produce a subject within it (Youdell, 2004a). Students, therefore, are discursively produced subjects within the social contexts of the classroom, and their performances within the classroom carry the potential to challenge and reinscribe what others know as “normal” or “right”.

Performance theorists expound upon subjectivity with additional concepts that are especially useful for investigating the struggling reader construct. Interpreting performances and identifying a student as a type of reader implies a declaration of what someone is *not*. Butler (1990, 1999) views this polarisation of identity as a kind of loss harboured within the self and refers to that self-perception as *melancholia*. Using the example of the complex notion of identity with Black communities, Butler (1999) expounds,

the public discourse that gives us these lives...institutes a kind of melancholia for the black community which can't be overcome. It makes melancholia into as it were a kind of constitutive condition of urban black culture. There's a kind of grieving that is limitless and without end. (p. 171)

In other words, the normalised discourses that dictate publicly acceptable performances and ways of being within a social context also prescribe what is inadmissible, abnormal and deplorable. This dichotomy produces a sense of loss within the self when one does not fit in, and it is also this dichotomy that prohibits the self from mourning the loss since doing so admits one's difference and position outside of normalised discourse.

Additionally, the concept of *performative politics* offers the possibility of individual agency and change in the perceptions of identity held by others (Butler, 1997). Such agency, however, is discursive, bound by the social context at hand and produced through the socio-cultural discourses that comprise one's life experiences (Bettie, 2003). One's discursive agency may also be subject to misinterpretation or misfire, depending on the socio-cultural understandings others bring to the same social context (Alexander, 2004; Bettie, 2003). Still, performative politics offer the promise and possibility to destabilise performative patterns and reinscribe identity (See Figure 1). Blackburn (2002) states, "It is in the series of literacy performances that literacy has the potential both to reinforce and destabilise the values constructed through reading and writing" (p. 313). This potential echoes Foucault's (1980) claim that discourses are simultaneously productive and unstable. As they read school-assigned texts, students perform reading, positioning themselves and being positioned to side with, subvert or resist the discourses around reading that accompany their reading work.

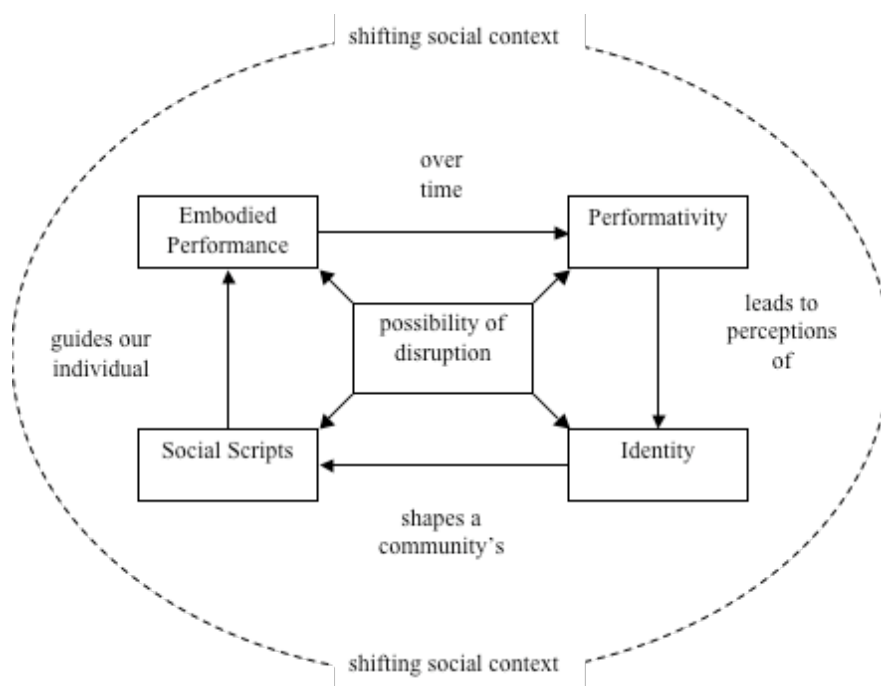


Figure 1. Possibilities for disruption within performance theories of education

Psychosocial qualities of identity

I also consider psychosocial qualities of identity to further investigate the intimate connection between bodies and identity. This dynamic is perhaps most apparent through expressions of emotion, which result from the intersection of psychological and socio-cultural constructs of the self (Jagger, 1989; Reay, 2005, 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). Since emotional responses are entwined with and expressed

through the body, psychosocial understandings of identity help emphasise that our understanding of ourselves and others in various social contexts is both felt and lived.

The relationship between identity and emotion can take numerous forms. Sometimes that union serves to confirm performative behaviours, language and values as “natural”, “normal”, or “right”. As Walkerdine and colleagues (1990, 2001) argued, emotion can stunt our perceptions of shifting subjectivities and contribute contradictory feelings of belonging and displacement that both stabilise and disrupt our various subjectivities.

Still, emotions can lead to productive performances, bolstering and directing our perceptions of self toward outlooks and behaviours that lead to change (Reichert, Stoudt and Kuriloff, 2006). Emotion can therefore spur agency and performance, and ultimately a successful reinscription of identity, as we attempt to navigate the multiple discourses within a social context. Not attending to psychosocial qualities of identity deterministically places a huge amount of responsibility (and blame) on students without considering the role that social, cultural and emotional factors play.

This study, therefore, is grounded in theoretical perspectives of literacy, education and identity that highlight one’s position and embodied performance in social contexts in order to explore the impact of the struggling reader identity on students’ daily classroom experiences and interactions as literacy learners. More specifically, this theoretical meld framed my pursuit of the following research questions: (1) What embodied performances did students attempt in order to disrupt their perceived identities as struggling readers? and (2) How did students understand and explain their identities as struggling readers?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

I employed qualitative case study methods, focusing on the ways in which single subjects in specific contexts make sense of their experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In addition, I drew upon critical approaches to interrogate the systematic social inequities resulting from classifying students as certain kinds of readers, as well as the production and reproduction of values, actions and identities involved. This article details one part of a larger, yearlong project investigating the embodied performances and reading identities of four students (Enriquez, 2009). In this article, I describe the embodied performances of two of those students, Raquel and Omar.

Data were collected primarily through fieldnotes from classroom observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and individual interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seidman, 1998) with students, their ELA teacher and other school faculty. I visited the students’ ELA classroom two to three days a week (totaling three to four hours per week), from September through June. I interviewed each participant and the teacher twice, as well as other school officials at single intervals throughout the year for 30 minutes each session. I supplemented this data with video recordings of classroom observations, audio recordings of interviews, official school documents and student-produced documents (Dyson & Genishi, 2005;

Seidman, 1998) to fully capture representations of physical performances, both expected and seemingly disruptive, that are crucial to understanding the embodiment of students' reading identities and the discursive agency they exerted to challenge those categories.

Data analysis began with writing narrative reflections after each data collection session and developing preliminary coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach afforded me flexibility to generate theories while coding and analysing data, as well as facilitated an inductive, recursive and reflexive process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Once data collection ended, I coded the entire data set for themes related to the research questions about students' reading identities.

Researcher's position and reflexivity

My primary role in the classroom was that of observer/participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), a position that acknowledges both the shifting social demands within a classroom context and my multiple subjectivities as a middle-class Asian-American female, a university researcher, and a former ELA teacher and literacy staff developer. Knowing I had previously taught middle school, the teacher sometimes asked me to watch the class when he needed to step away momentarily or to help collect and distribute materials. These moments positioned me to observe participants away from the faculty's authoritative gaze. Moreover, the students came to view me as a "tolerated insider" over the course of the year, someone whom they knew would not reprimand them as other faculty might, but who was nonetheless an adult and outside their peer networks.

To further aim for reflexivity, I sought the assistance of five to six "critical friends" for my developing analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Critical friends are fellow colleagues and researchers who lend an evaluative eye to the researcher's interpretations about the data and supportively point out assumptions or alternatives that could enrich those interpretations. Seeking the help of critical friends was in keeping with my theoretical framework, which contends that one's performance can be interpreted in different ways. Approximately twice a month, I shared preliminary analyses with critical friends to acknowledge the subjective construction of my interpretations.

Research site and participants

City School, which served as the site for this study, was a small, public, middle school (ages 11-13) in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse neighbourhood of New York City. Though the neighbourhood had recently undergone much gentrification, City School's student population continued to arrive on bus or subway from more diverse sections of the city. Within Raquel's and Omar's eighth-grade ELA classroom, half of the students were on free or reduced lunch, 11 students were Latino, 10 were Black or African American, one was Asian, and one was of Arab descent. This demographic data was roughly proportional to that of the larger school context, with the exception of a 7% White student population at City School.

Ideally, ELA instruction incorporates a diverse range of intersecting language processes: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and even viewing (Gallego &

Hollingsworth, 2000). However, like the majority of schools in the US that are pressured by federal legislation to maintain and measure strictly psychological definitions of literacy, City School focused its curriculum largely on reading and writing printed texts. The school utilised a balanced literacy and workshop approach to teaching. Thus, the curriculum concentrated on equipping students with strategies for reading, rather than a set body of literary content. This perspective allowed teachers to meet students' individual literacy needs and build on the strengths and skills they already exhibited. For example, some teaching points were "Good readers should always remember to jot their thoughts about their books on Post-its" and "Two things that good readers look for when reading poetry are *What is the author really trying to say?* and *How is the author saying it?*" Lessons focused on teaching the skills and behaviours that would help students develop into successful readers of various kinds of texts. Allowing students to choose the books they read during independent reading time, therefore, was a fundamental component of ELA class.

City School followed a class schedule common in many US middle schools. Students attended five, 75-minute classes every day, each concerned with a different academic subject and taught by a different teacher. However, teachers at City School sometimes "looped" with their students from one grade to the next in order to continue developing relationships with students and support their academic growth over several years. Along with many of their classmates, Omar and Raquel had the same ELA teacher, Charles Davis, during the previous year in seventh grade. At the start of this study, Charles' eighth-grade class consisted of 23 students. Midway through the year, one student moved away and another joined the class so that the final count was also 23 students by the year's end. Although some classes met on alternate days, ELA classes met five days a week. Charles often divided the class time into separate sessions for reading and writing instruction.

I selected student participants through purposeful sampling, which considered the maximum variation of student demographics that fitted the purpose of my study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seidman, 1998). Since I sought to explore students' embodied performances closely and in-depth, I narrowed the participant pool to a sample size of four students, two of whom are the focus of this paper. This sample size reflected criteria for sufficiency and saturation of information while also allowing me to conduct detailed research with the practical research considerations of time and cost (Seidman, 1998). Furthermore, because my theoretical basis for this study centres on the everyday experiences and performances of individual students, I did not seek a larger sample size in order to focus on the nuances of identity construction that embodied performances can illuminate.

FINDINGS

Assessing students as struggling readers

Raquel escaped my inquiring eyes during the first two weeks of this study. By completing her classwork, participating dutifully in Charles' instruction, and not overtly socialising with many of her classmates, Raquel resembled many students who fly under the radar because they blend right into the landscape with their well-behaved ways. She did not immediately strike me as someone who struggled with

reading, nor did she stand out as a student who had difficulty doing school. Raquel shared a staunch closeness with a small group of female friends who were generally regarded by faculty as responsible and well behaved, and she was hardly seen around school without her best friend, Julia. Raquel explained to me that she valued these friendships because “when I was growing up my friends wasn’t real friends to me ’cause they used to be backstabbing and two-faced.” She also had an identical twin in the same grade at City School, was one of five children, and lived in a neighbourhood within walking distance to the school. Raquel and her twin sister shared babysitting duties for their 9-year old sister, which sometimes prevented her from completing any schoolwork at home. Raquel said she didn’t really read outside of school, but if she did, it was to her younger sister with books from her fourth grade classroom.

Charles directed my attention toward Raquel one afternoon at the end of my first month of observations, stating, “We have a pen-and-paper relationship other than pleasantries. She’s very quiet otherwise, and I just don’t know where she is because of this.” Unlike many of her classmates, Raquel did not speak with Charles unless necessary, and most often she communicated with him in writing. Raquel had been one of Charles’ ELA students during the previous year. She began the school year assessed as reading at guided reading level V, but her grades and test scores did not reflect that ability.

Though her reading level was not far behind most of her classmates, Raquel’s reticent ways made it difficult for teachers to figure out what kind of reader she was and how to help her further develop her skills. She compliantly moved to the meeting area whenever Charles began a read-aloud or lesson, and she usually finished all of her classwork on time. Charles described her as “highly accountable” in class, but he worried about what seemed to be the opposite behaviour regarding homework. In addition, he perceived her to be resistant to reading, commenting, “She doesn’t like it,” and repeating, “She does it because she’s accountable.” He also reiterated that he wished he knew how to “take her [reading] to the next level, but [he didn’t] know what she need[ed] or how to help her.” Charles admitted that he didn’t always monitor Raquel’s progress, but he was concerned that if she didn’t make reading a “lifestyle choice”, merely doing school would not help her as a reader. Halfway through the spring, Charles began meeting and corresponding with Raquel’s mother in attempt to keep her on track and prevent her from falling behind.

Omar’s presence in the classroom was much more conspicuous for adults and peers. Unlike Raquel, he caught my eye the first day I visited Charles’ ELA class because he stood out from the rest of the students in easily observable ways. Not only was Omar’s physical appearance different from most of his classmates, his reading work was also distinct. Charles initially portrayed Omar to me as a “low-level reader”. At the start of the school year, formal reading assessments placed Omar at guided reading level R, which was five reading levels or more behind his classmates. This contrast was also apparent in the kinds of texts he read in class. Whereas most of Charles’ students read thick, young adult novels during independent reading time, Omar mostly read graphic novels, magazines and assorted collections of short stories. Since the classroom library consisted primarily of young adult novels – especially in the genres of realistic fiction, fantasy, horror and adventure – Omar had a limited selection of printed texts to read, unless he borrowed some from the school library.

Consequently, he listened as other students initiated discussions with each other about their books, but did not actively participate in such conversations.

In fact, Omar responded to and sought the attention of a variety of male classmates due to his generally unpopular status among peers. He especially sought social affinity with the boys in class who had not yet acquired physical maturity, but who displayed the masculinities valued among peers because they were involved in a variety of sports and extracurricular activities. Sometimes he seemed to sit equally among them, chatting about video games, movies and sports teams. Other times, he appeared to be the target of classmates' ridicule and responded partly in self-defence. As a result, Omar usually sat alone during independent reading time, sometimes of his own volition, and sometimes because Charles asked him to move in order to manage classroom behaviour.

School records showed that Omar scored below average on the state reading test and received average or below average grades in all academic subjects. Charles assured me that Omar was comfortable with the descriptions of him as a struggling or low-level reader: "He understands that, and he accepts it." He spent much time working individually with Omar, assuring him that reading books on his reading level would strengthen his skills and that with enough focus and determination he would be reading at the same level as other classmates. Yet, he also grew frustrated with what he perceived to be a lack of effort on Omar's part. In ELA class, Omar did not consistently finish or submit assignments and he spent more time reading each of his books than other students did. To push Omar's reading work, Charles often reminded him, "if he wants to play with the big dogs, he needs to step it up."

Embodying awareness, loss and grief

Concluding that Raquel and Omar were struggling readers relies largely on traditional forms of assessing students that focus on cognitive processes. Looking more closely at their embodied processes while interacting with printed texts, however, reveals a deeper complexity to their reading performances and identities. Neither student admitted she or he was a struggling reader, yet throughout the school year, their physical behaviour and emotional expressions pointed to an awareness of how that identity positioned them socially in the class. Moreover, their embodied performances divulged a deep desire and various attempts to reject and change that perception.

When focusing on her embodied performances, Raquel's behaviour appeared more to mask any feelings of difference, inadequacy or exclusion than to prove her "accountability". When the class was invited to the school library to meet with a Reading is Fundamental³ representative who was offering free books to City School's students, she quickly chose a book from the table, while other students, including Julia, took more time and care to make their selections. She waited for Julia to pick a book and sit beside her, then began whispering with her and writing notes to friends. Raquel seemed to rush through the motions so she could move on to something more interesting – something more social and that she could actively participate in and control.

³ A national nonprofit organisation that provides free books and literacy materials to communities in need.

Raquel avoided much scrutiny of her behaviour because of her performativity as a quiet, unassuming and responsible student in class. Many times, she requested to use the hall pass and was often granted permission because she completed her class assignments early. She claimed to use the pass to go to the nurse or school library, but more typically she took Julia with her to the computer lab, her locker or the bathroom. Sometimes, she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head or lay her head down on the desk during independent reading time. Other times, instead of reading her independent novel, she pulled out her Sidekick⁴ and sent text messages to other friends in school, reiterating to me that “I don’t read that much.” As described in the opening vignette, she even fell asleep. Furthermore, it wasn’t only classwork that she treated superficially; she seemed to also withdraw from events that centred on academic or scholastic experiences. At a visit to a college fair in April, while other students circulated among the tables and talked with college representatives, Raquel, Julia, and another friend, Darla, spent most of the time plotting to snatch some of the balloons that decorated the walls and empty tables until Charles approached them and offered to help them speak with some of the representatives. Therefore, although Raquel seemed to perform as a good student, her participation in academic activities was cursory.

Raquel’s embodied performances bespoke an underlying avoidance of school reading and activities, not because she was disinterested in it but because it served as a constant reminder of her exclusion from a classroom context that exalted good readers. Her embodied performances revealed a melancholia in which acknowledging or expressing grief over that loss is discursively unacceptable and therefore unthinkable for the self. Raquel rarely spoke of her reading identity. She also deflected attention about any reading difficulty away from herself and onto other factors, explaining: “Sometimes when I read books, I get bored out of it, like, I can’t find the right books for me.” In an interview, however, she offered a self-assessment of her reading work that indicated her perceived weakness but not her full acceptance of it. She explained, “I know I’m not that strong. I just don’t do it enough,” thus justifying any judgments that she struggled with reading without fully articulating any grief over it. Instead, she embodied that grief, particularly when she covered her head with her sweatshirt hood, went to sleep during independent reading time, or physically removed herself from the classroom. She said, however, that she enjoyed reading her best friend Julia’s writing but that she viewed it as part of writing, not reading.

Omar’s melancholia was more conspicuous than Raquel’s, in contrast with Charles’ reflection at the beginning of the year that “[h]e understands that, and he accepts it.” What Omar may have accepted was the fact that he needed to commit himself to completing his assignments and sustaining his practice with independent texts for his reading level, but he did not appear to accept the loss of his social position in class due to his identification as a struggling reader. In fact, when asked about his goal for the year, he answered that it was to “do all my work and get a higher average than before.” His desire to read the kinds of books his classmates read and to constantly correct their estimation of his reading level disclosed his unhappiness with his official and public reading identity. Many times while reading, he pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head like Raquel did or buried his face in his arms on the desk, as if hiding from those of us in the classroom. His pursuit of attention from the other

⁴ A mobile phone with wireless Internet capabilities, manufactured by T-Mobile.

students and his continual watching of them from afar, which teachers noticed as well, also revealed Omar's isolation and loss.

Omar's melancholia was derived from a loss of status as a reader, but any direct acknowledgment or expression of that unhappiness was inconceivable and forbidden. Butler (1990) explains that "melancholy designates a failure to grieve in which the loss is simply internalised, and in that sense, *refused*" [author's italics] (p. 114). Though manifest in his embodied performances around reading, Omar could never verbalise his feeling of exclusion from his peers and loss of his recognition as a good reader.

Instead, Omar challenged and flatly denied the inscription he received as a reader, and he directed outcries toward those whom he felt mislabeled him. He also pulled the jackets off hardcover books and held them upright, bare and inconspicuous, as he read. During an interview with me, he denied reading the *Simpsons* book I had described in the opening vignette about him:

- [Author]: What are some of the best or your most favourite things that you read in school?
 Omar: Like comics and stuff.
 [Author]: Comics?
 Omar: Teen issues.
 [Author]: Teen issues. Okay, anything in particular? Can you think of any titles?
 Omar: No.
 [Author]: Just all of them together?
 Omar: Yes.
 [Author]: 'Cause I saw you reading the *Simpsons* earlier.
 Omar: No.
 [Author]: You were reading the *Simpsons*, Bart Simpson, *Bart's Big Book* or something. And I was like, "Look at that! What's in that?"
 Omar: (*shakes his head no*)

Another time, he expressed frustration at the choices available to him in the classroom:

- [Author]: What do you wish you could read in school that you're not allowed to read?
 Omar: More adult stuff.
 [Author]: What do you mean by "adult stuff?" Are you talking books? Are you talking magazines? –
 Omar: Yeah, books.
 [Author]: – (*overlapping*) Are you talking newspapers?
 Omar: Books.
 [Author]: Books, okay.
 Omar: Because Mr. Davis has us read a lot of childish books, kind of.
 [Author]: Okay. So, when you say adult books what sort of stuff?
 Omar: Like teen issues, drama.

In these excerpts, Omar both admitted and rejected the kinds of texts he was known to read in class and therefore altered his reading performance according to his perception of the shifts in discursive power during our conversation. In other words, believing that I too was appraising his reading identity based on the kinds of texts he read,

Omar recanted his performance. Rather than express any sort of melancholia about his loss of social affinity with the other students in class, Omar found fault with the structure and materials of reading at school. His perception that Charles provided mostly “childish books” denied the fact that his classmates were reading texts that contained much more difficult language structures and more mature content. Consequently, such deflection also denied the loss he experienced in being forbidden to read what his peers did.

Melancholia involves the internalised, tacit mourning of something denied – in a sense, something that never really existed – and therefore cannot be overcome. By virtue of their recognition as poor, resistant and disinterested readers, Raquel and Omar did not have equal standing with their peers, who enjoyed consistent and official acceptance, praise and affirmation for their performative ways of reading. Melancholia, therefore, was a condition of their official reading identities. Operating within a very narrow scope for officially recognised reading performances, authoritative discourses monitor and reproduce certain performances as normal and desirable in order to fashion ideal subjects (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1995). However, “relations of power work ‘not merely through the mechanism of regulation and production but by foreclosing the very possibility of articulation’” (Butler, 1996, as cited in Rasmussen, 2006, p. 477). Thus, the process of establishing idealised identities also preempts a desire to be otherwise, so that a kind of loss is a necessary condition of that ideal. And since that loss cannot be declared and accepted, it is suppressed and internalised through the body as melancholia.

Performative politics: Missing and dismissing reading performances

The discussion above about melancholia does not mean that Raquel and Omar easily resigned themselves to the struggling reader identity. Through their bodies, they also summoned agency to act in their own interests. An act of agency is not always a conscious one, but an act that attempts to assert control over the production of a subject (Butler, in Salih, 2004). Whereas using traditional forms of assessment to determine students’ attitudes and abilities toward reading – and thus concluding that Raquel and Omar were dismissive and deficient regarding reading – attending to embodied performances with texts also reveals the nuanced ways in which students actually *are* reading in class. Analysing students’ embodied performances thus helps to illuminate the agency Raquel and Omar attempted to exert around their reading identities. Again, the concept of performative politics reminds us that such agency is discursive and vulnerable to misinterpretation by others. Alexander (2004) explains that when misinterpretation occurs, one’s performance becomes a misfired attempt at reclaiming and reinscribing one’s perceived identity.

Raquel’s performances in school confounded teachers. She often earned praise for starting her classwork right away and then quietly working for the remainder of the time, but she also frustrated teachers by not completing her homework or showing any outward enthusiasm for reading. Her inconsistent performances became “unintelligible” to them, a term Butler (1990) uses to explain the difficulty in perceiving the possibility of multiple subjectivities rather than a single, fixed identity. Given the numerous demands of classroom teaching, it was much easier to claim that Raquel was struggling with reading rather than to discern the subtleties of her reading performances. Yet Raquel also laced these performances with an agency that aimed to

establish reading as a personally meaningful activity for her rather than an institutional requirement.

During most of March, Raquel, Julia and Darla gathered at a table along the edge of the classroom space, obscured by the students at the larger circle of tables in the centre of the room and the computer station next to them to read the *Scary Stories* (Schwartz, 1981-1991) series. The first time I observed them engage in such performances, Raquel read a story from one of the collections aloud to Julia and Darla. When she finished, she passed the book to Julia, who commenced reading aloud the next story. Twenty minutes later, they were still reading. After finishing another story, the girls whispered to each other, "That's scary!" Ms. Oswald, the substitute teacher that day, who also regularly taught seventh grade social studies at City School, approached them and whispered back, "Ladies, I know you're doing a good job reading, but I need you to keep it down so the rest of the class can't hear you talking." Immediately, Darla protested, "But we're reading!" Ms. Oswald repeated that she just wanted them to keep their volume down. The girls sighed and turned back to the book. As they read the next story, "The Bride", they giggled and squealed quietly, pointing at the illustrations. Darla exclaimed, "That's hideous!" and Raquel pointed at the text, saying, "I like this one." The girls continued in this manner for the entire class period and for the next couple of weeks, often with one of them arriving to class and asking the others, "Where's our book?" Soon, they began bringing snacks for each other: cheerios, lollipops and other candy. Julia even asked Charles for the other books in the series, and when he informed them that he didn't have them, he wrote passes for them to search the school library. All the while, the other students sat reading their individual texts separate from each other.

Raquel also showed a strong interest in reading her peers' creative writing. She regularly read Julia's stories and provided her friend with immediate verbal feedback. As she read those stories, Raquel asked questions of Julia to help her clarify the characters and reasons for acting in certain ways, such as, "Who Andrew's mom?" and "Why he walk away like that?" Raquel would keep reading Julia's stories throughout entire class periods without breaking her concentration, once even when nearby classmates began horse-playing and laughing loudly beside her. Instead of acknowledging the nearby commotion, Raquel sat back in her chair and propped one leg up on Julia's chair next to her as she continued reading. A few minutes later, she placed her foot back on the floor and scooted her chair closer to the table. Placing Julia's story in front of her on the table, Raquel leaned forward over the text. Julia leaned in, too, and soon both girls began giggling about something in the text.

By tuning out other social interactions and relaxing into an engaged body position with the text, Raquel embodied concentration and interest in the text she read, a performance she did not usually display around the novels she was required to read for class. Raquel read her friends' writing whenever they asked her, but she also initiated the act, sometimes asking Julia to let her read the latest version of her writing. She admitted a love of creative writing and engaged in it during school as often as she could, especially during unofficial times for writing such as during reading workshop. She explained this preference during an interview:

[Author]: What do you enjoy doing in your ELA class?

Raquel: Writing.

- [Author]: Writing?
 Raquel: *(nods)*
 [Author]: Okay. And what kinds of things do you like writing?
 Raquel: I like writing about, like, child abuse and horror stories and stuff like that.
 [Author]: Yeah, I saw you reading a lot of R. L. Stine and stuff like that. That stuff scares me.
 Raquel: *(nods)*

Raquel's creative writing topics matched her reading interests, and her friends wrote similar kinds of stories. Hicks (2004) posits that by writing of horror stories, students may be transposing their "own vulnerability amid sometimes unsettling local landscapes" (p. 72). Raquel's fascination with stories of adolescents in emotional, psychological, physical and sometimes supernatural danger might speak to her experiences with tumultuous friendships in the past and to her everyday positions as a socially marginalised teenager, a caretaker for her younger sister and a struggling reader. However, Raquel did not articulate an association of reading scary stories written by friends with the horror stories she read during independent reading time. To her, they were divergent performances that held her interest in vastly different ways.

These scenes illustrate Raquel's personal interest in reading, something that Charles and Ms. Oswald noticed but did not fully incorporate into their assessments of her reading identity. Raquel's collaborative performance with friends pushed against a dominant discourse about reading and schooling. Delpit (1996) argues that within most ELA classrooms, the kind of literacy that is valued continues to define reading as an individual and independent endeavour, one that requires the reader to make meaning of the text in social isolation. What is also implied in this school norm is the solitary position of the body while reading. Not only did Raquel purposely repudiate this expectation by relocating her body to be beside friends, but she also rejected the expectation that one remains quiet while reading. In this sense, she exerted agency and engaged in performative politics, attempting to perform reading in ways that mattered personally to her and could genuinely engage her interests. Ironically, the overt display of enjoyment while reading is something that is often valued by teachers. However, coupled with her rejection of school rules by sitting with her friends, Raquel's inconsistent behaviour in ELA class obscured the valid and valuable reading performance she displayed. By reading a shared text during independent reading time and audibly expressing their reactions to it, Raquel and her friends undermined hegemonic school discourses and led faculty to read these performances as unintelligible and question her abilities or interests as a reader. Her agentive attempts at reading misfired in the eyes of faculty, and she therefore retained an identity as struggling reader.

Many of Omar's reading performances also pointed to his strengths as a reader, yet they too were often undetected or viewed as unintelligible by faculty. Like Raquel, he performed in ways that aligned with good student behaviour, but whereas Raquel avoided singular attention, Omar eagerly participated in class discussions, arrived to class prepared to work, and frequently searched through the classroom library for new books to read. These performances, though, were largely dismissed as his lack of following through with activities and constant desire to socialise with other classmates were conflated into what seemed a "lack of effort" with reading. Charles explained:

I don't know if he knows what it takes to get there [good grades and college admission]. It requires a full literacy commitment....It's like Omar wants to be like the other boys, but he has to put in the time and work.

The perception that Omar did not contribute enough time or work into his reading tasks emphasised an expectation that good readers performatively displayed self-disciplined performances around printed texts that can be read as “effort”.

Once, Omar walked over to the classroom library and began picking through the books in the bin containing level U, V and W books. After a fruitless search, he switched to the fantasy bin and began sorting through the books there. He pulled out *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998), showed it to a classmate who was also book shopping, exchanged a few words with him, and returned the book to the bin. Omar picked out another book instead, returned to his seat, and plopped the new book on the table before him: a *Cirque du Freak* (Shan, 2004) novel. Seeing him, Charles approached. They conversed quietly before Charles left to confer with other students. Omar read a few lines, using his finger to follow the words, and then turned the page and did the same. He did this with another page as well, all in the matter of minutes, indicating that he was scanning the text to see whether he could understand the words and sentences, a strategy Charles taught to the class as a way to determine whether a text was “just right” for a student's independent reading level. After less than five minutes with the book, Omar stood up, put it back in the fantasy bin, and then went over to another stash of books in the drawer beneath the overhead projector.

In this vignette, Omar performed several attempts to change his identity from struggling reader to good and capable reader. He utilised the classroom library to search for a new book, engaged another student briefly in conversation about a book, and once he decided on a book, sat down with it to begin reading. All seemed well until Charles checked in with him about the book he had chosen to read. The *Cirque du Freak* series is a level Z young adult horror series that was popular among students in Charles' class. Knowing the book was eight levels above Omar's typical reading level, Charles seemed to encourage Omar to assess its difficulty by scanning the text for words he did not know. Omar's selection of a *Cirque du Freak* book was not something a good reader in this context would do. According to the school's model of balanced literacy workshop teaching, good readers would only read texts that are appropriate for their reading level. Charles' intervention testifies to Omar's repositioning as a struggling reader. Omar abided by Charles' suggestion to give the book a second thought, a form of self-surveillance, thus attempting again to perform and reposition himself as a good student and ultimately a good reader.

Along with teachers, peers voiced their uncertainty about Omar's reading abilities and clung to their perception of his performative behaviour in class. When Charles announced that Omar thought the class could break the school record for time spent doing independent reading, one classmate accused Omar of spending “the whole time reading baby books”. Students also noted how teachers constantly separated Omar from the other boys because they perceived him to be a distraction. One day, when Charles asked Omar to move to the front of the room, Omar asked, “Why do I always gotta sit up front?” Another classmate named Markus remarked, “You sit up front in every class, man.” Other students likewise positioned Omar as an annoyance and

someone whose input was uninformed and unnecessary. For instance, once when Charles agreed with Omar's protests that he was not the instigator of an argument with Alvin, Alvin exclaimed with astonishment, "You agree with Omar?" Markus concurred, "Man, if you're listening to Omar, that's wrong." Each of these remarks ignored the many ways Omar attempted to perform as a good reader and reaffirmed his identity in school as a struggling reader. Thus, Omar's agentive performances as the boy or reader he wanted to be often misfired.

Omar was scrutinised again and again as attempting to pass rather than repeatedly engaging in contextually approved kinds of reading performances. While Omar assumed "the necessary and performative strategies that signal membership" in the good reader club, Charles and the other students did not recognise Omar's attempts as performative over time and context. To them, as Charles put it earlier, Omar was simply trying to be "one of the big dogs"; he was trying to use reading to pass as the kind of male who was deemed powerful, approved of, and welcomed by his peers.

Though Alexander (2004) continues his discussion of passing regarding performances of Black masculinity, he draws upon Williams' (2001, as cited in Alexander, 2004) reminder that

the performer "suppress[es] the more obvious artifice of performance [that is associated with the origin of their denial.] Passing is a performance whose success depends on not overacting" (p. 176). Thus "overacting" would call attention to the fact that performance is, in actuality, being used as artifice to racial identity. (p. 380)

By continuously asserting that he was a better reader than others initially thought, Omar appeared to be overacting and thus not passing to various audiences. Certainly, he worked hard to establish himself as a good reader among peers, with me during interviews, and with Charles. Toward the end of the year, Charles pulled Omar aside to administer a final formal assessment of his reading level. He began by telling Omar that his level from the last assessment was T. Immediately, Omar protested, "T? I'm a V!" Charles explained again that he was assessed as T the last time. Omar then handed the book he was currently reading to Charles, insisting, "This book is a V." Extrapolating Williams' argument to the case at hand, Omar's repeated and emphatic rejections of his identification as a struggling reader and the reductive perception of his reading performances only seemed to fuel the assessment that his performances as a good reader were disingenuous and invalid. The politics involved in the interplay between Omar's agency as a reader and others' interpretation of his performances therefore continued to inscribe him with an inferior reading identity. For Raquel, attempts at passing did not carry consequences as severe. Her quiet and harmless demeanour generally kept her out of conflict with adults and peers, but it also kept her genuine attempts to be a good reader out of the limelight so that they passed instead as performances of a responsible student, but not a good reader, to others.

DISCUSSION

Embodying exclusion

Highlighting the interplay between classroom reading and the body revealed how two students internalised their official identities as struggling readers and drew agency from that inscription. Their embodied processes while interacting with printed texts

testified to the exclusion they felt within the classroom due to their positioning and identification as struggling readers. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) argue that emotions are embodied processes, manifest and perceived by the self and others through the body, and therefore parts of our identity. Probyn (2005) claims that emotion is part of our embodied habitus. Butler (1990), too, asserts that melancholia is a condition of having one's performances marginalised from dominant practices, manifest in the body. Thus, emotion, embodiment and identity converged to emphasise the students' difference and isolation from others.

While Raquel and Omar could not assert their melancholia as struggling readers, they were still aware of their distinction from other students. They heard the words others used to describe them as readers, knew what their perceived weaknesses in reading were, and did not like those evaluations. Yet the deep sadness and sense of loss around those matters were beyond individual cognition and articulation. Put differently, they subconsciously refused to grieve their separation and isolation from what is normatively desired and deemed worthy. Butler (as cited in Salih, 2004) explains,

If in melancholia a loss is refused, it is not for that reason abolished. Internalisation preserves loss in the psyche; more precisely, the internalisation of loss is part of the mechanism of its refusal. If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalisation will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss. (p. 247)

Applying this understanding to Raquel and Omar, it seems that even if they found reading as school and teachers defined it to be challenging, they could not fully comprehend, announce and face their separation and ostracism as struggling readers. Thus, they embodied their feelings of exclusion through their performances with printed texts.

Embodying a different kind of struggle

Nonetheless, neither Raquel nor Omar wallowed in any sense of loss or melancholia. Rather, they also embodied an agency that sought to disrupt how others perceived them as readers and therefore rewrite their reading identities. They shifted their daily reading performances, emphasising the temporal quality of identity, performing subjectivities that aligned with school norms for reading, and therefore attempting to unsettle the understanding that they only struggled with reading. The concept of performative politics, however, does not guarantee that efforts to disrupt identities will be successful. Here, perhaps, was the real "struggle" for Raquel and Omar: to convince teachers and peers that they were capable and successful as readers, regardless of how school discourses positioned them. Any difficulty with reading that they had did not rest solely with the cognitive processes of reading, but also with the unsuccessful attempts to reposition themselves and gain social recognition as readers in their own right.

Asking when the focal students were aware of any identity disruption also implies that a disruption successfully occurred. Because of the political dynamics of performance and identity, Raquel and Omar remained inscribed as struggling readers. Though they engaged in reading in salient and personally meaningful ways, those performances were not powerful enough to permanently sway the views of teachers or peers. In

other words, these individual performances of disruption did not overcome their perceived reading performativity – behavioural iterations with texts over time and space as compared to discursive norms – as struggling readers. Many of those singular performances were undetected, dismissed or declared false and, therefore, merely attempts at passing. When this happened, students did not sense any real change in their inferior and undesirable reading identities and thus retained them.

Butler (1990) states, “the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish casual or expressive lines of connection” (p. 23). Extrapolating this notion to the production of reading identities, I posit that many do not perceive the variety of students’ reading performances because what is intelligible to them is a sense of continuity and coherence about identity (that is, what good readers do). Performances that did not match up with school and classroom norms were therefore unintelligible for Charles, Ms. Oswald and other school officials. To them, identity is supposed to be coherent, not interrupted; otherwise, it is unintelligible and conflated into a user-friendly term like *struggling*.

Given that Raquel and Omar were aware of their positioning as readers but not wholly aware of the precariousness of their reading identities, they understood and explained their reading identities in largely indirect ways. They harboured a melancholia about their positioning as strugglers that further constituted their identities as such, but they did not articulate their grief about that citation. Rather, they embodied the wounding label, covering their heads during reading or even fleeing the space that reminded them constantly of their loss of membership and privilege in the classroom community. They also engaged in performative politics, summoning their agency and seeking to confound the perception that they were struggling readers. However, the agency involved in spurring that disruption is not a completely free and conscious one. Instead, it is a discursive agency that prompts students to act in their own interests, an agency shaped and limited by the assumptions and criterion of the discourse in question and therefore subject to the discursive interpretations of the audience before it. In these ways, Raquel and Omar both exhibited some unspoken understanding of the significance of their identities as struggling readers and also refused it by incorporating it into their embodied existence in the ELA classroom.

Reading (identity) matters

The politics of performative reinscription operate on the understanding that identity is fragile. At any time, any person can perform in ways that unsettle the identity with which he or she has been cited. But whether that disruption is powerful enough to significantly change others’ perception is uncertain. Identities are rooted in powerful, historical discourses that have dictated ideal performativities for them. Such discursive chains have ultimately normalised or essentialised what those identities and their related performances are so that identity categories like race, gender, sexuality and social class become viewed as inherent and deterministic.

The problem, though, is that the assignment of many of these identities based on perceived performativities are often maligned and hurtful. The same can be said about reading identities. Just as certain racial identities have been construed as inherently

weaker or stronger than others over time, so too are certain reading identities. Just as specific gender or sexual identities have been deemed perverse and others right, so too are some reading identities viewed as wrong and others exemplary. And just as some social class identities are considered pitiful and undesirable, so too are some reading identities – especially the struggling reader – perceived as unfortunate, unwanted and unacceptable. More importantly, these perceptions translate into performances in the social realm that affect how people recognised with these identities act and are treated.

In education, one's officially recognised identity matters. Countless works examine how identities like race, gender and social class impact and are impacted by different forms of learning and teaching (for example, Anyon, 1980; Delpit, 1996; Grant, 1984; Hicks, 2004; Jones, 2006; Lesko, 2000). I assert that reading identities are no different. Raquel and Omar were repeatedly ridiculed, dismissed, overlooked and reprimanded in their formal education, both deliberately and unintentionally and by both peers and faculty. In turn, they avoided, mocked and attempted to challenge the discursive practices that inscribed them as struggling readers. They also attempted to pass as good readers. As such, their identities and thus their performative existence in the classroom were seeped in melancholia. Youdell (2004b) writes that performative politics "at once shows the functioning of chains of enduring discourses and how students tacitly and knowingly refuse the wounded and denigrated identities ascribed to them" (pp. 489-490). Such were the cases of the focal students, whose reading performances worked to both reinforce and reconstitute their official identities as readers.

IMPLICATIONS

Identifying students as struggling readers is not simply a matter of looking at test scores and determining cognitive abilities through formal assessments. The complexity of identity, of deciding that a student is a certain kind of reader and therefore should receive certain kinds of instruction and support, leans heavily and often invisibly on one's social interactions and embodied performances in the classroom. Examining this interplay of mind, body and context yields a more nuanced understanding of student identity and provides fertile ground for further development in theory, research and practice about the ways students engage with reading.

If one's identity as a reader involves embodied interactions with texts, then the concept of reading too must encompass more than autonomous, cognitive skills for interpreting and understanding texts. A reconceptualisation of reading that takes into account one's embodied performances with texts along with cognitive ones can have tremendous impact for educators and students alike. Reading does not occur solely in the mind; rather, experiences and interactions with texts are also felt, lived and enacted through the body. Throughout the education system, students' bodies are regulated to keep things running smoothly and to concentrate students' attention on learning (Warren, 2005). The notion that students' bodies are central to experiences and activities at school dovetails with a conception of reading that highlights the body's engagement with texts and within the social context where reading occurs.

Preparing teachers to assess readers in this way involves teaching them to not just acknowledge embodied interactions with printed texts, but also helping them to stop viewing students as monolithic kinds of readers and recognise multiple performances. Comber and Kamler (Comber, 2005; Kamler & Comber, 2005) posit that this kind of re-seeing of students requires teachers to “turn-around” their instructional practices and assumptions about students. They explain that this turn-around involves several different kinds of work on the part of teachers and schools, among which are *interpretive work* and *discursive work*. Interpretive work calls for careful, continual and open-minded observations of students in their classrooms, whereas discursive work focuses on the impact of social language in schools. Encouraging and supporting such turn-arounds can assist teachers to carefully reflect and rethink their initial assessments of students.

By perceiving readers through a rigid lens, teachers position themselves to miss the individual and nuanced strengths, interests and needs of readers. Perceiving multiple performances in multiple contexts can provide insight to those possibilities. Instead of addressing so-called struggling students by first attending to their cognitive processes with texts, teachers might make more headway by first asking what a student is trying to do as a reader, what texts he or she is using to do that, and for or with whom – and then determining how best to support them in those efforts. Omar was trying to gain esteem among peers with the texts they valued. Raquel was trying to balance an avoidance of adult scrutiny with an enjoyment of sharing reading activities with friends. Those acts of agency are powerful resources upon which to build meaningful and effective instruction.

Furthermore, while the halting of monolithic citations may greatly serve those identified as struggling readers, it could also benefit any students who have been pigeonholed as a single type of reader (for example, strong, average or reluctant). Turning around their views of students can also attune teachers to those students who follow the rules, complete assignments, and may even achieve good grades, but who could still fall through the cracks because instruction for good readers might also neglect some more subtle skill that they need. By citing students as kinds of readers only through language and social interactions, teachers risk developing a kind of tunnel vision that limits their ability to see students in different ways. Rather, by carefully and reflexively engaging in interpretive and discursive work, teachers can turn-around their pedagogies for students.

Turning attention to the embodied performances involved with reading would help educators better determine what students are doing with texts, as well as re-examine their goals for teaching reading. With this lens, we might better perceive what students are doing moment by moment and action by action, viewing interruptions in performativity as indicative of agency and prompting educators to inquire about them rather than dismiss them. In addition, paying attention to embodied performances could help teachers redesign instruction to build upon agency and interests rather than prescribed curricula. More importantly, we as educators might also better work toward social justice, challenging institutional norms that covertly oppress students’ abilities and possibilities with their disciplining demands for the continuance of existing power structures.

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