

# High school students' literacy practices and identities, and the figured world of school

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## *ABSTRACT*

Conventional wisdom holds that American teenagers do not read or write – that they are a media-driven group who prefer movies, television and playing video games. Ethnographic data gathered in the High School Literacy Project, a study of four North Carolina high schools, showed a far different picture of teenage literacy. This paper reports on partial findings of the larger study and argues that students use their literacy practices to form their identities within, and sometimes in opposition to, the figured worlds of school, work and family. Many students look to school to provide formal literacy experiences, but find their reading and writing passions at odds with the demands of the school curriculum.

## **INTRODUCTION**

'I love to write. I write journals, a diary... every day. [I write about] what happens during the day, how I feel, if I had a bad day. You know, if I really meet a cute guy, or if I had an argument with a teacher, or anything. [I write poetry about] mostly how I feel.' (Mindy, an eleventh grader at Central High who went on to fail her English class)

How can we understand the complex world of student literacy, where an articulate and energetic student, who by her own accounts 'loves to write' fails to meet the required level of standardised literacy to pass 11th grade English? Conventional wisdom holds that American teenagers do not read or write – that they are a media-driven group who prefer movies, television and playing video games. One of the most striking things we learned in the High School Literacy Project is how wrong this picture of teenage literacy is. We found that many students are engaged in everyday literacy practices far beyond the school day in ways that their teachers are unaware of.

This paper reports on partial findings from a much larger comparative case study of four North Carolina high schools. We draw upon the concept of 'figured worlds' by Holland et al (1998) to understand specific contexts within which students carry out and make meaning of literacy tasks and to consider how students' uses of reading and writing are linked to their interests and identities. Of particular concern is how a student like Mindy, who identifies herself as a 'writer' and uses writing as a way to express and reflect on her everyday life and feelings, can find herself failing in English.

In the first section of the paper we describe the research project as it was implemented in the four schools. The second section outlines our theoretical framework of looking at students' literacy practices as refracted through the figured worlds of one high school in the study, 'Central High'. The third section considers one student, Alice, and the complex ways in which she understands her literacy practices. Alice uses reading and writing to make sense of her life and to script an identity that is at odds with her place in the figured world of Central High.<sup>1</sup> By moving between three contextual levels of meaning – institutional, specific school site and individual – we hope to illustrate how deeply dialogic the relationship is between student identities and literacy practices.

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This project was initiated by a university/school district collaboration and was funded by state professional development funds. The study was designed to maximise teacher input in redefining the problem of low literacy among high-school students, and, in so doing, to explore new solutions. Rather than assuming that students *are not* reading and writing, the project investigated how and why students *are* doing the reading and writing that they do. Using ethnographic methods – including photography, classroom observations, teacher and parent surveys, in-depth interviews with students, and analysis of school records – the study sought to document literacy as a social practice.<sup>2</sup> The research focused on how students think and feel, what their purposes and values are, and what rules might govern their literacy practices, as well as how students' literacy practices are supported or hindered by schooling.

In each school, a group of teachers, administrators, and students joined with a university faculty member and several undergraduate students to collect and analyse the data. Each inquiry team (consisting of between eight and ten people) began by photographing literacy events in their school, taking more than one hundred photos of what they thought best represented literacy practices in their school.<sup>3</sup> The photographs established a rich, comparative visual archive of literacy practices within each school context that the four inquiry teams could compare and assess. The photos also served as a means for each inquiry team to consider what counts as a literacy event or practice—for example, whether graffiti, written texts on clothing, tattoos or marks on the body and school banners at prep rallies should be included as examples of teenage literacy practices.

After gathering and analysing images of literacy events, a series of research instruments were adapted for use in the project. A 'Survey for School Staff' focused on teacher attitudes and goals. A 'Survey for Parents' was designed to gather information about parents' goals, expectations for and assessments of their teenagers'

schooling as well as how they would rate their child's skills as a reader and writer. An accompanying 'Survey for Students' asked, among other things, whether 'at this school, has any person (student or adult) ever made fun of someone for not knowing how to say something right, not knowing the right word for something, or not being able to read something correctly? If yes, would you say that this is a problem at this school?' (School staff members were also asked this question.) There was also a 'Survey on Teacher Instructional Practices'. At each school, 30 ninth-grade students were asked to keep diaries of their everyday uses of reading and writing for a week, and in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty students representing different reading and achievement levels (low, average, high). These interviews covered a range of topics, including student attitudes, values, past experiences and access to resources (adapted from Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Students were asked whether they ever read secretly; whether they had ever become excited about reading a book because of something a teacher or another adult at school had said about it; whether they kept journals; whether they were ever given books as presents; if they did any kind of reading and writing as part of school clubs, sport teams or religious groups; what they remembered about learning to read and write; under what conditions they enjoyed reading and writing; how they would describe themselves as a reader or a writer; and whether they thought a person could read too much.

The interviews provided testimony of the deeply personal uses students made of their reading and writing. Across all four schools students reported that their school-based and personal-based literacy practices were at odds. School was all too often described as a place of discomfort and anxiety where students expressed feeling constrained or 'put on the spot' about their reading and writing. But in their own private spaces, these same students talked about the pleasure they got, for instance, from reading the Bible and writing poems. The interviews raised a key question – why are these two forms of literacy (for school and for personal pleasure) understood as so distinct by students?

At the end of the year, the four inquiry teams presented their findings to each other. Common findings included the following: most students' definitions of literacy were text-based, and believed they were not good readers if they did not like or do well in school reading and writing. Most students also described daily and varied reading and writing activities through which they defined and expressed themselves in the world – from reading magazines, corresponding with friends and family through letters and email, and writing poetry. The teams noted a pattern in students' motivation to read, depending on whether the reading was being done inside or outside the classroom.

The following is an excerpt from 'Central High', which among many observations, linked students' literacy practices with their gender identities:

'The discrepancy between students' perceptions of themselves and their reported behavior was especially interesting to us. In fact, we found this project to be a study in contradictions – students' reports often contrasted with what teachers on the committee knew to be true or with what the interviewer observed. One of the most obvious discrepancies was in the boys' frequent observation that reading and writing were 'girl' activities. They reported thinking that girls are better readers, yet they went on to describe quite a bit of their own reading and writing activities ... When questioned about their choices in reading material,

boys often reported that they liked to read the sports page of the newspaper, and car and sports magazines, frequently seeking out these materials and trading them with their friends. Not many boys claimed that they liked to read books, but the ones who did often said they liked to read non-fiction, particularly history, especially about war. When they had to read novels, they often reported wanting to read “thrillers”.

Girls, on the other hand, often said they liked to read the horoscope section of the newspaper, and sometimes, the comics. Many girls reported liking to read teen and fitness magazines. They often claimed to enjoy Shakespeare and other classics, usually because of a good teacher, and said they enjoyed romance and thriller novels. While both genders reported reading the Bible, girls did so more than boys.

One perception that seemed to be held by both girls and boys was that athletes are not readers. Even self-described athletes made such statements, even though they went on to list quite a bit of “sports” reading. Another widely-held idea was that readers are “nerds” or that they are “dorky”, although one girl said being dorky was not a bad thing. While holding this perception, however, almost all of the interviewed students acknowledged that reading and writing were very important to success as an adult.

... Students’ interests motivate their reading and writing practices. What they are interested in reading about in some degree defines them socially. They choose their reading matter and their friends for the same reason. In other words, their social relationship to reading outside of the classroom is the inverse of that same relationship inside the classroom: in the classroom, social relationships determine their interest; outside the classroom, interest determines their social relationships.’<sup>4</sup>

Understanding more about what defines students’ identities, interests and uses of reading and writing set the agenda for the second phase of the project in which selected students and teachers from Central High were re-interviewed.

## LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN PRACTICE

### Theoretical Framework

‘The self is a position from which meaning is made, a position that is “addressed” by and “answers” others and the “world” (the physical and cultural environment.) In answering (which is the stuff of existence), the self ‘authors’ the world – including itself and others.’ (Holland et al, 1998, p. 173)

Synthesising theoretical contributions made by Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Bourdieu and drawing upon examples from cross-cultural fieldwork, Dorothy Holland and her co-authors offer an account of identity in practice. Their theory of identity formation emphasises the dialogic relationship between institutional addresses (e.g. a ‘low level’ literacy student or a female science student or an underachieving African-American student) and how one answers to these varied addresses. For Holland et al, this dialogue and the identities that result are not predetermined by structural im-

sitions; rather, people find ways to improvise. When applied to understanding teenage literacy practice, this means considering how students improvise and author their worlds – how they cope with the ever present, demanding task of answering to others and to their changing environment, how old answers about who one is can become undone and can be replaced by new answers.

According to Holland et al, identities are practised within figured worlds or frames of meaning. A figured world is not abstract, but peopled, providing a context for action:

'Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances and artifacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters and types who carry out its tasks and who have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it.'  
(Holland et al, 1998, p. 51)

Individuals are recruited into figured worlds, which they simultaneously reconstruct through their participation.

Student identities form as a result of day-to-day activities undertaken in the name of a figured world. For example, students enrolled in an honours English class and students enrolled in a woodworking class come to view the meaning of their reading and writing differently. Moreover, these two figured worlds of school (academic and vocational) are organized around positions of status and influence – not all course work or school activities yield the same prestige and power to those who engage in them. Nor are students from different figured worlds expected to be part of the same social group, to be treated by teachers in the same way, or to be held in the same esteem by their classmates. In short, as students fashion themselves through their daily literacy practices, they negotiate their place within the hierarchy of figured worlds.

### **The figured worlds of Central High**

Students at Central High have traditionally been the children of rural (white and African American) residents. Over the last 20 years professional families have moved into the area, taking advantage of nearby research facilities. The town has become a bedroom community for many of these professional residents. It is described as 'a middle-class, relaxed community... that enjoys the closeness of a small town atmosphere and the close proximity of larger urban areas'. 80% of its student body is said to pursue some type of post-secondary education, reflecting Central High's shift from what used to be a working-class to a middle-class school context and set of expectations. The world of work for which Central High used to prepare its students was based mostly on wage work in agricultural, construction, textile and service work. As the community around Central High has changed, the school has become more orientated to a world of professional and managerial work that requires college attendance.

Driving up to the school, one notices at least six different groups of students hanging together outside – groups that students identify as 'preps, rednecks, jocks, skaters (who double as musicians), Mexicans, ag' [agricultural] students. Often divided by gender or race, the students know the names of each of the groups and who belongs, who does not belong and who can move between groups.

Central High separates its classes into vocational and academic education. Students' recruitment into and experience of being in vocational or academic courses shape how they make meaning of everyday literacy practices. School personnel are proud of the vocational programme and the unusual resources it provides for students (including a house-building project that has earned the school money and fame). Nonetheless, the department is in the basement and outer wings of the school, signifying its lower position in the hierarchy of academic legitimacy.

There is also a hierarchy within academic education, and students are placed into one of three different levels: regular, honours/AP(Advanced Placement) and seminar. Students take up different positions in the figured world of school depending upon their participation in one of these three strands. Being a regular, honours or seminar student shapes one's relationship to the cultural arts, school activities and leadership, and one's expectations for future jobs or study.

The English classroom is the focal centre of formal school literacy, and is where students are exposed to literacy practices that are supposed to orient them to their place in society. Seminar classes are designed for independent learners, and allow students to participate in designing their own curriculum. Ms Acker, the founder of the seminar concept and an English teacher at Central, explained that the greatest difference between her seminar and non-seminar classes is that the students in seminar classes are self-selected, and most of them have parents who actively participate in their children's learning. In one 11th grade seminar class, students studied *The Grapes of Wrath* and were asked to make a visual representation of one of the last scenes that expressed their personal interpretation of the book.

In contrast, in the 11th grade regular class, the 20 students sat in rows with their textbook in front of them, while the teacher explained the major characteristics of early twentieth-century American literature. They were told about literature rather than engaging it. Even when asked to read a short story for 15 minutes, the students were not given an opportunity to respond to the story. Rather, the teacher explained to them the key points they would need to know in order to answer the follow-up questions in the textbook. These two classes provide contrasting classroom worlds and orientations toward reading and writing. Whereas the seminar class provides students a forum to express their interpretations of literature, the regular class orients students toward the official textbook interpretation. (See Oakes, 1985 and Olsen, 1997 for similar examples.)

Each teacher interviewed at Central High, in her or his own way, identified student types, locating students in different figured worlds. Mr Heath, a vocational education teacher, differentiated motivated from unmotivated students:

'I try to use examples all the time of real life. "The people that put forth this extra effort are going to be your supervisors, and you're going to be the supervisee. That's the difference". What do kids need? They need work ethics, motivation.'

From this perspective, success in the figured world of vocational education is equated with autonomy at work (being a supervisor) and there is a direct relationship between students' motivation and their social mobility. Ms Thorne, a 9th grade regular English teacher, views these same students differently. She spoke about how vocational education students connect with furniture-making more than with their academic classes:

'Just to see the focus of the students, and . . . the pride they show in their work, whereas in a social studies or math or English class . . . "I just want to get the paper in. But this is representative of me, this piece of furniture".'

Ms Thorne believed that furniture-making may be more aligned with these students' identities and interests than their academic courses. She understood the world of vocational education as providing a space for students to author their worlds in a way that their academic courses could not.

Mr Maxwell provides another view of student types: whether or not they are college-bound. Because he teaches special education at Central, Mr. Maxwell is particularly concerned about whether his students are capable of performing in regular classrooms:

'We're . . . putting these children in courses where . . . they're set up for failure, if we hold them accountable to the same standards, which the end of course tests require them to do. And . . . it's very scary, being that . . . kid who can't read very well in the back. What's wrong with taking children and saying, . . . "You're heading to college, so you need the certain requirements and course, be that AP or be that standard" . . . Vice versa, what is wrong with saying, you know, "OK, you're not heading for college . . . Let's get you the most skills necessary that we can." . . . They end up getting jobs at nursing homes, or the VA (*Veterans Administration hospital*), . . . and being pretty happy. So . . . I have no problem with tracking at all. I think it's needed, to be frank'.

Mr. Maxwell wants the school to orient students toward their future figured worlds. He takes this view, in part, as a way to protect students he believes are being unfairly judged by institutional criteria. But in doing so, he advocates maintaining and increasing the hierarchical criteria determining student experiences.

Teachers' views about where their students are heading are indeed quite complicated and beyond the scope of this paper. Our point is that school tracking systems are not abstract divisions made between students with identified skill levels. Rather, these systems of distinction operate as figured worlds and are 'peopled by the figures, characters and types who carry out its tasks' – including teachers who (unwittingly perhaps) interact with students they view as being or not being college-bound or as working with their hands rather than their minds. Just as students know who among them can move between different worlds; for example, between the preps, jocks and skaters, teachers hold perceptions about which students belong in and can move between different work and academic worlds. (See Connell et al, 1983; Foley, 1990; Luttrell, 1998; Willis, 1977 for a few examples).

A student's placement in a regular, seminar or honours academic strand shapes his or her prestige, status and power within the everyday life of Central High. At the top of the hierarchy are the academic honours and seminar classes and the fine arts programme. Students who participate in these classes and activities described Central High as a stimulating environment that challenges them and prepares them for the world of elite universities. Students in honours and seminar classes spoke about their ease of access to and participation in the wider school culture. From this position at the top of the hierarchy, some of these students can even enrol in vocational education classes and gain status for being adventurous. Mr Heath, the woodworking

teacher, provided an interesting example of this. Typically, students who elect to take his class are ‘overwhelmingly white and male’. His beginner classes might enrol three or four girls, but his more advanced classes often have only one. Last year a particularly talented young woman changed classroom dynamics. She took his classes, participated in and won a national competition, and is currently attending an ivy league college. Mr Heath described her with obvious pride:

‘She was the only female in the advanced class. And I think the other guys were intimidated. She’s good. She could handle the power equipment, she knew what she wanted, where so many of the others will go over there to some of my magazines and will say, “I’m going to build that”. Whereas “*that*” never crossed her mind. She came in, “I want to build ‘*this*’” – something she had drawn’.

According to Mr Heath, this young woman was able to move comfortably into the physically demanding, gendered world of woodworking for two reasons. She had the requisite skills to handle power equipment and a disposition toward authoring. Indeed, most girls in Heath’s classes tend to stand out from the rest of the class. Heath gave two explanations for their success: ‘Just about all the girls I get for some reason had an interest in woodworking . . . And so, they do a good job . . . Most of them are at grade-level reading, writing, math. Where a lot of my guys are not at grade level’. In Heath’s view, the girls need higher levels of motivation and functional literacy in order to cross the gender line and join the class than do the boys, who can participate in furniture-making with lower skills and motivations. For boys, vocational education identifies them as low performing and prepares them to be labourers. For girls, vocational education classes are an entry into a male world, and as such demand that they step out of their figured world into another. Put somewhat differently, the figured world of vocational education takes shape in different ways for boys than for girls and for students enrolled in different academic tracks. As social conditions and gender expectations change, so do students’ sense of who they are and who they will become.

### **IMPROVISING IDENTITY THROUGH LITERACY PRACTICES: ONE STUDENT’S STORY**

Many students at Central High reported personal literacy practices that the school structure does not acknowledge. Alice, a student in regular classes, fits the image of a regular student (working-class parents, minimal academic achievement, not sure whether she is college-bound or not), but her personal-based literacy practices narrate a far different story. Like so many other regular students interviewed, Alice keeps a journal and writes poetry that reflects who she is and who she would like to be. She talks about reading in order to think more deeply. She writes, both literally and metaphorically, outside the lines that have been scripted for her, including aspirations for college. Alice’s literacy practices are embedded in two key worlds – her family and her school. Her interview illustrates the complexities and dialogic link between student identities and literacy practices.

Alice’s father is a construction worker. Although she lived with her mother and her stepfather as a child, Alice is not sure where her mother is at the moment. Alice

described herself, 'I'm a person that thinks a lot and has learned a lot in a short period of time. I'm very friendly and I plan on going into something in writing or computers'. Alice told her interviewer that before moving in with her father she lived in 'homes' because her stepfather could not support her. She did not mention what happened with her mother or why she could not contact her. Alice's interviewer described her as being 'slightly annoyed' at first about being interviewed, explaining that she had been interviewed several times before for other reasons. But after a short time, Alice opened up and spoke a great deal more about her personal life than other students did. Alice had only been at Central High for a few months when the first interview was taken (she has attended four high schools in the last two years). She recently moved to the area to live with her father, whom she had not seen before she moved there. She described her literacy practices as intimately connected with coming to terms with her recent separation from close friends and family members, and as a way to express her loneliness. She talked about keeping a journal intermittently: 'I wrote about what happened in the day, and if I was mad about something, or if I had a good day'. She described a poem she had recently written about returning to her father's house after visiting her grandparents:

'I came home and I remember walking in the house... It just had a familiar sort of smell and I had gotten so used to being at my grandmother's and grandfather's house in Myrtle Beach, that the smell was like... I had to get used to it again... And I wrote about that and I wrote about commitment... it [the poem] was just saying that I'm back again... and I gotta get used to it. I didn't want to come back... I'm around my dad all the time and I get pissed off when I'm around him'.

Alice's personal literacy practices – her reading and poetry writing – are organised around making sense of her new relationship. The most recent poem which Alice had written and the most recent book which she had read were related to her attempts to sort out her feelings toward her father. In discussing the most recent book she had read, *Gates of Paradise*, Alice reflected upon gaining new insight about her father. Just as the main character of the novel, 'found out what she wanted to find out', Alice 'found out what she wanted to find out' by way of reading the book. Alice's 'ruling passion' – what she wanted to talk about in the interview, even when her interviewer was trying to change the subject – was her struggle living a new life with her father. Barton and Hamilton write about 'ruling passions' (1998, p. 83): 'When we went to interview people we wanted to find out about reading, writing and literacy practices. Unfortunately, it seemed the people we interviewed often wanted to talk about something else; each person had a ruling passion... We talked to them about literacy, it seemed, and they talked to us about their lives'.

Regrettably, Alice's place in the regular academic classes kept her separated from rather than connected to the passions that rule her literacy practices. Indeed, Alice views her journal and poetry writing and everyday reading materials as outside the parameters of her English classes. She feels her English classes are disconnected from her interests in reading and writing or her hopes for a college education. For example, Alice described being advised by her teacher to change her choice of poem for an aesthetic evaluation project. According to Alice, her teacher feared that the poem would require too much research. Instead, she suggested Alice use a poem

from the textbook, where the author's biography was already included. Alice still carried the poem she had wanted to use in her notebook, and presented it during the interview. Her attachment to and passion for the poem had not been acknowledged in the context of her English-class assignment. Much like the teachers interviewed by Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998), Alice believes that 'reading in private is a world apart from reading in school' (1998, p. 24). The personal-ness of her reading is not addressed in the classroom setting. This split between her private and public reading resonates with what we heard from students across all four high schools and shapes the meanings they attach to their literacy practices.

Alice acknowledges that she reads far less than she would like to. She uses the *idea* of books as a way to contemplate her inner life. There is a gap between how she wants to see herself as a reader, and the reading material afforded her. Her father gave her *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, which she criticises for being 'just like watching a TV show'. Meanwhile, her teachers give her pre-packaged literature that does not address her desire to find books that enable her to see her life differently.

Alice's desires to be a certain kind of writer and reader frame her sense of self. She speaks with frustration about the gap between how she sees herself and what she can accomplish at school. For example, none of Alice's writing can get published in the school paper. At Central High one must have been in more than two years of journalism class to have an article published (which she has not). Meanwhile, she described her aspirations to be involved in the arts: photography, music, guitar, painting. But she has made strategic choices to take only academic classes in high school, hoping to take arts classes while in college. No sooner does she finish articulating this wish, she answers it with another voice: 'I think there should be more time to experiment around (in high school) and take the classes you want to, in case you don't get into college. Because . . . I don't know if I'm going to be able to go'.

One year later, Alice struggles throughout her second interview to re-define herself and her options for the future. Asked again to describe herself, after a long period of silence, and then testing out a few ideas, she began:

'I guess I'd be a person that knows most what's right, but has . . . a problem doing it, just has a problem getting disciplined . . . I don't know, I'm too lazy! I know this. And I know what's right most of the time. And normally, most of the time, I do do it'.

Then, noting that she had not respected the interviewer's request to describe herself 'in a few words', she modified her answer and listed 'hard on myself' and 'I'm very strong'. Both of these self-definitions fit the image Alice fashioned throughout the interview, but then she added:

'I don't want this to seem silly . . . but lately . . . I figured out . . . [that I] wake up in the morning, and just smile because I should be drunk with joy, because God loves me, and that'll make everything at its best. So that's what I say every morning. And I'm all happy and I don't let anything worry me . . . But, at the same time, I'm like . . . two people. I'm telling you, one's sitting there saying, "you need to do this and do that." The other's saying "who cares? It's no biggy" . . . But at the same time I'm like . . . "what do you mean, no biggy? I know it's no biggy", but . . . "it's so simple". That's my other thing. I know

it's so simple and so easy to get something done or to do something, or to try, and to do right, it's so simple. Just as easy to go one way as it is the other. So why don't you just go the way that you should go? So that's the thing with me. I'm definitely too hard on myself'.

Alice pulls the interviewer into her inner dialogue about feeling torn. Alice feels like she is two people, one who is concerned about what she should and should not be doing about her future and the other who should relax from caring too much ('it's no biggy'). The 'biggy' in her life is college, and Alice is in the midst of figuring out how or if she will get there. College has come to symbolise a certain level of freedom and self-fulfilment, a wished-for alternative to her limiting home environment. Alice moves between seeing college as both within and outside her grasp, as being 'so simple', if she just tries 'to do right' *and* as being something she should not care too much about. Perhaps by trusting in God Alice hopes to assuage her conflict.

The world Alice walks in at Central High encourages her to research a poem that is easy rather than one that inspires her, teaches her chorus without teaching her to read music, and more often than not requires a minimal and unchallenging level of writing. Alice has taken up her position in the figured world of Central High, but is also engaged in an inner dialogue that challenges this position. She wishes to embrace college as a symbolic place where she will become the reader, writer and artist that she cannot be at Central High.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that there is a complex and dialogic relationship between students' literacy practices and their evolving identities in the figured worlds in which they are recruited and participate. Students use their literacy practices to form their identities within, and sometimes in opposition to, these figured worlds of school, work and family. The students in this project were aware of a gap between formal school literacy and their everyday literacy practices, and this gap was greater for students in lower-valued figured worlds. Many students like Alice looked to school to provide formal literacy experiences, but found their reading and writing passions at odds with the demands of the school curriculum. Put slightly differently, within the figured world of school, only some students' rich, everyday literacy lives were being validated. Vocational education classes at Central High illustrate how students' experiences of the very same classroom depends on the figured world they bring with them: as boys or girls, vocational or academic track students. At the same time, one's participation in a figured world is not set in stone or over-determined. But what seems most crucial for educators to understand is that students' *positions* within their figured worlds need not be equated with their *dispositions*. Alice's inner dialogue about how hard she should try and how much she should care about going to college exemplifies the merging of these two. Alice moves between acknowledging her lower *position* in the school hierarchy to taking on a *disposition* in which she voices opinions about herself (being 'too hard' on herself or being 'lazy') that serves to keep her in her place. Likewise, when students take on school's view of their literacy practices – that they are not good readers and writers even as they write poetry and read books related to their ruling passions – they are taking up dispositions that can

be limiting, if not self-censoring. Meanwhile, teachers who mistakenly equate their students' positions within their figured world as essential dispositions (i.e. that students are unmotivated or slated for a particular future) can play a limiting role in students' lives. Insofar as schools seek to provide students with the means to redefine themselves and to author worlds (a goal that most teachers in this project would strongly endorse) then it is important to close the gap between students' everyday literacy and their school-based literacy. Equally important, students and teachers must challenge the contexts of meaning (including hierarchy and privilege within schools) that shape how people use reading and writing to fashion their senses of self and identities.

## NOTES

1. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. This view of literacy as a social practice, emphasising the social relationships and specific institutional contexts within which literacy is embedded, has been most clearly presented by Street (1984); Gee (1992); Barton (2000); Ivanic and Hamilton (1990); Barton and Hamilton (1998).
3. Other researchers had been successful using photographs to document how people use written texts, where and how (Barton et al, 1993; Hamilton, 1999).
4. The Central High inquiry team decided to examine the links between racial identities and literacy practices in the second year realizing that these were missing in the first year's data and analysis.

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