PERCEPTIONS OF AGENCY: BELIEFS OF FOUR ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN HIGH SCHOOL AS REVEALED THROUGH LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS

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Published research suggests that cultural practices and institutional structures influence adolescent girls’ engagement and achievement in school. This study was an attempt to further investigate that claim by describing the perceptions of agency held by four adolescent girls in high school. Members of the same English class, the girls volunteered to participate in three lunchtime meetings to discuss Evelyn Coleman’s (2001) *Born In Sin*. Analysis of classroom observations, transcripts of audio recordings of the book discussions, and individual interviews yielded a more precise definition of agency than those used in previous research, including a view of agency as dialogic. In addition, four major themes describe these girls’ agentic moves: (1) a temporal orientation, which connects the past, present, and future; (2) responsibility for positive and negative events; (3) strategic decision making; (4) negotiating with people in power. Implications of this study inform both teaching decisions and future research related to adolescent girls.
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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Adolescent girls are interesting – funny, delightful, exasperating – as Margaret Norris, middle school teacher, confirms after her experience teaching in a school that serves adolescents who have failed one or more grades by eighth grade. Norris saw extraordinary changes in the girls in this school after the decision was made to reorganize the schedule to make all the classes single-gender. Yet, after working with the all-girl classes, both the counselor and the English teacher reported that the girls formed bonds with one another and displayed an attitude of acceptance. Additionally, the girls made remarkable changes in their academic behaviors. Before the altered classes, it was “like pulling teeth” to get them to go to the board or speak in front of the class, but now, they are “fighting each other over who gets to go next,” (M. Norris, personal communication, April 5, 2006). Unlike the females’ previous behavior in classes with the boys, they were reading the assigned material, answering questions, doing their homework, and completing class assignments. These girls were facing personal challenges, as well. Two of the girls had a parent in jail; two were evacuees from the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina; and at least three had been sexually molested by a relative or family friend. Surrounded by other girls, they had begun to open up and talk about their experiences. But Norris reported that as much as they began to accept each other and talk about their difficulties, the girls seemed “like deer in headlights when you suggest that they can make changes to make their lives better,” (M. Norris, personal communication, April 5, 2006). Even in this supportive, single-gender classroom, the girls did not seem to realize that they could make decisions to
improve their lives and did not seem to see themselves as agents who were capable of
taking control of their decisions to positively influence the trajectories of their lives.

Background

Studies (Gilligan 1977, 1982) of the psychological development of women have
shed light on the differences in the ways men and women view their lives. Gilligan’s
work suggests that, metaphorically speaking, men see themselves as islands,
disconnected from others. Women, on the other hand, are bridges, always connected to
those around them. Women live lives that are characterized by relationships to others,
and there are potential problems inherent in living relational lives. Relationships,
whether social, familial, or work related, involve negotiations of position and power
(Gilligan, 1977, 1982).

It is important for girls to recognize their achievements as their own doing
(Galley, 2003) because that is a sign of agency. Agency, in social cognitive theory,
refers to the beliefs a person has that she can influence the course of events by her
actions (Bandura, 2006). According to Giddens (1984), agency cannot be separated
from social structures. People function within social systems which consist of patterns of
conduct, the repetition of the give and take between people’s interactions, and the
“enduring cycles of reproduced relations” (p. 131). Human conduct in the form of
structured practices make up social structures, which have rules for behavior as well as
resources which necessitate constraints and provide opportunities for individual
development and functioning. School imposes such a social structure as it has all the
necessary components – procedural rules, moral rules, material resources, and
resources of authority. The triangulated relationship between girls, agency, and school is drawing the attention of researchers and educators (Moje & Lewis, 2007).

Research suggests that during early adolescence in the United States, many girls begin to show signs of submitting to others’ wishes in order to get along with boys, peers, teachers, and parents (Gilligan, 1977; 1982). For example, Galley (2003) learned in an interview with educational psychologist Janice Streitmatter that early adolescent girls saw themselves as being in control or the cause of negative aspects of their lives. In contrast, but when good or positive things happened to them, adolescent girls perceived it was just a coincidence. Further, if girls did not recognize positive events as self-influenced, they had no reason to replicate decisions or behaviors which led to these positive experiences.

Adolescence in the United States is a time of searching for identity, for place, for future – answers to who am I, where do I fit, and where am I going (Sadowski, 2003). Adolescents are looking for opportunities to situate themselves and looking for a personal stance to take (Dillon & Moje, 1998). Even though the time period has common characteristics for all adolescents, there are distinct variations due to differences in gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic circumstances.

Adolescents make choices everyday about whether or not to engage in school, and if they choose to engage, how they will enact that engagement in all the different contexts that each day and each classroom offers them. We live in a fast paced, high tech, global world that changes daily. Students no longer graduate from high school, go to work in a factory over their next 40 years, and retire with a nice pension. Nor do others go to college and graduate to wear a tie to the same company building for the
next forty years, where they then retire with an even nicer pension. Today, “new types of jobs open up and old ones disappear or go overseas” (Gee, 2006, p. 166), and the divide between the rich and the poor just gets bigger. Today’s adolescent faces new choices, and education is becoming even more critical. A high school diploma is almost a necessity to prevent living near the poverty line. Adolescents are expected to decide for themselves who they are and who they are going to be and not expected to follow some predetermined dictate about who they are (Gee, 2006).

Literacy includes the receptive processes of reading, listening, and viewing, and the expressive processes of speaking, writing, thinking, and representing (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). According to Alvermann (2001), literacy refers to “reading, writing, and other modes of symbolic communication that are often valued differently by people living in different social and economic structures and holding different political views,” (p. 4). Thus, the expansion of the definition points to a new set of experiences and circumstances that previous generations have not encountered.

Perhaps because they are immersed in these new literacies outside of school, many adolescents have trouble engaging in school-sanctioned literacies, especially if teachers do not reach past the curriculum to know the students they teach (Sadowski, 2003; Nakkula, 2003; Finders, 1997). The hidden curriculum, that part of the school structure that remains unwritten but very much a part of the system, often sends the message that the only literacies that have value are the literacies used in school, such as text books and other teacher chosen texts. Alvermann counters the limiting influence of the hidden curriculum by proposing that “literacy is more than school literacy,” (p. 4). Girls in an Orenstein study (1994) only read teen beauty magazines, but they did not
bring the magazines to school because the magazines did not count as reading. These
teen magazines exemplify some of the gender differences that can operate in schools
and continue to perpetuate the “be good, look good” role for girls (Finders, 1997;
Orenstein, 1994). One of the focal students in Finders’ (1997) study commented that the
teachers expected “us to be good all the time,” (p. 23). Researchers refer to the hidden
curriculum of schools (Noguera, 2003; Orenstein, 1994) as the place where societal,
ethnic, racial, and gender roles are unintentionally reinforced. The hidden curriculum
can be manifested in dilapidated school buildings serving low income students and in
teachers who spend less than a third of class time on instruction and the rest on
controlling student behavior (Orenstein, 1994). “Students are told that they’re stupid,
treated as if they’re uneducable, and accorded no respect—then blamed for their
behavior” (p. 143). Grouping is another way the hidden curriculum reinforces racial roles
(Noguera, 2003). When African American students see ninety percent of the football
team composed of African American players, but only Anglo or Asian students in the
Advanced Placement classes, they get the message that African Americans have less
academic ability than athletic ability or that their school only values their athletic ability
and not their intellectual abilities. Gilligan (1982) found that even though girls might want
to succeed academically, the pressure embedded in the hidden curriculum to be
attractive to boys is too great, and many girls bow to that pressure and disengage from
schoolwork.

Adolescents use literacy in a wide variety of ways both in and out of school – for
example, to be a part of a group, to exclude others from membership, to express their
thoughts, to sort out feelings, to resist others, to embrace others. Alvermann, Young,
Green, & Wisenbaker (2004) found teens who liked to read embrace membership in an afternoon book club where they formed new alliances with other teens as they discussed the books they read. Moller and Allen (2000) used a book with tough issues and saw girls rewriting characters’ actions, empathizing with the characters, making current connections with the feelings of the characters and their [girls] own feelings. This group gave these students a safe place where they could talk about tough issues. In a study by Broughton (2002), early adolescent girls constructed new subjectivities as they read and discussed the novel Lupita Mañana. Elizabeth, one of the participants, began greeting her mother in Spanish, a language she previously avoided. Rose, another participant, changed her feelings about illegal immigrants. Through reading and discussing the book, knowledge changed and beliefs, values, and attitudes also appeared to change as the girls became more accepting of others in their communities. These studies suggest that literature discussions – especially discussions of redressive texts (Luke, 2004) – provide context through which girls can express and transform beliefs, values, and attitudes. It follows that these discussions would provide contexts through which researchers can study phenomena like agency.

The premise of public education is that it provides all people in this country with equal opportunity. “American education is often seen as a ‘great equalizer,’ but this mission is difficult if not impossible to accomplish as long as children continue to attend school and live their daily lives under such unequal circumstances” (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 120). Students must be agents in their own lives (Bandura, 2006; Galley, 2003) who are offered opportunities to exercise their agency. To take advantage of these opportunities, however, students must see themselves as capable; they must know that
their decisions and their actions can make a difference. This study is an attempt to investigate what adolescent girls in high school believe about themselves in this regard, utilizing small group literature discussions as the primary research context.

Purpose of the Study

Once out of elementary school, it may be a difficult task for girls to develop a sense of agency when they are trying so hard just to please everyone else. Research suggests that this trying to please is particularly problematic for adolescent girls, but the literature has few studies that provide detailed descriptions or analyses of agency within the school lives of girls in high school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and analyze the perceptions of agency revealed by girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English/language arts class.

Research Question

What perceptions of agency are revealed by adolescent girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English/Language Arts class?

Definitions of Terms

The following operational definitions will be used in the context of this study:

Adolescent – a person who is between, and inclusive of, the ages 12 to 19.

Agency – the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the future, and
responsive to the present (adapted from Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Moje & Lewis, 2007)

Anglo – a person of European or Anglo-Saxon heritage; also known as White

Critical literacy – deconstructing the language of texts to examine how people are positioned in places of power and status or places of silence and marginalization (Bean & Harper, 2006; Luke, 2004; Luke & Gore, 1992; Shor, 2008)

Hispanic – an umbrella term for people of Spanish-speaking origin

Redressive texts – visual and/or aural texts that depict feasible representations of character that examine or oppose the dominant ways of being (Luke, 2004)

Self-efficacy - the belief a person has in his/her competence to act upon the events which affect her life (Bandura, 1986).

Contextual Constraints of the Study

There are several factors that may constrain the interpretation of findings from this study:

1. The small number of participants in this qualitative descriptive study limited the conclusions drawn to these four girls in this specific context. As a qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized.

2. This is the first time the teacher has used small group book discussions in her classroom so her reduced familiarity with them may influence the amount of student discussion generated.

3. This may be the first time these participants have been a part of a small group book discussion so their knowledge of the way small group book discussions operate
may be limited, which may affect both the discussion and written responses.

4. The qualitative nature of written reflections is limited to what the participants write.

Assumptions of the Study

This research will operate under these assumptions:

1. Jaye Lowe, the teacher, will be candid in her descriptions of herself and her teaching philosophy.

2. The participants will be truthful in their responses to questions and their reflections in their journals, as well as during the interviews when they describe themselves.

3. The participants will complete the assigned reading and other assignments in a timely manner.

4. Small group discussions of redressive texts provide contexts through which students will make statements that reveal their perceptions of agency.

Significance of the Findings

As a qualitative study, this inquiry into the perceptions of agency held by adolescent females is not an attempt to generalize to the entire population of adolescent girls in high school. Those perceptions are as multifaceted and varied as the number of girls in high school. This study does, however, add to the literature surrounding the issue of girls and schooling. Because the beliefs of these girls are assumed to be valid, the analysis of their beliefs about their capabilities can be a springboard for discussions
in schools concerning ways to build on their beliefs in themselves. Several theorists (Ellsworth, 1992; Luke & Gore, 1992) believe that by reading through a critical lens in an attempt to scrutinize the forces that impact our lives, perceptions of agency can actually be enhanced because agency has potential for change. By describing what these girls reveal about their own perceptions of agency in school, both researchers and educators might have significant insights about student motivation, behavior, and future choices, which can lead to larger studies and/or interventions to enhance perceptions of agency.

Summary

Because many adolescent girls disengage from school-sanctioned literacies, it is a problem for educators to understand how these girls view themselves and their competence within the structure of school. This chapter described an initial interest in the topic of adolescent girls and identified the purpose for investigating perceptions of agency held by adolescent girls in high school.
The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and analyze the perceptions of agency revealed by girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English/Language Arts class. Thus, the literature review begins with a discussion of adolescent girls and school and moves to a discussion of the theories of identity formation, commencing with the seminal work of Erikson (1968) and concluding with the more recent poststructuralist concept of identity as dynamic rather than a static construct. This study is grounded in the belief that identity is a fluid and mediated construction, being created and recreated as people negotiate with others in varying contexts (Gee, 1999; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Nakkula, 2003). Giddens’ (1984) foundational work concerning agency and capability begins the next section with the move to Bandura’s social cognitive theory to providing a more complete understanding of the types of agency. Feminist theory related to agency completes this section. Feminist theory is less concerned with a precise definition of agency and more concerned with its relation to action and change (Gardiner, 1995). The assertion that adolescent girls are fully capable of living the lives they imagine is central to this study and also prompts the principal research question – whether they are aware of their capabilities. That leads to a discussion of Bandura’s work in self-efficacy because belief in one’s ability is arguably the most central component of personal agency (Bandura, 1989).

Since this study was conducted within the context of school, learning and literacy theories are presented next. Learning, as well as language and literacy, are social,
cultural, and historical practices. Belief in these social, cultural, and historical influences informed this study within the context of small group discussions and not solely individual conversations. Because girls often become followers and people pleasers during early adolescence (Gilligan, 1977, 1982), it is important to have a clear picture of what happens in schools during those years to support or constrain their personal and academic development. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1938, 1987) is considered seminal work by literacy professionals in the area of reader response, and therefore, relevant to a study using small group book discussions. This study is grounded in the assumptions that discussions of literature, particularly discussions of redressive texts, provide rich contexts for studying agency so Chapter 2 concludes with a review of the literature regarding the connections among reader response, critical literacy, identity formation, and the development of agency.

Adolescent Girls and School

Gender differences that operate in schools are well documented in the literature. In Orenstein’s (1994) ethnographic study of two middle schools in Middle America, she identified the hidden curriculum in teachers’ language and attitudes which reminded students of their hierarchal places in the larger society. Historically, in the United States, men have held the preferred place in social order. This dates back to the Founding Fathers who gave rights to Anglo men who owned land. In contrast, women were an afterthought to the Constitution. This oversight resulted in women gaining equal legal rights in 1920, nearly 150 years after the writing of the Constitution. The Orenstein study illustrates that even in schools, girls are often reduced to second class citizens.
Orenstein (1994) observed boys eagerly blurting out answers to questions while girls rarely raised a hand. Boys were shouting out answers – wrong answers frequently – but the girls sporadically raised a hand and then only if they knew their answers were right. Being heard in class is a validation of who we are, that we have thoughts that matter, and boys are not shy about demanding that attention. Orenstein reports this example:

“I think my opinions are important, so I yell them out,” Nate tells me one day after Mrs. Richter’s math class. “The teacher’ll tell you not to do it, but they answer your question before the people who raise their hands. Girls will sit there until the bell rings with their hands up and never get their question answered.” He waves his hand in the air as if brushing the girls aside and says contemptuously, “Forget that.” (p. 13)

Orenstein (1994) points out that she saw class after class where girls sat silently and only boys raised their hands and shouted out answers – and this went completely unnoticed by most teachers. In one class, Orenstein talked to the teacher who had realized what was happening. The teacher began using her attendance roll to mark when she called on a student. After two days, the boys began complaining that they were not being called on, and that she was playing favorites with the girls. When the teacher pointed out with her attendance roster that she was calling on boys and girls equally, the boys refused to accept the truth. The teacher made the observation that the boys sensed equality as loss.

Orenstein found this same sort of scenario in the classroom of a California teacher who had turned the mirror of other classrooms on her own classroom and become what they are not – walls full of female leaders, artists, writers. Students had to role play from research on two chosen people – one female and one male. The teacher started using two reports when she noticed that some girls chose males to research, but no boy ever chose a woman. Boys began complaining loudly about the unfairness of
this class although it was simply a mirror in reverse of other classrooms. One eighth grade girl commented on the boys’ feelings, “…it’s the resentment of losing their place” (p. 255). In listening to the girls talk about this class, Orenstein noticed that, as much as they liked the fact that someone was saying that women deserved attention and were equal to men, the girls, too, seemed somewhat uncomfortable. It was as if the girls were already accustomed to “taking up less space, to feeling less worthy of attention than boys” (p. 255).

As is seen in the wider circle of advertising, television, movies, and other media, the way a woman looks is all-important and this message has not slipped by the girls in these studies. “Ways of being social were for the most part enacted as ways of appearing and being the same” (Finders, 1997, p. 48). These social queens read the teen magazines as if they were the Bible, speaking truthfully to the girls with all the answers to fashion, make-up, and relationship questions. Orenstein (1994) found girls overwhelmingly wrote about clothes, hair care, and cosmetics in writing about chosen objects for a time capsule in an eighth grade social studies class.

Lisa, who describes herself as a “fat adolescent” in the Orenstein study, learned quickly that the only thing her peers noticed about her was her size. She came to school with a positive attitude but was called Miss Piggy that first day of school and noticed that people looked at her “like I had a disease” (Orenstein, 1994, p. 100). Although Lisa’s standardized test scores placed her in the top 20%, and the researcher noticed her vocabulary was at a higher level than the other focal students, Lisa’s grade average was barely passing. Lisa has dreams but has equated everything with being fat – poor grades, no friends, no love in the future. Somewhere along the way of that first
semester, Lisa changed from a smart girl to a victim of fat – her agency had diminished to nothing during the seventh grade because she, like many privileged girls, had looked to the outside for confirmation of her person and her desirability and received worse than nothing in return.

Educators have been amazed at the degree to which the adolescents’ stories about school and their views of themselves in their school environment were infused with social class (Brantlinger, 2003). To these educators, social class played a role at least as prominently as gender and race in the construction of their identities. It is important for educators to realize how class identities are the underpinning of students’ functioning in the school arena and how these associations and interactions might reveal the roots of some adolescents’ suffering (Brantlinger, 2003).

In Finders’ (1997) study, socioeconomics showed vast differences between the “tough cookies” and the “social queens,” two groups of middle school Anglo girls at the same school. The “tough cookies,” at the lower end of the socioeconomics scale, were determined to succeed in school because they had been told over and over by their mothers that education is the key to a different life. These girls did their homework meticulously and on time and engaged in class discussion, but did so cautiously. They did not let others see their work; for these girls, this “private literacy is self-disclosure and should be protected from the view of others” (p. 98). On the other hand, more affluent girls paid the better student to write papers for them and could not seem to discuss the work unless they were with their social group. Where the “social queens” relied on the affirmation of each other, the “tough cookies” worked independently and shunned help from others.
The “tough cookies” differed in other ways from the mainstream view of adolescents. Their lives did not revolve around their friends; in fact, they only saw their friends at school because after school was spent, as expected, with family. They did not engage in extracurricular clubs or sports because they were expected home after school. On the contrary, the more affluent girls, the “social queens,” were encouraged by their parents to spend their time with friends. Conversations and weekends revolved around the social calendar. As the “tough cookies” worked seriously to engage in school literacy, the social queens worked equally hard to resist it. They did not admit to reading books for class, nor did they admit to each other about reading books. Teen magazines were acceptable, and that is what the social queens used as their literacy focus.

Certainly there are girls who speak up in class, but research suggests that, in general, girls’ strengths remain unrecognized in school. Perhaps the most extreme example of intolerance toward females being boisterous is in the African American group where adolescent females are seen as loud and disorderly. In Orenstein’s (1994) study, April is an African American who knows speaking up is about being a part of the group and making yourself known. She understands it in relation to making mistakes and learning from those mistakes. Interestingly enough, her teachers do not see this as being about learning; they see it as being disruptive. For the teachers, the boys call out answers and it is accepted – “boys will be boys” – but African American girls are seen as loud and disorderly. Ironically, teachers and administrators can give these same girls credit for successfully handling a difficult personal life. April’s teachers and counselor talk about the maturity she displays at home by taking care of younger siblings and troubled parents, but those same teachers offer no support at school to assist April in
academic endeavors. Instead, these teachers who are giving her credit one minute, are calling her stupid the next and spending the majority of class time disengaged from teaching the students who are trying so hard to learn. Many teachers never see April as a student demanding attention from a system that has tried constrain her agency to silence her.

For many girls, school is merely a reflection of what they see elsewhere in society. Boys are demanding and favored, and girls are expected to “keep the peace.” Girls still find themselves in schools that value neatness over originality and appearance over intelligence (Bruce, 2003). It is only plausible that many girls would disengage from the academic discourse and become quiet students who look nice.

Identity Formation

A common assumption is that identity development is a central task for adolescent girls in schools. Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity development cites several stages which begin with a crisis or critical task to traverse. If the task is successfully negotiated, then successful ongoing identity development continues to the next stage and the next critical task. However, if the task is not negotiated successfully, future tasks become progressively more challenging. Erikson called the first crisis, which occurs during the infancy stage, “trust vs. mistrust.” If the infant gets the care and love needed to successfully traverse this crisis and arrives at the next stage with a sense of trust intact, it is easier to navigate the next critical task. However, if the infant is neglected and reaches the next stage without a sense of trust, the subsequent critical task is more difficult to negotiate. This negotiation of tasks continues through each life
stage where there is both opportunity and risk for growth. Adolescence, according the Erikson (1968), is the last chance to successfully rework past crises and find the way toward future growth and development. Implicit in Erikson’s theory is an inner core that is basically unchanging even as adolescents search for self and build on this inner core. Poststructuralists’ (Derrida, 1967/1976) thinking challenges this notion of unchanging inner core as the self is decentered and deconstructed. Instead of identity, poststructuralists (Weedon, 1987) use the term “subjectivities” to call attention to the ideas of the self/notions of self as fluid, constantly changing as we negotiate with others. I am subject to constant renegotiation according to particular contexts and discourses, thus subjectivities. Self is decentered according to, and dependent upon, discourse, social structure, repetition, memory and affective investment (Giroux & McLaren, 1992). Nakkula (2003) offers this explanation of identity, “identity is not the culmination of a key event or series of events …It is, rather, the lived experience of an ongoing process” (p. 7). Gee (1999) theorizes the situated identity in reference to the different enactments of self as people negotiate positions of power in varying contexts. We assimilate all our experiences – the successes, the failures, the routines, the challenges – we assimilate and re-assimilate as we come to understand who we are. In working with adolescents, Raible and Nieto (2003) have observed that “their [adolescent students] identities change based on their experiences and the contexts in which they live and study at any given time,” (p. 145).

In a Broughton study (2002), early adolescent girls constructed new subjectivities as they read and discussed Lupita Mañana (Beatty, 2000). The study took place in a suburban middle school during one academic year in a large Southeastern city. Four
sixth grade girls participated in the study. All the participants liked to read and discuss literature and demonstrated an average or above-average achievement in reading skills as determined by grades in the language arts class. The girls were observed in their small group for six months as they read and discussed Patricia Beatty’s *Lupita Mañana* (2000). Elizabeth, whose mother is Hispanic and her father Anglo, began greeting her mother in Spanish, a language she previously avoided. Rose, an affluent Spanish American with a mother who minimized the Hispanic identity, changed her feelings about illegal immigrants. Through reading and discussing the book, knowledge changed and beliefs, values, and attitudes also appeared to change as the girls became more accepting of others in their communities.

**Literacy and Learning Theories**

Language and literacy are social, cultural, and historical practices. Through learning as an instrument of sociocultural and historical transmission, learners acquire the discourse of the community to which they belong (Bruner, 1986; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Social constructivists believe individuals construct what they learn and understand through interactions with others, which makes knowledge subjective and personal, a product of one’s own cognition. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the interaction of social, cultural, and historical factors as the key to learning. Interactions with people in the environment stimulate developmental processes and foster cognitive growth. Culture provides tools and other resources to mediate thinking. Additionally, culture implies that learning and development cannot be dissociated from
their context. The ways learners interact with their worlds – people, objects, institutions – transform their thinking.

*Reader Response and the Transactional Theory of Reading*

In 1938, Louise Rosenblatt published the first book, *Literature as Exploration*, for teachers to explain her theory regarding a reader’s response to literature. This theory of reading places importance on the transaction that occurs between the reader and the text. Acceptance of the transactional theory of reading was a move away from the strict emphasis on the objective meaning found in literary theory called “New Criticism” and stressed the transaction the reader makes with the text as she brings the totality of her being and experience to the reading. The meaning of the text does not lie solely in the text nor in the reader but in the transaction between the two. The reading event involves the reader, the text, and the transaction that occurs at a specific time in a specific context.

An important aspect of this theory is the stance the reader takes toward the reading act. Stance is related to purpose. Rosenblatt (1988) defines two stances: efferent and aesthetic. The efferent stance is appropriate with textbooks or other informational texts. Efferent refers to the stance a reader takes with the intent of taking away from the text to retain meanings after the text is read. The aesthetic stance is what Rosenblatt refers to as the lived experience of making meaning while reading. From an aesthetic stance, the reader draws on all the emotions, images, sensations, and feelings that occur during the reading. Rosenblatt (1988) likens the reading stances to an iceberg. In efferent reading, the reader focuses on the tip of the iceberg, the public,
dictionary meaning of the text. Conversely, with aesthetic reading, the reader’s focus is on the rest of the iceberg – the iceberg under the surface with all the thoughts and feelings that the reader associates with the words seen. Aesthetic reading is most often associated with novels, short stories, and poetry although any text might be read aesthetically if that is the purpose of the reader.

Texts do not exclusively require either the efferent or aesthetic stance of the reader. The reader slides back and forth between stances depending on the focus of the reader at any given moment. An aesthetic reading of a poem might change purpose if a test follows the reading or new information is imparted so that efferent reading might become the focus. The fluidity of moving back and forth between stances or the stances emerging during the reading demonstrates that it does not have to be one stance or the other. This theoretical frame suggests that within these literacy transactions, readers not only come to understand the text, but also can, within these literacy transactions, come to understand themselves and their worlds in new ways.

Sumara (2002) suggests that reading literature, specifically the novel, is one way of delving into the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the human experience. Because literature is an interpretation of one person’s, the author’s, reality, close examination of this reality allows students to consider insights that are new to them. Through exploring other possibilities of reasoning, they can enlarge their own understandings. Sumara (2002) believes the “literacy experience is a place. By learning to attend to its details, readers can improve the quality of their lived experience” (p. xiv). Appleman (2007), concurring with the idea of literature as a place, refers to literature as a “site for self-discovery and intellectual growth for adolescents” (p. 147) if teachers are attentive to
creating spaces for students to act as readers and thinkers. The study of literature is ripe with possibility for students to reshape ideas and beliefs, which can lead to more mature thought and action (Bean & Harper, 2006). This suggests that a book discussion might be a conduit in which participants' views about significant issues, like agency, might become apparent.

For example, Smith (2001) met with eight girls in sixth grade over a period of six months in order to read and discuss books. Each of these girls was considered a good reader and good student. Smith purposely chose novels with strong female protagonists and then gave the larger selection in order for the girls to narrow the selection from which they chose the books they wanted to read. The group met once a week for an hour to discuss their reading and write letters to the characters. Findings included the girls' identifying with the characters and experiencing negative situations vicariously through the characters. The small group was a safe space where the girls could explore and negotiate through discourse some of the harsh issues of life. This was a space that supported the agency of these girls.

In a Möller and Allen (2000) study, the researchers analyzed the discussion between four fifth grade girls, three African-American and one Hispanic, as they read The Friendship (Taylor, 1987). The girls met with one of the researchers, Karla, for 25 to 75 minutes outside their classroom for five days over a period of two weeks. The girls were all struggling readers who were part of a larger research project between the classroom teacher and the local university faculty seeking new ways to meet the multiple literacy needs of a number of fifth graders who were reading and writing below grade level.
Having read 10 to 15 pages of the book before each meeting, the girls then wrote responses to Karla’s prompts intended to facilitate discussion and understanding of the characters, themes, story line and other related concerns. Findings indicated the girls did increase their understandings by connecting to the characters, the writer’s craft, and the social issues, both past and present.

As the girls moved to deeper understandings, they also showed ways of resisting those same understandings. They rewrote and critiqued the actions of the characters and predicted less negative outcomes. In its most powerful form, the girls resisted by detaching themselves from the racist meanings that made them uncomfortable. This detachment was evidenced by wanting to read a different book and remove themselves from the discussion. One participant not only said she did not want to talk about it [racism] anymore, she told the others to stop talking about it. Another way the girls showed detachment was laughing at the way the characters talked so that there was a disassociation from the characters as people.

In addition to connecting and resisting, the findings indicated the girls found a safe space in this small group book discussion that allowed them to talk about their hopes and their fears. They also chose to read and discuss another book with Karla because they had found that she provided a space that supported their agency.

Adolescents will find the spaces they need inside or outside of school. Alvermann et al. (2004) discovered adolescents who liked to read would embrace membership in an afternoon book club where they formed new alliances with their peers as they discussed the books they read. The 20 participants were recruited during three weeks in August and paid $5.00 a week for the 15 weekly meetings that occurred. They kept a
daily after school activity log and attended a weekly 30-minute book club discussion group that met in the local library.

The participants ranged from Grade 6 to Grade 9 and included 8 girls and 12 boys that were divided into four different discussion groups. There were four African Americans, one Korean, and 15 European Americans. Data sources included activity logs, researchers’ field notes, transcripts from taped book discussions and interviews with the participants and their parents.

The groups chose to have each participant read whatever s/he wanted, and the participants enjoyed interactive dialogue about the different books. Discussions took the course of authentic conversations with the usual turn-taking, and those that usually did the talking continued talking.

Findings revealed that the participants were avid readers who spent time after school reading frequently and usually for substantial periods of time. More than half indicated their favorite reading place was their bedroom. The reasons they gave for coming to the Read and Talk Clubs included the discussion groups were a social outlet for readers, there was a monetary incentive, and the groups gave them a chance for authentic discussions.

Additional findings included the importance of choice and confirmation that reading is a social activity. The researchers were also able to identify literate practices that delineated social class boundaries, as well as the way peer gossip was used to strengthen and uphold a group’s stance on reading.

The above studies document the possibilities for dialogue in small group book discussions. As participants interact and construct meaning from the books, tough
issues like racism and sexual abuse and rape, along with fears and opinions can be explored with peers.

*Critical Literacy in Book Discussions*

Critical literacy is a way of deconstructing the language of texts to examine how some people are positioned in places of power and status while others are positioned in silence. Critical literacy activities allow opportunities for students to examine their own beliefs about gender, racial, and/or class identities and, given adequate space, as well as allow opportunities for students to reconstruct their own identities as they relate to gender, class, and/or race. “Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” (Shor, 2008, p. 1).

Young adult literature offers a wide range of texts which offer an opportunity for an examination of assumptions about the ways in which the world works. Luke (2004) calls texts that offer this opportunity “redressive texts.” By using redressive texts, the climate is set for an examination of the current state of affairs. Redressive texts (Luke, 2004) are types of visual or aural media with characters that go against the dominant social structures or ways of being. By using these types of texts, students have opportunities to examine gender, racial, and social roles with fictional characters who have questioned the status quo (Marsh and Stolle, 2006), but it is only when these texts are examined through a critical literacy lens that the possibility for authentic questioning is realized (Bean & Harper, 2006). It is in this critical examination and questioning of societal dictates and assumptions that Luke and Gore (1992) believe agency can actually be enhanced. Because a critical literacy approach involves questions of power
and positioning, it also includes the opportunities for manifestations of agency (Bean & Harper, 2006). It is important to share literature which provides the spaces for students to see themselves and broach areas of stereotyping and prejudice in a critical manner where questions are asked and discussed by students and teachers (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Noll, 2003).

Marsh and Stolle (2006) report on an adolescent girl who participated in critical literacy book discussions. Carlie was in an afterschool book club at her middle school where redressive texts with various construction of gender were chosen to read and discuss. The students were invited to examine their own construction of gender as they examined the characters’ different constructions of gender, which might be in opposition to the gender norms of the time period. One of the books read was The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle (Avi, 1997), where the protagonist dressed as a man and crossed the ocean with a ship of men in 1832. The data clearly reveal that Carlie sees gender identity as an individual’s choice, but the data is less clear about whether the critical literacy discussions and activities allow for Carlie to reexamine her beliefs about gender constructions.

Fecho, Davies, & Moore (2006) describe a year of teaching high school in a northeastern urban school when Fecho and his students focused on one question, “how does learning connect you to your world” (p. 191). Fecho put the focus of the curriculum on language and incorporated three inquiry projects for the year’s study. Literature was used as the foundation from which to work. The first third of the year, the focus was on the issues and nature of language. The students read Girl by Kinkaid (1993), Fences by Wilson (1986), and The Miracle Worker by Gibson (1957) and were attentive to what the
books said about language, as well as the ways in which language moved the story forward.

The second part of the year was a focus on an autobiographical investigative look at language, and the students were responsible for writing an autobiography which was four chapters in length, and one chapter centered on the ways language had impacted their lives. By this time, four themes of language had emerged and dominated the discussions: Standard English, Black English, profanity and slang, and code switching.

The third and last inquiry involved individual student investigations into language. The students developed questions, generally around one of the four themes, and collected data through interviews, journal entries, note making, and electronic recording. In research reports and essays, students reported their findings and made pleas for their ways of thinking.

There was no consensus on the use of profanity or code switching or standard and Black English; there were opinions as diverse as the people. For example, one opinion was that because profanity is so pervasive, it should be embraced by everyone. An alternate opinion was that because profanity is used to hurt people, it is not appropriate in school or toward teachers. The students did agree that the issues surrounding language and its use would be affecting their lives for as long as they studied them.

LeCourt (2004) reports incorporating critical literacy activities paired with redressive texts in her college classroom. One young woman who wrote and spoke passionately about the need for change refused to make any changes in her own life
because she said it would break up her marriage, and she did not want to take that risk. Her school knowledge and church knowledge tangled with one another. A young man in the same classroom also spoke fervently about the unfair social system, but he, too, refused to make any changes in his personal life because, as a male Anglo, he really had no desire to change a system that privileged him. These students were not adolescents but were in their early 20s, and the inclusion of both genders demonstrates the complexities of using redressive texts and critical literacy activities in ways to ask students to look at their identities. These studies suggest that within classrooms, book discussions provide a context in which adolescents can critically examine their attitudes and their life choices as they relate to established norms and expectations. Literature and subsequent discussions offer all students the opportunity to talk about differences among people, as well as the chance to envision a different world where the practices which devalue human existence no longer exist (Dudley-Marling, 2003). Used as an effective educational tool, literature, when combined with “dynamic and informed teaching, can enable young people to empathize with others, develop moral attitudes, make sound choices, think critically about emotionally charged issues, and understand the consequences of their actions” (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 9). Rosenblatt’s theoretical frame and the subsequent research cited here provide a rationale for focusing on the discussion of a redressive text as one context in which girls’ expressions of agency can be investigated.

Agency and Adolescent Girls

Agency is a term used in multiple disciplines, and although the definitions are
similar across the disciplines, there is not a unified agreement on a precise definition. According to Emirbayer and Mishe (1998), the various fields focus on different dimensions and one-sided views of agency. The dominant theorists in social science highlight the routine, the recurring, and the assumptive dimensions; agency is routine and taken for granted. Prevailing feminist theorists put emphasis on forethought and reasoning, while rational choice theory and phenomenology theory underscore goal seeking and usefulness. Social psychology emphasizes the dimension of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). Agency is a complex concept; one that includes negotiation and renegotiation with the past, the future, and the present. A relational concept, agency is not static and fixed, but fluid and continuous (Emirbayer & Mishe, 1998; Giddens, 1984; Bandura, 1989; Gardiner, 1995).

**Social Science Theory**

Social scientists consider the work of Anthony Giddens as seminal thinking on the subject of agency (Emirbayer & Mishe, 1998). Agency, as viewed by Giddens (1984), refers to a person’s capability for completing an action. Agency is co-produced. People act; the acts, repeated over time, become practices. The practices become guidelines for the actions people make. Thus, the co-production of agency – actions make practices which remake actions which remake practices. Agency cannot be separated from structure in Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory. For Giddens, structure includes practices that are more specific and detailed than in social systems. These practices fall into the categories of procedural rules which define how the practice is performed and moral rules which give guidelines for the appropriate ways of interacting,
and a third category of material resources. This category includes the distribution of resources, as well as resources of authority, including formal organizations, organization of time and space, production and reproduction. School is such a system of structures. The curriculum, the rules both written and unwritten, the resources such as books and furniture, the discourse, the expectations, and the hierarchy of administration, faculty, staff, and students are enacted practices of school structure. These practices cannot be separated from the agency of the teachers and students who fill the classrooms of the school. Because public secondary schools in the United States are traditional establishments, “male domination and female submissiveness” continue to be apparent today (Bruce, 2003, p. 5). Schools continue to operate in the status quo because the enacted practices of the people are structured in ways that reproduce the structure (Giddens, 1984).

In Finders’ (1997) study of five Anglo girls at the same middle school, two of the girls showed their resistance to the classroom practices of peer group writing and brainstorming discussions because they saw the girls who participated as weak. Cleo chose to resist the discussions by not joining in the discourse, and Dottie chose to sign another’s person’s name to her paper to document a peer response that she did not get. Another of the participants chooses to pretend she is asleep during the time the teacher reads aloud. She is listening intently, but she chooses not to let her friends know that she is paying attention. Clearly, these are ways these adolescent girls make agentic moves in school.
Albert Bandura's (1986) work in the area of self-efficacy and the related conceptual construct of agency comes from the field of social cognitive theory and is the prevailing school of thought in this field. Bandura (1989) connects agency to “the capacity to exercise control over one’s own thought processes, motivation, and action” (p. 1175). He describes an agentic perspective as one “in which people are viewed as self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting” (Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. ix). Bandura (1989) describe three constructs of the ways in which one can view how agency operates: autonomous agency, mechanical agency, and emergent interactive agency. According to Bandura (1989), autonomous agency has few proponents and views the subject as completely independent from any influences. Mechanical agency places the focus on external influences. An internal instrument reacts automatically to those external factors without any thinking on the part of the subject. Agency is part of the environment, and the self is merely a storehouse and channel for those influences. Emergent interactive agency, widely accepted by social cognitive theorists (Bandura, 1989), recognizes both internal and external influences. This concept acknowledges the subject’s ability for control over thoughts, reflective thinking, and motivation. Since personal (emergent interactive) agency is influenced by external influences which surround the individual, students in school are influenced by the context of school and the individual classroom. The implication of this belief is that the school environment might be one effect on the agency of adolescent girls.
In feminist theory, agency is related to action and performance (Gardiner, 1995). According to Messer-Davidow (1995), feminist theory perceives agency as intended for change. When agency is attached to an individual, it is conceptualized as “an individual’s capacity for self-determination realized through decision and action” (p. 25). In this way, it is thought of as a factor in psychological being. When attached to “persons” and thought of as a factor in social being, it is conceptualized as “their capacity for social influence” (p. 25). Messer-Davidow (1995) defines agency not as the capacity of individuals nor a function of the social system but as a creation of both the regularized practices of individuals and the processes of the social system. However, Gardiner (1995), states the definition of agency is not as important as its social use, which is to improve the circumstances of women. Feminist thinking enhances our understanding of the importance of agency as it relates to adolescent girls in a structure that imposes male superiority. The concept of agency for the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s illustrated the importance of collective agency, where people with shared values and shared goals work together for the common good. The Women’s Liberation Movement intended change in individual consciousness, in personal lives, and in society. However, the change did not always happen in all three contexts. People joined consciousness raising groups but did not always transfer the change in consciousness to their personal lives, nor did they become social activists. One of the positive outcomes of the consciousness raising groups of the Women’s Movement was the sense of sisterhood, which underscored the importance of collective agency. This construct of collective agency supports Giddens’ belief that structures can
be changed when people change their practices and also reflects the feminist idea that the personal is political.

*New School for Social Research*

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) acknowledge the various dimensions of agency, but emphasize the importance of the interplay among the various dimensions for research purposes. Focusing on the temporal aspects of the concept, they define agency as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future and toward the present” (p. 963). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), it is through examination of these temporal aspects that an accounting of the variability and change in capacities of individuals might be accomplished.

*Agency and Power*

Other researchers point to the central role of power as it relates to both agency and structure. For example, Giddens (1984) connects power to the definition of agency because “to be a human being is to be an agent…and to be an agent is to have power,” (p. 9). In this context, power implies the individual’s ability to carry out an intended act. Power can also refer to an accumulation of prejudices embedded in the system which enables some a favored position (Giddens, 1984). Examining the power structures and the disruptions of those structures in schools, Moje and Lewis (2007), define agency as “the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (p. 18).
Grounded in the work of these theorists and researchers, the concept of “agency” within this study is defined as the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the future, and responsive to the present. In looking at adolescent girls in school, the concept of agency emerges from complex dynamics involving individuals, structures, power, and temporal and social processes. As agency is the focus of this study, the research question was conceptualized to investigate these complex dynamics as they relate to female adolescents in schools.

Self-Efficacy and Agency

In social psychology, researchers studying similar concepts refer to beliefs related to agency as “self-efficacy.” Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his/her ability to act upon the events which affect his/her life (Bandura, 1986). Educators can influence students’ development of self-efficacy. How learners see themselves as learners can be influenced by how they see themselves in relation to their own educational achievements and challenges (Galley, 2003). If classrooms are structured so students are actively engaged in learning and with each other, opportunities are provided for successes. Further, social supports are presented as models to imitate in order to assist the development of self-efficacy and resilience that students need to live full and competent lives. A strong self-efficacy also increases the chances that they can reject society’s scripted role and become the people they truly want to be.

Self-efficacy determines how people think, feel, self-motivate, and behave. The influences on the building of self-efficacy are in four major areas (Bandura, 2006).
Success breeds success is the first influence. The more we succeed, the stronger our self-efficacy, but successes cannot come too easily. We need to be challenged and experience some failure or obstacle so that we build resilience and understand that achieving one’s goal takes a sustained effort. Social influences come in the way of being told you can do it – encouragement from others. Working in a classroom on a group project, students can build their own self-efficacy as an offshoot of collective efficacy, which is achieved through successful collaboration. The third influence is a modeling influence so a person chooses a competent individual to imitate. This competent model guides the person until s/he can be successful on her/his own. The fourth influence on the development of self-efficacy is one’s physiological state. Feeling good leads to a better chance of success. The climate in a classroom can be either a support or constraint on the self-efficacy of students. Agency has different components – motivation, engagement, behavior, belief. Self-efficacy, belief in one’s ability, is the most central aspect of agency (Bandura, 2006).

A Working Definition of Agency

While Giddens (1984) stresses capacity, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) highlight the temporal influences of agency, and Moje and Lewis (2007) emphasize the strategic choices students make within power structures. The ways people interpret the experiences of their lives influence the decisions they make. From these theoretical approaches, I have adopted this working definition of agency: the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the future, and responsive to the present.
Summary

The theory and research reviewed here suggest that adolescent girls choose whether to be engaged in school activities; they choose whether or not they read, write, and participate. In order to better understand how to help female adolescents make healthy and productive choices, educators need to understand more about how these adolescent girls see themselves, particularly about how adolescent girls take action on their worlds. In other words, educators need to understand more about agency among adolescent girls. This chapter has reviewed the literature surrounding adolescent girls and school, identity formation, literacy and learning, and the construct of agency. The theories that inform this study include identity as fluid, learning as socially constructed, reading as a transaction constructed between the reader and the text, and agency as fluid and continuous, manifested in girls’ discourse and in their decisions. Redressive texts combined with a critical literacy approach to study allows for space where girls can examine who they are, as well as examining who occupies the positions of power. The literature supports that girls can remake themselves in these spaces and possibly discover ways to express their agency.

In reviewing the literature concerning agency, Giddens’ (1984) connection between agency and structure helped clarify the relationship between students exercising their agency within the structure of school. The temporal involvement in agency for Emirbayer & Mische (1998) was the insight I needed. When I thought about how easily sometimes people get buried in past events and cannot seem to move forward, the temporal ties to agency were clarified. Also, the Moje & Lewis (2007) relationship between agency and power and strategic decisions really connected with
school, given the power structures at school. The definition of agency for this study was primarily derived from Emirbayer & Mische (1998) and Moje & Lewis (2007). Given this previous research, the study reported here was designed to describe and analyze the perceptions of agency revealed by girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English/language arts class.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Franz Boas (1943) wrote, “If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people the whole analysis of experience must be based upon their concepts, not ours” (p. 314). The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of agency revealed by girls in high school through small group book discussions. As a participant observer in a high school English classroom, my intent was to come away with a better understanding of these girls, and that understanding be derived from their words, not mine. For a period of 14 weeks, I observed and interviewed four girls in that classroom. In addition, they met with me during lunch for an informal book discussion. This chapter explains the methodology used to investigate this research question:

What perceptions of agency are revealed by adolescent girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English language arts class?

This chapter contains two sections: 1) information relating the pilot study to this study and 2) the methodology related to the study reported here.

Pilot Study

The idea for this study of adolescent girls and their agency began during the period I taught remedial reading and encountered a diverse group of girls who took different paths in school. I wondered about the differences between the girls who dropped out of school before graduating, girls who graduated and got jobs or married, girls who had babies during high school but stayed in and graduated, and girls who had babies and quit. I wanted to understand the disparity between the girls who quit and the
girls who persevered in school despite major obstacles. The dissimilarity had to be more than cultural and/or societal expectations. I decided to investigate girls' beliefs about themselves in the context of education.

Research suggests that during early adolescence in the United States, many girls begin to show signs of submitting to others' wishes in order to get along with boys, peers, teachers, and parents (Finders, 1997; Gilligan, 1977; 1982; Orenstein, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). According to Galley (2003), educational psychologist Straightmatter revealed in an interview that she found that early adolescent girls saw themselves as being in control or the cause of negative aspects of their lives but that good or positive things were coincidences in their lives. If girls do not recognize positive events as self influenced, they have no reason to replicate decisions or behaviors which led to these positive experiences.

In an effort to understand more about adolescent girls' beliefs about choice and their ability to effect change, I conducted a study in a classroom comprised only of adolescent girls. Because research suggests that literature can serve as a vehicle for students to have significant discussions (Alvermann, 2004; Braughton, 2002; Dillon & Moje, 1998; Hynds, 1997), I chose a novel from a selection of young adult literature and conducted a pilot study to investigate the conversations this novel instigated. This study became the pilot for the study reported here. In the book, *Born In Sin* by Evelyn Coleman (2001), a 14 year old African American girl is determined in her mission to go to medical school despite messages to the contrary that she receives from friends, neighbors, school personnel, and instructors in a summer program she is chosen to attend. I selected this book because, centering on education, I thought it had a strong
message that society cannot dictate roles we are to take, and sometimes we have to fight to get what we want.

I conducted the pilot study in spring 2006 in an alternative school in a large suburban area in the Southwest. The school combined the eighth and ninth grade years into one set of classes. There were 70 students in the school, and all the students had failed at least one grade prior to eighth grade. An overwhelming majority, 95%, of the students qualified for reduced/free lunch program. There were 16 girls in the combined eighth and ninth grade; three were African American and thirteen were Hispanic, and they ranged in age from 14 years of age to 16 years of age. The administration had segregated the classes by gender at the beginning of the second semester at the request of the English teacher. During the fall, the English teacher noticed that the girls rarely answered questions, rarely completed homework, and usually spent their time either trying to get the attention or avoid the attention of the boys. Enlisting the support of the counselor and documenting the request with research that supported single gender classes, the English teacher asked the principal to separate the sixteen girls from the boys. The classes would then be segregated by gender with the hope that the girls would become more engaged in school.

Taking the role of temporary teacher for the class, I went once a week into the English I and advisory class, which was 80 minutes long, and stayed through lunch for a total of two hours each week. The study lasted six weeks. I spent time reading aloud the novel, *Born In Sin* by Evelyn Coleman and opening the floor to student responses. There were no predetermined questions. Most often, after reading a short segment, I would ask, “What did you think about that?” In addition to the class discussions, I gave
the girls time to respond to the novel by writing in journals. Again, there were no predetermined questions or prompts. I told the girls to write whatever they were thinking about at that given point in time. I also ate lunch with the girls and participated in their conversations.

Data sources included transcripts of classroom discourse, participant’s journal entries, my field notes, transcripts of lunchroom conversation, and the classroom teacher’s notes from other classroom discussions about the story when I was not present.

I analyzed the data to look for textual connections and what could be gleaned from the connections. Analysis revealed that the girls did engage in conversations that showed connections to the characters in response to this novel. For example, in class one day, Lola began her comment with a quote from the book, “‘If I got a man who gonna take care of me, what do I need to finish school for?’” She continued, “You should never trust any man if he tells you that he wants to get married with you because all what [sic] they want is you to drop out of school and have a messed up life.” Her comment showed her thoughts on the role of men in lives of adolescent girls.

Data analysis also revealed that students responded to this book in ways that implied lessons learned. For example, in her journal, Raquel wrote, “I loved the book. It helps me to understand that no matter what life throws at you. It will awlase [sic] get better. You just have to pick yourself off the floor and get back in the game.” Raquel learned that you do not stop just because the going gets tough.

From the pilot study, I learned valuable lessons in designing the current study. First, regarding the chosen novel, Born In Sin, I learned that these adolescent girls did
respond to the novel by making connections between the text and their lives. They revealed beliefs about the roles men can play in their lives and a tenacity to get through rough times in life. The question that remained at the conclusion of this study concerned the girls’ beliefs about school and education. What did they believe about their own abilities to determine a successful path in school? This question led to my focus on agency in school. At the age of being able to drop out, what did girls believe about themselves and school? A review of the literature indicated the need for more research about how adolescent girls near drop-out age see themselves, particularly how they see themselves as students.

In terms of methodology, this pilot study made it clear that, in order to focus completely on the participants’ perspectives, I would need to take a participant observer role, rather than that of a teacher researcher. That would allow me to focus on the dialogue of the participants and not be distracted by teaching responsibilities.

The Research Design

The pilot study was the basis for the further investigation reported here. This report presents naturalistic case studies using ethnographic methods and inductive data analysis concerning the discourse of four girls, sophomores in high school, who participated in a small group book discussion. Analysis includes both within case analysis as well as cross case analysis. Transcripts of their book discussions, as well as their semi-structured interviews and field notes of class and of the book discussion sessions were analyzed.
The Initial Design

As originally designed, the small group book discussion was to be part of the English Language Arts class. The plan was that the classroom teacher would introduce several young adult novels, and students would choose the book they wanted to read. The selections offered included *Born in Sin* (Coleman, 2001), *Nothing but the Truth* (Avi, 1993), *Speak* (Anderson, 2001), *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2003), and *Whale Talk* (Crutcher, 2001). The group that chose to read Coleman’s *Born In Sin* (2001) would be the participants in this study. All but one of the girls in the class had signed and returned an Informed Consent Form.

The novel *Born In Sin* (Coleman, 2001) concerns a 14 year old African American protagonist. Keisha has just finished ninth grade and has been chosen to attend a summer program at a local university for selected students who are interested in medical school and have shown a propensity for future success in the sciences. Keisha was nominated for the program by her science teacher. As the daughter of a single mother who makes a minimum wage, Keisha is depending on a scholarship to cover the costs of the summer program. Before she can complete all the paperwork, the principal of her school removes her from the university program and redirects her to an urban rescue program for teens living in poverty. I chose this novel because my students at the high school where I taught had responded to the story with comments about how much they liked the book, and they also recommended it to other students. The participants in the pilot study had responded positively to this book. Because of different elements of the plot, I felt it offered many opportunities for critical examination of dominant thinking in society.
The teacher decided to instruct each small group to read for 30 minutes and then discuss the section of the book they read. In order to facilitate discussions with students who were not accustomed to conversing about books, she determined that the initial discussions would be guided by participants having a specific responsibility as part of the conversation. Responsibilities included one who summarized the text read, one who made connections to the text, one who asked questions related to the text, one who focused on the feelings of the characters, and one who illustrated the text. After the third week, I could see that the original design would need to be modified. At the conclusion of the 30 minute reading time, students spent 10 minutes recording their thoughts specific to the day’s responsibility. Then each student in each group stood and reported their reading from the perspective of the responsibility. For instance, one person stood and gave a summary of what he had read that day. The next student stood and told the connections she had made to the text read that day. The students did not discuss the text with one another. The other dilemma was a consequence of instructing the students to read for a specified period of time rather than a specified amount of text. Reading at diverse speeds, the four girls who were reading *Born In Sin* were at different places in the book, which impeded any significant discussion of the text read, and further investigation of the research question was not possible.

*The Final Design*

In an effort to find another context for open-ended book discussions, which would make it possible to investigate the research question as intended, the teacher agreed to let any of the girls who chose to participate meet with me during lunch for the
discussion. I met with four girls from this class who volunteered to be a part of this study, agreed to read the book *Born In Sin* by Evelyn Coleman outside of class, and meet with me during lunch to discuss what they had read. We met during lunch in the English classroom and continued two of the discussions in the library at the conclusion of the lunch period. Prior to each meeting, the girls read to a predetermined page in the book. We met for three consecutive class days, for a total of two hours and 15 minutes, and I audio recorded their discussions.

Following the book discussions, I interviewed each participant one day during class. Spradley (1979) compares the ethnographic interview to “friendly conversation” (p. 58). Employing ethnographic questions, my goal was to learn more from the participants about how they saw themselves as teenagers in general and as students specifically. The semi-structured interviews included these requests/questions: (1) how would you describe your life as a teenager; (2) tell me about your family; (3) describe yourself as a student. Each participant was interviewed during class time. Individually, the participant and I left the classroom and walked the school halls as we talked. As we walked, I audio recorded the interview using a hand held electronic digital recorder.

**Rationale for the Design**

Naturalistic inquiry was the appropriate design for this study for several reasons. According to Geertz (1973), it is ethnography that insists on thick descriptions of the context in which meaning is being constructed. As an adult teacher investigating adolescents in school, I was acutely aware of the inequities of power that have historically existed between teachers and students. In school, teachers hold power in their hands.
Teachers give grades, issue discipline referrals, take attendance, make decisions about the length, topic, and timing of assignments, and can even tell students where to sit in class. In many classes and many schools, students have little say in how to spend their time in school. Even though I was not the teacher in this context, the participants knew I was a teacher by profession. This inequity of power in our roles could have affected the data collected if the participants had waited for me to initiate discussion or expected me to have answers about meaning in the story. It is through naturalistic inquiry that “meaning is jointly constructed between researchers and research subjects in the context of interests that are formed out of contradictory power relations” (Roman & Apple, 1990, p. 40). The researcher in a naturalistic ethnography must enter the study assuming only the smallest kernels of social order and value (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). I took this stance into this study in an attempt to ensure that, with the participants, I could socially construct authentic meaning from the data. For example, when looking at the data for positive and negative events, I looked at the language of the participants for insight into whether the participant considered the event positive or negative. For a more complete description of the researcher stance, see the section designated Background and Experience of the Researcher.

The Research Setting

This study took place in small group book discussions, an English II classroom, and during individual interviews in a public high school in a small city, which is centered 35 miles north of two major metropolitan areas in the Southwestern part of the United States. The research site city is billed as a “Main Street City” and was founded in 1857. The land
area is 87 square miles with 1,186 miles of maintained streets. The population is
overwhelming White at 76%. African American residents constitute 9% of the population
and approximately 17% are of Hispanic or Latin origin. Asians comprise 3% and the city
Websites list 11% as Other. The city is the county seat for one of the fastest growing
counties in America. Coming into town on one of the state highways, there are acres of
corn growing bordered by new housing developments. The fields of corn have a large For
Sale sign along the highway side of the acreage.

Two public universities, as well as a community college, are located in the city,
resulting in a population as diverse as almost no formal education to an abundance of
people with terminal degrees. Politically, the population runs the gamut from the ultra
conservative to the freethinking liberal, although there is a conservative Christian thread
that runs through the city. What is not seen is the immense divide between rich and poor in
the housing units. There is only one shopping mall, and many residents are found around
the downtown square on any day of the week. The top two employers are the larger public
university and the school district.

The school district encompasses 180 square miles and draws from an area which
includes several small rural communities. In the 2005-2006 school year, the district had
18,000 students enrolled. There are 18 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, 3
comprehensive high schools, 1 alternative high school, and 1 early childhood center.

The neighborhood surrounding the site school is an older neighborhood. Many two
bedroom frame houses line the streets closest to the school, and larger brick homes from
the 1960s are several blocks away. Older stone houses dating back to the 30s and 40s
are west, and the city Historical District is just a mile away. Large older homes over fifty
years old line the two streets that compromise the majority of the Historical District. The two universities are within two miles, as is the downtown square area. The original district football stadium is across the street from this school, but all district football games are now played at a much larger, and newer, stadium on the north side of town.

Profile of the School

The names of all participants, the classroom teacher, and the school are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. One of three high schools in the district, Learning High School is the oldest school with 1620 students enrolled for the 2005-2006 academic year. With yearbooks that date back to 1906, the school has a rich history. The building presently occupied was built in 1956 and underwent extensive renovations in 2005. The halls are lined with white tiles and bordered at the top and bottom with a row of dark green tiles. Above the upper row of green tiles is white plaster, and on the white plaster are purple handprints and names. Many of the names have “Sr. [year]” beside them. The white walls are clean.

There are several trophy cases built into the walls. The one by the library is probably 6 feet by 5 feet and is divided into 4 sections. Section 1 contains the words “Yellow means yield. Don’t run red lights.” Section 2 has the names and pictures of the class favorites. Section 3 is display of the student council awards, and Section 4 is a display of the Learning High Mascot flag; it has a horse on the white flag. A trophy case in another hall has flags of three Central American countries displayed: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Guatemala. Near another entrance, there is a trophy case shared by the dance/drill team and the cheerleaders, displaying trophies won by each organization.
On the opposite wall is a trophy case with a poster naming the new class officers on one side and an announcement that the last day for senior handprints will be May 29.

The visitor office where visitors sign-in is immediately to the left upon entering by the main entrance. Other entrances are usually locked on the outside. Inside the visitor office are pictures of the Teacher of the Month and the Staff Member of the Month.

There are two mission statements displayed in this office, one being the district mission and the other, the newly adopted mission of the school. The district mission as stated:

The mission of the Public Schools, in partnership with the home and community, is to provide the best educational opportunities in a challenging yet supportive environment where individuals and cultural diversity are respected so that our students become knowledgeable and responsible citizens who are capable of life-long learning and who have developed the necessary skills to contribute productively to a complex and ever changing world.

The Learning High School Mission is as stated:

Learning High School, in partnership with the home and community, is dedicated to the development of knowledgeable, compassionate individuals who actively and ethically contribute to the betterment of our world. By providing challenging and educational experiences that encourage cooperation, creativity, and intercultural understanding, Learning High School aims to create life-long learners who embrace the diversity of others.

Adopted 2007

Displayed next to the school mission statement is the Learning High School Learner Profile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caring</th>
<th>Open Minded</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
<th>Principled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquirer</td>
<td>LHS Learner Profile</td>
<td>Thinker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Communicator</td>
<td>Risk Taker</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both the mission statement and learner profile are laminated posters and displayed throughout the building.
Learning High School was the only high school in the district until the early 1990s. The year the second high school opened, students were shuttled between the two campuses in busses. Only certain courses were offered at the new school, so students had to ride the bus to Learning High for required courses that were not yet offered at the new school.

When Learning High School was the only high school, athletics, especially football, were really important. The 1979 yearbook contains 12 pages of football information; there are pictures from every game played. With the division of the students, the quality of the program diminished and other courses/activities increased in importance. The fine arts curriculum is really strong, and the girls’ volleyball and baseball are considered competitive. The 1997 yearbook only has four pages of football, and they come after four pages of girls’ volleyball, as well as two pages of cross country pictures. The 2007 yearbook gives equal coverage to football, boys’ and girls’ basketball, and girls’ volleyball, and also has a page about skateboarding.

Formerly an all-Caucasian school and neighborhood, the first African American students appear in the yearbook in 1965. In 1968, there were 10 African American football players, and all but one are sitting grouped together in the yearbook picture. In 2008, the “prince,” elected by popular vote, was African American. The language in the mission of the school, “embrace the diversity of others,” seems to be reflected in the student body since African Americans only make up 14% of the student population.

Teacher turnover from year to year is low because, according to one faculty member, Learning High is a “good place to work” (personal communication, 06/11/2008). One of the current counselors graduated from the school in the early 60s
and has spent her entire career there. Three of the teachers have been at Learning High for over 30 years. Several faculty members commented that the school was a stable place with a faculty and staff that had adjusted well to changing demographics.

The graduating class of 2005 had 360 graduates with four National Merit Semifinalists and three National Merit Recipients. “In the Ultimate Pursuit of Education” is the school motto. Table 1 reports the current ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the school as received from the principal’s office.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>School Presence (1620)</th>
<th>At Risk (596)</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged (665)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>17.76%</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>42.76%</td>
<td>54.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo, not Hispanic</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>36.91%</td>
<td>21.95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current achievement information was received from the office of the Dean of Students and includes the achievement of the sophomore class on the 2007 Spring Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The figures given are for all four subject area tests. The subject areas include English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Math. The chart indicates an achievement gap exists between African American students and Anglo, not Hispanic students. Over half of the Anglo students met the test standard, while only 19% of African Americans achieved those same results. Female
and male students are just about equal with a few more boys meeting the standard, but a few more girls receiving commendation.

Table 2

**Achievement Information for the 2007 Sophomore Class at Learning High School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Number Tested</th>
<th>% Met Standard</th>
<th>% Commended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo, not Hispanic</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. Disadvantaged</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficient</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted/Talented</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gaining Entry

I met Jaye Lowe, the classroom teacher, during summer 2006 when we were both involved in the local Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project. The National Writing Project (NWP) is an organization with the goal of improving writing instruction and developing teacher leadership. It operates through a professional
development model to build the leadership, programs, and research needed to meet the NWP commitment that every student deserves a highly skilled and knowledgeable writing teacher. Over 200 NWP Invitational Summer Institutes are held annually across the United States and attended by experienced teachers. These teachers spend a month together preparing for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices for teaching writing, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves. At the conclusion of the Summer Institute, Writing Project teachers conduct project-sponsored professional development programs in their own schools and in neighboring schools and districts. They focus on two goals: developing teacher knowledge and leadership in their home communities and putting this knowledge and leadership to work to improve student achievement (National Writing Project, 2007).

Jaye is in her late 40s and identifies herself as Anglo, not of Hispanic origin. As she talks about her background, she emphasizes that she and her family have moved frequently. She spent her early adult years as a stay-at-home mother who home schooled all three of her children during part of their schooling years. Jaye completed her university degree in the last decade and, at the time of this study, has been teaching for six years, all six being at Learning High.

As co-director of the local Invitational Summer Institute, I had the opportunity to work closely with Jaye for four weeks during summer 2006. I connected to her warmth and sincerity and was interested when I realized that she wanted to make changes in her classroom to incorporate the new ideas and strategies she had learned at the Summer Institute. Specifically, she was interested in small group activities and
discussions and using Young Adult literature. She also expressed an interest in professional collaboration, which she did not feel she encountered in her school. I admired Jaye's desire to make changes in her classroom which could benefit student learning. Her goal to incorporate young adult literature and small group discussions aligned perfectly with my ideas for a research study.

At the close of the month-long NWP Invitational Summer Institute, I approached Jaye with the prospect of using her classroom as the site for my dissertation research. I explained my questions about adolescent girls and their perceptions of agency and schooling. As a woman who experienced severe trauma as an adolescent and has since struggled with her own feelings of competence, Jaye was excited about using her classroom to find out more about girls so that she might learn ways to assist them in avoiding some of the struggles she has encountered.

Jaye shared her philosophy of teaching with me as we discussed plans for my research. She works to ensure a warm and familiar environment for her students with a focus on relationships. “Once you give of yourself, then often you will receive from the other, with the process continuing like a pendulum in motion.” She makes a concerted effort to maintain a positive and encouraging classroom without making the “content simplistic.” Her lessons “are intended to challenge and move the students forward in their knowledge.”

Jaye read eight young adult novels I recommended to consider using for small group book discussions in the coming school year. After reading the books, Jaye chose the six she wanted to use, and once determining that the books were not on the approved District list, she met with the Director of Secondary Language Arts to get
approval. She received the Director’s approval and began the slow process of securing enough copies of the books to be able to use them during the fifth six weeks.

In fall 2006, I first visited Jaye’s classroom and looked at the class attendance roles to determine which class would work best. Because I initially planned to focus my research on Hispanic girls, I chose the class which had the largest number of Hispanic girls in attendance. During January 2007, I began visiting the selected class each day they met, which was every other day. In early February, I submitted the required paperwork for district approval of the study to the central office. District approval was received on February 20, 2007, and I submitted the application to the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board on February 21, 2007, and received approval on April 2, 2007. I have included in the appendix a record of these transactions.

Observation of Classroom Procedures

Field notes from early observations in Jaye’s classroom revealed a literacy-rich classroom environment with posters of the writing process, placards of notable quotations, posters with catchphrases for living, and student work covering the walls. Books filled the book cases by the door and student work folders filled the crates by the windows. Bulletin boards by the door and covering the back wall were a showcase for student work. A flip chart listed the day’s objectives, and the chalk board always had the day’s activities listed. There were pictures of her family and her students on the bulletin board by her desk. Two oblong tables created a work area for Jaye and contained her desk and computer. The desks were arranged in rows at the beginning of each class but moved into groups later during the period for discussion and projects.
The class had been reading and studying Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* during the time I began observing. On one occasion, the students were either choosing text from the play or writing their own text and putting the chosen text in iambic pentameter. Students were quietly practicing the rhythm of the text aloud. Another day, the students were engaged in free writing when I entered the room. Soft music was playing on a CD player as the students wrote. At the conclusion of the free write, Jaye shared the poem she had written about her daughter who had been born 18 years ago on that day. When one of the girls asked if they could read theirs aloud, Jay “smiled and went on to the next activity” (field notes, February 1). I saw direct instruction of grammar and then the students were put into groups to complete their work on grammar. On another occasion, the class spent the entire period listening to a performance of Act III of *Julius Caesar* on a CD. Students commented on the significant difference between hearing Shakespeare and reading Shakespeare.

While Jaye employed a variety of strategies to engage her students, I did not see students really working collaboratively in small groups. While they might be responsible for completing a project with a few other students, they were still working independently. For example, during one class meeting, each group was responsible for reading a short story assigned by Ms. Lowe and then presenting a summary to the class. Instead of each member reading the story and then talking about it and working together to write a summary, the group members divided up the story so each member only read a portion of the story. Then each member wrote a sentence to summarize what s/he had read, and they put the sentences together for a summary of the story.
By the end of February, Jaye was preparing the class for small group book discussions. They spent two days in the library reading text of their own choosing – books, magazines, newspapers. On the third day, she put them in groups and gave them each two minutes to talk about what they had read with the other members in the group. My field notes from February 26 document the ideal lead into my focus on a small group book discussion with girls.

At the conclusion of class that day, one of the girls said, “This was fun, Ms. Lowe. We ought to do this more often.” I walked over to the group and said, “So you liked talking about your books?” All three girls nodded, and the one who had been talking said, “I really liked this.” “So what if you were all reading the same book and then talking?” One of the other girls interrupted and said, “That would be better.” The first girl added, “Yeah because then we’d get to hear different perspectives.”

The conversation above occurred about a month before the whole class attempt at small group book discussions, but the girls who talked to me above are the girls who became my participants in the book discussion which is the primary focus of this study.

Participants

The participants, all girls, chose to engage in small group book discussions involving the novel, *Born In Sin* by Evelyn Coleman. I did not choose the participants; I selected the class, and members of the selected class elected to take part in this study. Because neither the teacher nor the students understood what was expected in book discussions, the discussions were not happening in the class. Therefore, I announced that I would meet with members of the class at lunch who would read the selected book and talk about it. The four girls who volunteered became my participants. A brief profile
compiled from information the participants revealed during the interviews is shown in
Table 3. During the interview, the girls were asked to describe themselves as teenage
girls, tell me about their families, and describe themselves as students. All the words in
the profiles are the words of the participants.

Table 3

*Participants' Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Self Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Anglo/Hispanic</td>
<td>Close family; good student; dancer; independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Infant son; good student; nice; college too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweetie</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>Distant family; good student; leader; college for sure; talkative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Quiet &amp; loud; serious student; gentle; college determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Confidentiality

As required by the university Institutional Review Board, each participant and her
parent signed an informed consent assent form. All field notes, audiotapes and
transcripts, and any other correspondence between the participants and me as well as
between Jaye and me have been kept in a locked file cabinet. To protect the
confidentiality of the participants, each person has chosen a pseudonym in the report of
the study. The names of the school, the teacher, and the participants in the pilot study
have all been changed and are identified only by their first initial. Sweetie and Alyssa
chose their pseudonyms; I chose Claudia’s and Julia’s and received their approval.
Role of the Researcher

I took the role of participant observer, having no teaching role. Consistent with a constructivist theoretical framework, the role of participant observer allowed me to participate in the socially constructed meaning (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Interacting with the participants was necessary since meaning was constructed through interaction and situated in the specific context of this discussion group.

Background and Experience of the Researcher

It is important to document the background and experience of the researcher in order to understand the lens used by the researcher in data analysis, as well as understand any unintended biases or perceptions revealed during the analysis. My educational and personal experiences as a white female influenced the focus on this topic, helped frame the design of the study, and shaped the relationships with the participants. Because the subjectivities of the participants is a focus of this research, it is important to disclose the subjectivities of the researcher.

I am female, in my later fifties, and Anglo. The daughter of a medical doctor, I grew up in a family which placed an emphasis on education. Both parents had college degrees, although my mother has never held a job for which she was paid. The one grandparent I had and spent time with always spoke regretfully of not going to college. One of four children to live to adulthood, I was the fourth child born and the first girl to live past two years of age.

Literacy has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Both parents were avid readers, and I learned early that reading could be a diversion from life’s
problems. One of my older brothers was sick for two years when I was young. Because my father was a doctor, we had a hospital bed in our family room for my brother where he spent his time in bed reading hundreds of comic books and every Hardy Boy mystery available. I was 4 and 5 years of age during that time.

When I was 10 years of age, I contracted the childhood disease of red measles, which went into my eyes. For 10 days, my mother sat on my bed in a darkened room and read a Trixie Belden mystery to me. Nancy Drew was my heroine; her stories told me that I could grow up, be independent, and solve mysteries. In our family, reading was definitely a way to turn one’s focus away from problems.

Growing up during a time and a place where racism was overt in the practices and thinking of my parents as well as the people in the community, it never made sense to me how skin color could determine the worth and capabilities of a person. My mother suffered from chronic back pain and clinical depression during my entire childhood. From the ages of 2 to 12, our African American housekeeper Janice was the stability in my life. Thinking she was less than me was not possible. In 1955, we took a trip to New Orleans, and our housekeeper went with us. When we stopped in South Louisiana to get gas, my parents asked Janice to take my brother and me to the restroom. Janice was told by the White cashier that my brother and I could use the facilities, but she could not because she was Black. When I finished, I insisted Janice go in to take care of her own needs. She reminded me that the cashier had told us that she could not use the facilities, and at the age of 4 years, I told her that was wrong so to go in, and I would stand guard. When my brother came out and asked where Janice was, I told him that I had thrown up, and Janice was cleaning up after me (J. Davis, personal communication,
October 7, 2007). I graduated from high school with many of the same people who were in my first grade class, except by the time I graduated, seven African American students had enrolled in my high school. One of these students wrote in my senior yearbook, “My friendship with you is one of the few things I have to be proud of. Thank you.”

Children and learning have also always been important to me. As a junior high student, I volunteered a month of my summer each year to be a junior counselor at the local YMCA day camp. As a senior high school student, I spent two summers as a mentor to younger children. One summer was spent mentoring and tutoring a 10 year old boy in foster care. The next summer was spent as a companion/mentor to three 8 year old girls who were cousins. One of the girls had severe learning differences and had lost her 2-year-old brother in a drowning incident in May of that year. The summer after graduation, I assisted a family friend and teacher with summer school for children with learning difficulties.

Beginning my college experience with a major of special education, I changed that to speech pathology when I decided to get married and transferred to a school without an undergraduate degree in special education. Having a baby just three months after graduating, I then spent the next 21 years as a stay-at-home mom to five children. During those years, I briefly directed a parents’ day out program, did 18 hours of graduate study in speech pathology, and worked in a law firm.

In 1995, following the death of my husband, I was hired to teach remedial reading at the neighborhood high school, which my two older children had attended. I knew nothing about reading except that I was a voracious reader; I knew absolutely nothing of teaching reading. What I learned quickly is that I had a real gift for connecting
to the students, most of whom were Hispanic and English was their second language. I also learned quickly how much I cared about these students, and knew they deserved the most knowledgeable teacher possible. For that reason, I decided to go to graduate school and learn about the teaching of reading.

In fall 1997, I began graduate school in a small state university and graduated in fall 2001 with a Master of Arts in Secondary Reading. The learning transformed my teaching, and I abandoned the district’s curriculum of remedial reading programs. I established a reading/writing workshop environment for my classroom, following the workshop ideals of community, choice, minilessons, and peer response/collaboration. I extensively read Young Adult literature so that I could talk knowledgeably about books with my students. I witnessed the engagement of my students change as they took ownership of their learning, and I became more a listener than a talker. I realized how important it was to listen to what they had to say instead of me deciding what they needed or wanted or meant.

With this experience in mind, I began work on my doctoral degree in reading education in spring 2002. For three more years, I taught fulltime and attended classes at night and in the summer. In summer 2005, following the graduation of my youngest child and concluding ten years of teaching remedial reading, I was able to quit my job to become a fulltime doctoral student.

During those years of teaching and extensive reading during graduate school, I realized the passions and interests which fueled my program of study:

1. Connecting to marginalized adolescent students to help them understand their worth and stay engaged in school
2. Understanding adolescent girls and helping them realize their potential to do anything they want to do
3. Educating classroom teachers about the pitfalls of relating to students through a deficit lens and the benefits of relating to students by viewing them through their strengths

It is this second interest that I have chosen to explore in this study. My background as a high school teacher made it easy for me to enter another high school classroom and feel right at home. One of the most amazing moments in my career as a classroom teacher was watching students literally run to my class and grab a novel so they could start reading. That was followed by watching and listening as they talked with each other about the books they were reading. That was when I knew that a book discussion was the right context for studying agency – I remember that spring as I sat listening to my students talk and thinking, this would work.

In addition, because I had become experienced in taking notice of quiet students, I noticed students in the field site who never said anything and only appeared to be working. For example, one of the first days there, I noticed a boy who never said anything and never wrote anything down. On the third or fourth day, I walked over to him and explained something about the organization of the text in the book that he was “reading.” He smiled, said “Oh,” and for the first time since I had been observing, he seemed to engage in the reading task.

Finally, my previous experiences have convinced me that, in order to help adolescent girls realize their potential in school, it is imperative to have some understanding of what they already believe they can do. I knew from listening to my own students, that I had to remove myself as much as possible from the data analysis so that I could remain committed to an emic perspective. My students had taught me that the world may be made up in one way, but there were multiple ways of seeing it, and the only way to accurately reflect someone else’s thinking was to listen carefully to their
words. In these ways, my previous experiences with teaching and with research have shaped my role and my decisions related to this study.

The Context and Extenuating Circumstances

The semester that my data was collected was a difficult time in the life of the teacher Jaye Lowe and contributed to a tense classroom environment. The combination of personalities in this class had given Jaye moments of concern. My field notes document that on February 22, Jaye told me, “I want you to know that you are coming into one of my most tense classes in terms of attitude and behavior.” In addition, Jaye perceived no support from her campus colleagues as she attempted to make changes in her classroom. As she reported on March 12, “The master [Jaye’s emphasis] English teacher came into my room and looked at the YA books in the table groups. She said that our kids need whole class instruction and that if she had wanted to teach elementary school and use book groups, she would have done it.” Jaye had tears in her eyes as she relayed this conversation to me. In mid-March, one of the students accused the teacher of harassment, and his mother threatened a lawsuit. According to Jaye’s report to me, the Principal called Jaye out of the class on two different occasions to talk with the Assistant Principal and the student. The parent also demanded an after school conference with Jaye and the Assistant Principal. As reported by Jaye, she felt no support from her administrators on any of these occasions. Jaye requested that the specific student not remain in her class due to the legal threat of a lawsuit, but the principal, conceding to the wishes of the parent, refused to move the student to another classroom. My field notes document the students’ discussion of the incident, the
potential lawsuit, and the change in Ms. Lowe’s demeanor. My own recorded observations [March 16 – Jaye is really tense today] also document the change in her disposition. Jaye was less patient with the sometimes silly, but typical of high school, behavior of the students. She was much more apt to raise her voice if students were not paying close attention. There were several occasions when she told the students how tired she was and got tears in her eyes. She often had no make up on, nor was her hair well kept. Although the final study was not conducted during this class in the classroom, the participants were in this class prior to their lunch meeting with me, and they went back to this class upon concluding their meeting with me. Because the classroom environment seemed particularly tense during this semester, the participants might have felt somewhat constrained in their freedom to express themselves, which could have been a factor in the data collected.

Data Collection

Data collection began with field notes recording observations of the class on February 1, 2007 and continued for 23 class meetings. For a description of what I saw in the classroom, see the previous section Observation of Classroom Procedures. I began audio taping the book discussions of the participants on April 16 and continued with the interviews on April 20. I concluded collecting data on May 4 with class field notes. Data sources include audiotapes of the participant interviews, audio tapes of the participants’ small group book discussions for a total of 2 ½ hours, field notes, and various artifacts resulting from activities assigned.
Data Analysis

Borrowing from the Listeners’ Guide of Brown and Gilligan (1979), I began my analysis reading the interview transcripts through seven times with a different focus each time. The first time I read the transcripts to get a general idea of how each participant talked about herself and made marginal notes. The second time I read through, I focused on references to self, references to I, The Subject and highlighted each reference noted. On the third reading, I looked for references to positive events or comments, and looked for negative events or comments on the fourth reading. For the fifth, sixth, and seventh readings, I focused on references to past, present, and future respectively. During these readings, I highlighted passages in different colors. In retrospect, the data analysis can be explained in four phases: (1) defining agency; (2) coding and categorizing; (3) developing the portraits; (4) describing the small group discussion as a context for expressing agency. These four phases are further explained as the findings are presented in Chapter 4 below.

The focus of my initial coding came from my definition of agency as fluid and continuous and involving strategic decisions made that are closely connected to the points in time of past, present, and future. This theoretical framework is grounded in the work of Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, from the New School of Social Theory. Focusing on an “utterance” as the unit of analysis, I coded utterances that pertained to events in the past, events in the present, and possible events in the future. I then looked for references to decisions made for a specific reason, which indicated a strategic choice. Because previous research suggests that younger adolescent girls see no connection between their actions and positive events (Galley, 2003), I coded instances of positive
and negative talk (instances when the speaker attributed either positive or negative value to an event, person, etc.).

One utterance could either end with the cessation of talk by the speaker or by the change of subject within the continuous talk. For instance, Alyssa reported, “I care a lot about my family and friends … get along with everyone. I’m sorta creative cause I like to dance.” That is coded as two utterances because caring about people and liking to dance indicated a change in subject within the continuous talk.

As I read and reread the transcripts, I further deconstructed the utterances into more specific codes. The codes were suggested by relevant research. For example, Bandura (2006) attributes four characteristics to agentic awareness: (1) intentionality; (2) proactive; (3) self-regulation; (4) self-reflection. I used these characteristics as I looked deeper into the coded utterances. With respect to the book discussion transcripts, I only coded connections to self or to the larger world with the same codes used for the interviews. I did not code any comment that limited its scope to the character or novel, as literature response was not the focus of this study.

Being aware that students will report one behavior in talk but exhibit another behavior in action, I included my field notes of classroom observations as a possible source of validation of reported behavior; small sections indicating behavior or talk by the participants were coded, but the majority of the field notes were used to corroborate what I found in the interviews and book discussions. The interviews and book discussions were downloaded onto my computer, and if I had a question about an utterance in the transcript, I went back and listened to that segment of the recording,
paying particular attention to tone, pitch, and inflection of the speaker. I have included a code glossary in the appendix.

Credibility

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the research design included multiple data sources for the purpose of triangulation, thick description, final member checks, and debriefing with knowledgeable peers during the data analysis/interpretation process. As I analyzed the data, I consulted with Claudia Haag, an Assistant Professor in the field of literacy. Haag, an English as a second language coordinator for an area school district before entering higher education, reviewed some of my codes and then checked utterances for code verification. I also consulted with Veriena Braune, a former first grade teacher and retired professor of literacy. To ensure accurate interpretation of the data and construction of the participants’ portraits, each participant read her portrait to see if she agreed with the interpretation of her words. Although there was no expectation that the findings would be generalizable, the findings are fully elaborated and the research process documented, in the tradition of ethnographic approaches to research in authentic settings.

Summary and Conclusion

Four adolescent girls in a sophomore English class read and discussed a Young Adult novel. Data collected from 37 hours of observing whole class behaviors, small group book discussions, and individual interviews were analyzed for references to the temporal aspects and strategic choice components of agency.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study began with the express purpose of describing and analyzing the perceptions of agency revealed by girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions in an English Language Arts class. The following question guided the research: What perceptions of agency are revealed by adolescent girls in high school within the context of small group book discussions? More specific questions came out of the data analysis and interpretation: (a) How do these perceptions of agency manifest themselves in relation to school? (b) To whom do these girls attribute events or occurrences that they see as positive or negative? (c) How do references to time relate to these girls’ expressions of agency in this context? (d) In what ways does the small group book discussion provide a unique context to investigate agency among these girls? This chapter summarizes findings in response to these questions, focusing especially on a small group discussion of a particular novel chosen as a “redressive text” (Luke, 2004) to encourage critical thinking about life decisions. Although the small group book discussions took place outside the time period allotted for the English/language arts class, the four participants did come from the same class, and the discussions took place in the classroom where they had their English class prior to lunch.

This chapter is both an explanation of the process of finding a definition of agency for this study as well as a presentation and discussion of the findings. The data analysis and interpretation were informed by reading and rereading published accounts and explanations of agency. This recursive meaning-making process seemed to
progress in four phases and are discussed here. Phase 1 includes the process of arriving at a definition of agency. Phase 2 details the codes and themes which emerged from the data. Phase 3 presents the participants’ portraits which elucidate the findings from the analyses of the book discussion transcripts, interview transcripts, and field notes. Phase 4 is a synthesis of the book discussion as a unique context for manifesting agency.

Phase 1 – Defining Agency

As I began thinking about agency, the definition of agency offered by Giddens (1984) seemed the logical place to begin. According to Giddens (1984) agency refers to a person’s capacity for completing an action and is connected to structure. I thought about the structure of school and that made sense to me. But what did capacity mean? For some reason, capacity went to ability and that went to physical and agency seemed more mental to me.

I looked at my data and did not have any insight into how to code what I was seeing. I was not even sure what I was seeing yet. I read feminist literature but that still did not help me understand more about agency and my data.

It was when I read the Emirbayer and Mishce (1998) discussion of agency that introduced a temporal orientation that I began to see significant patterns in the data because I knew I had seen talk of past, present, and future. I went back to my data and confirmed that the girls saw connections among past, present, and future. The Moje and Lewis (2007) concept of agency related to power was also evident in the data because I
saw talk of intentional decisions within the context of school. School is a context with multiple layers of power.

From going back and forth between the literature and the data, I now had a working definition of agency for this study: the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the future, and responsive to the present.

**Phase 2 – Coding and Themes**

I was two months into the writing and now had a working definition of agency that was grounded in the data. There were three categories of codes: temporal orientation, strategic choices, and positive and negative language. The first two categories of codes came from the working definition and the data. The third category came from the data because I had observed talk that seemed either positive or negative.

The first codes reflected a temporal orientation and referred to talk of past, present, and future events or moments in time. As I coded the past events or moments, I considered events that had happened during childhood or a previous year or semester in school. During the coding, I began to notice talk of purpose or a reference to a lesson that had been learned, so I coded those utterances first for the past and then for either purpose or lesson learned. I also coded for whether the participant considered the event or moment a positive or negative experience.

The next codes were for present events or activities or situations that were currently happening or existing or as recent as sometime during the current semester.
Again, I also coded for present events that included a purpose or motive and whether or not it was considered a positive or negative experience for the participant.

Future codes included utterances that referred to plans in the immediate future or plans in the more distant future. If there was a specific goal included in the utterance, I also coded for that as another level.

Utterances that reflected decisions made for a specific purpose or considering possible consequences were coded as strategic choices. The second level of coding under strategic choices involved utterances that also indicated resistance of some sort. These included resistance that was passive such as remaining quiet or confrontation that was conducted in a less serious manner, like joking, as well as aggressive resistance, such as a verbal remark that was made in a serious manner.

The third category of codes was for positive or negative language. Positive language included those utterances that had a connotation of being affirmative or constructive or optimistic. The next level was the referent for this talk. It referred to self, family, school, or friends. If the referent was school, I coded whether it was to students, teachers, or administration. The negative talk was language that had a connotation of being unhelpful, harmful, depressing, or disapproving. The referent codes again were self, family, school, or friends. The additional referent code for negative talk was for society.

The coding, which emerged from the data, revealed four major themes: (1) a temporal orientation, which connects the past, present, and future; (2) responsibility for positive and negative events; (3) strategic decision making; (4) ways of negotiating with people in power. For a complete listing of the codes, see the Coding Glossary in the
appendix. This coding and the identification of themes provided a way to make sense of these data in response to the researcher questions, and the full discussion of these themes is presented as a synthesis of the findings in response to the main research question at the end of this chapter. These themes, however, did not fully describe or explain the uniqueness of each participant in her expressions of agency. For that, I turned to “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Phase 3 – The Portraits

The participants’ portraits were generated from analyses of the transcripts of interviews and book discussions. Classroom observations were also used to corroborate findings across the data sources, in addition to providing an understanding of classroom climate factors that might support or constrain acts of agency.

In The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), Lawrence-Lightfoot presented the data in the genre of portraiture. Portraiture seeks to illuminate the perspectives and experiences of participants by documenting their voices and visions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Each of the following “portraits” is a description of each girl, drawn from the data. Because the context of the participants is vital to portraiture (Woodcock, 1988), these portraits focus on each girl within the context of school, which is the focus of this study. The data provide evidence about the “essence” of each of these girls’ perception of agency. The portrait offers a glimpse of each participant as a young woman and student poised on threshold of her future.
Alyssa

Alyssa is a 15-year-old sophomore who lives with her parents and two younger brothers of whom she is quite protective. Alyssa’s mother is Anglo, and her father is Hispanic. Family is an important part of her life. It was during one of the book discussions that talk had veered to family support when someone is in trouble, and Alyssa contributes, “I’d have to have my family no matter what happens. Like I’ll take care of my little brothers cause I’m not gonna let anything happen to them” [Book discussion, 04/20/2007].

Family is a cultural phenomenon for Alyssa. Because her father’s family is “Spanish” [Interview, 04/24/2007], they are “really tight knit” [Interview, 04/24/2007], and because her father’s family is close and enjoys each other, her family is also close and enjoys being together. Her grandparents are from Mexico but have moved around due to her grandfather’s job. They now live in a small town about 35 miles north of where Alyssa lives, and she has several aunts and uncles who live there, also. Some of her father’s family remains in Mexico. Alyssa does not see the physical separation as distance since “we’re all really close” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Even with the knowledge of the essential part her family plays in her life, Alyssa reveals in one of the book discussions that she understands if you want something, you have to be the one to go for it. Her comment followed a passage about a character teaching himself to swing, “Well, I liked that cause I think you do have to do things yourself” [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]

Alyssa describes herself as responsible because “I take care of things” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Part of this she attributes to being the oldest child, but she also
sees that she carries it outside of home and takes care of school concerns. Her brothers are five and nine, and she admits that she is quite protective of them. Alyssa is a caring individual, “I care a lot about people” [Interview, 04/24/2007], caring about her family, her friends, and people in general. She is open-minded and does not like to judge people because she does not want to see them hurt. Following one of the book discussions, I was inquiring about tacos for the next lunch meeting. Alyssa voiced concern that the four of them had such different tastes that they were making it difficult for me, and she told me not to worry about their lunch. “Ms. Curtis, how are you gonna keep all this straight? You know, you don’t have to bring us lunch [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. This was a demonstration of the ways in which she considers the feelings of others.

During one of the book discussions when Claudia mentions getting a scholarship, Alyssa adds, “That’s why I’m on two dance teams. I have to keep my grades up so I can dance and I dance more and I’m hopin’ to get a scholarship for dance [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]. She is aiming toward her future now by being on two dance teams, one a competitive drill team and the other a competitive ballet team. She considers the relationship between her grades and her dancing and knows she cannot dance unless she makes good grades. Dancing is an important part of her life; it is the dancing that is her bridge to college, but it is the dancing that is her strongest desire. “I try to keep up my grades so I can dance ‘cause if I don’t pass, I can’t dance and that’s what I like to do [Interview, 04/24/2007].

Alyssa thoughtfully considers what goes on around her and the consequences or results. For example, although her mother was absent much of the time when Alyssa
was young, “I just know that ever since I was little, she’s always gone to school” [Interview, 04/24/2007], she now thinks it is really “very cool” [Interview, 04/24/2007] that her mother has received both an undergraduate and a graduate degree from college. Since her mother is a teacher, Alyssa thinks about how she would approach a teacher if she had received a grade she disputed. Beginning with “maybe I did not understand the directions or I did not clearly state what I meant” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007], Alyssa wonders aloud about ways to go “In the back door” when raising questions about a grade.

Having a mother who is a teacher seems to influence Alyssa’s view of educators. During the first book discussion, she questions why the principal dismisses the protagonist’s desire to go to the college preparatory summer program, believing instead that a principal would not really discount what a teacher said. When the other girls remind her about the apparent lack of support by the administration for their teacher Ms. Lowe, Alyssa sits back in her chair and listens to the discussion as it moves to declarations of not doing what the school officials want. She then jumps in to remind everyone that it is easy to sit in a group and talk about resistance to authority, but it is another concept to actually resist.

Yeah, well, it’s easy to say that when we’re just sittin’ here, but they tell us to do things here, like you’re gonna take this course or be in that class and we just do it. We don’t even ask any questions; we just go where they say. [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]

In summary, Alyssa is connected to her past and how it has contributed to who she is as an important member of her family. She strategically makes choices that support her plans for the future by ensuring growth in her studies and her dancing
abilities. Alyssa knows where she wants to go with a dance scholarship and is doing what she can to get there.

On May 16, 2008, Alyssa read her portrait and approved the interpretations that had been made. She also added that she would “be an officer” [Personal communication, 05/16/2008] on the school dance/drill team for her senior year.

Julia

Julia is 16, Hispanic, and lives with her five-month-old son, her fiancé, and his mother and brother. Her mother, older sister, and younger sister live in a small town about 15 miles from where Julia lives. Julia was born in Mexico and lived there with both of her parents the first few years of her life. “My dad, he used to hit my mom so she left him, uhm, in Mexico” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Her mother left her abusive husband, Julia’s father, in Mexico when Julia was six. “I lived with my father for two years and then I came here to live with my mother [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Julia does not mention anything else about her father.

The school she attended had no bilingual classroom, and she was only in ESL classes for three months. Her freshman year was a year when Julia identified less as a good student and more as one who thought of herself as “baddish” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. “I would skip school a lot ...I did drugs and I would sneak outa my house” [Interview, 04/26/2007], but it all came to an abrupt stop because “I got pregnant” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Since becoming a mother, Julia has also taken on the identity of a successful student and talks about herself in a positive light when she says “I’m a good student because I keep my grades up” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. She adds that she
has to keep her grades up, but she never says why this is important to her. She also describes herself as “nice to people and I listen to their problems and stuff and I offer advice” [Interview, 04/26/2007].

Julia reports being troubled by her temper, which erupts when people annoy her. Although Julia recognizes this temper as a negative part of her personality, she makes choices for the negative impact on anyone else to be minimal. If she is at home and finds herself angry or frustrated, she finds her mother-in-law to take care of her son. “I don’t wanna hurt my baby so I get my mother-in-law and give him to her and I go outside or to the back yard until I calm down and then I come back in and get him” [Interview, 04/26/2007].

She knows she is failing geometry, but she does not consider the teacher helpful so she has made the decision to bide her time until next semester when she can get a different teacher. When she realized she was struggling in geometry because this teacher was more difficult for her, she went to the teacher for assistance. Julia reports that the teacher told her she was too far behind to catch up so to just come to class so she was not counted absent, but she did not need to do any of the work. In fact, Julia reports that the teacher told her she could sleep. Since she cannot get out of the class, Julia is doing as the teacher instructed, just coming to class. During one of the book discussions, Julia refers to this teacher when indicating that it would depend on the teacher before she would protest a grade. “For me, it depends on the teacher. Ya know, sometimes ya have a teacher who listens but other times it’s teachers who are always right and don’t listen to anything so I would waste my time with her. Like my geometry teacher, just a waste” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007].
Since she had a freshman year of not getting all of the needed credits, Julia is aware of how important it is to be certain she is getting the credits she needs. In this high school, counselors call an entire English class together for next year’s scheduling discussions. Because Julia wanted to be sure she got the junior classes that she needed, she did not wait for her class to be called. She went to the counselor’s office during a lunch period and scheduled her classes for the next year. She referred to this during one of the book discussions when Alyssa made a reference to the protagonist in the book being like them because they always just do what the teachers tell them to do. When Julia disagreed, Alyssa asked, “So when do you not do what they say?” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. At first, Julia said she skipped school, but she learned that was not the wisest course of rebellion. Then she referred to going ahead of time to the counselor to schedule classes instead of “just wait[ing] for them to call me” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007].

Although socioeconomic status and racial/ethnicity issues did not enter the conversation often, Julia does put the issue right on the table during one book discussion. “Sometimes I think people think they’re better because we’re Mexican. Do you ever feel like that, Claudia? That people think they’re better because we’re Mexican?” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007]. The discussion erupts in laughter as the three girls who are Hispanic allude to the idea of Sweetie, the Anglo, thinking she is better than they are.

Julia then moves to a section of the book when the protagonist has invited two new friends, friends with money, from the summer program to her apartment.

Who was I kidding? I was ashamed for them to come in my house.
house? I had always referred to our three-bedroom government cookie-cutter apartment as “our house.” But today I’d been in a real house with a screened-in porch, a maid, and a swimming pool, and even a little cabana, as Clarissa called it, for you to change clothes in. How could I call where I lived a “house” ever again? (Coleman, *Born In Sin*, pp. 150-151)

Julia relates to having less but wonders why embarrassment is part of the picture.

I thought that was sad. Like she was embarrassed about where she lived. I don’t know she’d be like that. Sometimes I want something somebody else has, but I know now I have to get things for the baby so that’s it. When I work this summer, I can get more. That’s just the way it is, no reason to be embarrassed. [Book discussion, 04/18/2007]

Julia’s strategic choice is to get a job for the summer so there can be some changes at home that extra income can achieve.

When asked about plans after high school, Julia is baffled. College is too expensive, but she puts the responsibility for the funds on everyone but herself – her mother, her fiancé, her mother-in-law, all of whom, she says, have other responsibilities.

The day of my last visit to the school, Julia sees me in the hall and approaches me. She inquires about what I know about scholarships and other possible funding opportunities for college. I tell her what I know, and she looks at me eye to eye and says, “Okay. I can do that. It won’t be easy, but my life isn’t easy, but I can do it. Yeah, I can” [Personal communication, 05/04/2007].

In summary, Julia understands she made some poor choices early in her adolescence which have resulted in different circumstances for her life. She is strategic about not letting her temper harm her son, as well as ensuring her academic endeavors are on the right track. The year ended with Julia considering how she can make college happen.

On May 16, 2008, I went to Learning High School so Julia could read her portrait
and approve it or make any necessary changes that would be more reflective of her views. I learned that Julia had withdrawn from school early in the year. The school had no additional information.

Sweetie

Sweetie is 15, “almost 16” [Interview, 04/26/2007], Anglo, and the younger of two daughters but the only one still living at home. Sweetie lives with both her mother and father, and has grandparents who live next door. Her sister is ten years older than Sweetie and left home when Sweetie was eight or nine years old. Although she remembers her sister living at home and helping her sister move into the dormitory when she went to college, she does not feel like she has a sister anymore. With her sister who lives 35 miles away and another grandmother who lives 120 miles away, Sweetie sees her family as “spread out” [Interview, 04/26/2007], which is fine with her.

Sweetie’s mother works at a local church, and when asked if they go to the church where her mother works, Sweetie responded, “Oh yeah, whenever they’re open” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. When asked what her mother did at the church, Sweetie named secretary but dismissed it by saying her mother is really a mother. She supported this by adding that during the interview for the job, when asked what she did, her mother said “mother” [Interview, 04/26/2007] and that’s what she does as she organizes and types everyone’s schedules, obtains information about the summer camps, and does all the things a mom does. As I listened to this part of the interview over and over, I never heard any tone of condescension, just an intonation of matter of fact – this is what
moms do; they keep everyone organized. Sweetie’s father works for a major technology corporation, but she is unsure exactly what he does there.

Describing herself as talkative, she says she talks to people at random and does not care if they are listening because she has “plenty to talk about” [Interview, 04/26/02007]. During one of the book discussions, Claudia commented that Sweetie talked to everyone because she seems to like everyone. It was Sweetie who introduced herself to me the first day I was there to observe, and it was Sweetie who often lingered in the classroom chatting with Ms. Lowe and me long after everyone else had gone to lunch. This picture stands in contrast to her apparent relationship with her sister. Sweetie acquiesces to her sister’s desire for privacy, “she’s real private so it’s like that doesn’t make me feel like I can talk to her” [Interview, 04/26/2007], to the extent that she does not feel like she has a sister.

It is during her description of herself as a leader that I take notice of Sweetie’s strategic thinking. She has considered aspects of leadership, and although she likes to assume the responsibility, she realizes that she is not always the best person to lead.

C: I would describe myself as one of those people who like to lead people because I like to take charge.
R: Oh.
C: Yeah so I see myself as a leader but when there’s someone better or more qualified, I like to be a follower.
R: So how do you define more qualified?
C: Older than me like teachers; I can just see one of them saying, “You can’t teach this” [starts laughing] “You don’t have the experience” or “You’re not old enough.”
R: [laughing] My guess is you’re usually right.
C: Oh yeah, so older but also have more experience than me so like in ROTC ’cause you have others with more experience. Uhm like the Wing Commander who has led more people and others who’ve been in there longer
‘cause like you have people who’ve been in there for all four years so I have to go with that. [Interview, 04/26/2007]

She shares that she is a good student, “average or maybe a little above average” [Interview, 04/26/2007] and involved in several extracurricular activities – ROTC, choir, Business Professionals of America, and another club she failed to name. Her only problem with being in multiple organizations is that sometimes she has to choose between activities, and she does not like to miss anything.

Sweetie has already started thinking about college and knows her parents have saved the money to pay for it. She is also aware that she is in a privileged position economically because she knows she is in the minority of students who already have the funds to ensure a college education. Her mother and grandmother both graduated from one of the local universities, and she has an uncle who is a Dean in a church affiliated college just 35 miles away. Although she was vocal about the unacceptability of failing a course, she never does connect good grades to college attendance. Her choices seem to be focused more on where she can go that she does not have family ties in case “I just want to slack off for a minute” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Since her mother and grandmother and uncle all have ties to universities in the area, Sweetie asks questions during the interview about other schools that are not far away but have no family connections. “I have looked at places like Baylor and also A & M because I know it’s a good school but isn’t there a school called Austin?” [Interview, 04/26/2007].

Sweetie seems to be comfortable in her identity as a student engaged with the many social aspects of school life. She is friendly with students, relaxed with teachers, and involved with several organizations. One day in class, the students had been trying their hands at free writing while listening to soft music playing in the background. When
they finished, Ms. Lowe shared the poem she had written for her daughter. Sweetie then asked if they [students] could share theirs. Ms. Lowe smiled at her and then moved on to the next item on the agenda. I watched Sweetie’s face, but she seemed untouched by what could have been perceived as rejection. On another day when the students were asked to vocalize their opinions about the novels Ms. Lowe had passed out, it was Sweetie who spoke first, saying how much she liked the book. The day they read a little more from the books and then talked about them in small groups, Sweetie volunteered how much she enjoyed talking about the stories, and she hoped they would do that again. It was during one of the lunch time book discussions that Sweetie said she would ask any teacher about an undeserved grade, but she would phrase it lightly, “You gotta be kiddin me with this grade” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. In these instances, Sweetie remains calm, relaxed, and non-confrontational.

Sweetie seems to want to know she is part of the group of girls. At one point in the second book discussion, Claudia raises the issue of racism, and Sweetie, in a non-confrontational tone, asks, “So do you think all white people are like that? Like do you think I think I’m better?” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007]. Perhaps in an attempt to fit in, she does not stand firm in her disapproval of selling drugs “like she didn’t know he was selling drugs but that was okay ‘cause she got a necklace” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007] when Julia comments that it is nobody’s business. “It’s their own business if they do drugs and somebody’s gotta sell ‘em so.” Sweetie backs down with “Yeah, I know” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007].

Sweetie is also not a girl to hang back so the boys can get first choice. On my last day to observe the class, I ordered pizza for everyone. When the pizzas were
delivered, Ms. Lowe and I spread the boxes on an empty oblong table and gave directions to the students to form a line and start with two pieces each. Sweetie, on the opposite side of the room, was up and at the table before most of the students had even moved a muscle. I jokingly asked if she was hungry, and she retorted that she was not excessively hungry, but she was not going to let the guys go ahead of her.

In summary, Sweetie is a friendly, easy going girl who strategically thinks about when to lead and when to follow. She enjoys her involvement in several school organizations and wants to know she is part of the group. Because she knows she has the funding for college, she has begun thinking about where she wants to go.

Sweetie met me in the office on May 16, 2008, and read and approved her portrait. She also told me that she had applied for early admission to an area university with no family connections and been accepted. She shared her enthusiasm about this plan, “Pretty cool, huh?” [Personal communication, 05/16/2008].

Claudia

Claudia is a 16-year-old sophomore at Learning High School. She describes herself as Hispanic and is originally from Mexico. Her family moved to California when Claudia was seven years old because her parents believed the United States offered the opportunity for a good education for their daughters. Claudia has two sisters who are 22 and 23 years old, and her older sisters each have children of their own. These sisters, along with their children, lived with Claudia and their parents for awhile, but now live in their own houses in a nearby neighborhood.

Describing herself as quiet around people she does not know, she reverts to the
opposite with people she knows and becomes loud. I took notice of her almost immediately in class because she was quiet. She usually sat in the back of the classroom and always near the same three or four girls. The first two or three times I was there observing, I noticed these girls clustered together looking at and putting on make-up. Claudia was one of these girls, although she was the one who was paying less attention to the make-up and more attention to either the reading or writing in which she was engaged. During the lunchtime book discussions, she was more vocal than she was in class. She did not appear shy or reserved during the interview. She sometimes wore an ROTC uniform.

Claudia describes herself as a serious student who wants to go to college and finish. Both of her sisters started college, but neither finished, and the graduating has become important to Claudia. Like many of the students I taught who did not come from college educated families, Claudia equates a college education with being “somebody” [l:46-48, 4/24/2007]. Claudia is the participant who had read the book prior to our small group book discussions because she read it in class during the designated time for reading.

Not willing just to accept things the way they are, Claudia questions the thinking and actions of people who surround her at school and in society. She wonders aloud about students who do not like school and just want to get finished so they can be out but do not come to school often enough to get credits needed for graduation.

Claudia: It’s like people who uhm barely come to school. I mean they skip it and so they have to come an extra year to graduate when all they do is talk about how they don’t like it wanna get out of here so I don’t know, I don’t understand that.

Researcher: You don’t understand their thinking?
Claudia: No, I don’t understand that they don’t like it but don’t come to get finished. [Interview, 04/24/2007]

Speculating about a society where people judge her family and expect her to choose pregnancy over education, Claudia rejects this idea displays a determination to chart a new course.

I mean I want to graduate and go to college because both my older sisters went to college but neither of them finished it because they both got pregnant, well one of my sisters got pregnant in high school. But I wanna go to college and finish. I wanna graduate because that is important to me, to finish… I wanna be the first in, I don’t wanna get pregnant like my sisters did. I wanna start a new pattern because a lot of people think I’ll be just like them [sisters] and I don’t like that because I think that’s being judgmental of my family. And I’m like keeping to myself because I, because I can do anything I want. [Interview, 04/24/2007]

Claudia exhibits a strong awareness of the choices she has made in terms of constructing her identities as a student and as a person. She understands that many of these intentional choices are connected to her past experiences. For example, when Claudia came to the United States, she spoke no English but was placed into a regular third grade class. There was a bilingual student assigned to assist her. One day in the computer lab, Claudia needed to go to the bathroom, and when she told her student helper, Claudia was just told to “hold myself” [Interview, 126, 04/24/2007]. When Claudia lost control, the teacher became angry with Claudia. “It was horrible” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Because Claudia received no help from the student assigned to help her, she has made the decision to be a person who helps other students. “That’s why I look for kids who appear lost or confused at school and then I try to help because I don’t want anyone to go through what happened to me” [I:133-142, 04/24/2007]. Instead of becoming bitter or remaining in the past thinking no one will help her so why try, Claudia
has remained connected to the past, but responsive to the present by using this experience to become “more gentle with people” [Interview, 4/24/2007].

Another example of this “gentle” behavior is her friendliness at school. Having experienced groups of people at school or in public places who apparently have chosen to ignore someone for various reasons, Claudia interprets that behavior as unacceptable and “mean” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. She has decided on an alternate way of being and intentionally speaks to everyone. Claudia understands the difference between being friendly and appearing friendly with an ulterior motive. In one of the book discussions, as Claudia talked about obtuse comments of the white program leader character, Sweetie asked Claudia if she thought all white people were as insensitive as the character. Claudia did not appear to feel as if it was a challenge but a legitimate question and said that she did not think all white people were alike and certainly not Sweetie whom Claudia envisions as “it’s like you like everybody” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007].

Claudia also makes choices in the present that are aimed toward the future. As a freshman, she made a C in a geometry class. She did not like the way that felt, so now does “everything I’m supposed to” [Interview, 04/24/2007] to ensure better grades. Outstanding grades are the key to a college scholarship, and that is what Claudia is expecting to achieve. She admits her mother would not take charge as the mother of the protagonist does in the novel, but Claudia relates the mother’s actions to herself and thinks she would take some kind of appropriate action that would effect change for others. When asked if she would question a teacher if she received an undeserved
grade, Claudia thinks for a moment and then responds that it would depend on the teacher and that is part of what she meant by appropriate action.

Depending on the teacher, if I thought I was right and the grade wasn’t fair, I’d say something. I don’t say much in class but I think teachers know I’m serious so yeah, I’d wanna explanation so even if I’m wrong I know why. But I know one thing, remember how Keisha’s mother went up there when that other girl told the lady that Mr. Walt was maybe molesting Keisha? I don’t think my mother would do that, but I sure would. Nobody’s gonna say that kind of stuff about me and besides if you let that someone get away with that kind of stuff then they just keep doing it and other people get hurt. You have to figure out the best thing to do. [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]

On another day, Claudia connects the action in the book to what has gone on in their English class with the parent of one of the students threatening to sue Ms. Lowe. Claudia dismisses the actions of their principal and points out that you always have to think about whether the intended listener will actually listen and then what the result will be before you take any kind of action. “You always have to think ahead” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007].

Claudia is an adolescent who is strategic in her decision to make good grades, her willingness to question a teacher, and her resolve to not end up pregnant like her sisters. She charts her own course toward a college education with foresight as she considers other people and reflection as she has made past experiences opportunities for learning. Claudia states it best, “I can do anything I want” [Interview, 04/24/2007].

Claudia was eager to read her portrait for the member check on May 16, 2008. She approved what she read and asked me if I knew Julia had dropped out of school. Claudia did not know anything current about Julia. She was excited about the AP courses she had signed up for next year.
Phase 4 – The Small Group Discussion as a Context for Expressing Agency

It was during the book discussion that I came to know these girls much better. It was clear from the beginning of the book discussions that each of these girls participated in this small group discussion much differently from the way they participated in the class activities. They spoke up in different ways, and in the book discussions, the girls’ unique stances toward past, present, and future events became even more apparent.

The book we read and discussed was *Born In Sin* by Evelyn Coleman. Keisha, the protagonist, is a smart African-American ninth grader who dreams of being a doctor and has been invited to attend a premed vacation school for the summer at nearby Avery University. Because she is labeled “At Risk,” her plan to go to Avery is subverted, and she is sent to an urban rescue program for teens in poverty. Keisha is outraged, but she turns her anger into the will to prove her doubters wrong.

I chose this book because I transacted with it as a redressive text (Luke, 2004). In the book, Keisha explains that her grandmother told her that rich people equate being born poor with being born in sin and doomed to poverty, ignorance, and self-destruction. My own experience with wealthy parents in an area private school reflected this same kind of thinking as they were quite vocal of their fear and distrust of the students I taught prior to becoming a fulltime doctoral student. Keisha’s mother and sister, as well as her best friend, are all women whose lives and life choices are captivating. Reading this story is a chance to examine how Keisha’s life in influenced not only by her own decisions, but also by the decisions of these three women in her life. I believed this book had many points to examine and discuss about expectations of others and our
own goals and dreams. The pilot study had also confirmed that adolescent girls responded to this text with rich discussions.

To analyze the book discussion transcripts, I first focused on each participant so that I was only coding for one participant at a time. After coding, I reconstructed the discussions and looked at each time a participant spoke, and what came before that utterance and what came after it. I then made notes in the margins of the transcripts about the context of the utterance.

Because I was asking the girls to stay during their lunch period which I knew was a time of socialization, I brought them lunch each day of the three days. Ms. Lowe gave us permission to eat in the classroom, and the food seemed to make the conversation more casual. Each of the participants appeared to settle easily into the book discussions. The first day we met, Sweetie began by asking me how long I had taught, and Alyssa followed that with a question about agency and “what is it that you’re looking for?” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. I told the girls that agency was an ability to do something and I was wondering what they believed about themselves and their capabilities. Sweetie then asked me about my family. Reminding them that I had taught high school reading in a nearby urban district, I told them that I started teaching when my husband died twelve years ago. I also told them about my children, who they are and where they had or were presently going to college. The girls seemed to want to know something about me before they talked about what they had read. I had been in their classroom for three and one-half months, but they seemed to need to have their own questions answered before they would feel comfortable having a discussion with me present for their discussion.
The first day, we put five desks in a small circle and the girls grabbed the pizza I had brought them for lunch. Alyssa jumped right into talking about the book because she did not believe a principal would make a decision about a student that countered what a teacher had decided. The girls did not talk in great detail about the book that day, or on any other day; usually one of them would comment about something in the book and either make a connection to herself or ask a question making a connection to the world outside the text. I occasionally asked for clarification of a comment or for further detail about a comment, but probably 95% of the discussion was among the four girls. The discussion flowed evenly; there were not huge spaces of silence. When the bell that signaled the end of lunch rang on the first day, we went to the library. The librarians greeted us warmly and directed us to a back table. We continued the discussion for about 10 more minutes, agreed on the amount of the book to read for the next meeting, and the girls went back to class.

The second meeting was much like the first except that I began the discussion by asking what they had liked best in the text they had read since the last meeting. Again, a comment about the text moved immediately to a connection to self or the larger world. I did notice by the end of this meeting that Sweetie was talking less than I observed in class, and Claudia was talking more than she did in class. At the end of this meeting, I said I would bring tacos next time, and because everyone liked something different, Alyssa was concerned that bringing the tacos was too much trouble for me. She told me that I did not have to bring them lunch.

The third meeting began with my asking whether or not they like the ending of the book and then continued in the same manner as the two previous discussions. We
ended a little early this time because Claudia needed to go to the library, and Alyssa and Julia wanted to have a few minutes at lunch with their friends. Sweetie stayed and talked to me.

I never got the feeling anyone in the group disliked anyone else. They all appeared on easy and friendly terms with one another. Alyssa and Sweetie usually sat near each other in class, as did Claudia and Julia. They also seemed to know about each other – who was involved in what, that Julia had a baby, that Alyssa danced.

The first day when I asked if everyone had read, Julia let everyone know that she had read the book but that it had been difficult. In response to my asking if everyone had read up to the agreed page, Julia responded, “Yeah. My son was sick, ya know, the time, well, I did it but it wasn’t easy” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. During another discussion, Julia had problems with the ending of the book because “It all ended too good. Keisha’s gonna go to college; she found her dad and he’s a good guy; she’s a good swimmer. It’s not all so good in real life, at least it’s not for me” [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]. When discourse surrounded questioning teachers, Julia was the only one to mention teachers who did not listen to students. “It’s teachers who are always right and don’t listen” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. This small group of girls seemed to provide the space for Julia to give voice to the minor complaints of her life: I have less time; my life is harder; teachers don’t listen to me.

Claudia, who rarely said anything in class, took an active role in the book discussions. She used the space to ask questions and express her doubts about judgments of the larger society and decisions of the administration in the smaller world of school. When Alyssa expressed her disbelief that a principal would act the way the
principal in the book did, Claudia alluded to their principal’s not supporting their teacher Ms. Lowe.

    Alyssa: Well, I don’t think a principal would really do that.
    Claudia: Do what? You don’t think a principal would send you where he wants instead of where a teacher wants?
    Alyssa: Maybe but I think a lot of principals do listen to teachers.
    Sweetie: Think about how the principals have listened to Ms. Lowe and …
    Claudia: Yeah, ya mean haven’t listened. It’s like they’ve just thrown [boy X] and his momma in her face. I can’t believe he’s still in this class. Pleeeeeeeeeease.

Later in the same discussion, Claudia points out teachers who may not call a non-English speaking student stupid, but their faces reveal the same thought. “When you don’t speak great English, there are, there are some teachers who look at you like, like you’re stupid” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. I asked Claudia if she had had many teachers like that, and she replied, “No, but I learned English really fast, and I did have some bad experiences because I didn’t speak English” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. When asked if she wanted to talk more about that, she chose not to reveal anymore. “No, not really” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. In a later book discussion, Claudia returns to this same subject, still without revealing any specific details.

    Alyssa: The part I did like is Keisha’s boyfriend, uh, Malik or however you say it. When he was talking about teaching himself to swing and then he’s gonna do that sculpture garden for kids, well I liked that ‘cause I do think you do have to do things yourself.
    Claudia: Right and I like that part of the garden and showing kids ‘cause sometimes people need help and you gotta help ‘em. It woulda been easier when I first came and didn’t know any English. I made it, but it didn’t have to be so hard. [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]

Just as she expressed concern about principals discounting teachers and teachers discounting students, so she, too, was disturbed by people who make
judgments based on race or ethnicity or class or family differences. “I know people think I’m just like my sisters, that I’ll get pregnant, but I won’t. I’m not like them. I see how hard it is ’cause they lived with us. I’m going to college. People just judge us but they’re wrong” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007].

Claudia seemed to become the conscience of this small group. She was able to see where, in several instances, people do not receive help or support that could make their jobs or lives a little easier to negotiate. Claudia seemed comfortable assuming an ethical identity for the whole group, but she did not seem comfortable revealing specifics of her life. Twice she referred to a bad experience but neither time would she elaborate or give any specific information. Later in the month when I interviewed her, and it was just the two of us, she did go into detail about this experience. Because she was willing to share the details with just me, but not with the group, it seems she could be the public conscience, but her personal investment was still guarded.

Where Claudia seems to question the actions of people, Alyssa expressed doubt about episodes in the book because she seems to believe in the benevolence of people. In the same discussion when Claudia is expressing doubt, Alyssa is expressing confidence in the goodwill of people

  Alyssa: Well, I don’t think a principal would really do that.
  Claudia: Do what? You don’t think a principal would send you where he wants instead of where a teacher wants?
  Alyssa: Maybe but I think a lot of principals do listen to teachers. [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]

Later in the same discussion, Alyssa again voices her disbelief in the book.

  Sweetie: So what about that part in the book where the people who run the summer program are telling ’em that their parents don’t know anything and they’ll never see anything unless they do this summer program? Have you ever heard anything like that?
Alyssa: Not me. I can’t believe people would say something like that. [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]

Perhaps Alyssa believes in the kindness of people because that is what is important to her own way of being. When asked about saying something to a teacher concerning an undeserved bad grade, Alyssa’s response centered around fairness. “[Talking to teacher] would depend on what it was for me. Like if it was an important assignment or if I had really worked hard on it, then I might say I don’t think this is fair or something like that. And I wouldn’t be all mad or anything” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. Another example is her concern for Julia and her own younger brothers.

Alyssa: So was your mother mad when you told her you were pregnant?
Julia: No kidding. She didn’t even speak to me for about three months. But now we’re okay.
Alyssa: Do you live with her?
Julia: No. I live with my mother-in-law. My mom lives in {city} with my sister but she helps me with money and everything.
Alyssa: That’s good. I’d have to have my family no matter what happens. Like I’ll take care of my little brothers cause I’m not gonna let anything happen to them. [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]

Ironically, it was also Alyssa who thought the ending of the book was “kind of fairy tale-ish” [Book discussion, 04/29/2007]. Alyssa apparently used incidents in the book to make known her beliefs that people are mostly good to each other and kindness matters. However, if it looks too good, there is cause for suspicion.

Sweetie, who was one of the more vocal students in class, was the quietest during the book discussions. Several times she draws connections between what is happening at school and what is happening in the book, but then sits back and lets the others do the talking. When Sweetie’s comment about selling drugs is challenged,
Sweetie does not reassert her opinion but nods in agreement. She seems unwilling to take on an anti-drug identity if that is not the consensus of the group.

Sweetie: Can you believe she got that necklace that costs so much, like she didn’t know that guy was sellin’ drugs but that was okay ‘cause she got a necklace.

Julia: And who knows if that was a real necklace ‘cause I know people who wear that shit, I mean that stuff, and it doesn’t cost so much, just shines a lot. Like when I was sneakin’ out doin’ drugs and drinkin’ and stuff, that’s what a lot of the people wore, that gold stuff and those big chains and all that but I know it didn’t cost so much.

Sweetie: But what I was talking about was that it was like it was okay even though it was sellin’ drugs that bought the necklace.

Julia: Yeah, so a lot of people think that’s okay. It’s their own business if they do drugs and somebody’s gotta sell ‘em so…

Sweetie: Yeah, I know. [Book discussion, 04/18/2007]

Sweetie is the only Anglo. Accustomed to being in the majority, she is now the minority in a small group and reading about unfair treatment of people of color. What did that mean for her? It seems Sweetie needed to make herself part of the group. In an earlier discussion when Claudia draws a comparison between the white person in the book and people in the larger world, Sweetie needs to know that these girls do not see her in the same negative light.

Claudia: What made me madder was the part, uhm, right before, oh yeah, when that woman said like it was normal in Black families and why would you say something so dumb?

Sweetie: So do you think all white people are like that? Like do you think I think I’m better? [Book discussion, 04/18,2007]

Sweetie needed to know she was just one of this group; she was not like the people in the book.

On the last day when the discussion was winding down, Claudia asked if they could go ahead and leave so she could go to the library. The other girls wanted to go to
lunch with their friends, except for Sweetie. She asked to stay. “I’m good to just stay and
talk with you, Ms. Curtis. Would that be okay?” [Book discussion, 04/20/2007]. Sweetie
did not have anything specific that she talked about that day. We carried on a
conversation consisting of small talk. We talked about different colleges and whether
they were computer schools or not. We also talked about the positives and negatives
about sorority life. Sweetie told me about the church camps she had attended and the
national competition she had gone to for the business professions club.

The small group books discussions seemed to provide the space for the girls to
take on different subjectivities than the ones they manifested in class. Although there
were few whole class discussions, I never heard Claudia say anything in class. Julia
seemed to know that she had people who would listen in this small group and was able
to relax for a little while and admit that life can be hard. The redressive text gave the
participants the opportunity to say something was wrong and needed changing.
Because agency resides in the mind (Moore & Cunningham, 2006), the small group
book discussion provided a dialogic context for the manifestation of agency. The
following sections describe the subjectivities taken on by the participants during the
book discussions.

Synthesizing the Findings: Manifestations of Agency at School

How do these perceptions of agency manifest themselves in relation to school?
Three themes emerged from the data which carried implications of agency as it relates
to school. Important to these girls in regards to academic endeavors is how they see
themselves as students, how they make decisions regarding negotiations with people in
power, and how they connect current decisions to past experiences and future endeavors.

**Student Identities**

I have begun to see fluid identities as a puddle of water that reconfigures its shape each time the water is in a different location. Temperature, shape and material of the floor all make a difference. The water reconfigures its shape so it looks different, but the elements of the water are the same. I did see evidence that new situated identities were constructed as the girls found themselves in a smaller group and with different configurations of people.

All the girls describe themselves in positive terms when it relates to their identities as students. They use words like *good*, *serious*, and *above average* in their descriptions. Doing what they need to do in order to maintain acceptable grades, Claudia and Julia each talked about the difficulties they have encountered in school and their decisions to make changes, and Alyssa and Sweetie have a record of good grades because it is the good grades that have enabled them to take part in all the activities they have chosen.

Alyssa knows that in order to dance as much as she does, she has to maintain good grades. “I try to keep up my grades so I can dance cause if I don’t pass, I can’t dance and that’s what I like to do [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Sweetie is active in several organizations which take up her time, and she understands that failing grades translate into no clubs.

ROTC and choir and other things that take up a lot of time and means I have to spend time studying because I can’t do it all if I fail anything. I’m in two clubs like
BPA. That’s Business Professionals of America where we do a lot of computer stuff, like learn software and excel, power point access so it’s a lot of good stuff so I gotta make good grades. [Interview, 04/26/2007]

Claudia made a C in an early math class her freshman year. She did not understand many of the concepts, but a C was still not acceptable. “I learned it fast in high school. I made a C; I took geometry, and I made a C and I didn’t like that so I do everything I’m supposed to.” Now Claudia reads carefully in the beginning of a class if it is new material, and she asks a multitude of questions until she knows she has a foundational understanding. Claudia also has discovered that it is easier to learn and remember material if you already know something about it. “I really read the chapters they tell us to, and I’ve finally started asking questions because then it’s easier for me to understand what I’m reading by myself” [Interview, 04/24/2007].

Julia knows she missed many of her credits when she was skipping school her freshman year, so she has taken steps to ensure she has the right classes scheduled for next year. “I already have my schedule for next year to make sure I have all junior level classes. “ She also has put attendance as one of her main priorities. Julia talked about the difficulty of always being at school when a baby has entered the picture, but she has chosen to continue with school and attendance is an essential part of that choice. “It’s hard with a baby, but I know I have to be in school. That’s why I go to geometry even if I’m failing” [Book discussion, 04/18/2007].

All four of these girls were usually on task during observations of their English class, although Julia was one of the girls occupied with make-up during my early observations. I did not hear Ms. Lowe ever speak to any of them about missing assignments or lack of engagement. While Alyssa, Julia, and Claudia were rather quiet,
Sweetie was frequently asking or answering questions or volunteering to read. During one six weeks period after they had identified themselves as participants in this study, each girl shared her report card with me. The grades for each one matched what she had revealed during the interview. As a colleague observed one day as she perused the data, these girls know how to do school. Although gender expectations might generally relegate girls to the ways they look and act in relation to others, for these girls, school is about studying hard, doing the homework, taking the right classes, and making good grades.

*Negotiating with People in Power*

The data provided instances of seven different references to questioning a teacher about a grade or an administrator about a decision or action taken concerning a student. All four girls indicated that they would question a teacher if a given grade was not what they expected or felt was fair. No one mentioned bombarding the teacher or demanding a change, but each demonstrated thoughtful consideration about how she would approach a teacher.

Alyssa, whose mother is a teacher, suggested she would first attempt to discern the teacher’s thinking so that she could see the paper from all angles. For example, “I might say I don’t think this is fair or something like that. And I wouldn’t be all mad or anything. I’d want her to explain what she was thinking” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. Sweetie, feeling comfortable with most teachers, revealed that she would question any teacher, but that she would take a light tone so that the question appeared to have a joking quality. “I talk to teachers a lot so I might say something no matter what but
sometimes I might no sound so serious like I’d say ‘you gotta be kiddin’ me with this grade’ or something like that” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007].

Julia, making a reference to her geometry teacher, held that she would make a decision about talking to a teacher after she decided whether that teacher would listen to her. Otherwise, according to Julia, it was time squandered for her. “For me, it depends on the teacher. Ya know sometimes ya have a teacher who listens, but other times it’s teachers who are always right and don’t listen to anything, so I would waste my time with her” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007]. Claudia also mentions that it would depend on the teacher as well as what she wanted to accomplish. “If I thought I was right and the grade wasn’t fair, I’d say something…most teachers know I’m serious so yeah, I’d wanna explanation so even if I’m wrong I’d know why” [Book discussion, 04/16/2007].

There were three references to the situation taking place during the semester in the classroom with the student whose parent was threatening to sue their teacher, Ms. Lowe. These references were pulled from conversations noted in the field notes, and suggested the students perceived an unfairness for their teacher on the part of the administration and questions about what they could do to help Ms. Lowe. For example,

After Ryan leaves, Jaye [teacher] gives directions for class. Fifteen minutes later, she is called into the hall. Sweetie asks, “What is going on?”
Someone says, “Ryan’s mom is suing Jaye.”
Sweetie remarks, “How could they [administrators] be so stupid?”
Alyssa adds, “And unfair? What can we do? He [Ryan] shouldn’t still be in here.” [Field notes, 03/27/2007]
**Temporal Stance – Connecting Present Choices to Future Goals**

Data from each of the girls showed clearly that each considers her future as she makes choices about the present. For Julia, Claudia, Sweetie, and Alyssa, aiming toward goals they have set has

Claudia wants to be the first in her family to graduate from college. With that goal in mind, she is making choices to make the best grades she can. “[I] take[s] school seriously ‘cause I want to be somebody. I want to graduate. I want to graduate early. I have great grades, and I plan to, I wanna keep it that way” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Claudia’s family came to this country “so we [the kids] could get a good education” [Interview, 04/27/2007], and Claudia is making strategic choices to bring that goal from long ago to fruition.

Alyssa loves to dance and has set a goal for herself to continue the dancing in college by getting a dance scholarship. With that goal in mind, she is dancing on the drill team at school and on “a competitive team at a dance studio” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Dancing on two dance teams takes a lot of time and to get a dance scholarship requires more than just dancing, so Alyssa is “a pretty good student” who “tries to keep up my grades” [Interview, 04/24/2007]. Alyssa has set a goal for herself which requires both academic and athletic expertise, and she is doing what she can now to achieve that goal.

Julia missed a lot of school the first semester of high school so she has been working to make up for lost time. She knows she does not want to spend her junior year in sophomore classes, so she has gone to the counselors ahead of time to plan her schedule for next year. Julia also knows she does not want to hurt her baby, and she
recognizes that she has a temper. When she gets mad, “I get my mother-in-law and give him to her and I go outside or to the back yard until I calm down” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Julia is making choices now as she envisions an abuse free childhood for her son.

Sweetie wants to go to college and knows money will not be a problem because her parents have saved for her education. Despite being involved in several organizations, Sweetie maintains good grades because both her activities at school and her college aspirations require good grades. Because she has family connections at two of the colleges in the area, Sweetie is looking at other universities and what they offer. “I’ve already started looking at colleges …I don’t know what I want to major in so it’s kinda hard to choose a school without a major in mind” [Interview, 04/26/2007]. Sweetie is making good grades and already investigating different aspects of college so she can make an informed decision when the time comes.

Attribution of Positive and Negative Events

To whom do these girls attribute events or occurrences that they see as positive or negative? Although Streitmatter (Galley, 2003) found that early adolescent girls did not believe they had any influence on the positive events that occurred in their lives, these four girls do know that positive events are neither accidents nor chance happenings in their lives. They know if you want something good or want something to change for the better, it is up to you to make it happen. Both Alyssa and Claudia make the connection between their hard work in school and dance that can result in scholarships for college. Julia knows that if she wants a more secure life for her son,
she cannot use drugs or skip school. She even asked her fiancé to turn himself into the authorities, which they knew would mean jail, but she thought that was better than wondering when the police would knock on their door. In her interview, she confided, “He only has three months left and then he can get a job, and we don’t have to be afraid they’ll catch him” [Interview, 04/26/2007].

Both Claudia and Julia seem to realize that a negative experience can turn into something positive if you make a decision to learn from it. Claudia took the negative experience of not being understood and committed herself to learning English as quickly as she could. She also took the painful experience of feeling lost to become someone who looks for students who need help. Julia knows her father hit her mother, which resulted in her mother leaving. Julia recognizes a temper in herself, and she removes herself from the vicinity of her baby until she is calmer. She does not give any more information about her father and her mother, but could it be that just as her mother removed herself from the rage of her father, Julia also distances herself and her rage from her baby?

Summary

In an attempt to more fully understand how agency is manifested among adolescent girls, the purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of agency as revealed by four adolescent girls in a small group book discussion. Derived from the theoretical work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Moje and Lewis (2007), the definition of agency in this study is “the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the
future, and responsive to the present.” The data were analyzed to for examples of choices, temporal events, and positive and negative attributes.

Through the interviews, book discussions, and classroom observations, a portrait emerged of each of the girls showing a person aware that she can be an agent of change or an agent to move herself forward in the direction of her goals. The major themes in these findings include (1) a temporal orientation, which connects the past, present, and future; (2) responsibility for positive and negative events; (3) strategic decision making; (4) negotiating with people in power. They understand that they have an inner capacity for achieving goals, and that they have to be strategic in their thinking. Although these themes are clear in the analysis of data from each of these girls, these are four individual girls who are different from one another. They have different experiences, different family configurations, and different ways of making agentic moves in school. As educators and literacy researchers, these portraits are a window into four students’ beliefs about themselves, and we can use this knowledge to think in more complex ways about adolescent girls in our schools.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

To acknowledge agency is to acknowledge the freedom of the individual to make choices about how to conduct one’s life (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). The extent to which adolescents understand the choices available to them is influenced by how they see themselves in the contexts of home, school, and the larger society. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of agency held by four adolescent girls in high school. The data clearly indicate that all four girls are intentional concerning the agentic moves they make. The different manifestations of agency among the girls are explained under four major themes: (1) a temporal orientation, which connects the past, present, and future; (2) responsibility for positive and negative events; (3) strategic decision making; (4) style of negotiating with people in power.

Summary of Findings

Definition of Agency

Emerging from the data and literature was a definition of the concept of agency. Agency is defined as the capacity for carrying out the choices resulting from decisions strategically made while connected with the past, aimed toward the future, and responsive to the present. This definition was drawn from both Emirbayer & Miche (1998) and Moje & Lewis (2007). As analysis of the data indicated both a temporal orientation and a propensity for making decisions that were strategically thought through, I drew from these researchers to include the major components of their definitions for this study.
**Temporal Orientation**

Each of these girls demonstrated ways of knowing that there is a thread running through her life which connects past, present, and future educational experiences. The manner in which a person interprets the events in life influences future choices (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Adolescents often understand that past experiences make us who we are, but they do not understand that it is our interpretation of those experiences that influence who we are. Often living in the moment, adolescents tend to see no connection between past, present, and future (Bandura, 2006). Important in the manifestation of agency is an understanding that our past experiences contribute to who we are, and the choices we make today influence the future experiences we encounter. Claudia understands that experiences as a child have resulted in a gentle adolescent girl who looks for students who need help. She also connects her current commitment to good grades to a C she made as a freshman, as well as her determination to get a college education. Julia skipped school as a freshman and, as a result, failed to get credit for some of her courses. Knowing that her actions resulted in no credit, she has taken the necessary steps to ensure that she receives all the credits for her sophomore year. She also has taken the steps to be enrolled in junior classes for the coming year. Alyssa spends her days actively engaged in dance, which she hopes will result in a dance scholarship for college. Alyssa also understands that her mother’s educational goals took time away from the family when Alyssa was younger, but these goals have resulted in a model to emulate. Sweetie is making sure she keeps her grades in good standing while she searches for area colleges to attend where there are no past family connections.
Responsibility for Positive and Negative Events as Related to School Events

Analysis of the data shows that these are girls know they are responsible for the positive events in their lives, just as they are responsible for negative events which result from their actions. Julia blames no one for the drugs she did and knows it is her hard work in school that has resulted in reclaiming some of her credits so that she can take junior level courses next year. Alyssa knows it is the time and work commitment in dance that will result in a dance scholarship; that scholarships do not happen by accident. Claudia recognizes that attention in class and to homework will result in grades that can lead to a scholarship and result in being the first in her family to graduate from college.

Strategic Decision-Making

Adolescents, in the same vein of denial that there is connection between past, present, and future, often take action without thinking of the consequences. Having an understanding of the connection between elements of time contributes to thinking before acting. Making strategic decisions demonstrates a thought process that includes weighing the consequences of different choices. This thought process is a manifestation of agency and being able to articulate the choices demonstrates an awareness of such agency. These are girls who make strategic decisions in both school and everyday life. Further, they are able to talk about the impact those decisions have made in their lives. Claudia did not like making a C in math when she was a freshman. Her internal conversation presented two choices – she could choose to study harder and start asking questions or she could continue to make low grades. Claudia chose the former
and now makes good grades and teachers consider her a serious student. Sweetie likes to take charge but sometimes finds herself in a place where there is someone with more experience. Her choices are to step back and follow and learn or to try to lead someone who knows more than she does. Sweetie strategically steps back and is content to follow and to learn. Julia knows she has a temper and that babies and tempers are not a safe combination. When Julia gets mad, she has a choice to risk harming her son or to step aside and leave him in safe and loving arms. Julia chooses to step aside, and her mother-in-law takes care of her son until Julia calms down. Using strategic decision-making skills at this age empowers the self and moves these girls to a place past many of their contemporaries.

_Negotiating with People in Power_

Data for each of the girls indicated that she appreciates the power difference between teachers and students and administration and teachers and would weigh carefully the feasibility of approaching a teacher or administrator with a complaint. Sweetie would question a teacher but would do it in a joking manner. Claudia would approach the teacher but would start from the perspective that maybe she did not understand something. Julia would weigh whether or not the teacher was someone who would listen to her. Alyssa would first see if she could discern the teacher’s thinking and go from there.

_Subjectivities Enacted during Small Group Book Discussions_

Briefly, these are the girls who shared themselves in interviews and book
discussions. These are the girls who revealed themselves to be strategic thinkers who carry out the choices that are connected to the past, aimed toward the future, and responsive to the present, each in a way appropriate to her unique personality and life situation.

Claudia enacts a quiet and engaged demeanor in class, but became a voice of challenge to what she perceives as unfair judgments and actions in the small group book discussion. She identifies herself as a serious student who has used past experiences to make herself into a gentle person who wants to be of help to people. Claudia is studying hard now as she aspires to be the first college graduate in her family. She is excited about taking AP courses her senior year.

Julia is a young mother who gave up risky behaviors as a freshman once she learned she was pregnant. She has made an intentional choice to become a more engaged and successful student, but she has encountered difficulty in geometry and is trying to move past it. In the small group book discussion, Julia was able to take advantage of this space to “let down” and take a deep breath. This seemed to be a space where she realized she did not always have to be so strong. Unfortunately, she has now withdrawn from school.

Alyssa is the dancer who is working hard on two dance teams in order to get a scholarship in dance for college. In the small group book discussion, she revealed a reserved optimism, a belief that people are usually well intentioned. She will be an officer on the school dance/drill team during her senior year, which heightens her dance scholarship prospects.

Sweetie is the outgoing and friendly student, but became quieter in the small
group book discussions. She seemed to need to be an ally more than needing to stand firm in her ideas. Sweetie enjoys being in charge, is content to follow someone with more experience, and is making good grades in order to be active in several organizations. She wants to attend a college without family connections and has applied for early admission to an area university that meets that requirement.

Instructional Implications

Current accountability measures that include high stakes testing treat adolescents as passive creatures influenced only by external forces, instead of active individuals with internal worlds (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Often, students who fail the mandated tests are put in remedial classes with a curriculum which focuses on top down drilling of skills. Remedial classes are working to remediate deficits, which offer nothing to enhance agency and even denies that students are agentic beings. It is not only in remedial classes that there is a denial of agency. In regular education classes, students make agentic moves, but teachers ignore such moves. Agency can be constrained by structures – institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and curricular. The hidden curriculum can be a constraining force for the manifestation of agency. When Sweetie wanted to read her poem, Ms. Lowe, with a smile, just moved to the next item on the agenda. Julia wanted help with geometry, and her teacher brushed her aside by saying come to class and sleep.

The difficulty with understanding agency is that it can only be seen in its manifestations of enactment because agency resides in the mind and is the result of an internal dialogue involved in choice (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). When we make a
decision, there is a dialogue going on in our heads. Agency is dialogic and relates to Vygotsky's (1978) intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity. We hear metaphoric “voices” as we go through our daily activities – voices that inform our actions and feelings. These voices we hear come from both ourselves and others as our experiences inform these internal voices that we use to make decisions. The more voices we hear, the more informed we are when we make decisions. Hearing the perspectives and beliefs of others contributes to our own understandings of why we believe and think the ways we do. School can be a place where multiple voices and perspectives reside, in other words, a dialogic context. For example, Jeff Wilhelm (1995) offers students the opportunity to role play; one student has the role of reason; another student has the role of devil’s advocate. It is in this type of context, this dialogic space, that students are given the opportunity, not only to hear alternate perspectives, but also to create alternate perspectives.

**Space for Dialogic Meaning-Making**

To encourage this internal dialogue, what is needed are literacy classrooms with teachers who recognize that adolescent girls have agency and provide the spaces for girls to enact their agency. When you are in a classroom with only one voice – the teacher? the textbook? the test? – there is the possibility that these expressions of agency are constrained/ignored/suppressed instead of being nurtured or developed. What did we learn from the girls in this study to inform our practice?

Sweetie is a talker in the classroom, but volunteers less in the discussion group, where she, as an Anglo, is in the minority. Julia feels as if there are many teachers who
do not listen, and Claudia has seen teachers whose facial expressions tell ELL students that the students are stupid. All of these girls need classrooms where multiple voices are heard and encouraged. Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006) believe “if student agency is to be respected then such classrooms need to be sites where multiple perspectives become the fabric of the curriculum” (p. 189). It is in this dialogue – in hearing multiple voices and perspectives – that students can learn how to use dialogue to examine alternatives and make choices. When those dialogues are internalized, according to Moore and Cunningham (2006), adolescents can examine and discuss different viewpoints, and in that discussion become more aware of various ways of making meaning. By knowing other ways of making meaning, adolescents have to find more support for their own ways of thinking or make a decision to make change. This internal dialogue enhances agency as well as the awareness of agency.

Multiple instructional strategies can encourage multiple perspectives when adolescents hear the voice of the teacher in lecture, but also hear the voices of other students in paired conversations and small group discussions. Class discussions of texts can result in multiple ways of constructing meaning. If the teacher always gives the meaning of every story, poem, book, students are being told that they are not capable of making meaning themselves. Working through difficult texts by thinking aloud is a way to model and make explicit the internal dialogue that occurs when people make choices.

One way to talk about texts is in a model of critical literacy practices. Ciardiello (2004) offers an instructional model to inform the reader concerning the hidden designs of texts and how to question and challenge them. These practices involve “examining multiple perspectives, finding one’s authentic voice, recognizing social barriers and
crossing borders of separation, regaining one’s identity, and listening and responding to
the ‘call of service’” (p. 138). Through questioning to elicit discussion, Ciardiello
describes strategies to look at multiple perspectives by asking about family and
arguments. That is a beginning. Finding one’s authentic voice concerns power and
position, of being able to voice one’s thought without fear or intimidation. Reclaiming
one’s identity looks at the issues of borders and exclusion. This relates to foreclosed
identity (Nakkula, 2003) because we have a tendency to believe what people say about
us. A foreclosed identity happens when an adolescent continues on a life course without
examining any of the alternatives. By reclaiming our identity, we discard the prejudices
and dispersions cast by others. What Ciardiello refers to as “call of service” concerns
civic responsibility and moral virtue. These abstractions are fundamental components of
a democracy (Ciardiello, 2004). It is only when we each take civic responsibility and
moral virtue as personal goals, that we have any hope of living in a true democracy
where there is social justice for all people. Authentic voice, reclaiming identity, social
justice, and multiple perspectives are all part of critical literacy and necessary
components for a sense of agency (Greene, 1978). Children and adolescents do not
learn these by accident. They have to be intentionally taught, and literature can be a
conduit for the lesson.

A wide range of texts is another way to bring multiple voices into the classroom.
Different authors, different perspectives, different genres bring different voices to
consider. Educators should go outside the standard canon and find books which bring
to the forefront questions of dominant thinking, democratic ideals and realities, and
social justice issues. Claudia already has questions about fairness and raised other
issues during the small group book discussions. Certainly, she would have much to contribute in small group discussions in the classroom if given the opportunity. Texts, such as the ones Luke (2004) refers to as “redressive texts,” show agency by having characters that somehow move against dominant thinking.

Different texts were offered in Ms. Lowe's classroom, and students chose the ones they wanted to read. But Ms. Lowe did not know how to facilitate discussions about the books, and the students apparently did not know how to talk about the books. So the books were read and enjoyed; the students told me they liked the books. Harper and Bean (2006) believe through literature discussions “schools offer a public space where adolescents and their teachers can consider, critique, and act on a host of topics and issues” (p. 148), but adolescents cannot critique and act if no one knows how to discuss the literature.

Literature combined with discussion can be a powerful context for studying agency. Reading redressive texts (Luke, 2004) opens the floor to discussions about power and exclusion and fairness. Teachers who keep abreast of cutting edge research understand these concepts. However, many teachers do not have access to the research outlining the “how tos” of discussion and providing the theoretical underpinnings for using such discussions, and therefore, do not understand the possibilities of class discussions. A teacher cannot be handed a book and told to talk about it in class. Teachers need professional development in learning the strategies for facilitating book discussions, and then they need to experience the model before slowly incorporating the discussions into the culture of the classroom. The classroom is a culture, and cultures do not change overnight. It takes time. Teacher educators need to
incorporate book discussion strategies in preservice teacher literacy classes so our new teachers understand the concept of book discussions. Literature can be so powerful, but only if we know how to teach our students to read critically. As they reclaim their voices and identities without the baggage of other’s prejudices, agency can be given voice and its manifestations studied.

Inviting community people in as guest speakers is another way of bringing multiple points of view into the classroom. People from the community who can talk about the ways they use reading and writing in their lives outside of school can provide a valuable message for adolescents that reading and writing as tools for real life after school. For Julia and all the other girls who are trying to stay in school and be a mother at the same time, bring in a woman who had a baby in high school and not only graduated from high school, but also graduated from college. Be explicit to all the young mothers like Julia: it can be done; here is someone who did it.

Adolescents make choices everyday; educators can help them move in constructive directions by sharing information that informs their choices. Multiple voices in the classroom can provide that information, but they can also say to Sweetie, Julia, and Claudia that all perspectives have value, are worth being heard, and bring knowledge to benefit of all students.

**Implications for Future Research**

As indicated in Chapter 1, triangulated relationship between girls, agency, and school is drawing the attention of researchers and educators (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Although this study revealed information about the perceptions of agency within the
lives of these four girls, larger studies are needed that look at adolescents and their beliefs about themselves. Studies about agency would inform our approaches to motivation, classroom management, and instruction, adding to our knowledge concerning students. Through longitudinal studies, we would have the opportunity to learn more about the relationship between agency and adolescent girls’ engagement in school. By following a small group of girls beginning in middle school and continuing through the transition to high school, more would be learned about the growth that happens as girls mature as students and as people in school. Who are adolescent girls as agentic people? Such studies might generate new research questions, as well as data analysis possibilities.

Future research agendas could also include studies into the relationship among literature and agency and engagement. The findings of this study suggest that teachers can address that problem by using redressive texts to increase engagement and, perhaps, more positive school decisions and actions. Does the type of literature used in the classroom make a difference for engagement? There is a need to find answers to keeping students engaged in school. The more learned from adolescents about their perceptions, the more insight there is concerning ways to make changes in high school so that students are better served. Agency is a multifaceted issue with components residing in the mind – capacity, temporal awareness, intentionality, reflectivity. The definition provided by this study can be used as a tool for classroom teachers to consider as they seek to better understand their students and, with that understanding, create more opportunities for engagement.
Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of agency held by four adolescent girls as revealed through talk in small group book discussions. The data revealed four girls who appreciate how the past has contributed to who they are as adolescent girls in high school. They realize that choices they make today influence the goals they have for their futures. These are girls who grasp the significance of making good grades, dancing on two dance teams, coming to school everyday, consenting to follow someone more experienced. They make decisions every day, and they articulate what their decisions mean. Alyssa, Julia, Sweetie, and Claudia did not say, “We have agency,” but in the ways they talked in a small group and in the ways they talked to me as a researcher, they told me that they knew they could accomplish what they set out to do, and it was all connected by past, present, and future.

This study is not the end of my journey into a deeper understanding of adolescent girls; it is merely the beginning. The findings confirm that a small group book discussion is a venue for studying agency. There is also a definition that can be used to study agency because it is possible to look for those temporal connections to choices that are being considered. There are girls who are making strategic choices everyday about ways to get where they want to go. There are adolescent girls who will take a troublesome experience, learn from it and become more understanding of others. Despite the hidden curriculum and what it might be saying, these girls offer encouragement with the knowledge that there are girls who cast aside embedded gender expectations because they know they can depend on themselves to go anywhere they want to go.
Unit of Analysis = Utterance
This is defined as that part of continuous spoken language by one speaker that relates to one event or a series of connected events.

Data Analysis Codes

I. The first codes refer to events and specific moments in time; when the event occurs

Past Event (PST) – An event which occurred in the past. These events could refer to events which happened during childhood or a previous year or semester in school.

Example: (1) When I was a freshman, I skipped school and did drugs.
(2) My mother left Mexico when I was six.

- Lesson learned from past event (PST – Li) – A lesson was learned from this event, which resulted in a change of attitude, action, or beliefs.
  Example: I didn’t like making a C so now I do everything to make good grades

- Purpose at the time of event (PST – Prps) – There was a purpose to the occurrence of event. There was a motive for this incident.
  Example: We came to the United States so the kids could get a good education.

- Negative experience (PST – Neg ex) – The event was a negative experience in the view of the participant.
  Example: My mother didn’t speak to me for three months.

- Positive experience (PST – Pos ex) – The event was a positive experience in the view of the participant.
  Example: I spent a lot of time with my dad when I was little.

Talk of the Present (PRSN) – Events or activities or situations that are currently happening or existing or as recent as occurring/existing in the present semester. These events or activities could be related to school or family or outside school or family.

Example: (1) I’m in band and three other clubs at school.
(2) I went to the counselor’s office so I could get my classes scheduled.

- Purpose for event or activity (PRSN – Prps) – There is a motive or goal for this event or activity.
  Example: I dance on two dance teams so I can get a scholarship.
• Negative experience (PRSN – Neg ex) – This is a negative experience in the view of the participant.
  Example: My sister has her own life so it’s like I’m an only child.

• Positive experience (PRSN – pos ex) – This is a positive experience in the view of the participant.
  Example: My father’s family is Spanish and they’re close so we’re close like that, too.

Talk of the Future (FTR) – An event which has not happened yet. This event could refer to definite plans in the immediate future or long term plans for a more distant future.

  Example: (1) I’m going to the BPA Conference next month.
  (2) I don’t want to go to a college where we have connections.

• Specific goal in mind (FTR – Gl) – Talk of the future with a specific goal.
  Example: I’m going to take AP History next year so I can graduate early.

II. Strategic Choices – These are decisions that have been made or are being made with a specific purpose and possible consequences in the mind of the participant.

  Example: (1) When I get mad, I get my mother-in-law to take care of my baby.
  (2) I look for kids who look lost so I can help them find what they’re looking for, and they don’t have to feel so bad like I did.

Strategic Choice (SC)

• Resistance Passive (SC – Rp) – An act of resistance but in a passive manner such as remaining quiet
  Example: I would question a teacher about a grade, but I’d do it like it was a joke, like “You gotta be kiddin’ with this grade.”

• Resistance Aggressive (SC – Ra) – An act of resistance but in an aggressive manner, such as making a verbal remark or making an action meant as resistance.
  Example: I wouldn’t let someone talk like that about me; I’d have to say something.
III. Positive/Negative Talk

Positive (PSTV) – Language that has a connotation of being affirmative or constructive or optimistic.

Example: (1) I am responsible because I take care of things.
          (2) I think most principals support the teachers.

- Self (PSTV – Slf) – Reference by the participant to same participant
  - Strength (PSTV – Slf: strng) – a descriptor with a connation of being favorable or an asset
    Example: I’m a serious student.

- Family (PSTV - Fmly) – Reference made to participant’s family.
  Example: We get along great now.

- School (PSTV - Schl) – Reference made to participant’s school.
  - Students (PSTV – Schl: st) – reference to one or more other students
    Example: Most of the students are pretty friendly.
  - Teachers (PSTV – Schl: tch) – reference to one or more teachers
    Example: I haven’t had any bad teachers.
  - Administration (PSTV – Schl: adm) – reference to an administrator
    Example: I think most principals support the teachers.

- Friends (PSTV – Frnd) – Reference to friends of the participant
  Example: Gloria [friend of participant] always helps me with the problems I don’t understand.

Negative (NEG) – Language that has a connotation of being unhelpful or harmful or depressing or disapproving.

Example: (1) I have a bad temper.
          (2) People are just judgmental, and it’s not right.

- Self (NEG – Slf) – Reference by the participant to same participant.
  Example: I was baddish then.

- Family (NEG – Fmly) – Reference to participant’s family.
  Example: We used to fight a lot.

- School (NEG – Schl) – Reference to participant’s school.
  - Students (NEG – Schl: st) -- reference to one or more other students
Example: I can’t believe that boy is still in here. He is so wrong.

○ Teachers (NEG – Schl: tch) -- reference to one or more teachers
  Example: She didn’t even try to help me.

○ Administration (NEG – Schl: adm) -- reference to an administrator
  Example: None of those principals have helped Ms. Lowe.

• Society (NEG – Scty) – Reference made about the larger society.
  Example: There are people like that; they just think they’re better than everyone else.
REFERENCES


