

“THE READING WARS IN SITU”¹

James Collins

Abstract

Engaging Raymond Williams’ argument (1977: 112) that “[a] lived hegemony is always a process ... [that] can never be singular,” this paper examines contrary tendencies toward domination and autonomy in national debates about education, classroom-based reading practices, and students’ formation of literate identities. In particular, I explore the dynamics of inequality and reflexivity through an ethnographic-and-discursive analysis of a US urban middle school undergoing pedagogical reform. The school presents a balance, roughly 50/50, of students living in poverty and not living in poverty and from majority and non-majority ethnoracial backgrounds. Because of statewide pressures to “improve test scores,” the school has agreed to an ambitious English Language Arts curriculum initiative which encourages reflexive self-guidance among teachers and students. The paper presents analyses of public debates about literacy and of classroom interactional dynamics as well as case studies of ‘struggling readers,’ that is, young adolescent deemed unsuccessful at school literacy. The analysis of literacy debates focuses on the displacement of class and race “effects” in discussions of pedagogical reform. The classroom analyses focus on conditions of pedagogical inclusion and exclusion and the apparent role of class, race, and gender in such conditions. The case studies focus on the articulation of school and non-school literate identities and the role of class, race, and gender in those identities and their articulation.

Keywords: Reading; Education; Classroom interaction; Involvement; Gender.

1. Introduction

Distinctive features of the “Post” or “Late” Modern era in which we now live are heightened reflexivity or self-guidance and increased inequality (Bauman 1997; Giddens 1991). In the contemporary United States, a country exemplifying both tendencies, there has been an ongoing debate about schooling and education, in particular, a heated and unusually politicized debate about literacy pedagogies. Common to the debates about education and literacy are concerns about increasing social inequality - phrased as concerns

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with “educational equity” and “no child being left behind” - and sharp disagreements about the role of reflexivity in schooling - phrased as disagreements over “learner-centered” versus “explicit” pedagogies. One outcome of the ongoing debate has been an elite-led movement for “standards and testing,” which are intended to improve educational performance, uncover inequities and force reforms (Coles 2000; Lemann 1997).

The elite-led “standards movement” in the US has been quite successful at establishing a new consensus about what is fundamental in education, and it can be viewed as a textbook case constructing a new hegemony. However, I will argue below that it is important to think of hegemony, the interplay of domination and consent first conceptualized by Gramsci (Hoare & Smith 1971), as never simply an imposition, but as always instead a conflictual, negotiated process. Of the works I have found most useful in thinking about the discursive dimensions of hegemonies, all have emphasized the multiplicity and negotiation in what may, in the last analysis, be understood as domination and resistance to domination. This is true of Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) arguments that hegemonic struggles entail an always-contingent discursive articulation of social antagonisms and that there is no single, definitive hegemony, but rather plural hegemonies. It is true also of Fairclough’s discussion of hegemony as pointing to the joint role of ideology and subjectivity in changing social dynamics (1995), and of Donald’s (1983) historical work on the conjoined emergence of public education, Standard English, and literacy crises in 19th and 20th Century England. This emphasis on multiplicity and negotiation is also found in Williams (1977), who argued that “[a] lived hegemony is always a process... In practice, ... hegemony can never be singular. It’s internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis (p.112).”

In the account which follows, I take up the concern with “lived hegemony” by examining contrary tendencies toward domination and autonomy in national debates about education, classroom-based reading practices, and students’ formation of literate identities. As we will see, the national debate about education and literacy expresses contrary tendencies toward domination or regulation and autonomy or self-guidance, while also displacing attention from and returning to issues of economic inequality. In order to develop what Williams calls “a concrete analysis” of “lived hegemonies,” my investigation of the national debate is supplemented with an ethnographic-and-discursive analysis of an urban middle school undergoing pedagogical reform. Because of statewide pressures to “improve test scores,” the school, along with others in the Upstate New York region, has agreed to an ambitious English Language Arts curriculum initiative which encourages reflexive self-guidance among teachers and students. But the new curriculum has significant constraints on its implementation. In addition, it can be seen as posing novel challenges to students, especially those who are deemed as having literacy difficulties; some of these latter are the focus of special attention.

This study will thus permit a particular entree or vantage point from which to explore dynamics of inequality and reflexivity. It does so by presenting analyses of public debates about literacy, of classroom interactional dynamics, and of ‘struggling readers,’ that is, young adolescents deemed unsuccessful at school literacy. In this way we will attend to society-wide discourses about what counts a legitimate knowledge, to particular, changing institutional practices, and to identity/subjectivity as a practice. Let us turn first to the national discourse.

2. The "Reading Wars"

In the unusually politicized debate in the US about literacy pedagogies, what many have called "the reading wars," we see a subset or specialized argument within a broader debate about raising educational standards. This debate includes claims about educational crises, about the need for school reform by means of tougher curriculum standards and stricter testing, and about the relation of the apparent crisis and the proposed solution to ongoing problems of social inequality. The standards movement, mentioned earlier, has been an effort unfolding since the early years of the Reagan administration to restructure US public schools (NCEE, 1983). Its advocates argue that the best reform for US schools is to make them more efficient and equitable, by implementing statewide if not nation-wide curriculum frameworks, by using more frequent testing as the primary measure of achievement, and by tying test performance to sanctions and modest rewards for schools and school districts as well as individual teachers and students (Shanker 1986). Critics argue that the emphasis on standards and the discourse of crisis is a smoke screen to hide the fact of substantial disinvestment in public education, especially in those schooling systems with the large concentrations of poor and minority children (Berliner & Biddle 1995). The "standards movement" has been largely a success in that most states in the US have adopted new, more explicit curriculum frameworks along with stricter and more frequent testing (Frontline 2002). In New York State, for example, within the last decade there have been changes such that five Regents Exams, which were previously given only to college-bound high school students, are now required of all graduating seniors, and benchmark exams, keyed to state standards which prepare for the Regents Exams, are required of all 4th and 8th graders. Should schools, almost always those with high proportions of poor children, perform below certain levels on the benchmark exams, they are put on special intervention lists, and risk a state takeover of their school management (Brownstein 1999; Karlin 2000).

Within the larger movement for stricter educational standards, the so-called reading wars have also emerged in the last decade. The debate about reading pits adherents of a rejuvenated "phonics" pedagogy against an earlier, progressive and learner-centered literacy pedagogy called "Whole Language," which held sway in many schools in the 1970s and 1980s (Lemann 1997). The advocates of a phonics pedagogy, which includes a coalition of fundamentalist religious groups, major textbook publishers, a strategically-placed federal research center (National Center for Research on Child Health and Development), and now President George Bush, have a distinctive vision of language and of literacy development (Allington 2002; Allington & Woodside-Jiron 1999). They argue that reading consists of a series of hierarchically related skills, in which knowledge of the alphabetic code takes pride of place, developmentally and instructionally. In their account, phonics knowledge underpins word-recognition skills, which are necessary for the ability to read full sentences and, later, to understand complete texts (Adams 1993). Phonics adherents argue for and indeed have devised numerous 'direct instruction' pedagogies which feature closely sequenced, closely regulated lessons, in which teachers and students often work in tightly orchestrated call and response drills that focus on sound/symbol or alphabetic knowledge as applied to word-recognition and carefully controlled text reading (Lemann 1998; NRP 2000).

Whole language, adherents, on the other hand, which includes a coalition of teachers committed to a progressive or 'learner-centered' vision of learning, as well as key academic researchers, have a different vision of language and literacy development. They argue that

reading and writing are like language development more generally, in that (a) all children are capable of becoming literate and (b) that development occurs best in circumstances which expose children to a range of engaging and 'authentic' experiences with reading and writing (Goodman 1986). They view literacy as a complex amalgam of skills, inclination and knowledge, in which awareness that books tell stories and that pictures relate to texts may accompany or even precede alphabetic knowledge. In their pedagogies they give teachers considerable leeway to construct lessons; and while alphabetic knowledge is not neglected, it is not given pride of place - whole language pedagogies encourage that children apply prediction to reading at the earliest stages, guessing at words in the large story context, rather than, as in a phonics approach, stopping at unknown words and applying decoding strategies (Routman 2000).

Although this contrast between what might be called decoding versus meaning-oriented pedagogies has long existed in American educational circles, in the mid-1990s it crystallized in the US around the case of California. The state of California had initiated a statewide Whole Language literacy curriculum in the late 1987, but by 1996, when it turned out that student achievement levels of standardized literacy tests dramatically declining, the California legislature and Department of Education became involved a volte face in which a strict phonics curriculum was mandated and school performance ratings were tightly indexed to student performance on a single standardized test, the SAT 9 (Jiron 2002; Lemann 1997). While this was occurring, another major state, Texas, had implemented a strict phonics-oriented curriculum, along with a regimen of statewide achievement tests, promoted by then Governor George Bush. Beginning in 1998, there was a strong effort by phonics adherents to get the federal government to pass legislation about what kinds of research would be acceptable. The legislation, which was passed in 2001, gave center place to experimental and quasi-experimental studies, a psychological research paradigm in which most phonics studies have been conducted, and the legislation derogated naturalistic, descriptive, non-experimental studies, which provide most of the case evidence for Whole Language adherents, to the nether land of 'non-scientific' research (NRP 2000). Although still contested, the phonics-and-strict-testing vision of school literacy is now dominant in the federal government and most state legislatures and education departments (Allington 2002; Coles 2000).

As with the broader debate about standards, advocates of both the phonics and Whole Language pedagogies argued their pedagogies helped address issues of economic inequality. Phonics adherents claimed that their highly regulated direct instruction was most important for low-performing populations, the poor and minority poor (NRP 2000); Whole Language advocates argued that their pedagogy drew upon natural capacities for meaning making, shared by all children, and further, that their approach gave teachers leeway to adapt materials and instruction to the actually socioeconomic and cultural diversity of children's backgrounds and literacy experiences (Coles 1998; Edelsky 1996). The way in which economic issues are inflected in the pedagogy debates takes other forms as well. In 1997, in response to the arguments that California literacy achievement levels were falling because of a flawed Whole Language approach, a prominent proponent of this approach (Goodman 1999) reviewed the funding levels for public education in California and found that the years of decline were also years of the great demographic and economic shift. The 1990s were the years when minority students - African-American, Latino, and Asian-American - became majorities in many California school districts. It was also when California slashed its public school spending, going from having one of the nation's highest

per capita expenditures to having one of the nations lowest per capita expenditures (Males 1995, chs. 1, 9). As with the standards debate, is the issue one of flawed pedagogy or disinvestment in public sector institutions?

The issue of reading and social class presents yet further puzzles. A consistent finding across numerous studies is the social class status correlates with children's literacy performance. The reasons, of course, are hard to agree upon. Take one language-focused area of disagreement. Young children's possession of a mental skill or disposition called 'phonemic awareness' - the ability to detect sound sequences in known words, and to manipulate them, say changing initial consonants or syllables upon request - is strongly correlated both with reading ability and with economic status. When measured at the age of 4-6 years of age, children from poverty level families have drastically lower scores on phonemic awareness than do their middle class cohorts (Coles 2000: 91-100). For phonics adherents, this means that phonemic awareness, and drill designed to increase such awareness, is the key to reading pedagogies for the poor (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, & Schatsneider 1998); for Whole Language researchers, however, phonemic awareness is a result, not a primary cause of reading ability. They argue that middle class children have high phonemic awareness because of their ongoing exposure to rich and varied texts and literacy experiences, and that what are needed are schools with resources and pedagogies to provide poor children with those experiences, and not schools that provide only or predominantly highly regulated phonics drill as the necessary gate to any school literacy (Coles 2000).

I suggest that the so-called reading wars be viewed as a hegemonic struggle because they claim to address a perceived "education crisis" of literacy failure and increasing social inequality. The phonics and Whole Language movements propose to ameliorate widely-perceived inequalities of educational preparation and achievement through pedagogies that evoke different images of learning subjects and learning processes. In the case of the phonics camp, they propose tighter regulation and oversight of official literacy as a way of increasing "equality of opportunity" - a familiar neoliberal stance on the issue of economic inequality (see DeVos and Verschueren, this issue). As noted earlier, the phonics movement is an effective alliance of fundamentalist religious groups, major textbook publishers, a strategically-placed federal research center (National Center for Research on Child Health and Development), and now the current federal administration. It is now hegemonically ascendant, and Bush administration legislation such as *No Child Left Behind* stipulates criteria for what will count as legitimate research, how classroom learning will be assessed, and what counts as appropriate instruction. This effort to authoritatively define the field of literacy has been contested, but it is currently dominant.

3. An ethnographic case of an urban middle school

Although the reading wars have been largely about approaches to early primary and remedial literacy education, they have implications for secondary education. This is because the "literacy problems" that are frequently identified seem to percolate upwards. Increasingly, middle schools and high schools are identified as sites where students have literacy deficiencies, not necessarily with basic decoding of words but instead with more demanding tasks, say comparing texts or recognizing distinct genres (Kirsch & Jungeblut 1986). In recent years the middle school has been identified as a time of a crucial

curriculum transition - from the holistic curriculum of primary schools to the highly differentiated curriculum of high school - in which literacy problems are salient (Angelis 2001). Since the problems are often identified with standardized tests, and are, predictably, correlated with socioeconomic and ethnoracial background, one leading response in federal task forces on the topic (Applebee, p.c.) is to assume that so-called 'struggling readers' are a fairly homogeneous group requiring remediation through direct instruction of various familiar kinds. That is, in terms of the themes developed earlier in this paper, there is an emphasis on giving a highly regulative pedagogy to 'struggling readers' who come, disproportionately, from dominated social groups (Alverman 2001). While this emphasis on 'direct instruction' and remediation appears to be an emerging elite consensus, it is not the only approach to helping struggling adolescent readers. In what follows I will present some findings from an ethnographic case study of a different kind of literacy curriculum, one which emphasizes self-guidance and reflexivity, but which also does not escape its social moorings.

The ethnographic site centers on a middle school in a small city in Upstate New York. Middle schools serve early secondary education, that is, 11, 12, and 13 year old students. The school at issue, which I will call Harrison Middle School, recently agreed to have its English Language Arts faculty take part in a federally-funded curriculum intervention program. This program features extensive professional development for participating teachers and a "best practices" curriculum, which is not a "direct instruction" curriculum but rather one which emphasizes self-directed, literature focused discussion and inquiry. The research I am reporting is part of a qualitative evaluation of the effort. Although the intervention program has rural and suburban sites, urban sites were a strategic focus because urban schools are where the interplay of class and race and school achievement is most dramatically evident. The city's school district and the Harrison administration were receptive to the intervention proposal because they were concerned about students' test scores at Harrison, and elsewhere in the district, and eager to get additional professional development for the teachers.

In many respects, Harrison is a typical US urban school. It has a majority minority population: The majority of students are African American, though there is a large EuroAmerican minority, predominantly Irish and Italian, and there are small numbers of students from Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian backgrounds. Almost half of Harrison students live at or below the official poverty level half (43%; HMS website).² As might be expected, with such demographics, which are typical for the district, Harrison students have not done well on 8th grade standards tests. Indeed their performance was recently included in television and newspaper reports on the poor test performance of urban, racial minority students in the region (**Times Union*, March 27, 2002).³ In addition,

² According to State Education Department data, the * School District has 70% minority students (60% African American) and 30% EuroAmerican. Harrison has a slightly more integrated mix: 63% are minorities, and 37% are EuroAmerican. In the overall school district, 54% of students are eligible for free lunches, that is they live at or below the poverty level. (Source: NYS Department of Education School Report Card for 2001)

³ According to State Education Department data, in the year 2000, 99 out of 317 8th grade test takers passed the ELA Standards Test at Levels 3 and 4. These are the levels which 'predict' successful completion of the Regents Exam in high school and thus would meet graduation requirements. 1/3 of students at passing levels, 3 and 4, and 2/3rds at failing levels, 1 and 2, are not good aggregate performance, even though the

the larger school district is currently strapped for funds, and has cut back on professional development for teachers. In this situation, the promise of relatively long-term professional development activities for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers was quite appealing.

As mentioned previously, the evaluation study from which I am reporting is one of five multi-site ethnographies. Major dimensions of the five studies were the dynamics of classroom participation in the ELA classrooms and interplay of adolescent identity and literacy practices among the students we were profiling.⁴ I will report on both below, with a focus on the way in which class, gender, and race appear to influence both classroom engagement and the literate lives of our case study students.

3.1. Classroom engagement

It is a central tenet of the overall professional development project that the quality of classroom discussion is very important for learning literature well. Accordingly, in our studies we have sampled and conducted ongoing analyses of familiar features of classroom discourse: To what extent discussions occurred as opposed to, say, management activities; to what extent teachers dominated the discussion, as is frequently reported (Cazden 1988); and to what extent teachers built upon prior contributions and encouraged students to respond to one another in the discussion, which is not frequently reported (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast 1997).

In the particular ELA classroom we have been studying, one taught by a Ms. Sharon Babette, and featuring a medium-tracked group of 8th graders almost exactly balanced between EuroAmericans and students of color, it has appeared that project goals of engaged discussion were being achieved early on and consistently. Classroom lessons frequently featured lively discussions in which equal numbers of minority and non-minority students participated; indeed it often seemed that African American and Asian American girls participated more than their EuroAmerican counterparts, although the latter slightly outnumbered them.

Among the reasons we hypothesize for this lively discussion dynamic is that Ms Babette has a quick and earthy sense of humor and this licenses student repartee with her in which issues normally censored from official school discourse, such as sexuality or cheating, were allowed into the lesson discussion. By allowing in aspects of the students' lifeworld, it seemed to encourage broad and lively participation. In the example below, (1), the class has been discussing a story in which a man wishes for a bride and a beautiful swan becomes a beautiful bride and wife, later to revert to being a swan. In the excerpt on student, Ron, suddenly raises the tongue-in-cheek question about swan/human sexuality, by inquiring about "honeymoons":

2000 rates did improve slightly over the 1999 rates. (Source: NYS Department of Education School Report Card for 2001)

⁴ In these studies two person teams began with intensive participant observation in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms participating in the federal intervention, but then moved outward, studying literacy practices in other school subjects and in after-school programs, as well as in non-school home and community sites, with a focus on a small number of adolescents identified by their teachers as 'struggling readers.'

(1) *Encouraging involvement: Licensing humor*⁵

Ron: Ms. Babette?

SB: Yes?

Ron: I was wondering, did, um, did, umhm, did the swan and him have any um, honeymoon, or=

Ss ((giggles from classmates))

Ron: =or um like.. You know what I'm talking about, right?

SB: I CERTAINLY DO RON ((with a smile))

Ron: Well, um, what is he supposed to do uh, with a swan, if they did?

SB: Well]

Ron [I know it was a person, but maybe the um, swan has different honeymoon RITUALS=

SB: ((hearty laughter from SB))

Ron: =than humans and stuff, that maybe she]

SB [you crack me up]

K: [Why did she ask the swan (xxx)?

SB Oooh, that's a good point. I don't know the answer to your question, Ron. That's a good question. I can only assume that if she was given the shape of a human, that she would be the shape of a human in all parts]=

Ron: [I know that, but]

SB: =[that's my guess, but]

Ron [But probably she might not know how to... RITUALS.

SB: Well, he'd have to teach her the rituals, right?

I think the humor and the laughter are clear enough in the excerpt, but what should also be noted is the timing: Both Ron and Ms. Babette are closely synchronized in their responses, and they achieve comic effect from emphasis in allusive words and phrases like “different honeymoon RITUALS” and “I CERTAINLY DO.” Other students are also involved in this exchange: They laugh quickly and offer their own questions.

Another way in which Ms. Babette seemed to encourage a sustained discussion was by building upon what previous students had said. This involved rephrasing statements so that they fit with an ongoing academic theme; giving students explicit directions to note what another student had said; and allowing a conversation to work through students without providing a correct answer. In the excerpt below in (2), students are asking questions about the title of a story they have read the previous day. The story concerns a

⁵ The transcript conventions are as follows:

- (xxx) signifies transcriber uncertainty or (estimated wording) estimated wording;
- (()) contains nonverbal descriptions of action, as in ((looks away));
- two and three dots “.” and “...” indicate pauses of short but perceptible duration;
- (N) indicates a pause of N seconds duration;
-]
- [marks overlapped or latched utterances;
- “=” marks utterances that continue with the same speaker;
- Full CAPS indicate emphatic stress or loudness on a syllable, word or phrase.

man who was sick, thought he smelled his own dying, and incorrectly selects a casket for himself. The discussion excerpt centers upon the meaning of the word "invalid", and, as you will see, a key exchange is initiated and maintained by the students.

(2) *Encouraging involvement: Chasing words together*

SB: Alright, now that you've finished the story.. we read the whole thing, we finished it, somebody let me know something. Yes, Mr. P

AP: Why is it called the Invalid Story?

K: What does 'invalid' mean? (unclear whether pronunciation is IN-valid or in-VA-lid)

SB: That's another good question. Let's start with Kanisha's. Let's see what you can come up with as a class and then we'll see what (can be) found in the dictionary. ..Bob?

B: Is Stargirl (xxx)

Ss ((laughter at digression))

SB: Kanisha's question is what does 'invalid' mean?

B: I know, I know

E: I think it means the opposite of valid.

SB: The opposite of valid? I got you. Somebody give me another answer

A: I'm going with what Eric said, that it's the opposite of something. Because like he thought the cheese was a dead body or something...

SB: Okay, so you're sort of going with your knowledge and you think that it means ... so you're thinking that it means it's negative. Let me get a couple more responses... Mr Edgar?

JE: Well.. yesterday, was he thought it was invalid, and it kind of goes along with what Amyra said about the opposite of something...

SB: Okay

JE: Valid is the opposite of inVALid.. inVALid is like the wrong access code or something like that. And he had the wrong casket.

S: Like in the movies when they say put the password in and when they put it in, it says 'invalid'.

T: 'invalid'.. But remember we said it's not the 'inVALid' story, it's the 'INvalid' story.

This excerpt continues longer, as Ms. Babette elicits other definitions and the talk focuses on the fact that the different words, In-valid and invalid, are pronounced distinctly although they are spelled the same (in-VA-lid, the adjective, receiving primary stress on the second rather than first syllable; IN-valid, the noun, receiving stress on the first syllable). As we can see from the excerpt above, Ms. Babette takes a student question, embeds another, and guides numerous contributions in which students listen to each other (as JE argues, "it kinds of goes along with what Aymara said") and reason from their knowledge of popular culture (as S says, "Like in the movies..."), as well as their knowledge of prefixes, in working out definitions of words in story title.

It was not the case, however, that all classroom discourse was inclusive, or that all students were disposed or able to participate on an equal footing. Most notably, over half of the class rarely said little; they were not disruptive in any fashion, but they rarely said anything. And among those who did actively participate, it was clear that gender mattered. The Table 1 below gives a simple representation of gender differences in participation in

discussion. It gives a count, for four consecutive English lessons that we studied, of average number of different boys and girls involved, and the number of replies or initiations by boys or girls.

Table 1: Gender and Response Rate for Four ELA Lessons*

	<i>Average participants per lesson</i>	<i>Average turns per lesson/Total number of turns</i>
Girls	4.25	7.75/31
Boys	7.5	18.5/74

* Based on tallies from fieldnotes, not lesson transcripts.

As we can see from the numbers, slightly less than twice as many boys took somewhat over twice as many turns at speaking. I should emphasize, however, that the causes of this differential involvement are unclear. As we will see below, students opt out of discussions, and participate, for complex reasons.

There were, however, more striking differences in the quality and kind of participation in classroom discussion, and these were related to the system of classroom tracking. Recall that I said that the ELA classroom we were studying was ‘medium ability’. Harrison is a tracked middle school, indeed it has a total of five different curriculum tracks. In order to get a sense of tracking might affect classroom dynamics, I also attended lessons taught by Ms. Babette with her Honors (or academic-track) class and her ‘G3’ class. The latter was composed of students tested as reading at two or more years below their grade level. What was striking upon initial observation was how both the racial composition, the social class inflection, and the instructional conversation varied between the different classrooms, even though they were being taught by the same teacher.

Compared to the even mix of minority and non-minority students in our main classroom (roughly proportional to the school, see note 1), the G3 class contained 17 African Americans, one Asian American, and one Euro-American. All seemed older, dressed in a more “street” and, for the girls, a more sexualized fashion; items of personal grooming were confiscated at the beginning of the class period and subsequently; and students openly indicated inattention. Ms. Babette engaged in much more classroom management talk than in the other class, once launching into a long harangue about how the students needed to learn to “listen” because listening would be part of the ELA standards test. Her questions elicited a reasonable amount of response, but no questions were initiated by the students. Her questions in this lesson were predominantly in the familiar Question-Reply-Evaluation format, and they often featured yes/no or other fixed-choice formats, which does not encourage extended discussion. An example can be seen in (3):

- (3) *A limiting strategy of questions: Either/or*
 SB: If I say something REEKS⁶ is that a POSITIVE or a NEGATIVE thing?
 Ss Negative.
 SB: Right.

⁶ “Reek” is a word on a vocabulary sheet.

In the Honors classroom we found a quite different state of affairs. First, EuroAmerican students predominated, by a ratio of 2 to 1 (14 to 8; reversing the proportions at the school as a whole). In addition, dress was more restrained and suggestive of students who had more money and less "street" style. For example, many of the girls wore unstudded jeans and expensive looking baggy sweaters rather than tight blouses found among several G3 students. Finally, the conversational dynamic was a teacher's dream. In an initial vocabulary discussion involving the word "consign" almost all student offered definitions or overtly agreed with others' definitions. Throughout the lesson, students frequently volunteered either to read or answer questions. In the lesson, they were discussing one of James Thurber's humorous stories in which a pampered dog figures, and numerous girls spontaneously contributed anecdotes about similar dogs they had known. Near the end of the lesson, when Ms. Babette asked what the Latin phrase "*Cave Canine*" meant, it turned out that two of the African American girls had looked up the phrase in the footnotes. So they volunteered "Beware the Dog."

The reader will have noticed, perhaps, that all of my examples from the honors class refer to girls. Gender composition was also a striking difference in this honors class: There were 20 girls and only four boys, and the four boys said nothing throughout the lesson. There are two general points to draw from these differences among the tracked classrooms. First, race and class, as they work into a system of curriculum tracking, influence the kind of classroom learning students have access to and can engage with. It is not that working-class African Americans or girls do or do not participate, it is that who they are with has strong implications for the kinds of literature discussions to which they have access. In this school as many others, minorities are over-represented in lower-income cohorts,⁷ and in non-academic tracks. Second, girls' participation or non-participation in classroom discussions is context-sensitive. Although boys conversationally dominated in the medium track class, which had equal numbers of boys and girls, in the Honors class, where girls were a clear majority and academically oriented, then they dominated the talk.

3.2. Case studies of struggling readers

In order to gain insight into why some students were not involved in classroom discussions, even in the main ELA classroom we were observing, we are conducting case studies of 4 students selected by Ms. Babette as having difficulty with school literacy. Two of these have been institutionally designated as needing special assistance (i.e., they are assigned to 'resource rooms' during their free or study hall period); two do not seem to have been institutionally marked, but Ms. Babette is aware that they entered her classroom with low scores on reading assessments, and she is mildly concerned about their progress. As a group they are from working class families, two are headed by single mothers, and two are ethnic minorities

What we find for all four of our case study students, and this is true across all five

⁷ This is a projection from general characteristic of the city population as well as well known national figures ("Per Cent Minority Ages 0-17 Below Poverty," City of *, New York State Social Indicators Project, Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, <http://mumford.cas.albany.edu/nysi>). We have not yet studied the race/poverty rates for the census tracts serving Harrison, but assume the usual convergence of race and class occurs.

sites that make up the larger qualitative assessment, is that all of these so-called struggling readers, students who often feel that they are marginal to the education mainstream, have places and practices in which they engage others, feel responsible for their knowledge, and use literacy knowledge. This might be, in the case of some boys, avid involvement in out-of-school sports or on computer games, in the course of which they consult and discuss complex manuals. Or it might be, as with one of our female students, an avid interest in reading, discussing, and writing romance fiction.

The puzzle posed by struggling readers in- and out-of-school personas can be illustrated with a girl I will call Nancy. What was striking about Nancy from as soon as we began noting her classroom behavior was that she never took part in discussions. If she were called upon, which occasionally happened, she would answer correctly but without any elaboration; typically she maintained an impassive demeanor except when exchanging glances or notes with friends who lined up the same “non-participants” wall that she occupied. When Nancy was interviewed, we discovered that she had a favorite genre of literacy, and it was romantic fiction, whether in book or magazine (or television and musical) form. We also discovered that Nancy was a self-aware young woman who realized that her interest for “stories about relationships and stuff” might get in the way of her educational and occupational ambition. As she put it: “I’m not too worried about relationships right now. I want to just get through school and basically ... [...] And I have plans to go to college, so, and I gotta get good grades and pass quizzes and stuff.” Despite this sense that “relationships” can distract from pursuit of her goals, she is an avid reader of what she calls “cute” stories, and when a plot or predicament is sufficiently enticing, she gets on the phone and discusses this book with her peers, including a good friend, Janey, who is also in the class. In addition, she likes to write romance stories, based on relationships experienced or observed, and she shares and compares these stories with her friends.

These enthusiasms have little place in official curriculum, of course, and so little place in the official literature discussions. When Nancy was asked about her experience of school, and why, in particular, she did not participate much in class, it turned about that peer response, rather than anything teachers were or were not doing was, was a prominent reason for not putting herself forward. As she said “I don’t raise my hands a lot... Sometimes I’m scared to raise my hand because of my classmates might say some stupid things, and I’ll be like ‘oh, forget it’...”. Despite the fact that she had a good personal relationship with Ms. Babette, indeed would often drop by a few minutes before class started to talk with the teacher and just hang about, Nancy also admitted to feeling afraid to volunteer: “I don’t know why. I have to get over it, I guess I’m shy”.

Another case study student, Tara, is a girl who occasionally tries to enter classroom conversations, but usually diffidently and without much success. Upon interviewing her, it turns out that she is quite avid in her use of e-mail to keep up with friends, and, not unexpectedly, likes reading magazines like *Teen People*. Like Nancy, Tara also reported that the reasons for her reticence in class had to do with peers. If she says something “stupid” the taunting begins in class and continues afterward.

Tara is also a perceptive social analyst, or at least quite aware of school cliques. When asked about popularity at the school, she described a system of two cliques, the “preps” and the “ghettos”, who are distinguished by their style of talk, the amount they talk, their clothing choices, and their relationship to teachers and school. Tara’s commentary is given in item (4):

(4) *The social world divided: 'Preps' and 'Ghettos'*

"Well, like basically, it's divided into two groups. Either like, the preps, or, like, the ghetto. [...] So, I like basically hang out with all the ghetto people [...] The preps mostly say like 'Oh my god' and they talk so much. And they like wear pink and purple. And like, *they're just so good in every class*. And ghetto usually wears like red, blue, black and white. And like, like they [preps] say 'whatever' and we [ghetto] say 'what's up.' Like that. We just have different words to say. [emphasis added]"

Tara's description of 'preps' and 'ghettos' provide a different frame for the the issue of peer affinities and aversions. These are obviously relationally-constituted groups in which a range of choices allows a young person to identify with one and distinguished themselves from another. The contrasts occur along many criteria: Expressions and proclivity to talk, clothing styles and color; they also include music, as might be expected, with the ghettos preferring Rap and the preps preferring Britney Spears and NSync. But also, as with Eckert's (1989) work on high school social networks, we have groups with differing social class affinities and differing affinities for school. As Tara comments of the preps, "they're just so good in every class"; and, we can assume, a typical member of the ghettos is not.

4. Conclusion

In the foregoing I have traced various aspects of contrary tendencies towards domination and regulation versus self-guidance in society-wide literacy debates, institutional sites, and the lifeworlds of adolescents. In the 'reading wars' the enduring facts of class- and race-based educational inequality fuel an ongoing controversy in which the arcane details of reading pedagogies becomes the stuff of Presidential election platforms. In this controversy a hegemonic view argues that poor children need highly regulated forms of instruction and remediation. The hegemonic view is countered by an argument that all children need a pedagogy of learner-directed 'authentic' experiences with a wide range of literacy practices and literary texts. The issue is complicated, for there is evidence, plausible in my view, that the learner-directed pedagogy works most easily with those who already have a middle class literacy habitus - knowledge and dispositions that are the product of a history of immersion in school-related literacy events before ever coming to school (Bernstein 1996; Delpit 1995). This does not mean, however, that a pedagogy based on self-direction is only appropriate for the privileged, but that it takes more critical awareness in teaching, and more effort in learning (Freire 1970; Gee 1996).

If we turn from society-wide debates to the institutional site of the classroom, we encounter an effort to implement an English subject pedagogy-and-curriculum that gives priority to dialogic inquiry, in which students learn to question each other as well as the texts being read while also accepting direction from the teacher. We discover, however, what in retrospect is obvious: That such a curriculum can only unfold in the realities of given schools and classrooms. Due to Ms. Babette's commitment, experience, and skill, as well as the willingness of many student to meet her halfway, in our focal ELA classroom there were many occasions of dialogic, student-initiated inquiry. This goes against the grain of much more common pattern of teacher-regulated organization of talk in secondary English lessons (Nystrand et al. 1997). As we discussed, however, tracking decisions -

which bring in their train legacies of economic and ethnic positioning vis-à-vis school - can lead students and teachers to co-construct very different classroom lessons. In the examples we discussed above, the Honors classes was an exemplar of active, learner-initiated discussion, while the G3 track called forth and received the most regulated pedagogy.

When we turn to our case studies, our initial forays into the lifeworlds of struggling readers, we find that the enthusiasms such youth have for forms of reading and writing outside of school settings are inflected by gender ideologies as well as peer group affinities. As Luttrell (1997) reminds us in her *Schoolsmart and Motherwise*, in the United States talk about school is frequently a code for talking about class. In interviews we had with our focal students, all four expressed a desire to “be somebody,” a desire that presupposes the possibility of “being a nobody,” that is, that expresses as a class-based condition of domination as a personal shame. It is a desire involving a familiar trope of class mobility through education, in the case of our students an intended but provisional mobility, given their current educational circumstances. In Tara’s account of the ‘ghettos’ and the ‘preps’ we have a statement of racialized class differences which are also classroom differences: “They’re just so good in every class.”

We should point out, however, that we are in the early stages of conducting the case studies. As noted of our classroom analyses, gender is a context-sensitive though undeniable influence on who does and does not take part in classroom discussions. In our case studies of focal students, gender is powerful yet unpredictable: We find that whether the out-of-school literacy enthusiasms of young adolescent girls and boys finds connection to school-based activities depends on very sensitive pathways. One self-excluding girl, Nancy, eventually found her way into classroom discussions, while a previously involved boy, Roy, slowly excluded himself from schoolwork (Collins 2002; Collins & Woodcock 2002).

In closing I would like to argue again for the usefulness of Williams’ conception of hegemony as “lived process that is never singular” and Laclau and Mouffe’s argument for the plurality of hegemonies. An emphasis on “lived” and “plural” hegemonies opens onto a concern shared by the papers in this volume: How to understand processes of domination as discursive and situated, as linking subjects, interactional practices and institutional processes in multiple ways. It is a concern in which both sociolinguistic and ethnographic analysis have much to contribute as we strive to understand the complex forms of feedback, multiple-causation, and indeterminacy that contemporary social theory argues is characteristic of the post-modern, late modern, or network society (Castells 1999; Kontopoulos 1993). Sensitizing concepts such as hegemony point us in the right direction if we want to undertake discursive and ethnographic analyses capable of exploring how unequal access to resources is a structuring principle in our society, not a superficial error awaiting remedy, but also how the distribution of discursive resources is dynamically sensitive to the multiple interactions of race, gender, and class, in various social-discursive zones: Society-wide debates, formal institutional processes, and lifeworld practices.

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