Permeable Textual Discussion in Tracked Language Arts Classrooms

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Permeable textual discussion occurs when the unofficial texts and discursive practices and personal histories that are already recognized and valued in students’ cultures are scaffolds to academically sanctioned literacies. Ideally, permeable textual discussions are safe havens where students’ identities (racial, gender, world views) are intentionally interwoven with classroom texts, and classroom communities are formed that responsively address matters of student identity. Yet the social contexts and instructional practices of academic tracking may shape how students reveal their identities during textual talk. This project examines the conditions of permeability during textual talk in tracked classrooms taught by the same teachers using the same texts. Using ethnographic methods and discourse analysis, the author examines how two tracked urban middle school language arts students of African American heritage revealed and hid their identities during textual talk and the instructional moves that precipitated textual talk.

Introduction

Ms. Jones: Do you think rap music has free verse or meter?
Dave: It got free verse and then you break it down.
Jones: And then you put it to beats?
Dave: Yeah.
Jones: I would think it usually had meter.
Author: I think you can turn anything into a rap—like a telephone number—if you’ve got skills.
Dave: To remember it… I’ve got that down.
Jones: Let’s talk about alliteration now.
Dave: I can rap my phone number.
[He proceeds to do so.]

Through his textual discussion, sixth-grade student Dave is contributing to a permeable curriculum. A permeable curriculum is enacted when the unofficial texts, discursive practices, and personal histories of students are scaffolds to academically sanctioned literacies (Dyson, 1993, 1997, 2003). Dave can connect his
knowledge of rap to the school language concepts of free verse and meter. As he raps for his peers, it is clear he can apply these terms. He can also resist the static binaries of free verse and meter as he pontificates on the genre-blurring features of rap.

Research indicates that home and community knowledge is a great asset in learning. Dyson (1993) found that children used their knowledge of superheroes and popular culture to express their racial and gender identities during play and literacy instruction. Dyson’s participants and their teachers constructed classroom communities where students used cultural knowledge to broach topics of social justice and form personal and collective identities. Ethnographers of adolescent literate cultures in and out of classrooms also advocate a permeable curriculum for educationally disenfranchised youth (Kinloch, 2007; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Home and community literacy knowledge, including knowledge of popular culture (Hobbs & Frost, 2003) or language use (Lee, 1995), are explicitly showcased in a permeable curriculum as a means to discuss connections with canonical literature, standard grammatical form, or tacit codes of power (Delpit, 2006).

One goal of the permeable curriculum is to integrate cultural socialization and identity development processes with literacy and literature learning (Lee et al., 2003). As students deconstruct and reconstruct texts in light of their lived experiences, textual discussions are often significant mediating activities for a permeable curriculum to be enacted in classrooms. Permeable textual discussion (PTD) occurs when students use their prior knowledge of language and community literacy practices to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections and share that knowledge with peers and teachers to grow new learning (Gritter, 2011). Permeable classrooms build communities where students feel safe to reveal and build on personal identities (Paley, 1998). Teacher-dominated transmission of text fades into conversational space that affords students opportunities to make personal and interpersonal textual connections (Nystrand et al., 1997; Rex, 2001). At its best, PTD becomes text-to-other discourse and a co-construction of discourse for teachers and students (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000) that leads to deep insight in disciplinary understanding (Lee, 2001).

Previous research indicates the positive benefits of permeable textual discussion in English language arts classrooms. Langer’s (2001) research indicates that classrooms demonstrating high-level literacy achievement are led by teachers who offer adolescents opportunities for multiple texts to be discussed. In these “beating the odds” classrooms, adolescents relate personally to print and connect it with their own lives. Morgan (1998) describes the personal and intertextual connections that language teachers scaffold in order to bring the identities of adolescents into reading tasks: creating room for dialogue concerning the cultural and ideological power relations that shape literary characters, giving adolescents the freedom to
read against text if it contradicts the reader’s worldview, and addressing gaps and silences in texts.

This study examines the conditions of PTD in academic tracks. Academic tracking plays a prominent role in the social context of schooling. Research shows that students in lower tracks tend to experience an environment of deficit and lack of classroom community (Harmon, 2007). Students in lower tracks read and write less than students in gifted tracks, receive less challenging instruction, and receive more isolated literacy instruction particularly focusing on preparation for decontextualized high-stakes testing (Watanabe, 2008). Racial disparities also occur in tracking. White students tend to be tracked in the most rigorous academic tracks and experience infrequent contact with minority students, resulting in a dearth of explicit talk about race in school by students of different races (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Discussions in lower-tracked classroom tend to focus on details at the literal level of text while discussions in higher tracks are characterized by more inferences requiring higher levels of cognition (Watanabe, 2008). Students are often aware of their academic track and prefer to associate with higher-tracked peers. An academic track may be more important than peer grade level, gender, or ethnic background when students select friends outside of their ethnicity (Eshel & Kurman, 2001). Because tracking may affect the social positioning of students in language arts classrooms, tracking may affect language and literacy practices in those classrooms. Lenmire (1992) found that children of high classroom status used public spaces to showcase their wit during the sharing of student written texts. If the social stratification inherent in tracking determinations affects student status, it may also affect which students get to tell their stories and their personal connections and interpretations of literature during literacy activities.

In this article, classroom discourse suggests that social stratification of academic tracking creates a classist system in one school, even when the same teachers approach the same texts across different academic tracks. Even within one school where students are taught by the same teachers, differences in classroom discourse during textual discussion demonstrate Anyon's (2008) opposing constructs of reproductive and nonreproductive knowledge. The discourse of the lower-tracked context of this research tended to purvey reproductive knowledge that did not question the authority of text or teacher. Discourse in the higher-tracked context more consistently delivered nonreproductive knowledge that encouraged evaluation of student ideas.

**Methods**

This study responds to the following question that addresses academic tracking, instructional practices, and student identity manifested through textual talk:
How did instructional approaches in tracked classrooms afford or prevent opportunities for adolescents to engage in permeable textual talk and reveal their identities to classmates?

Setting
Pinkerton Middle School (a pseudonym) is located in a mid-sized Midwestern city, a town considered to be in decline because of high unemployment and comparatively low property values. Pinkerton students are racially and ethnically diverse, and this diversity is reflected in both participating classrooms. In 2006, about 39.5% were Black, non-Hispanic; 37.4% were White, non-Hispanic; 19.4% were Hispanic; the remaining 3.8% were Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaskan Native. In 2006, approximately 72% of Pinkerton students were considered economically disadvantaged with 62.1% of the total population eligible for free lunch and 10.4% eligible for reduced-price lunch (compared to 28.7% and 6.5% statewide).

Participants
The study took place in two sixth-grade classes taught primarily by Ms. Jones (all participant names are pseudonyms except for the author), a European American woman in her mid-30s. Ms. Jones had an intern teacher in her classroom during this research, Ms. McGuire, who also led some discussions during the poetry unit. In addition to Ms. McGuire, three other adults played a role in this research as they led textual discussions: a local disc jockey at a blues radio station; Johnny Heartsong, a blues musician and middle school teacher at another state school; and as a participant observer, I also occasionally contributed to discussions. I am a European American woman who was a 38-year-old doctoral student at a large Midwestern university at the time of this research.

Ms. Jones’s classes were selected because of her articulated interest in the lives of students. Ms. Jones was in her eighth year of teaching at the time of this research. Beginning in 2006–2007, students were, for the first time, required to wear standardized dress: khaki pants and polo shirts. Ms. Jones adopted the dress code along with her students as a sign of solidarity, one of the few teachers at Pinkerton Middle School to do so.

Two student participants became focal participants, Jerome and Dave. Jerome was tracked in Ms. Jones first-period language arts classroom; Dave was in Ms. Jones’s second-period language arts classroom. Students in Jerome’s classroom were designated low-tracked readers as defined by district interpretations of 2005–2006 data from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and reading and writing results from the high stakes state test (see Table 1). All but one student in this class scored in the 0–29th percentile on the reading portion of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. In Dave’s classroom, students’ standardized test scores for reading (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) were more mid-range with 7 out of the 19 scoring above the national average in
reading for fifth grade. The two student participants were selected because of a similar and tragic life event, their openness about their life stories during interviews, and their prolonged engagement in permeable textual discussion during the poetry unit.

Jerome, from the lower-tracked class, was an African American 11-year-old male. In class, he seemed comfortable with speaking out about text as evidenced by how often he initiated a line of questioning about text and his high rate of participation in whole class textual discussions compared to other participants in his class. Jerome was highly engaged in the blues unit and used school writing to document his personal history. Throughout the unit, he showed increasing interest in the blues and in relating the blues to his own life. He began listening to local blues radio after the local disc jockey visited and played clips of Martin Scorsese’s documentary on the history of the blues entitled *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey*. At the conclusion of the blues unit, Jerome wanted to discuss Muddy Waters after class with Johnny Heartsong, a visiting blues musician.

Although “low-tracked,” Jerome insisted he was college bound, just like his father who had been murdered. In the first weeks of the school year, he presented me with a piece of writing he had produced in the previous year. He kept the document in his sixth-grade notebook and carried it from class to class. This “Calbery,” a genre meant to combine the qualities of Caldecott and Newbery awards, was an illustrated history of his father’s life. Jerome’s Calbery described the life and death of his father who had been shot on Martin Luther King Junior Day a decade earlier. The conclusion is included below:

I do look up to him for all that he did, all that he was, and all that he accomplished in his short life. Every time that I look to the sky, I know he is looking down at me.

We all live to cherish every giving minute of my dad’s short life. Remain in peace Dad.
Always missed, never forgotten!

I love you Dad!

I was impressed by the artistic sensibilities of this piece of writing and by Jerome’s engagement in school. I was also interested in whether and how Jerome’s history would find its way into permeable textual discussions.

Jerome was an especially informative focal participant in this research because of his propensity for permeable textual discussion throughout the poetry unit. He was relational with classmates during textual discussions by seeming genuinely interested in the conversational turns of other classmates, especially Ms. Jones. His discourse tended to be invitational, asking other students and the teacher to share more about their lives when they inserted such comments into textual discussion. For example, when Ms. Jones said she could write a blues song based on her child’s disappearance into the garage one morning, Jerome wanted to know about Ms. Jones’s childcare situation and if the child was home alone by himself.

The second focal participant, Dave, who was nearing the age of 12, was also African American. He was in Ms. Jones’s higher tracked class. With his slight build and observant eyes and sardonic expression, he bore a resemblance to Dave Chapelle, the comedian. Dave requested “Dave Chappelle” as his pseudonym namesake and stated that Chappelle was his role model. He observed, “Everybody says I look like him and act like him.”

Dave was the oldest son in his family. His biological father, “a deadbeat dad,” Dave’s direct quote, had fathered 17 children and did not pay child support. Dave stated that he was “the only all-black one,” meaning that his paternal half-siblings had ethnicities that partially differed from his. At the beginning of the school year, Dave told me that he had had to testify at the trial of the alleged killer of his grandfather. His grandfather had been shot, and, unfortunately, Dave had witnessed the tragedy.

Prior to the poetry unit, Dave described himself as a comedian: “I’m the funniest member of my family and at school. I’m a student that makes kids laugh when it’s boring.” He did this many times over the four months of this research: reading aloud in funny voices, reading almost inaudibly while doing the splits and, on one occasion, striding confidently into class, smacking his backside sharply and heartily yelling, “I’m sexy!” causing his classmates to dissolve into laughter. Dave, like Jerome, displayed characteristics of PTD in his classroom discourse in that he often contributed a conversational turn that demonstrated he related personally to a character’s actions during textual discussion and actively listened to peers during textual talk by building on the contributions of classmates and teachers.

Jerome and Dave were both physically present during the entirety of the poetry unit and both turned in the homework and class work for the unit. In the lower-tracked classroom, absenteeism and missing work was a problem for Ms. Jones,
who often had to schedule make-up days so that the majority of students could receive passing grades for report cards. Often as much as half the population of the lower-tracked class was absent on a given day, and class work and homework was not turned into Ms. Jones in a timely manner. On day 19 of the poetry unit, Ms. Jones announced that only two students were making A's in the class because “they had turned everything in, and they came to school every day. They rarely interrupt class and are on time. They know the key to success in school.” Jerome was one of these students. In contrast to Jerome’s superior academic performance, ten students, mostly male, were making Es (Fs) in the class.

Table 1 demonstrates that both Jerome and Dave met state standards for reading comprehension on the state’s high-stakes test. Results on the reading comprehension section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills taken in fifth grade seemed to be the overriding criteria for tracking placement. Jerome tested in the 19th percentile on the 2005 Iowa Test of Basic Skills whereas Dave placed in the 44th percentile. Fluency measures for Jerome and Dave, taken from the DRA 4-8 composite score demonstrate that in the fourth grade, Jerome read at 40 words per minute with 98% accuracy whereas Dave read at 30 words per minute at 96% accuracy. Both reading rate scores are unusually slow according to reports prepared by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. By sixth grade it was determined that Jerome read at the fourth-grade level according to the composite score of the Reading Fluency 4-8. Because Dave performed higher on reading comprehension, his reading fluency was not measured in the sixth grade as the district assumed reading comprehension entailed reading fluency. The minimal data suggests that both boys may have been only slightly apart in terms of their measured literate proficiency.

**Data Collection**

Although this research took place in a four-month span in Ms. Jones’s tracked language arts classrooms, it was part of a year and a half of almost daily presence in Ms. Jones’s classrooms.

I began my observations of the two classrooms in late August of the 2006–2007 school year, but because the language arts curriculum was largely scripted by the school district in order to prepare students for high-stakes state testing in the early weeks of October, I did not begin to videotape or transcribe primary or secondary data for the first few months of school. During this time, I took daily field notes. Upon analysis of field notes, I discovered that permeable textual discussion was generally absent during this time. Instead, textual discussions generally focused on how to improve students’ testing savvy on reading comprehension and writing portions of the state high-stakes assessment. Training for the high stakes-assessment began on the first day of school when Ms. Jones focused on the writing trait of organization since, historically, that was where Pinkerton students underperformed on the state writing assessment. Before the poetry unit, reading activities, consisting of worksheets and tests produced by textbook publishing companies, were
mandated by the district in order to be aligned with content deemed important for grade-level performance on the high-stakes test.

The primary data for this study consisted of classroom discourse collected during a six-week poetry unit focusing on blues lyrics. This topic of study, unscripted by school district curriculum, was a deliberate attempt by Ms. Jones to select generative texts for classroom discussions. The poetry unit occurred from late October 2006 to the second week in December of 2006, before winter break. After the days of high-stakes testing, Ms. Jones expressed desire to participate in a more permeable curriculum so that students could relate personally with texts. Because Ms. Jones knew that her students enjoyed hip hop and rap, genres that have origins in the blues, she believed she could build on what students already knew about music in order to scaffold deeper language analysis and new learning in the literary elements of blues lyrics and poetic interpretation. When collecting the primary data of this research, I videotaped all textual discussions during the poetry unit. Discussions were then transcribed, designated as permeable or impermeable as I combed through discourse across multiple readings of transcripts, and analyzed according to the participation practices contextualizing a participant utterance. An illustration of one theme presented in Table 2 occurred when Ms. Jones introduced a book of poetry to students on the first day of the poetry unit. Jerome observed to his class, “I have that book at home.” That turn was coded “prior knowledge” because it demonstrated prior knowledge or interest in literature based on a teacher read aloud of poetry. Another theme that emerged was sharing of student writing with the whole class. This occurred, for example, when Dave shared a line of his poem with the class, “I wonder where I’d be if I didn’t get this far.” The 13th and 14th days of videotaping are not included in the data because Dave’s class, a higher-tracked classroom, did not have language arts as his class had to participate in school-wide testing.

After transcribing all of Dave and Jerome’s turns during textual discussions during the poetry unit, impermeable conversational turns were removed from the primary data. Impermeable conversational turns involved utterances at a literal text-level only (i.e., a participant identifying when a refrain was used in a poem when questioned by a teacher) or student clarification of language used in text or instructional practice (i.e., a participant asking a teacher the meaning of a word used in a poem, oral communication, or writing prompt).

I operated as a participant-observer in Ms. Jones’s classroom. As a former middle school teacher, I am comfortable with and interested in the identity development of young adolescents. There were times, however, during my year-and-a-half presence in Ms. Jones’s classroom that I felt obligated to take on a lead teacher role. Because Ms. Jones performed administrative roles in her school, she was sometimes absent from the classroom for a few minutes or an entire day. In one instance, when it seemed that students were, in my mind, at least, out of line when inquiring
about the sexual orientation of a substitute teacher, I informed the classroom their behavior was inappropriate. Students ceased their line of questioning immediately. In my months at Pinkerton, I also felt compelled to intervene in acts of physical violence on a few occasions by calling security or verbally commanding fighting students to desist in causing physical harm to one another. Students regarded me as something akin to a teacher; they addressed me as Mrs. Gritter and asked me academic questions during seat work. I occasionally participated in classroom discussions at the request of Ms. Jones. In general, though, I would talk to students one-on-one during independent seat work and would not address a whole class. Prior to the poetry unit, I sat with students and typed field notes into my laptop. When videotaping I generally stood quietly in front of the room in order to focus the camera on discussion speakers.

**Scope and Sequence of the Poetry Unit in Both Classrooms**

Ms. Jones focused on oral reading fluency skills during the poetry unit which meant her students practiced reading the words of poetry accurately, at a pace that fit the mood of a poem, and with expression. This was done with repeated readings of every poem selected. Ms. Jones began the poetry unit by introducing poetry written by well-known poets, including Shel Silverstein, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. By the second and third days of the poetry unit, Dave demonstrated behavior problems followed by discipline from Ms. Jones. For example, on the third day of the poetry unit, he was removed from his seat by Ms. Jones after falsely claiming he had broken his nose. When Ms. Jones invited him to bring in rap lyrics to analyze, problem behaviors ceased for several days. In the first four days of the poetry unit, Ms. Jones's learning targets also included student identification of the literary elements of poetry such as meter, free verse, rhyme, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, refrain, internal rhyme, and alliteration. I facilitated the poetry lesson on the fifth day so students made inferences about my favorite poem, entitled “Richard Corey.” I directed discussion so that students would make text-to-self-connections and visualize the action and motivation of characters in the poem. On the sixth day of the unit, Ms. McGuire used hip hop lyrics as texts for student application of literary terms and in order to practice oral reading fluency. On the seventh and eighth days of the unit, a local disc jockey showed selections of a documentary of the blues. On the eighth day of the unit, students co-wrote a blues song. On the ninth day, students constructed a semantic map of what they knew about the blues and blues musicians based on the documentary and the disc jockey’s direct instruction. For the 10th and 11th days Ms. Jones brought in Robert Johnson’s “Crossroad Blues” and “The Weary Blues” and Langston Hughes’s “Po’ Boy Blues” for analysis of plot and literary terms. The 12th day was devoted to student performance of student-written blues poems. Days 13 and 14 were excluded from data analysis because Dave’s class did not meet as a class and parallel practices could not be identified. On day 15, students wrote and
performed a second blues song, and on day 16, students researched an assigned blues singer. On days 17–18, students completed a substance abuse survey and started an “I Am” poem about a blues musician. On day 19, students wrote their “I Am” poem line by line after Ms. Jones or Ms. McGuire delivered the sentence cues for each line. On day 20, Johnny Heartsong visited, performed several blues songs, and set students’ lyrics to blues music.

Findings

Although Table 1 indicates that the two boys had minimal differences in measured reading skills, they were worlds apart in the social contexts of their textual discussions. Data provided in Table 2 indicate that Jerome and Dave were alike in their high level of participation during textual discussion. Jerome contributed 85 conversational turns designated as PTD during the poetry unit, and Dave contributed 48 conversational turns designated as PTD. A conversational turn was defined as interrupted public discourse shared with the whole class during textual discussion.

A permeable turn, on the other hand, 1) broached prior knowledge of a text, 2) vocalized personal engagement or disengagement with texts, 3) stated a connection made with texts or prior knowledge of textual information, 4) made connections to text based on prior knowledge of textual content, or 5) involved public sharing of student writing as students wrote poetry line by line. For Jerome, 53 turns were designated permeable in that they went beyond the literal level of interpretation. For Dave, 42 turns were designated as permeable.

When teachers afforded Jerome and Dave discussion space to share prior knowledge of texts, permeable textual discussion, or PTD, resulted in 16 turns for both adolescents (8 turns for Jerome and 8 turns for Dave). Twenty-seven turns resulted when conversational space allowed text-to-self and text-to-world connections (13 for Jerome and 14 for Dave). Most generative for PTD was two-tiered talk in which both adolescents were encouraged by teachers or peers to make connections with text based on prior knowledge (38 turns for both adolescents; 28 turns for Jerome and 10 turns for Dave).

The instructional contexts of Dave’s higher-tracked classroom aligned more closely with Yalom’s descriptions of contexts with high peer interaction (Yalom, 1995). Expression was freer and more spontaneous than in Jerome’s class, interactions between peers were more likely during textual involvement, and personal involvement in textual discussion was higher. Perhaps because of a comparatively supportive environment for personal revelation during textual interpretation, self-disclosure of Dave’s story of familial grief happened on the last day of the poetry unit. Throughout the poetry unit, a lighter, comfortable, improvisational teaching style characterized Dave’s classroom, the higher-racked classroom. For example, on day eight of the poetry unit, Ms. Jones made a passing observation about the multitasking genius of blues singers who simultaneously sing and play guitar or
Table 2: Participant Permeable Turns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context of PTD</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
<th># of Turns</th>
<th>Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Jerome: &quot;I have that book at home!&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;They taught us that [Shel Silverstein poem] at camp.&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jerome: &quot;That should say <em>whitely</em> whirs away.&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;[Rap] got free verse and then you break it down [into meter].&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement/Disengagement</strong></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;Poetry. Ugh!&quot; [Rolls eyes.]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Jones: &quot;Dave, why don’t you bring in rap lyrics for us to discuss.&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connections</strong></td>
<td>Jerome: &quot;Some people learn to play by just going to the corner and playing and people will give them money and all that.&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jerome: &quot;Do you know any songs by him?&quot; [Asking Johnny Lipstick if he knows songs of Robert Johnson]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;[Tyrell Owens] tried to commit suicide.&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jerome: [In response to substance abuse survey question &quot;How many times have you changed homes in the past year?] &quot;About five times.&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: [Survey item] &quot;My teachers praise me when I do something right at school&quot; [Laughing] &quot;No!&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;[Maya Angelou] is in <em>Medea’s Family Reunion!</em>&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: &quot;I know a lot of people who shot.&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[After Ms. Jones says she could write a blues song about her toddler, who wandered into the garage that morning] Jerome: &quot;Where was your husband?&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2: Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection made with objects or possessions</th>
<th>Jerome: “Miss E. has markers that smell. You can sniff those!” [During substance abuse survey]</th>
<th>1 9</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave: “I got one!” [A drum.]</td>
<td>1 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total connections turns for Jerome: 13</td>
<td>Total connections turns for Dave: 14</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior Knowledge and Connections</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making inferences about characters and details of plot based on context of poem</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total prior knowledge and connections turns for Jerome: 28</td>
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<tr>
<th>Student Sharing Personal Writing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing writing as student writes “I Am” poem about a blues musician</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total student sharing personal writing turns for Jerome: 4</td>
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drums. After the teacher patted her head and stomach at the same time, Dave and his classmates joined the demonstration. This led to an impromptu air guitar simulation with several male students participating with gusto. Jerome’s classroom seldom experienced what I described in my field notes as “light, spontaneous atmosphere in which students are likely to take conversational and performance risks.”

A comparatively comfortable atmosphere may be why such a large percentage of Dave’s turns went beyond the literal level of text compared to those of Jerome. The atmosphere may have been made more conducive for sharing of self because of the regularity of Ms. Jones’s approbation of the language prowess of Dave compared to that of Jerome. For example, on day 19 of the poetry unit as the class wrote an “I Am” poem about a blues musician, Dave volunteered eight conversational turns that involved sharing his writing usually followed by a teacher uptake praising his prowess with language. In contrast, Jerome volunteered four turns without teacher approbation.

Certain instructional practices invited PTD from Jerome. When Ms. Jones, Ms. McGuire, Johnny Heartsong, the disc jockey, or I created curricular space for him to make text-to-world inferences about text, Jerome volunteered 19 turns. Jerome tended to ask clarifying questions of text to make sure he understood the authorial intent of text based on his own understandings of text, a total of nine turns. He also wanted to know more about Ms. Jones’s personal life during a discussion in which she described (in seven turns) blues songs she said she could write. Compared with Dave, Jerome’s conversational turns rarely revealed aspects of his own life and his existing expertise of popular culture or language use. In contrast, Dave’s conversational turns revealed what he already knew and valued. He made text-to-world connections by relating poetry to recent happenings involving football players, rappers, and eventually blues players as the poetry unit progressed and Dave began to amass knowledge of blues players. Seven of Dave’s turns made connections with the stories of well-known individuals, such as connecting the suicide attempt of Tyrell Owens to Richard Corey. Dave presented himself as an expert in rap music when the conventions of the genre were discussed. Six of his turns referenced conventions of rap. Overall, Jerome demonstrated more dependence on a teacher to carve out conversational space for PTD while Dave initiated PTD. In fact, Dave often commandeered PTD by starting a line of discussion that peers and teachers responded to with conversational uptake.

Because Ms. Jones and other adult speakers used the same texts and assigned the same assignments for both classes throughout the poetry unit, it is useful to contrast parallel vignettes from the classroom discourse of Jerome and Dave to demonstrate how personal and classroom identities were constructed over time as the result of instructional decision making and the social contexts influenced by academic tracking.
First Contrast: Textual Performance

In the following examples, Jerome and Dave had written their first poem in the poetry unit with a partner. Their topic was selected from a grab bag of unfortunate events worthy of a blues song (e.g., a bad hair day, a girlfriend/boyfriend breaking up with you on your birthday, country music being the only available music on the radio, having three hours of homework in a night). Students were instructed to write a rhyming poem of 10–12 lines in length. This was a single draft writing assignment. Both participants co-penned the lyrics of Table 3. Jerome’s co-author was “Marc,” a European American male. Dave’s co-author was “Jacques,” an African American male. Grammatical “errors,” including those likely to be represented in blues lyrics have beendeliberately left in.

Ms. Jones perceived that both participants fulfilled the instructional goals of the assignment in that they both wrote rhyming poems of the specified length, and so both students received full credit for the homework assignment.

Poetry terms and devices can be applied to both writing samples, showing evidence of student learning of literary vocabulary. Jerome and Marc’s writing includes internal rhyme (“grab a pen in the den”) and end rhyme (“wrong”/“long”/“song”), although it lacks consistent capitalization and punctuation (i.e., no apostrophe is used in “won’t”). The line “it will be long” is repeated three times, employing a phrasal motif throughout the song. The title of the song “Patience,” is reflected in the final line “Just take your time and it won’t be wrong.” This poem is not particularly complex in sentence variation or word choice, but lines of the blues lyrics presented to the class were not necessarily complex either.

In comparison, Dave and Jacques capitalize the first letter of every line, suggesting familiarity with the grammatical features of the specific genre of poetry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: First Poem in Poetry Unit</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jerome and Marc’s Blues Song</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Patience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grab a pen in the den</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do your 3 hours of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will be long!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but it won’t be wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will be long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but take your time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and try to rhyme!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the homework is a poetry rhyme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will be long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but sing a song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just take your time and it won’t be wrong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
although they do not include marks of punctuation. Their humorous poem contains cause and effect sequential narrative detail of love gone wrong in almost every line: The presumably male narrator came to school happy, his girlfriend walked up with an attitude and broke up with him. Immediately the narrator drives away from school in his go cart, decides to come back to school, and listens to peers who presumably inform him of his girlfriend’s misdeeds. The girlfriend continues to sour the situation by going out with the narrator’s enemy, causing the narrator to lose his dignity, resulting in the narrator penning the words to the blues song because of bad news. Dave and Jacques’ poem employs rhyme (“enemy”/“dignity”) and alliteration (“Break up Blues”). Their poem utilizes features of Black English Vernacular (as in the line “people tellen me they got bad news”) by dropping the “g” in “telling” and with the use of the word “got” instead of the standard English “had.” Black English Vernacular is often featured in blues lyrics and Ms. Jones felt it was appropriate for full credit for this assignment.

As both boys practiced performing their song in front of me, accompanied by coordinating physical movements, they seemed highly engaged. They practiced speaking lines into a small digital audio recorder and played back their performances in order to critique their prosody, or expressiveness, of their oral reading fluency.

Following this practice, Ms. Jones expected students to “share” their writing with classmates by performing song lyrics prosodically in front of class and then discussing pros and cons of each verbal performance. She provided a microphone attached to an old karaoke machine in the front of the room and dimmed the lights to establish a spoken word environment similar to that of a coffee shop.

In the lower-tracked class, both Jerome and his partner Marc refused to use the microphone provided for them. At the front of the class, both young men laughed nervously, and then Marc quickly recited the poem while Jerome mouthed the words. Ms. Jones wanted Jerome to perform the poem as well, as she states in the following transcript.

**JONES:** Either you are going to read it by yourself or choose like Ty not to get a performance credit.

[Jerome mumbles a few things that the audio cannot pick up.]

**TY:** Why you trying to pull me out there?

**JONES:** I’m sorry. I’m trying to help you make a better choice.

**TY:** I got a D+ for that.

**JEROME:** [Who has walked slowly back to his desk] Can I read from here?

**JONES:** If you feel you need to.

[Jerome reads in a speedy and expressionless voice, hunched over his desk.]
On this day of class every male student in Jerome’s class had to be cajoled or verbally threatened with a failing grade in order to read their lyrics in front of the class. The instructional practice of public performance combined with punitive language comparing Jerome with a fellow student seemed to cause embarrassment for Jerome. The punitive language of this vignette is especially telling when compared to Dave’s experience the next class period.

In contrast, Dave’s verbal performance was accompanied by physical comedy and prosodic variation. It was precipitated by teacher acknowledgment of existing student ability and anticipatory silence and laughter of peers.

**Jones:** [Dave], yours really made me happy.
Go do it, [Dave].
[Jacques and Dave walk to the front, taking their time. They take several seconds to plan how to perform, where to stand and how to hold the mic as the class waits in silence. They finally decide to read with their back to the audience, speaking boldly into the microphone. Laughter erupts before they speak.]

**Dave:** [Booming into the mic] Today I came to school happy.
[Softer] I came to school happy.
She walked up acting sassy.
She said, “It’s over.”
She broke my heart.
I ran out the school and got into my cart.
[Jacques and Dave giggle.]

**Jones:** Shhh.

**Dave:** I came back.
People telling me that they got bad news.
She started going out with my enemy.
[Speeding up] I lost my dignity.
[Pause and with softer voice,] Now [pause] I’m singing the break-up blues because they told...
In this vignette, Dave demonstrated performance with improvisational moves such as standing with his back to his peers, an action his peers interpreted as humorous as demonstrated by their laughter. Ms. Jones confirmed that Dave was an able writer before the event and a good performer after the event. Dave used tonal variation, pauses, and physical action to both punctuate and interpret his writing as well as to showcase his comedic talents through his writing. His peers anticipated his performances as observed by a marked and unusual silence before he began his performance. This event was particularly generative, as it was followed by other pairs rendering prosodic interpretations of their blues songs. As he expressed in a later interview, Dave felt comfortable showcasing his verbal prowess and feeding his identity of a comic performer similar to Dave Chappelle, his role model.

**Second Contrast: Textual Inquiry**

The majority of textual discussions in the lower-tracked class were oriented towards getting the textual content “right,” understanding authorial wording or the teacher’s “point” when using the text. This was illustrated on the sixth day of the poetry unit when Ms. McGuire, the intern teacher, read “Hip Hop,” lyrics written by Mos Def. Her intent was to show students that the origins of hip hop trace back to the blues:

**McGuire:** What’s this story about?

**Jerome:** It’s the story of how he came into hip hop and how it changed.

**McGuire:** What did it change from?

**Jerome:** From picking cotton to chain gang chopping.

**McGuire:** [Nods.] Right.

[Moves on to ask another question.]

This particular text uses the musical genre of hip hop as a mirror of the evolution of black experience. In it, Mos Def asserts, “Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape.” In this vignette Jerome did not use speech as a hammer to voice his identity through analysis of language. Rather, Ms. McGuire, intent on driving home the message she wanted students to receive from the song, directed textual discussion towards literal comprehension of poetry.

In Jerome’s classroom, there was a comparative lack of collegiality in class discussion through affirmation or negation of the conversational turns of other classmates. Classroom peers rarely added uptake to previous student conversational turns or more detail to guided teacher questioning. However, whenever Jerome
and his peers could use their interpretation skills and life experiences to make meaning from text, conversations lengthened and deepened and became more animated and serpentine. When teachers simply asked “what does this mean?” or cued students to engage in textual interpretation, permeable discussion began to emerge, as illustrated by the following discourse in which students try to determine the meaning of a nuanced line of text written by Robert Johnson.

**JONES:** All right.
“I went to the crossroads.”
What does that mean?

**GIAN:** You cross the road.

**MANNY:** It’s a church.

**JORDY:** It’s an intersection!

**JONES:** I’m thinking of Dorothy
in the *Wizard of Oz*
and the two paths.
This person could
literally be standing in the middle of the road.
Or what else could that person be doing?

**JEROME:** Standing at the corner.

**JONES:** A race.

**MANNY:** At a cross?
Like in a church.

In Jerome’s classroom, what seemed to work against student engagement during textual inquiry was student conversational deference to the social status of dominant male students and teacher resistance to escalating noise levels. When too many students entered textual discussions, teachers retreated to the classroom management strategy of raising hands or eliminating discussion. In the following example, Ms. Jones would like students to connect their lives to that of Robert Johnson’s dilemma in “Crossroad Blues”:

**JONES:** Have you ever been at a crossroad in your life
where you needed to make a major decision?

**GIAN:** [Immediately responding] I have.

**JONES:** And whatever decision you make was very important.

**GIAN:** Yesterday.
I had to decide hot dogs or nachos.

**JONES:** Hot dogs or nachos is not a crossroads.

**GIAN:** Well, I had a crossroads.
Jones: You had a real one?

Gian: I chose the nachos.
And I got a hot dog too, later.

Jones: Anyway.
How about a more serious crossroads in your life?

Edward: [Hispanic male] What to do in your free time?

Jones: Oh, what to do in your free time?
I’m thinking of serious crossroads.

Will: [European American male] Oh, okay.

Jones: Have you ever been in a serious position?
Where you had to make a major decision in life?

Gian: I did.

Paris: [African American male] I feel like I’m going to puke.

Gian: Get shot or walk away.

Jones: Okay. Good decision.

[The noise level is rising.
Students chatter about their dangerous encounters.]

Are you guys listening?

A rising noise level caused Ms. Jones to abandon Gian’s potentially generative permeable turn, “Get shot or walk away.” Although the rising level indicated student interest in a topic, textual discussion was terminated. In fact, Paris did not have to leave the room to vomit, but he did temporarily get the attention of peers.

Both Ms. Jones and Ms. McGuire seemed more discursively responsive to student turns in the higher-tracked class. In the following vignette, Dave’s discourse changed the genre features of textual talk from the recitation present in Jerome’s classroom to permeable discourse in which Dave and Jacques discussed African American history. In this instance, Ms. Jones was called out of the room and she handed me the lyrics of the poem. Ms. McGuire read “Hip Hop” to Dave’s class as she had done with Jerome’s class. Unprompted by a teacher, Dave made an interpretive comment beyond the literal meaning of the text:

Dave: I know a lot of people who got shot.

Kris: Like who?

Dave: In the music industry
when they made it.

Now?

Kris: Yeah.

Dave: Biggie did.
Jacques: Biggie.
Dave: 50 Cent.
McGuire: Who was the guy from Detroit?
Dave: Proof.
McGuire: Proof.
Kris: So there’s a trend for hip hop musicians to get shot even when they become famous?
Jacques: Yeah.

In this vignette, Dave and Jacques worked out an important interpretation of text that reinforces the concluding message of “Hip Hop”: “Hip Hop will simply amaze you/Praise, you, pay you/Do whatever you say do/But black, it can’t save you” (Mos Def, 1999). They used discourse to position themselves as knowledgeable of the shooting attempts on Christopher George Latore Wallace (“Biggie Smalls”), Curtis James Jackson III (“50 Cent”), and local rapper and boyhood friend of Eminem, DeShaun Dupree Holton (musically known as “Proof”). Proof’s murder had recently occurred on April 11, 2006 and was important news in the local community. Moments later, Jacques connected how the death attempts (Biggie Smalls and Proof both died after the shootings) were thematically connected to the shooting death of Martin Luther King.

Jacques: It’s just like Martin Luther King.
Kris: What do you mean?
Jacques: Like he was trying to make all the black kids and stuff go to the same school. And then, like, with the rappers, they probably make music that people doesn’t like. And that gives them a reason.

Jacques asserted that envious “haters,” individuals jealous of the fame of others, have a long history of tearing down leaders in the African American community. He was able to construct a thematic whole from Mos Def’s lyrics and apply it to his existing knowledge.
Third Contrast: Textual Sharing

Throughout the poetry unit, students wrote three poems as lyrics for blues song. The final blues lyrics were to be statements of identity that might be performed by Johnny Heartsong upon his visit the concluding day of the poetry unit in December of 2006. When both students were given free choice of writing topic, both selected to write about their grief. For this assignment students were to write 8–10 lines, rhyming or free verse, on a topic they could write a blues song about. The poem was to contain two of five literary terms: alliteration, metaphor, rhyme, simile, or personification (see Table 4).

Jerome’s blues song fulfills the requirements of the assignment and includes examples of good memories of Jerome and his father: his father buying him shoes and spending time together looking at the moon. Jerome’s poem employs repetition (“My dad was good!” and “I love him!”). Because teachers conferenced with students as they wrote this assignment, punctuation and capitalization improved in this final poem. Jerome uses rhyme (“good” and “wood”) in this poem, although the meaning of the poem becomes murky probably because of an emphasis on rhyme. This poem employs alliteration (“loved” and “looked”). Without being explicitly taught, Jerome includes parallel language in his work (“My dad was good!” and “I will be good!”) and echoes the language of his Calbery with the repetition of a second sky reference.

Dave’s poem is untitled but characterizes his grandfather as a pivotal figure in his life and elaborates on the relationship the two enjoyed while his grandfather was alive. The ragged line lengths reflect the grief of the poem, although the use of line length to create meaning was not discussed during the poetry unit. Dave’s poem features simile (“If he ran like a dog, tail between his legs” and “It felt like...”)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jerome's Poem about His Father</th>
<th>Dave’s Poem about His Grandfather</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Dad</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My dad was good!</td>
<td>He has died.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He didn’t fix wood.</td>
<td>The only thing you see is a head in the casket.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My dad was good!</td>
<td>If he ran like a dog, tail between his legs,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He shakes those people when he should</td>
<td>I would be dead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love him.</td>
<td>I wish he was still here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love him.</td>
<td>I miss your snow white hair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will be good!</td>
<td>I’d jump in front of a bullet for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He used to buy me shoes.</td>
<td>Grandpa is not doing well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We loved to look at the moon.</td>
<td>He died and it felt like I was in hell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He was my buddy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I miss you.</td>
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</table>
I was in hell”), rhyme (“money” and “buddy” and “well” and “hell”) picturesque language, and heartfelt emotion. It is also longer in total length and the length of each line than Jerome’s poem. Before Johnny Heartsong visited on the last and 20th day of the poetry unit, Ms. Jones showed Dave’s poem to him, and Johnny set it to music. Both adults thought it was good student work.

Both classes were fully engaged on the last day of the poetry unit. Johnny Heartsong’s stories of being a blues street musician in Flint, Michigan, captivated both classrooms and were marked by high levels of participation from students. He named his musical influences, played snippets of lyrics from Robert Johnson, Elvis, Muddy Waters, and Stevie Ray Vaughn and revealed secrets to being a successful street musician (“put a little of your own money in your guitar case so people will think you’re a good performer”). He then asked students what they knew about various blues musicians. As students had spent a few days earlier building a jigsaw of information on several artists, they could showcase their expertise.

Students were next asked to share their “I Am” poems (see Table 5). Both Jerome and Dave shared their “I Am” poems with their peers, although both left out lines revealing their personal histories with father figures. Jerome left out the line “I want my dad to hear me” and Dave omitted the lines “I worry about how I’m going to die/I cry when someone dies in my family.”

The students were next asked to share a second set of writing, the less scripted poems that were the last poetic writings of the poetry unit, set to musical accompaniment. Although Jerome wanted his song to be performed, as he told me

<table>
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<th>Table 5: I Am Poems</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jerome’s Poem</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am depressed and sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wonder if I’m a good player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hear the river waving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see the crowd crying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my dad to hear me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am depressed and sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pretend to be weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I’m real strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>I touch my feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry about my future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cry in the hearts of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am depressed and sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand my rhythm is gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say I’m strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I dream for the crowd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try different rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope for a record deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am depressed and sad</td>
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later, other students were more overt about asking Johnny to sing their songs. In the higher-tracked class, Dave shared his lyrics with his classmates while Johnny strummed his guitar softly. For several seconds after Dave’s presentation, the class did not speak. Then both Johnny Heartsong and Ms. Jones expressed sympathy for Dave’s loss and approval of his powerful song. A few weeks later, Dave’s classmate, “Redman,” observed to me privately that Dave’s poem about his grandfather was “a good strong poem that made me think.” At the end of the year, Redman expressed that he still sometimes thought about the poem about Dave’s grandfather. For him, Dave’s song became a source of meaningful reflection throughout the year.

Instructional practices facilitated PTD in the last day of the poetry unit. First, teacher storytelling resulted in student storytelling through student writing. Second, the novelty of setting student writing to blues music motivated students to publicly share their writing. Third, creating space for students to showcase specialized knowledge of blues singers also proved particularly generative for permeable textual talk. The atmosphere in both rooms became receptive for students to want to share their personal histories and prior knowledge. However, an atmosphere conducive to sharing poetry did not develop the following day, and Jerome never did share any of his poetry referencing his father with his peers in his language arts classroom. Instructional practices that foster trust that often predicate sharing of self were missing from classroom discourse. The next class day, the poetry unit was abruptly over, and the topic of study was new vocabulary terms that applied to a young adult novel. The introduction to the new unit was more conducive to direct instruction than to PTD.

Discussion
A permeable curriculum is formed by building on what students already know and experience so that students can create new knowledge, a rich blending of official school knowledge and personal and communal knowledge. Permeable textual discussion is characterized by shared learning with peers and teacher, student ownership of textural talk, and the formation of a classroom community where students read on, with, and against multiple texts (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Paley, 1998; Rex, 2001). Reading “on” a text involves situating a text against the sociohistorical experiences of characters or student readers, an essential component of “beating the odds” within literary instruction (Langer, 2001; Morgan, 1998). Reading “with” a text means students are able to comprehend the literal and authorial intentions of a text by using the strategies of good readers (Brown et al., 1996). Reading “against” a text entails student resistance to interpretation of text when textual messages contradict student life and language experiences (Kinloch, 2007). Jerome’s classroom tended to read “with” texts during textual discussions in that they attempted to figure out the right answers for textual
questions; Dave’s classroom more often read “on” and “against” texts during textual discussions and was more likely to engage in textual interpretation.

The instructional discursive practices of adults contributed to different kinds of reading of the same texts. In Jerome’s classroom, the instructional environment was less conducive to PTD because teachers dictated talk preferring that students read “with” textual content. The classroom discourse of Jerome and Dave demonstrated that teachers tended to value Dave’s prior knowledge more than Jerome’s prior knowledge. When teachers asked Jerome to make connections to literary content based on his prior knowledge, he did so. Many of the differences in PTD can be attributed to teacher cuing for PTD with teachers asking students to defend their answers based on combining their life experience and knowledge of the world with textual content.

Although the same texts were taught in both classes, discourse was often socially stratified according to academic track. Anyon’s (2008) description of “reproductive” and “nonreproductive” knowledge helps explain the ideologies behind textual talk in both classrooms. Discourse in Jerome’s class tended to purvey reproductive knowledge that did not question the authority of text or teacher. Discourse in Dave’s class more consistently delivered nonreproductive knowledge that encouraged evaluation of student ideas.

Some of the differences in PTD might be attributed to the socio-historic context of classroom talk at Pinkerton Middle School in 2006 as well as student reactions against such context. Tracking at Pinkerton Middle School was associated with assessment of student learning as measured by standardized selected-response test prompts (Watanabe, 2008). The first two months of school were dedicated to preparing students to bubble in correct answers. Conscientious students like Jerome became conditioned to providing teachers with right answers. Others in his class, unwilling to fall into step with mandated curriculum and discourse routines, subverted such routines. The discourse of Ty and Gian, Jerome’s classmates, introduced in the second comparison of this research, are examples of such subversion during textual inquiry.

Should Jerome have been placed in a lower track than Dave because he demonstrated less proficient writing or reading ability? Jerome’s reading and writing data send mixed messages of ability. His fluency scores from fourth grade were better than Dave’s. The state reading test placed him at “standard” for reading skills just like Dave. A single day of testing for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills determined his placement in a lower track. If Ms. Jones had a more challenging curriculum for “higher ability” in the higher-tracked class and explicit literacy inventions at the level of the lower-tracked class’s abilities, perhaps an argument could be made that academic tracking served a purpose at Pinkerton Middle School. But Ms. Jones assigned the same texts and tasks to both classrooms. The shifting discourse of teachers across contexts was unplanned and deleterious to the lower-tracked
classroom when it came to textual interpretation. Sequestering students perceived as having inferior literacy ability created a cognitively poorer environment for Jerome when compared to the environment Dave experienced, which was rich in teacher and peer feedback. For example, in the first writing assignment in which students were to co-write blues lyrics (Table 3), Jerome penned lyrics with another student also designated as having inferior language skills. Therefore, it could be argued that Jerome’s writing support was weaker than Dave’s writing support, especially because students in both classes were only provided time to write one draft of their poem and were not given opportunities to conference with teachers to improve writing. Jerome’s Calbery and “I Am” poem demonstrated that he could write mechanically correct and compelling narratives and poetry when given opportunities and teacher support through revision processes.

In order for Jerome to share his writing, however, a safer environment was necessary. In Dave’s class, student talk had the power to change instructional subject matter. Perhaps if Ms. Jones and other teachers used language as a lexical indicator to reinforce that Jerome was a competent poet and storyteller as well as an industrious student who showed up for class and turned in his homework, Jerome might have revealed more information about himself and his writing during textual discussions.

Teacher discourse does not exist in a vacuum. Perhaps Ms. Jones and the other adults in the classroom were taking cues for their discourse based on the existing discourse of students. The discursive practices of classmates are vitally important for the existence of PTD. When Jerome seemed unwilling to perform his poem in front of his peers, he was walking a discursive tightrope between his school identity as an “A” student who complied with teacher expectations and affiliations with other males in his class. As he later told me, he did not want to get an F for his performance grade when reading his first poem, but he did not want to stand out from his male peers either. Interpreting peer status in classroom talk can become a hidden curriculum especially for adolescents in their quests for identity. Who gets to speak, especially who gets to tell their stories during textual discussions, may be determined by peer status. In Jerome’s classroom, for example, Paris had peer status. He demonstrates this through verbal one-upmanship in order to hold the floor. He has the power to curtail the speech of others, including that of Jerome, at times. Lensmire (1992) found that children with less status wrote more impersonal stories compared with students of higher classroom status. Research indicates that low-tracked students know of their comparatively lowly status (Eshel & Kurman, 2001); consequently, it affects their classroom identity and discourse.

**Conclusion**

A basic but profound truism of teaching and learning is that no one learns anything without knowing something first. Learning in classrooms is about connections
made with prior knowledge and also with human beings. Textual discourse can help classrooms establish school as a place of fierce investigation of self and literature, but fierce investigation does not just happen. Permeable textual discussion values what students already know and can do and informs students they bring important schema to literature, allowing them to interpret or recast texts in new and exciting ways. In the introduction to this article, Dave noted, for example, that rap music resists categories of rigidly defined literary elements. Rap might begin as free verse, but the able performer finds a rhythm in performance. When his teacher tried to move on to school discourse, Dave wanted to proceed with his discovery. As he rapped his phone number, several boys joined in a chant of lyrics of a rap composed of a phone number. This impromptu performance was rich in situ application of literary terms, the kind of assessment data that classroom teachers or administrators who assign academic tracks to students may not value or connect to the development of testable literacy performances.

For Jerome’s classroom, taught by the same teachers, PTD was more elusive because teachers more often resorted to Initiation/Response/Evaluation routines (Cazden, 2001) in which discourse tended to be controlled by teachers seeking correct answers from text. If, as Dyson notes, identities are formed through interactions with others and if children choose their words from those available to them (Dyson, 1997, p. 18) such discourse patterns are disturbing and the antithesis of social justice. If personal engagement with text mediated through discourse is necessary for deeper interpretation of text, lower-tracked classrooms need teachers who appreciate and use permeable textual talk to engage students. The practice of academic tracking seems to work against permeable textual discussion.

Academic tracking is not an institutional practice without communicative effect; its very existence in this research affected teacher and student discourse. Ms. Jones frequently bemoaned to me privately that Jerome’s class had difficulty understanding what they read. Consequently, much of her textual talk, and her student intern’s talk as well, involved bringing students into literal comprehension of text. She was not well-versed in how to cue students for PTD and how to bring students into texts so they could read on and against them when they did not do so autonomously.

Jerome’s discourse was situated within a landscape of voices (Dyson, 2003, p.12). Had his landscape changed, his discourse could have changed as well. Schools, especially language classrooms, must provide the cultural symbolic forms in instructional practices so students can examine their lives, the ultimate learning target of literature study. Reading “on” and “against” text requires examination of self and context which grapples with distances between adolescent and adult life and literacy values, conflicting perspectives on textual themes, and who has the right to tell one’s story. Both Jerome’s and Dave’s stories deserved to find their way into the study of literature should they have so chosen. Their peers and teachers
had much to learn from both young men and would have, had they been placed in the same classes and had the opportunity to learn with and from each other.

REFERENCES


