

# Subverting Race and Class Hierarchies in an Urban Magnet School: Identity Construction through Talk

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Students from non-dominant groups can be disadvantaged in their academic identity development when classroom interactions serve to exclude them from communities centered on subject matter, and when the dominant school discourses position them in negative ways. However, many students who are members of non-dominant groups still develop academic identities. This paper uses discourse analysis in order to explore the processes by which students can develop and maintain academic identities through their talk. It emerges from an ethnographic study in a Philadelphia magnet school and focuses on a conversation between three eighth-grade students and the researcher. Strategies used by students include voicing different social types in such a way that separates academic content and the methods of evaluation so that students continue to view themselves as having academic identities despite an organizational structure that potentially could restrict them from membership in academic communities.

## Introduction

Racial and socioeconomic inequalities in educational outcomes in the U.S. are related not only to access to resources, but also to schools' inability to facilitate the development of students' academic identities. By "academic identities," I refer to both students' sense of themselves as members of a community centered on some type of subject matter taught in school, and others' acceptance of them as members of this community. The importance of identity formation for academic achievement is highlighted in a socially situated view of learning, in which learning is viewed not as an individualized, cognitive endeavor but as depending on participation in collective activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In such a view of learning, students develop and demonstrate forms of knowledge not only because they are requested to do so by a teacher, but also in order to participate with others in goal-oriented activity and to signify their identities as members of the relevant groups (Wenger, 2000).

While people have some agency in determining their identities by making choices of groups with which to affiliate (Brickhouse, Lowery &

Schultz, 2000) and discourses which to use (Brown, 2004), their choices are still subject to structural constraints that impact the quality or success of the interactions in which they participate. For example, the privileging of white-middle class language that occurs in many science classrooms (e.g. Lemke, 1990) could interfere with some students' abilities to develop identities associated with science, in spite of their interest in the academic subject. In addition, as occurs in some urban science classrooms (e.g. Tobin, Seiler, & Walls, 1999), teachers may neglect to acknowledge students' contributions and life experiences in class discussions. Overall, students from non-dominant groups can be disadvantaged in their academic identity development when school interactions serve to exclude rather than welcome them into these communities. While there are many non-dominant groups whose members can experience exclusion in U.S. classrooms, this paper focuses on an ethnographic study involving African American students in Philadelphia. Therefore, I mainly discuss research pertaining to African Americans.

It has been argued that students from non-dominant groups may develop identities directly in opposition to academic achievement because schools are part of the dominant culture that has historically discriminated against them (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Students may therefore view striving to achieve in school as futile, as they see little hope of being accepted into communities in which Whites predominate. Developing an academic identity could therefore be seen as a rejection of their own group identity, rather than as an entailing an additional community in which they could participate. Fordham and Ogbu studied African American high school students and found that some students would describe high achievement in school as conformist and "acting white." Students who invested their efforts in school performance faced possible negative sanctioning by their peers. According to Fordham and Ogbu, involuntary minorities differ from voluntary minorities which include many recent immigrant groups that have made the active decision to immigrate to the United States and cope with dominant institutions. They argued that because African Americans are an involuntary minority, and have experienced a history of institutionalized discrimination, their cultural models entail a distrust of dominant institutions, including schools.

However, other studies have questioned these findings about African American students, arguing that the value that they place on school achievement is as high, or higher, than that of other groups (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Further, several qualitative researchers have described considerable variability among Black students' academic identities depending on the school situation, and have called for greater attentiveness to the conditions that have implications for whether achievement is considered "acting white." For example, in one study, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) found that the racial composition of

both the school and the high-track classes was an important factor in whether Black students equated school success with “acting white.” They described that when Black students were a substantial percentage of the school population and were represented in the higher track classes, school success was not viewed as “acting white,” whereas in schools where they were not sufficiently represented in high track classes, it was. Other researchers have found that peer groups mediate whether Black students develop academic identities (e.g., Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Hemmings, 1996). These and other researchers argue for considering the diversity in students’ experiences and outcomes, rather than assuming that Black students generally view achievement as “white.”

Many of these studies rely on interviews and observations, such as Horvat and Lewis’s study, which explored some of the ways that students managed their academic identities, such as downplaying their achievement in some social circles yet not in others. While studies such as theirs provide considerable detail on the factors that support academic achievement, there are other aspects of students’ identity formation that could be better understood by taking a more micro-level view of students’ interactions. It is understandable that having Black friends who are supportive of academic success would in turn boost a student’s achievement. But the questions remain: how exactly do these peer groups provide support? What exactly occurs within the peer interactions themselves that facilitates the development of an academic identity?

Rather than being fixed, identities are works in progress (Lave & Wenger, 1991), dynamic and unstable (Gee, 1999), and continually reenacted in social situations through participation in ongoing activity (Roth, Tobin, Elmesky, Carambo, McKnight, & Beers, 2002). They emerge as products of series of interactions over time within a variety of settings (Collins, 2004). The outcome for any particular student is not pre-determined, as students do not decide whether they identify with academic communities in some abstract sense based on ascribed categories such as race, class or gender. Therefore, just having Black friends who are high achievers would not necessarily result in a student developing an academic identity, as the outcome would depend specifically on what transpires in the interactions with these peers, and with others both in and out of school.

Davies and Harre (1990) write, “[a]n individual emerges through the process of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate” (p.46). In order to understand how students from non-dominant groups construct academic identities, it is important to investigate not only the structures that impact their school and peer group experiences on an everyday level, but also to understand on the micro-level how students position themselves and others through conversation.

In this paper, I discuss the identity work of three eighth-grade magnet school students, Jana, Kim and Tanya, during a conversation in which they discuss the school, standardized testing, teachers and books. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. In taking a micro-level view of the students' interactions, I address the following question: What processes do these students engage in within their peer interactions that facilitate their construction of academic identities?

After conducting a discourse analysis of the conversation, I discuss how through positioning themselves and various groups, the students create a space from which they can construct academic identities. They are able to do so even as they navigate an educational environment that they sometimes perceive as hostile or indifferent to their success. One of the ways in which they construct such identities is by establishing boundaries between the content taught in school and the standards by which their work is judged.

### Setting

This paper comes out of a five-year ethnographic study, drawing upon observations and findings from this larger study. The study takes place in an urban secondary magnet school, City Magnet. Students in this school have been selected from throughout the city to attend based on their elementary school grades and test scores. Once admitted to City Magnet in fifth grade, a student's position in this school is still not secure. In their eighth grade year, City Magnet students, like all students in Philadelphia, submit applications for high schools and are chosen for admission based on their grades in seventh grade, behavior marks, attendance record and scores on standardized tests. Only about 100 out of the 200 eighth-grade students will be selected to enter the more prestigious high school. The remainder of the students either attends other magnet schools, private schools or neighborhood schools.

During the year, the students in the eighth grade class attended numerous assemblies during which representatives from magnet schools came to recruit City Magnet students. In these and in other assemblies, the principal would praise City Magnet as the "best" school in the city, urging students who "have shown their high potential" to choose to stay. This choice process in Philadelphia, in which the school gets to do some of the choosing, was a structure that influenced students' interactions with teachers and peers both in and out of class. The eighth grade students have described the tension they experience in trying to prove to their teachers and to other students that they "really belong" at City Magnet. One student who wanted to attend but was unlikely to be admitted because of attendance and grades told me, "It is not right. Once they let you in and think you can handle it you should be allowed to stay there."

## SUBVERTING RACE AND CLASS HIERARCHIES

City Magnet's enrollment by race is 52% White, 34% African American, 9% Asian, 4% Latino, and 1% other (School District of Philadelphia, 2002-2003). These figures are for the high school and middle school combined, and therefore do not reflect that the middle school has a much larger population of African American children than the high school. Although there are a variety of factors that may contribute to this result that will not be discussed in depth here, it should be noted that while all of the students at City Magnet have been identified as talented academically, there were large variations in academic performance while at the school. Based on interviews with the students and an examination of their grades, such differences tended to correspond with whether or not they attended elementary school in a high-poverty area of the city. Given the residential segregation in Philadelphia, the African American students were much more likely to have attended schools in high-poverty areas with fewer resources, and some of them had to struggle considerably in order to succeed at City Magnet. Some students described how they quickly obtained a reputation in the fifth grade for being "smart" or "not smart" that tended to stick with them and affected their agency in accessing resources for learning. A few have described how in their fifth grade they were expected to have knowledge that they never were exposed to in elementary school, and how their teachers would sometimes say, "You are at City Magnet! You should know that." In addition, aspects of the admissions procedures of Philadelphia magnet schools can serve to disadvantage some of the city's African American students. Neild (1999) found that in Philadelphia, White children who achieved in the 60-79th percentile on standardized tests are more likely to get into a magnet school than Black children with the same scores. Further, some African American students from this study of City Magnet have made comments suggesting that the school does not seem as welcoming to them as it is to White students, which may induce some to seek other options even if they are admitted.

The eighth grade science classroom that is the focus of this study had 33 students. Of these, approximately 40% were White, 34% were Black, 10% were Asian American, 10% were Latino, and 6% were multiracial. Some of these students came to City Magnet from private schools, some from elementary schools in middle-class neighborhoods, and some from elementary schools in poor, predominantly African American neighborhoods. The teacher, Ms. Darcy, is White and came to the city from New Mexico. Of the students that participated in the conversation detailed in this paper, Jana and Tanya are African American, and Kim's father is White and her mother is African American.

At the time of this conversation, the students had just been through a stressful application process, had heard back from the high schools, and had decided where they will attend. The students had a heightened awareness of the school as an evaluator of their performance, and the

possibility of rejection. Each of the three students in this conversation was in a very different position relative to the school. Kim was accepted to City Magnet High, and chose to attend. Kim is a very high achiever, is the daughter of a teacher at the school, and is interested in being a doctor someday. Jana was accepted to City Magnet High, but chose to attend a larger magnet school. She came to City Magnet from a neighborhood school in a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood. She wants to be a physical therapist. She is a high achiever, getting mostly A's in her classes, but she did not achieve those grades when she first came to the school. Based on interviews, the transition to City Magnet seems to have been easier for Kim than for Jana. Jana described how she had to struggle when she first came to City Magnet since "they didn't teach the same kinds of things I had learned." Tanya was not accepted into City Magnet, nor into any of the other schools where she applied. Her grades included a few C's and D's and she frequently arrived to school late. On advice from her mother, she only applied to four schools rather than the ten that were recommended by the school. Tanya is talented at singing and drawing. She wanted to go to the performing arts magnet school, and thought it was unfair that they rejected her because they should have at least given her an audition.

These students, unlike the resistant students described in some studies, do not often oppose school rules, and usually actively engage with classroom activities. They do not reject school success, and are working toward obtaining the future benefits that schooling can provide them in society. However, their participation was still filled with contradictions and conflict, as they worked to establish academic identities within a school that had subjected them to categorization and evaluation.

### Theoretical Framework

There has been considerable research on how students from non-dominant groups may experience schooling as oppressive (e.g., Willis, 1977; Fine, 1991). Schools can be thought of as disciplinary institutions, with practices such as categorizing students based on test scores and grades, and maintaining attendance and behavior records. For the students in City Magnet, the process of categorization has practical consequences, as it could result such varied outcomes as a position in a magnet school or a position in an overcrowded, under-resourced neighborhood high school. However, the school's categorization practices also have implications for students' identity formation, as they impact how students are positioned by others and how they position themselves in ongoing interactions within the school.

Not only do schools hierarchize students, but they also use ideologies to mask the inequalities that result from these disciplinary practices. By ideology, I refer to ideas and beliefs that are circulated and widely accepted

throughout a society yet reflect the underlying interests of the dominant group (e.g., Willis, 1977). Fine (1991) writes about the ideologies that are pervasive in school, such as the myth that public education provides equal opportunity, social mobility and individualism. If these ideologies remain unexamined, students may accept as normal the practices that oppress them. For example, MacLeod (1995) who conducted an ethnographic study of Black and White youth in a low-income neighborhood, describes how many students blamed their lack of effort in school for having low wages and unsteady employment, rather than acknowledging the effects of factors such as racism and limited job opportunities in their area.

Ideologies are conveyed through the discourses that are prevalent within institutions. Gee (2000) describes the idea of "Discourses" as more than just language itself:

Discourses are characteristic (socially and culturally formed, but historically changing) ways of talking and writing about, as well as acting with and toward, people and things. These ways are circulated and sustained within various texts, artifacts, images, social practices, and institutions, as well as in moment to moment social interactions (p. 197).

While there are many relevant discourses that position students, thereby affecting their identity formation, in this paper, by "dominant Discourse" I refer to the Discourse promoted by the school and teachers in official and unofficial communication with students, which is integrally tied to power relations between participants. For example, in City Magnet, the Discourse propagated in assemblies about the school choice process positions students either as "City Magnet material" or "better off someplace else." These comments in quotes are some of the ways in which teachers and administrators have spoken about students. In one awards assembly, students were seated in different parts of the auditorium according to their grades. Those at the front, who had received straight As, were praised for being smart and hardworking, and those in other sections were positioned as having "taken it a little easier" this past semester.

In this school, it can be considered an ideology that the school is "the best" and rewards students only based on merit, since in reality there are many factors that lead to someone being inscribed as a "good student." For example, one of the teachers commented on how unlike other teachers, she avoids assigning take home projects, because there is such a vast difference in what the students end up turning in depending on the material resources, time, and knowledge of the parents. The implication is that many other teachers do assign these types of take home projects, and students are sometimes rewarded based on home resources rather than "merit." As another example, Tanya was occasionally late because she had to prepare two

young nieces to go to school every morning, since her parents and sister worked irregular hours. One could argue that this student was particularly deserving of merit, as she was able to manage both her academics and extensive child care responsibilities, yet she was still inscribed as “tardy,” and therefore as an uncaring and/or irresponsible student. According to the ideology conveyed in school dominant discourse, Tanya’s difficulty in getting admitted to a selective school was her own fault, rather than partly due to a system that penalizes students with home responsibilities. Because African American girls in Philadelphia sometimes have these responsibilities (e.g., Scantlebury, 2005), many members of this group can be disadvantaged by such policies.

It is possible that students in a selective school within a choice system like Philadelphia’s may not examine the functioning of the system and the accompanying ideologies perpetuated by dominant Discourses, may accept them as normal, and reflect them in their own talk. In turn, they may accept the categories that the school assigns them, whether these are positive or negative. For example, in this school, students would often describe themselves and each other as either “smart” or “not smart,” corresponding with how they were positioned by teachers. Some of the students describe changes in their identities over time, saying they were “smart at my old school but not smart here.”

Tanya describes how in her experience, people often end up fulfilling the teacher expectations that accompany assignment to particular categories.

A lot of people that I know stay in categories just because they think that that’s all that they can accomplish. For example, I had a friend who was a junior boxer. He wanted to finish high school, go to community, and have a personal trainer while he was taking college classes. Because he came from a bad neighborhood, certain things were expected of him. A lot of the teachers looked down on him, and told him that he would not be successful. He believed them, and ended up dealing drugs with some dropouts. It’s the same for school. If you’re always being told “oh that was good, but not good enough,” or “why can’t you be good as them?” soon you’re going to believe that you can’t be good enough, and you can’t be as good as them.

Alternatively, students who are marginalized in such a system may resist the negative categories to which the school district assigns them through refusing to participate. Just as Willis’s (1977) study of English working-class youth describes their participation in a counterculture in opposition to the norms of the school, there may also be students who resist the process of being categorized and chosen. For example, the teacher in the study, Ms. Darcy, describes how there were some students in a class she used to teach who would turn in blank



examination sheets for the required standardized tests. She describes how one of them told her, "If I don't take it, you can't say I failed." Fine (1991), in her research in an urban high school, described how some dropouts offered criticisms of the school as reasons for their departure. The phenomenon of associating academic achievement with "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) also could be thought of as a form of resistance, in that students develop identities in opposition to those promoted by the school. Resistance and/or disconnectedness from school may serve to perpetuate social reproduction (e.g., Tobin, Seiler & Walls, 1999), as can students' acceptance of negative categories that are assigned to them, but they are options for students who are relegated to lower status in a choice system.

However, students do not just fall within two groups, one that develops identities in coherence with the ideologies promoted by the school, and one that resists through developing oppositional identities. Instead, the process is more complex, as people navigate the discourses in creative ways. Davies and Harre (1990) write:

We are constituted in one position or another within the course of one story, or even come to stand in multiple or contradictory positions, or to negotiate a new position by 'refusing' the position that the opening rounds of a conversation have made available to us. With such a metaphor we can begin to explain what it means to 'refuse' to accept the nature of the discourse through which a particular conversation takes place (p. 53).

Students are not passive recipients of knowledge about themselves and their place in the world, but instead are agentic as they construct themselves through talk. For example, some students in City Magnet strive for success within the parameters of schools' admission criteria, yet criticize the categories by which they are judged. All students within a school district's classification scheme, whether they are placed at the top, the bottom, or the middle of a hierarchy, experience the disciplinary mechanisms of the school and position themselves within this context. One example of "refusing" could be the student who sat next to me in the "Bs and Cs" section of the awards assembly. After the principal characterized the "A students" at the front as more hardworking, she said, "This is not right. I work very hard at this school! Harder than some of them do. I had never even heard of some of the stuff they teach here." She rejected the image of a "less hardworking" person that she felt was assigned to her, and alluded to some of the advantages the other students had. Yet she did not develop an identity in opposition to school success, as she still strives to succeed based on the measures of the school. By positioning herself as hardworking an<sup>d</sup>

overcoming obstacles, and refusing the position of someone who does not try hard enough, she works to construct an academic identity for herself. Davies and Harre (1990) write:

Positions are identified in part by extracting the autobiographical aspects of a conversation in which it becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position they take up and in what story, and how they are then positioned (p. 50).

In this paper, I analyze a conversation that took place between me and the three students to look for how they position themselves and others in the context of the school community. I examine the interactional strategies that may facilitate these students developing academic identities.

### Data Sources

This ethnographic study primarily took place over the course of one year in an eighth grade urban science classroom. As the university-based researcher, I was a participant observer in the classroom, helping students with their work, sometimes co-teaching, occasionally conducting class, and holding a science lunch enrichment group. Data were collected in the form of field notes, interviews, student work, and video and audiotapes of class and of assemblies where administrators spoke about other magnet high schools. The transcriptions and field notes were coded for emergent themes and sometimes served as the basis for further interviews. Some tenth grade students were also interviewed in order to gain perspectives from students who had remained at City Magnet.

The teacher and four of the students participated in the study as co-researchers, reviewing and discussing videotapes of class. The student-researchers were selected both for their differences in science achievement and for their willingness to participate. All of the girls that were asked agreed to participate, while none of the boys did. While we did not intend to have only female student-researchers, the teacher and I felt it provided an advantage, since some of them expressed how they sometimes did not feel as comfortable talking in front of the boys. Every two weeks, the teacher-researcher, student-researchers, and I would meet to discuss the classroom events of the past two weeks. Three of the student-researchers were Tanya, Jana and Kim.

In addition to taking part in research meetings, the student-researchers interviewed other students about science learning and high school selection. Having students interview other students was advantageous in that the students can better understand the experiences of other students, and would be able to elicit ideas and understand dialect in ways that I could not. The students received training in conducting interviews by the university-researcher, and they benefited from developing

new skills and taking a more active role in constructing and carrying out the research.

As students' academic identities extend beyond school, it was important to also gain insight into how they situate academic subjects relative to other aspects of their identities that are important to them. While I did not follow students outside of the school, I gathered data on students' lives through conversations, journals, and the creation of their home ethnographies.

After the eighth-grade school year ended, the study continued with an investigation of the schooling experiences and academic identity development of the four student researchers as they moved through the Philadelphia school choice system. Data were collected in the form of students' journal writings and transcriptions of conversations among these students and me. The data from the continuing four years of the study not only provide insight into students' identity development, but also on how students position themselves relative to each other and to me.

### Data Analysis

#### *Voicing*

Wortham (2001) draws on the work of Bakhtin (1935/1981) to discuss how words are not just neutral descriptions or representations but are infused with meaning from the ways in which others have used them before. The choice of a specific term therefore not only carries a literal meaning but also references the recognizable groups or social types who commonly use the term. Further, the context in which the speaker uses the term, evaluative comments and tone can reflect the speaker's position relative to these groups and/or social types. Through this process of what Bakhtin's calls "voicing," a speaker can position others, and in doing so articulate his/her own position relative to these others and to the audience.

For example, in the transcript that I analyze later in the paper, one of the students, Jana, uses the word "Caucasian" to describe some guest speakers that came to her school to talk about their experiences in Africa. The literal meaning may be that the speakers were White. However her use of "Caucasian" in this context rather than "White," which is the word she regularly uses, entails her use of a particular voice, indexing a social type that would use that term. One possibility is that she is referencing academics. Another possibility is that she is referencing official, written discourse. While Jana describes both students and teachers as "White" in regular conversation, on the standardized test she had taken during the previous week, "Caucasian" was likely to have been the word used in the section where students had to identify their race.

However, Jana is not necessarily adopting that voice as her own. Depending on how she uses that term in the conversation, she may be

expressing a particular opinion about the types of people who use that term and could either be allying herself with this group or distancing herself from it. In other words, speakers are not just conveying literal meaning (in this case telling the audience of the other students and me that the speakers were Caucasian), but are always in dialogue with other speakers, either present or not present, as they use the terms that have been previously used by others. The particular words that are used in conveying an idea, the tone adopted by the speaker in using them, who is in the audience and other aspects of the context are essential for understanding a particular utterance.

It is important to note that there is not a rigid set of “rules” that connect a particular voice to a particular set of characteristics. Wortham (2001) describes the difficulty in elucidating a solid interpretation of voices and context through utterances because of their unfinalizability, as any utterance could be reinterpreted based on subsequent utterances. For example, the use of the word “Caucasian” on its own does not necessarily point to a particular social group or an opinion of that group, but instead needs to be interpreted based on both previous and subsequent statements in the conversation. Wortham addresses this problem by discussing how indexical signs, which point to relevant aspects of the context, mediate between the utterance and the voicing and interactional positioning that takes place. For example (see below) the student refers to the speakers as “Caucasian,” tells about the visiting speakers in the context of criticizing the school for the activities that it had planned for eighth grade students, says that the event was “not right” because it involved “listening to people talk” and associates the speakers with the teachers who “tease” the students. Wortham writes that the process of the articulation of voices stops when over the course of a conversation, the indexical cues hang together in such a way that the relevant context and the interactional positioning accomplished by participants become clear. If there are enough cues that support each other, a pattern emerges that shows how the character was positioned socially in the narrative. In this case, all of these cues suggest a view of the speakers as a distant social type who conducted an activity that had little relevance to the experiences of the students.

Another way in which speakers can assign voice is through the use of quoted speech (Wortham, 2001). In doing so, a speaker brings other people’s voices to his/her own utterances, and his/her meaning can emerge in interaction with these quoted voices. The voice that is referenced should not be seen as static but as in dialogue with other voices in the conversation. In the analysis, I describe how the students sometimes use quoted speech in discussing their teachers, thereby assigning the teachers a voice and allowing the students to position themselves relative to this voice. As with interpreting speakers’ use of particular terms such as “Caucasian,” the interpretation of quoted speech requires attending to

how the indexical cues over time combine to produce a relatively clear portrayal of the voiced characters and the speaker's relationship to them. In analyzing how the students voice some of the characters that influence their education at this magnet school and how the students position themselves relative to these other voices over the course of the conversation, I attended to indexicals, double-voicing, deictics and subject choice. Deictics work both to reference and establish groups (Wortham, 1996) and are therefore useful in examining interactional positioning. To examine whether words students use to describe characters have a positive or negative valuation, I borrowed from Eggins and Slade's (1997) description of appraisal, "the attitudinal coloring of talk along a range of dimensions including: certainty, emotional response, social evaluation, and intensity" (p. 124). In doing so, I examined the adjectives, use of minor clauses, exclamatives and other clause structures, which can help interpret valuation. For example, Eggins and Slade write that typically, exclamatives are used "to encode a judgment or valuation of events" (p. 89).

As another tool for interpreting how the participants position themselves relative to each other and other characters, I looked for abandoned clauses, which indicate that the speaker was interrupted. Abandoned clauses can point to either conflict or agreement between speakers depending on the context.

### *Narrated and storytelling events*

Wortham (2001) writes that it is important to distinguish between the narrated event and the storytelling event when analyzing a particular interaction. In telling stories about themselves or in making any type of statement, people are not just relaying stories (the narrated event) but are also participating in an interaction that involves the speaker and the audience (the storytelling event) that has implications for the ways in which participants become positioned, and consequently, their identities. In the case of this paper, the narrated events are the stories that the students tell about their school, the class trips, their tests, and their classes. The storytelling event is the interactional positioning that these students accomplish during the event as they speak with each other and with me. According to Wortham, personal pronouns, such as "we" or "they" relate the narrated event and the storytelling event by referring to the speaker, characters in the story and possibly other listeners depending on the context. In my analysis of the interaction, I will weave interpretations of both narrated and storytelling events.

### **The Conversation**

The conversation among the three students and me was held toward the end of the year, over a pizza lunch. The narrated events include the activities that they expect for the end of the year, their school, their

teachers assignments and comments to them, their experiences with the PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) and books they had read. The students had just heard back from high schools as to whether they would be admitted for the following year, and had spent a week taking these standardized tests. The storytelling event (the conversation itself) needs to be viewed in the context of these recent occurrences, as students are dealing with issues of whether they were admitted to City Magnet, their performance on these tests and their achievement more generally, and their upcoming choices as to the school they should attend. As stated earlier, the three students each have different experiences with regards to their high school acceptance and choice.

While I conducted a discourse analysis on the entirety of the conversation, the sections on which I focus below were chosen because they best illustrate the main themes of the conversation that I include in this paper: Teachers/administrators, testing, and authors/books.

*The school is ghetto and the school does not care*

In this first part of the conversation, the overall outcome is to assign the school a negative tone. Interestingly, the students do not characterize the school as “uppity” which had occurred in other occasions. In this conversation, the indexical cues hang together to point to an image of the school as “ghetto” and as intentionally not providing the educational experiences that it should. However, there is some disagreement among the students. Tanya and Jana consistently describe the school and its administration as negative, whereas Kim sometimes offers comments that indicate support for some of the teachers’ and administrators’ actions.

After I ask the students if they are going on the school trip, Jana is critical of the trip to Penn’s Landing as being “dumb,” and says twice that they need to do something fun. The students talk briefly about what the other grades get to do, and some of the students express how those options, such as a picnic, are better. In line 42, Jana says, “They teasing us.”

- 37 **Tanya:** I ain’t looking | forward to that trip |
- 38 **Kim:** We (have seen um) | (raging thing)
- 39 **Stacy:** ()
- 40 **Jana:** What’s that’s (above) Dave and Busters?
- 41 **Kim:** | Yeah |
- 42 **Jana:** That’s so wrong They teasing us.
- 43 **Kim:** They have graduation | we have graduation |
- 44 **Tanya:** | I don’t |
- 45 **Kim:** ()
- 46 **Tanya:** I don’t wanna go to graduation. I’d rather have a talent contest.
- 47 **Jana:** Why they teasing us.
- 48 **Sts:** ()
- 49 **Stacy:** Is it close ()

## SUBVERTING RACE AND CLASS HIERARCHIES

- 50 **Jana:** We could go to Dave and Busters and sit down..eat  
steaks. Eat French fries
- 51 ..play games (.6)
- 52 **Stacy:** You think the end of the year is something .. what  
makes it more boring then
- 53 the rest of the year
- 54 **Kim:** Because ..well .. like Everybody kind of looks for  
ward to the 8th the end of the
- 55 year because .. you don't think you need to do any  
thing () you think its just gonna
- 56 be all fun. .. (.5) And then once it gets there ...its  
kind of boring.
- 57 **Tanya:** I don't like school .. I don't EVER look forward to  
SCHOOL.
- 58 **Sts:** (Ha ha)

Kim follows Jana's statement on the school "teasing" the students with, "They have graduation... we have graduation," which suggests that Kim might not be in agreement with Jana's assessment. She is offering graduation as something that the school has planned especially for them, as eighth graders. Jana again says (line 47), "That's so wrong, why they teasing us." In these statements, "they" seems to refer to either the teachers or the school itself. Under Eggins and Slade's appraisal categories, "teasing" would fall under amplification: enrichment, which is described as, "adding an attitudinal coloring to a meaning when a core neutral word could be used." It is not only that the trips are not fun, but that "they" are actually "teasing," which is an intentional, negative act that humiliates the recipients. Is Jana characterizing the school in a negative light, as sadistic and arbitrary? In order to derive this, or any other interpretation, it is necessary to see how the subsequent utterances cohere, which I will detail later in the analysis.

Tanya then says (line 46), "I don't want to go to graduation. I'd rather have a talent contest." While this is a statement of affect, rather than directly characterizing the school, it still backs up the negative assessment of the school's activities for the students. It is also relevant to note that Tanya identifies herself as artistically inclined by this statement, which is consistent with statements she has made on other occasions. In some ways, she is positioning herself not only as critical of the school but as having different interests and orientation than of the school. In the storytelling event, Tanya is positioning herself relative to two students who were accepted to City Magnet, while she was not. She is also speaking with me, who can play a role as an adult who legitimizes her abilities, which in many ways the school does not. In the past, she has given me several drawings to take home. She could have said, "Graduation is stupid. We should have a talent show." By using "I" she separates herself from the other students and portrays her own interests and capabilities as legitimate.

Jana talks about how at Dave and Buster's she could eat steaks and French fries and play video games could be seen as a simple description of what the students could do at Dave and Buster's. The mention of steaks could call forth an image of wealth, depending on subsequent utterances. This statement about eating steaks at Dave and Buster's, combined with a negative appraisal of the trips that they get to take- the comments at the end of the conversation (lines 280-285) about the school being poor, ghetto, and not having a proper trophy case combine to connote an image of the school's lack of wealth. Following is an excerpt:

- 280 **Jana:** Our school poor. () (little sign that says chess team)  
 () its ghetto
- 282 **Tanya:** We need a trophy case. We have trophies on the  
 table.. trophies on the
- 283 desk .. we got (5 sec) when you go down to the  
 office.. and you go up to
- 284 that table.. you got to go behind the trophies just to  
 see who is behind the
- 285 counter. You be like EXCU:USE ME!
- 286 **Students:** He He
- 287 **Jana:** () Artist of the month.. you got to see the artist of the  
 month
- 288 **Kim:** I know!

This portrayal is coherent with other statements the students have made at different times highlighting the contradiction between the school's image as "the best" and the actual financial situation of the school. The statements throughout this conversation and others solidify into a positioning of the school as not exactly what it seems, as it has many "smart" students in it, but it does not really provide additional resources beyond what other schools have. The narrated events of a lack of school trips to celebrate their eighth-grade year and the trophies cluttered in the office have implications for the storytelling event, in that students give themselves some ground for refusing a position as "not the best" if they are not accepted to City Magnet or do not choose to remain there.

#### *Establishing different social groups*

In the introductory discussion on school trips in lines 37-58, the pronouns that students use effectively establish the social groups that provide the context for students' talk. In most of the sentences, the students do not specify an individual or a group by name. The word "they" is never directly connected to specific teachers, the school administration or some other they. However, from the context, it seems like "they" refers to the adults in the school, teachers and administrators, who are responsible for planning their programs.

Jana speaks about a "she," referring to a teacher who used to miss



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their class to go on trips with another grade. Her name is specified at a later point. "We" refers to the students and their eighth-grade class. Throughout the entire transcript, "we" is never used to refer to the school as a whole, except for in line 282 when Tanya says, "we need a trophy case." "We" is also never used to refer to all students, since sixth and seventh grades are also "they." This demonstrates that in this conversation the students are identifying with their eighth grade as distinct from the school, the teachers and other students.

In lines 59 -98, the portrayal of the teachers, the school and their class becomes more solid through Jana's stories and Kim's comments.

- 59 **Jana:** Last year I had Ms. Aaron last year ( )  
60 **Kim:** But she was a ( ) last year  
61 **Jana:** Well.. somebody ( )  
62 **Kim:** ( )  
63 **Jana:** But um.. she was an advisor last year...eighth grade  
advisor.. I don't know  
64 She was somebody.. She said she was the 7th grade  
house director because Ms.  
65 Smith left so  
66 **Tanya:** /Why'd Ms. Smith leave?  
67 **Jana:** ( ) Alright So ... so then she.. #she doesn't have a  
class # But Last year ..  
68 every time we had English.. we had English like  
twice .. #three times a week..  
69 ( )#On Tuesday & Friday# ..On Tuesdays and Fridays  
she would miss our class  
70 cause she's said she's going somewhere with her 8th  
grade.(every time she said  
71 "Oh I won't be here tomorrow I'm going somewhere  
with my eighth grade  
72 advisory." And then  
73 **Kim:** | And then when she saw Pearl Harbor last year  
74 **Jana:** Right ... This year we sit here.. and I mean nobody's  
doing anything.... Like  
75 by now they'd be on so many trips.  
76 **Tanya:** We haven't been on no trips  
77 **Jana:** We sat here and nobody know what she looks like.  
But now we don't go  
78 nowhere and we went on the most trips in sixth  
grade (everybody took us..)  
79 **L:** Mr. Sinclair took like two trips and that was only  
with the WHOLE sixth grade.

Jana uses quoted speech in lines 71-72 to voice the English teacher as neglecting their class to go on trips with another class. When voicing the teacher she changes to a higher pitch, rolls her eyes slightly, and moves

her head back and forth, which conveys a tone of indifference. Combined with her subsequent comment in line 77, “we sat here and nobody knows what she looks like,” and the comments about how they do not go on any trips, her disapproval of the absent teacher and her impression that the teacher did not care that much about their class becomes fairly clear. In addition, while she later talks about sixth grade as being better than eighth grade, she draws a connection between the two years by saying in line 74, “This year we sit here” and line 77, referring to when their teacher left them, “We sat here.”

Similar to Tanya’s assessment, Jana portrays the class as neglected. However, Kim proposes a statement which conflicts with Jana’s. After Jana says, “We went on the most trips in sixth grade” (line 78) Kim says “Mr. Taggart took like two trips and that was only with the WHOLE sixth grade,” which is a negative statement about the past. Though it is hard to tell from just these utterances, it seems that Kim and Jana position themselves differently relative to their current schooling situation. Later in the transcript, in lines 162-179, Jana and Kim dispute whether they had ten books to choose from last year or more than that. Jana was saying they had more before, which is consistent with her depiction of conditions now being worse than conditions then for the eighth grade. Kim was saying that “even last year” their books were limited to ten. While in the end she concedes to Jana, these exchanges indicate a pattern where Kim’s narrated events depict the current conditions for the eighth grade in more positive ways than Jana’s do. Relating this to the storytelling event, through their disputes, Jana positions herself as more distant from the school and critical of the way their class is treated as eighth graders. This difference in positioning is understandable, given that Kim was accepted at City Magnet, chose to stay there, and had a parent who was a teacher. Jana was accepted to City Magnet but chose not to attend.

In terms of the social groups, Jana is allying herself with the “we” of eighth-grade students, who do not get the benefits that they should receive. However, Kim seems to be more conflicted, occasionally making statements that contradict Jana’s portrayal of their class as neglected. Her statements suggest that she does not completely accept that there is such a strong social group division between the “we” of eighth-grade students and the “they” of the school administrators and teachers.

The students then talk over each other in describing their second “trip,” which was when guest speakers brought artifacts from Africa to share with the students. There are numerous false starts and abandoned clauses.

- 85 **Jana:** We only had one trip coming to us.. that was paper making and we made our  
 86 own paper... that was that was that was alright#...  
 And Then um.  
 87 **Student:** African than()

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- 88 **Jana:** They was uh  
89 **Students:** (inaud)  
90 **Jana:** Un No they wasn't . they were um Caucasian but  
91 **Sts:** (hehe)  
92 **Jana:** but they lived in Africa for a while and they had  
some artifacts.  
93 **Tanya:** I don't think that's right.  
94 **Jana:** Living in Africa?  
95 **Tanya:** No listening to people talk  
96 (he)  
97 **Jana:** I don't think so either

Jana describes the speakers as Caucasian, which makes the other students laugh. By calling them Caucasians, she is speaking in an academic register, which is unusual for Jana, and ascribes an academic voice to the visitors. While it is possible she used the word Caucasian because of my presence, a White woman from an academic setting, it is more likely that she was referencing the social position of the visiting speakers, since she has not used that register with me before, and has rarely, if ever, used the word "Caucasian" with me in the four years since that time. She may also be referencing writers of standardized tests, as Caucasian is often an option presented when students are asked about their race. By using "Caucasian" rather than "White," which is the term she normally uses to describe people, she seems to be voicing the visitors as different from the eighth-grade students. While she does not initially say anything directly negative about them, her initial response to Tanya's "I don't think that's right" is to say "Living in Africa?" which indicates that she might find something strange about these speakers. Tanya says that the problem wasn't that they were White people collecting artifacts in Africa but that it is not right to listen to people talk. Jana agrees, with a full sentence, "I don't think so either."

Just as the teachers are a "they," these speakers are also "they," thereby establishing a linguistic connection between the speakers and the teachers. This connection, suggested by pronoun use, is reinforced by Tanya's statements that link the visitors who made them sit and listen to their talking with teachers, who make them do the same thing. "They," the visitors, are similar to "they," the teachers and school personnel, who provide them with inappropriate activities. The use of the word "Caucasian" combined with a negative assessment of the value of the visit for the students, and the links between these visitors and teachers convey an idea of the speakers as just another group of people who are distant from students and provide inappropriate activities.

Tanya and Jana's comments in lines 93-98 serve to turn the talk away from the content of trips and speakers and back to the fact that they are not treated well by the school. By the end of this chunk of conversation,

the quoted speech, stories, and comments hang together in such a way that the school and teachers have neglected their grade and have not planned special things for them, whereas they did for other grades. Instead, their eighth grade is being “teased,” to the point at which they are intentionally neglected or provided with activities that are not right for them.

At this point, the conversation gets interrupted by someone coming into the classroom. Next, I ask students how their interviews are going. Their statements serve both to explain why they have not been doing as many, and to turn the conversation back to discussing their teachers. In the following section, I discuss how two new groups come into the conversation, authors and test question writers. I examine the ways in which students use voicing to position these groups through their talk, and the implications for the students’ academic identities.

*Positioning test question writers and characters in books*

In line 108, Jana changes the topic from interviews back to classes. In this next section, from 108-252, the students begin talking about books and the PSSAs. The students introduce some new characters into their conversation: authors of books, characters in books, writers of test questions and “you.” Overall, the test question writers are voiced as demanding unreasonable tasks that make students look bad, and the teachers are voiced as arbitrary and inconsiderate. While in this particular section, a book character is voiced as silly, this characterization of book characters varies later in the conversation.

- 108 **Jana:** English is so boring because they giving you these stories that don't
- 109 nobody ever want to read?
- 110 **Tanya:** |English like..()|
- 111 **Kim:** |Its really easy |
- 112 **Jana:** There's one Sto:ry where the girl looks under the flo:or boards for a
- 113 di:ary.
- 114 **Kim:** ()
- 115 **Jana:** |That's how'd she know to look under the floor boards for a diary |
- 116 **Kim:** ()
- 117 **Jana:** There's a Loose floorboard.. talk bout "One day I was cleaning .. and I
- 118 looked up at a loose floorboard ..a and found a diary" ..Nobody looks under
- 119 a loose floorboard you just walk over it and make sure you don't fall in.
- 120 **Tanya:** I like reading .. better than math.. but I know I got a bunch of questions
- 121 wrong... because they ask questions like (.5)

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- 122                    “Which is the best answer  
and I’m be like (.5) OK.... They’ll be a lady who  
opened a bookstore..
- 123                    #this lady opened a bookstore#..and one of the mul  
tiple choice questions
- 124                    be like “is the main point of this story a opening a  
book store, A woman
- 125                    who loves literature” and its like COME ON! Which  
one is it oh my God!
- 126 **Jana:**           Its just one of the interpretations=they want you to  
have an exact
- 127                    answer ..what they want you have for that answer..  
It just depends on how
- 128                    you look at the story.
- 129 **Kim:**            ()
- 130 **Tanya:**          |I like reading |
- 131 **Jana:**            |Readings not my best ()|
- 132 **Kim:**            its (short?) you cant get a lot |from it|
- 133 **Tanya:**          |Right.| Look and then they ask you question like  
“in nineteen..uh.. in
- 134                    nineteen eighty nine” Not 1989.
- 135 **Stacy:**          |()|
- 136 **Tanya:**          “In 1872 people used the word saucy. Does saucy  
mean A. What is
- 137                    Saucy.”
- 138 **Jana:**            And you can’t use ..They give you words you never  
heard of.. and you
- 139                    can’t use the dictionary you just sit there looking  
dumb like.
- 140 **Kim:**            (he-he)
- 141 **Teacher:**       Stop talking about Kim like that.
- 142 **Sts:**            Ha hah hah
- 143 **Kim:**            Thank you Mr. Smith.
- 144 **Teacher:**       I’m just sticking up for you.
- 145 **Tanya:**          When I was done.. what I was done the multiple  
choice questions.. I
- 146                    answered none of the questions about septuagenari  
ans..(.5) When I was
- 147                    done ... I looked up septuagenarian I’m like  
“Hmmm. Maybe I should
- 148                    check my answers.”
- 149 **Sts:**            ()
- 150 **Jana:**            I’ll do well in English anyway cause I don’t like read
- 151 **Tanya:**          I’ll do better in English and math .. than math
- 152 **Jana:**            Math is my favorite subject

In this part of the conversation, the students use quoted speech to voice both the test question writers and a book character. Through voicing these

characters, they are able to articulate their own position relative to these groups and to the school itself. For example in lines 117-118, when Jana quotes the book, "One day I was cleaning... and I looked up at a loose floorboard...and found a diary," she uses a higher pitch than normal, and shakes her head and smiles. She seems to be portraying a silly character, which is confirmed by her next statement, "nobody looks under a loose floorboard you just walk over it and make sure you don't fall in." This utterance serves as a negative appraisal of the character, and a way of positioning herself as a much more reasonable person. Her voicing of the character in this way also supports her earlier statement that "nobody" would want to read such stories. While in the narrated event she is commenting on the characters in books, in the storytelling event she is also positioning herself as more reasonable than the types of people (teachers) who would assign such material that nobody would want to read.

In using quoted speech to voice the test question writers, Tanya adopts a stiff, pedantic tone with a lower voice. While Tanya does not use metapragmatic verbs, her position relative to these writers becomes clear based on the comments that follow, "It's like COME ON! Which one is it - Omigod!" Through these exclamations, she conveys a negative evaluation of the writers, communicating that both answers are fine, and it is the questions themselves that is poorly written.

Tanya follows the negative view of test question writers with, "I like reading." This may seem somewhat unrelated to the prior statements, but it serves to introduce a new distinction between answering reading comprehension questions on a test and reading, which is a different sort of activity. So far, they have been lumped together, as the students have voiced both books characters and test question writers as sometimes not making sense. Tanya's statement establishes the two forms of texts - the types of reading that students do on tests and actual books - as different. Kim reinforces this distinction with her comment that implies that the excerpts that they give you on tests are too short, so it is not surprising that it is hard to answer some of the reading comprehension questions. In the context of Tanya's statement, Lisa's comment suggests that reading real books is a more legitimate type of activity than reading the excerpts on tests. Later on the conversation, reading becomes the focus of conversation, as the students discuss the books they like and do not like.

This excerpt introduces the use of the deictic "you" in social grouping. In line 126, instead of using "we" or "us" to refer to her class, Jana says, "Its just one of the interpretations.. they want you to have an exact answer...what they want you have for that answer.. It just depends on how you look at the story." She also uses "you" in line 118, "Nobody looks under a loose floorboard you just walk over it and make sure you don't fall in." While Jana makes most of the "you" statements, Kim and Tanya also use "you" in similar ways throughout the rest of the conversation. Sometimes in conversation, "you" can accomplish distance from a particular group.

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However, based on an examination of the sentences in which “you” is the subject or the direct object, it seems like “you” has a different function in the talk among the students, with two related meanings. “You” is a group that extends beyond the eighth grade, includes me the researcher and is synonymous with, “any reasonable person.”

Another interpretation of the use of “you” is that the “you” is subjected to unreasonable conditions. They want you to have an exact answer. She gives you books you got to choose from, rather than letting you choose your own. The students may be distancing themselves from the position of being subjected to aggravating conditions, but I think it is more likely that they interpret this “you” to extend beyond themselves, to anyone who has to endure the arbitrariness of teachers who do not give you choices on books to read (line 167) or tests with new words, yet they don’t let you use a dictionary (line 139). Students everywhere are included in this group, not just the eighth grade “we” that doesn’t get good trips. Even adults like me are included, since the students seem to assume (correctly) that I also would not want to have to take a test on words I do not know.

The test question writers are a new “they” (line 121, 133). It is interesting that they are given a personal pronoun, since Tanya could have said “The question was like ‘which is the best answer.’” The “they” marks the test question writers as a social group and connects them with the teachers. When Jana says, “they want you to have an exact answer,” it could be just question writers, but it could be teachers as well. As an example of “they” referring to teachers being arbitrary, like the test writers who ask silly questions, here is an excerpt from later in the conversation:

- 260 **Jana:** And they be talking about #no questions til the end#  
Well by the time  
261 the end comes I don’t got my question I don’t know  
what I was talking  
262 about ten minutes ago.  
263 **Kim:** It doesn’t make sense when you ask question | ()  
264 **Jana:** | yeah cause then you | () |  
265 **Tanya:** | Why | you ask that?  
266 **Kim:** Yeah  
267 **Tanya:** Ten minutes later... I hate when teachers do that ..  
Just wait til the end  
268 of the class.  
269 **Stacy:** OK..  
270 **Tanya:** OK ()  
271 **Jana:** and my question was ... Um.. And they always  
interrupt () anyway

As we have seen throughout these two excerpts, the juxtaposition of “you” and “they” reinforces students’ identities as reasonable and test

question writers and teachers as arbitrary and somewhat hostile to their achievement by interrupting them or using words that are unfamiliar. Jana says, "They give you words you never heard of.. and you can't use a dictionary," implying that reasonable people would use dictionaries. She also says, "you just sit there looking dumb like." "You" make sense; "they" do not make sense, yet "they" still try to place students in situations that make them look deficient. The students' characterizations of both the teachers and test question writers hang together with earlier statements when Jana described the school/teachers as "teasing." The word implies an intentional humiliation. Both teachers and test question writers set up situations where the result is students looking dumb, a particularly egregious form of humiliation with more serious consequences than "teasing" students about the possibility for better class trips.

What types of interactional positioning have been accomplished by the students in this section, both in the context of the storytelling event and in the context of the narrated events? In these two excerpts, the narrated events are the students' experiences taking the standardized tests, and with teachers who do not allow them to ask questions when they want. Through their pronoun use and evaluative comments, they position teachers and test writers in negative ways, and in contrast portray themselves as reasonable. In the storytelling event, as they interact with each other, the students are positioned as capable and competent even though their success is sometimes impeded. For example, Tanya's narrated event in line 145 concerns her looking up a word from the test in the dictionary and deciding that she should have changed her answers. The narrated event by itself could be seen as a story of regret over having incorrect answers. However, in the context of Jana's earlier comments, Tanya is positioning herself within the storytelling event as conscientious and reasonable. Jana voiced a reasonable "you," who would look up an unfamiliar word, and Tanya takes up this specific action.

What position have they been taking with respect to me, the interviewer? I occupy a marginal role in the conversation, asking very few questions and offering few opinions. Their use of pronouns changed over the course of the conversation from mostly "we" and "they," which refers to the eighth grade and the school staff respectively, to frequent use of "you." My speculation is that the use of "you" could be a way of including me in their group, which also places them in a group with an adult that comes from the university. Their statements seem to imply that I would agree with their assessments of the different groups.

The students' talk on this issue may seem to be simply complaining about tests, but it is also connected to larger societal inequalities that have implications for the educational and career opportunities available to them, and the development of their academic identities. Some researchers have criticized standardized tests as not accurately predicting the performance of African American students (Crouse & Trusheim, 1988) or of



being culturally inappropriate (Hilliard, 1990). Test questions that emphasize unfamiliar vocabulary can be thought of as arbitrarily testing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that students acquire in the home rather than at school. Because tests are considered an objective measure, evaluating students based on vocabulary knowledge can be thought of as legitimating racial and socioeconomic discrimination. While the students do not mention race here, their rejection of the capability of the test questions for measuring their intellectual worth is an insight that could allow some protective measure against accepting being inscribed negatively. As I worked with these particular students over time, they became more aware of the biases in test questions and would discuss explicitly how they were disadvantaged because they grew up speaking in a completely different way than some of their peers. Yet even as eighth-graders, through their talk they establish various positions (a common sense “you” and test question writers) in ways that allow them to reject the standards by which they are judged. As I argue later, in doing so, they are able to reject the assessment method without developing an oppositional approach to academic identity.

#### *Positioning authors*

In line 141, the talk is interrupted by a teacher. After a few turns of speaking about the amount of work they have, Jana makes a criticism, but as an “I” statement, and somewhat hesitantly. “I do not like the fact that she give us a book called the independent reading but she give you books you got to choose from?” There seems to be a disagreement, which I described earlier, between Kim and Jana, in that Kim thinks they were limited last year also, but Jana thinks there were more books to choose from back then. Kim changes her quantity of books, but does not give up her turn to speak. Her statement ends up in agreement with Jana, that there was more choice before, and in support of the idea that it is better to choose your own book. In line 180, Tanya talks about how she likes old books. She uses quoted speech from Shakespeare, then says, “What is THAT? .. Like that made any sense.” Following are excerpts from their talk about different authors and characters and books.

- 180 **Tanya:** I like old books.. Like I read Alice and Wonderland  
and the looking  
181 glass. I like books like that .. Like old books...  
That’s why I pick  
182 Shakespeare I don’t understand what they sa:aying.  
They was talking and  
183 then they go.. real 2000 words. And they was in  
eighteenth century, they  
184 was like “we ran down the hallway.. and a man  
attempt to go downstairs  
185 to see what was going on. We came upon a dog.

186 Gouging the neck of his  
 enemy. And then I blew his brains out.” What is  
 THAT?

187 **Sts:** Ha ha

188 **Tanya:** Huh OKa:ay thank you! Like that made any sense.  
 189 (inaudible for 2 minutes. Students are showing me a  
 passage in a book)

190 **Jana:** All these books I really like that I had to read in sev  
 enth grade we had  
 191 that book challenge thing... the only book that I read  
 like that was ..old

192 **Stacy:** What is it

193 **Tanya:** That book good.

194 **Jana:** I like stuff like that . But Gather the Flowers is so  
 boring I don’t know if  
 195 its just some stories people make up.. but some of  
 them is so long.. and  
 196 some of them is so confusing...  
 197 **Kim:** I read it like three times before | ()|  
 198 **Jana:** I think that’s a ()  
 199 **Tanya:** I like Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes like the  
 mysteries?.. Some  
 200 are real interesting. Like the one I just read I knew t  
 he answer.. But the  
 201 one I’m on now  
 202 **Kim:** the ()?  
 203 **Tanya:** No, the (). The butler read a piece of paper and then  
 they try to fig-  
 204 ure out why he read the paper. ASK the BUTLER!  
 ....

211 **Jana:** That title doesn’t fit the story.. () Uh I’ll talk about  
 (Going for)

212 **Kim:** |That was a good book |  
 213 **Jana:** |That was a good book |  
 214 **Jana:** Some of them is good..some of them like “why.. did  
 you write this.”

215 **Jana:** Cause like its confusing.. Almost almost everything..  
 cause like almost  
 216 is a person..()  
 ....

220 **Tanya:** I got to read over and over again cause it was like  
 “Really? What a  
 221 peculiar statement said he?”  
 222 **Sts:** (he he)  
 223 **Tanya:** And they be having a whole conversation.. and the  
 weird thing is...  
 224 they’ll have a conversation.. and then at the end ..  
 the core points .. and  
 225 then start a new paragraph with another quote.. and

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226 it will still be the  
 person that is talking in the paragraph before  
 227 **Kim:** You're not supposed to do that you're suppose to.. I  
 don't know  
 .....  
 233 **Jana:** |No periods | no commas and then.He .almost.. said  
 he like Oh my god  
 234 **Tanya:** Oh.. my goodness  
 235 **St:** Part of this it said earlier  
 236 **Stacy:** That's so long  
 237 **Sts:** Wow  
 238 **Jana:** Yeah.  
 239 **Kim:** Then you'll be all out of breath again?.. The next  
 sentence is like five  
 240 lines long  
 241 **Jana:** can do that but If we do that in our homework we  
 get five points  
 242 taken off.  
 243 **Sts:** (he he)  
 244 **Jana:** That's a run-on sentence.  
 245 **Sts:** (He he)  
 246 **Jana:** Well you tell him that.  
 247 **Sts:** He he  
 248 **Jana:** They'll do this and the sentence wouldn't be that  
 long  
 249 **Tanya:** And this is one thing you would never guess.  
 Sherlock Holmes was a  
 250 Cocaine addict. He was on Opium. Sherlock  
 Holmes = he need help. He  
 251 need to go to some AA meetings or something I  
 don't know Oh my gosh (

When they begin talking about authors and books, there is no consistent positive or negative value assigned to them. Some books are good, some are not. Some make no sense, but they are also fun to read. Tanya likes Sherlock Holmes, though she points out aspects of the story that are unrealistic. Even Jana, who at first says she does not like to read at all, later modifies her position and says that she has liked reading some things. Although the books are sometimes confusing, it is notable that there are no negative statements about what authors do to students. Test question writers make students look dumb, teachers interrupt them, but confusing writing does not harm students directly.

In line 223, Tanya describes one book that used an unusual structure for paragraphs and quotations. Kim says, "You're not supposed to do that, you're supposed to..." Next, the students describe a long passage in a book they have to read that has a lot of commas in it. Kim shows me the passage (line 233) and the students and I comment on it. Jana

then provides some comments about the “run on sentence” that are interpreted as a joke.

Jana’s comment refers back to the earlier discussion in several ways. She speaks of “We,” which points to the eighth grade. The teachers are not referenced directly, nor are the test givers, but they are implicit players, in that they would take the five points off. There may be multiple literal meanings for this joke. However, based on the context provided by the indexical cues, Jana seems to be juxtaposing the writer, who has crazy, long sentences, and the teachers, who evaluate the students in arbitrary and unfair ways, in order to provide a stance from which she can criticize the standards by which the school judges the students. In the narrated events, the teachers give students standardized tests on words they do not know, do not let them ask questions, do not let them use dictionaries, which reasonable people would do, and do not let them have choice in the books they read. Yet they assign the students books written by authors who flout the conventions for writing.

Jana is therefore not just telling a story about a long, confusing sentence. Jana’s “You tell him that” suggests her recognition of the inconsistency and unfairness of the school’s evaluation practices. The value of the knowledge that students are tested on comes into question, since authors who write run-on sentences can be successful and are not subject to the same rules that the students are. Jana’s joke could be read as, “You (in this case the teacher who just took five points off rather than the collective you that was used earlier) go and tell him that – I’d like to see how he wouldn’t listen to you. Why should we?” In the storytelling event, Jana positions herself as logical, in contrast to the teachers who are positioned as arbitrary.

While the joke is told by Jana, the other students ratify it with loud, extended laughter. In doing so, they position themselves in the storytelling event in alliance with Jana. The joke also coheres with some of Tanya’s and Kim’s other statements on authors and teachers. Clear patterns emerge voicing teachers, school and tests as arbitrary, somewhat cruel, and subjecting them to rules and practices that don’t make much sense, and authors as varied, unconventional, and sometimes making little sense. Tanya follows Jana’s joke with, “And this is one thing you would never guess. Sherlock Holmes was a Cocaine addict. He was on Opium. Sherlock Holmes = he need help. He need to go to some AA meetings or something.” The “and” indicates that the speaker is proposing a connection between her utterance and the previous one. How is the cocaine addiction of Sherlock Holmes, a character in a story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, related to a different author’s run-on sentences? Tanya’s new information contributes to the voicing of authors as not subject to conventions. Not only do they have sentences that flout the conventions for writing, but also some of the characters that they create have drug problems and thereby exhibit behaviors that conflict with social norms.

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The discussion of authors and book characters supports students' opposition to the school by serving as a voice that runs counter to the voices of teachers and test question writers. The authors are voiced as strange, irrational, confusing, and not needing to adhere to the rules that the students need to conform to. It is important to note that while the students are not as critical of the authors, the students do not seem to identify with them either. I would argue that both teachers and authors are depicted as not always making that much sense, while they, the students, position themselves as reasonable. They may be subject to arbitrary rules that try to confound them, but they know how to act. They know how to ask questions, to avoid loose floorboards, and when to look things up in a dictionary. They may need to read long sentences and crazy plots, and will sometimes enjoy it, but they can recognize that the stories are crazy and do not correspond to real situations. These students are affirming their own capabilities for acting in ways that make sense, in spite of an environment that at times is "not right."

Through their positioning of authors and teachers, the students are able to take a position in the storytelling event from which they can support each other in being critical of the school's practices of classifying and hierarchizing, yet still maintaining academic identities. They are subject to unfair conditions, silly test questions, rules that real successful people are not subject to and are evaluated based on those standards. But their response is not to oppose academics, in the form of the content learned and the importance of learning in general. Specifically, in this conversation they position themselves as reasonable, being good at either English or math (depending on which student), enjoying good books, knowing how to look up information that they need and other positive attributes that cohere with an academic identity. There is a consistency throughout the conversation of students (most often between Jana and Tanya) in not accepting the school's evaluation of them. In positioning themselves in this way, engaging in academic pursuits can still be considered desirable. They are aware that the standards by which they are judged are unfair, but they do not feel a need to reject all activities associated with school.

### *Differences in students' contributions*

Although there is some coherence to the way that characters and groups are voiced in the conversation, indicating the establishment of a group identity among the students, there are also differences among the students that emerge throughout the discussion. Kim speaks much less often than Jana and Tanya and makes fewer "I" statements. In addition, she makes several comments that mitigate the other students' criticisms of the teachers and administrators. Both her quiet and her specific comments may be distancing herself from negative views of the school and the teachers, which is congruent with her position as a teacher's daughter and as having selected and been accepted by the high school. In terms

of her academic identity, she may identify somewhat more than the other two with adults in teacher types of roles, as she showed me the book with the run-on sentence, and she responded to my questions. Though I was not a teacher at the school, I was still working closely with the teacher and offered a science lunch session for the students. However her lack of opposition to some aspects of the school does not mean that she constructs her identity in alliance with the school's classification practices. She confirms the other students' assessments of the arbitrariness of the test questions, seems to prefer to choose her own books, and agrees (line 266) that you should be able to ask questions without having to wait until the end of the class. Her constructions of herself in relation to the school seem complex and somewhat contradictory.

While Tanya and Jana are both critical of the school, Tanya has a greater proportion of sentences that contain "I" as the subject, whereas Jana often used "we" and "you." In terms of her academic identity, Tanya may be reinforcing her difference from the other students in her talk, as many of the eighth-grade students do not share in her experience of having been excluded by the school. She therefore may believe that she cannot speak for them. Tanya seems to identify herself with these authors, speaking frequently of liking reading in general and enjoying particular books. She constructs an academic identity as an artist in which she believes that her talents should have been recognized at the school (through a talent show) and in the school choice process more generally (by offering her an audition to the performing arts magnet school). In her articulation of different voices, her statements emphasize that the schools' methods of judging people have no hold on the authors, who can say and do strange things yet still be deemed successful. One implication could be that it should not have so much of a hold on how she defines herself or on her own ambitions either. Overall, her statements cohere with resisting the way the school has categorized her, yet still maintaining an academic identity.

In constructing her academic identity Jana tells more stories about the teachers, uses more declarative statements and frequently uses quoted speech. Her statements comprise most of the talk, and she makes the most statements that criticize the school directly. She voices other characters that are powerful in the school as unreasonable and positions herself as reasonable. Though Jana was accepted to City Magnet, she depicts the school as having neglected their class and she does not want to stay there. However, in speaking about the eighth-grade's experiences, her pronoun use indicates that she generally does not separate herself from them. Jana, by her use of "you" and "we" may be positioning herself as an included member of the eighth-grade believing her critical opinions are shared by the other members. Even in her position of being judged as successful by the school, she does not identify with the specific school or accept some the methods by which she has been categorized.

### Conclusions

All three of these students ended up with good grades in high school and are currently attending college. In speaking with these students over the course of their high school and early college years, none of them ever described themselves as resisting achievement, or portrayed academic success as “acting white.” While this study has limitations in that it only addresses the experiences of these three magnet school students, a close look at their experiences can still help illuminate some of the factors that can support students from non-dominant groups in school success. Close investigation of the conversations among these students can show the specific processes through which academic identities may be constructed through talk within a competitive educational environment that was not always perceived as supportive to them.

One of these processes of identity construction, highlighted in this discourse analysis, is voicing different social types in such a way that academic content (in this case, books) and oppressive methods of evaluation (in this case, the judgments of teachers, administrators and test question writers that influence whether students are inscribed as “City Magnet material” or not) are separate and opposed to each other. In the narrated events, the authors of novels are voiced as defying conventions and not even meeting the school’s standards, yet they are still successful, which highlights the absurdity of some of the school’s categorizations of the students. In addition, students spend considerable time in the conversation criticizing other aspects of the school, such as the activities that the school plans for them and the financial situation, which serves as a contrast to the image of the school as “the best.” In the storytelling event, as students point out the contradictions between classroom content and assessment, and between the high status of the school and the reality they experience, the students position themselves as reasonable, competent, and engaged in academics. They construct themselves and their eighth-grade class as “people who make sense,” as opposed to the teachers and their rules and tests, which do not. They are therefore able to refuse some of the ideologies perpetuated in the school’s dominant Discourses, such as that that the “best” students get admitted to the high school and that if one does not get admitted, one is somehow lesser. The specific ways in which they refuse do not involve a rejection of academics, but instead allow them to continue to see themselves as achievers despite an organizational structure designed to potentially label them as failures and at times restrict them from membership in academic communities.

Positioning different groups and themselves through talk offers a powerful tool for the students to position themselves in positive

ways, despite their ambivalent relationship with the school. The students do not need to conceive of themselves as model City Magnet students to see themselves as achievers; rather, they can be like the authors that are assigned in their English classes and flout conventions, or be like “reasonable people” and seek information that they do not know. It is important to note that the school itself provides students with the tools and content of refusal and organizational critique by teaching them literature. Without exposure to this type of academic content, it might be more difficult for them to construct themselves in positive ways.

Studies such as this one that focus on how students position themselves and others through peer interactions provide insight into academic identity formation and the subtle ways that school environments can be perceived as unwelcoming to students from non-dominant groups. In achieving a greater understanding of these issues, it may be possible to alter some of the structural conditions in order to further support these students. One aspect that has a focus of other studies is the potential negative impact on educational quality of a strong emphasis on standardized tests (e.g., McNeil & Valenzuela, 1999; Sloan, 2005). Certainly this study provides more support to the argument that it is problematic to focus on test preparation at the expense of other parts of the curriculum. In this case, it is the students’ exposure to literature that supported them in constructing an academic identity in spite of experiences with standardized tests in which they were likely to have been disadvantaged.

Another possibility for structural change is the school choice process itself. It could be argued that students should not have had to compete with each other on an uneven playing field for spaces in the magnet high school. While some people may argue that competition can support achievement, in the context of overall inequalities in the Philadelphia school system, this argument has some serious flaws. In addition, teachers and administrators could be more aware of the impact of the dominant Discourses surrounding the choice process, such as language that categorizes students as “City Magnet material” or those who are “not trying hard enough.” Such language presents a dichotomy between those who are academically successful and those who are not so inclined, whereas the reality of students’ abilities, interests, and identities is substantially more complex. Many students who are labeled as not “City Magnet material” actually have high aspirations and view themselves as achievers. Based on the research conducted in this magnet school, it seems that a change in the official Discourse and even more importantly, in the selection process itself, would better support the development of students’ academic identities.



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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

Key:

- : Elongated vowel
- = word said with little space between them
- || Interrupted talk
- ...: Broken talk
- #: Bounds passages said quickly
- underline: emphasis
- CAPS: Loud talking
- ?: Low talking
- (1): 1 second pause
- () : Inaudible section
- "" change in tone of voice and facial expression