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Analyzing Children's Social Positioning and Struggles for Recognition in a Classroom Literacy Event

Jessica C. Zacher
California State University, Long Beach

In this article I use a double theoretical lens of Bourdieuan (1985, 1991) and Bakhtinian (1981, 1986) perspectives on social space and the dialogism of everyday literacy events to analyze and discuss a classroom literacy event. In this event, which takes place in a diversely populated classroom with a social justice language arts curriculum, four boys read aloud intertextual stories while managing the shifting power dynamics of their social hierarchies. At stake in this analysis are the following two understandings: first, of the ways the boys' texts reflected and produced their ideological positionings in relation to issues of gender, race, and class; and second, of the ways that these positionings were linked to their struggles for the symbolic "right" to speak in literacy events. Findings highlight the usefulness of such a combined theoretical framework for understanding the ways children's social hierarchy maintenance might reproduce social inequalities and might also allow them to struggle against hierarchies and claim new identities for themselves.

Introduction: Analyzing Children's Social Positioning in Literacy Events

DeAndre' and one of his two best friends, John, finished their practice tests and were excused from their tables by Ms. Linda. They went together to the classroom carpet area, took out a chessboard from the game shelf, and began to set up the board. A few minutes later, I watched Marcus turn in his test to Ms. Linda and get permission to get a game out. He brought a game of dominoes to the carpet and began to take the tiles out one at a time, watching DeAndre and John as he did so. Concentrating on the board, the pair of boys steadfastly ignored him. Arturo, DeAndre and John's other best friend, came over and sat down between Marcus and the pair, with his back to Marcus. As DeAndre, John, and Arturo's kindergarten teacher and a visitor to the school over the past five years, I knew that these children had all once been friends, but over the past several months I had watched as DeAndre, John, and Arturo, three of the "most popular" boys in the school by their own reckoning, pushed Marcus farther and farther out of the group.

I sat down near Marcus, taking occasional notes in my ever-present note-
book. Arturo said he would "play the winner" of the chess game; Marcus then asked Arturo if he would play a game of dominoes with him. Arturo ignored Marcus, who then turned to me and invited me to play. I said I didn't know how, but Marcus said he would teach me. I moved closer, and Marcus again asked Arturo, "Wanna play, Arturo?" Without looking at Marcus, Arturo replied, "No, I wanna play the next [chess] game."²

As Marcus and I played (and he very politely beat me while showing me the rudiments of scoring), I thought about the classroom's social hierarchy, and realized how much Marcus' standing had slipped in the past few months, to the point where he was no longer a central member of his previous friendship group. Arturo, DeAndre, and John had just directly shunned Marcus again, yet he continued to sit near them and, it appeared to me, to hope for inclusion. As I show in this article, most of the reasons for Marcus' transition into persona non grata with his peer group were beyond his control; as his status slid, he sought to maintain his position in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of success.

On the surface, this group of boys—three African American and one Latino—seemed to be friends. Marcus, the boy who had been excluded from the chess game on the carpet, played with the others at recess, interacted with them in teacher-sanctioned and sideline conversations, and sat with them at most lunches. However, "the very representation of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 723) was at stake in these seemingly casual social interactions. Marcus' social maneuvering was, in fact, a constant negotiation of his rights to belong to this group and to claim friendship with the other boys. Our claims to certain identities, or to membership in certain groups, are based on the weight and volume of what Bourdieu calls our "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986); caught between his past and present, Marcus had very little with which to work, but he did try. To use a Bourdieuan term, he "struggled" with his peers, using the resources at his disposal to engage in symbolic fights to maintain his place in the social hierarchy.

With Marcus' struggles in mind, in this article I use qualitative data gathered in a year-long ethnographic study to analyze a commonplace classroom literacy event in which Marcus and three of his male peers wrote and performed stories rich in intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981) while managing the shifting power dynamics of their social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1985). My research methodology drew on three primary research traditions: anthropological notions of "thick description" à la Geertz (1973), interpretive methods (Erickson, 1986), and a sociological analysis of social structures (Bourdieu, 1985, 1991). With the data I collected, I was able to conduct a multi-level analysis that focused on both the immediate context (the classroom storytelling literacy event) and the surrounding influences or sets of relationships, as well as larger contexts. My analysis of the particular event presented here is framed by sociocultural (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) and critical (Luke, 1995) understandings of literacy acqui-
sition and by social reproduction perspectives on the hierarchical and negotiated nature of human relationships (Bourdieu, 1985). In the stories-within-stories that follow, I show Marcus' ongoing struggles, looking at how the four boys used texts to define and contest social status and to claim and deny friendship rights.

This analysis is constructed around a storytelling event in which Marcus and his peers read aloud routine homework stories and simultaneously negotiated the social hierarchy; the event spotlights Marcus' struggles in great detail, attending to the work he tried to do to repair his social standing. My specific questions for this analysis are:

1) How are the texts that the boys write and perform sites of ideological and identity production, in relation to issues of gender, race, and class?
2) How are the texts also sites where such ideologies and students' symbolic capital get reflected?
3) What kinds of symbolic "rights" to speak, to tell stories, are being negotiated in this literacy event?

In addition, findings speak to the ways that we organize classroom instruction, implications that I take up in the final sections of this essay.

The Distribution of Power in the Social Field of the Classroom

In the past decade, literacy theorists have used Bourdieu's social theories to understand a variety of problems. For instance, Luke analyzed teachers' changing symbolic capital (2004); Carrington & Luke explored the functions and consequences of literacies in students' life trajectories (1997); Dyson (1997) used Bourdieuan arguments about taste (Bourdieu, 1984) to show how students judged the appropriateness and value of popular culture materials in the classroom; Olneck (2000; see also Zacher, 2005) discussed the ways in which multicultural curricula might change students' cultural capital; and Lensmire (1994) took a detailed look at students' participation in his language arts classroom, focusing on social hierarchies and the ways that children's social standings affected their participation in the ongoing writer's workshop.

Building on this work, I see the classroom as a site of struggle; students are always "clash[ing] over the meaning of the social world and of their position within it" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729). They use their capital "to impose their view of the world or their view of their own position in the world—their social identity" (1985, p. 727) on others. They engage in what Bourdieu calls the "work of representation" (1985, p. 727, italics in original), or what we might term identity-maintenance, in the social field "through all the forms of benediction or malediction, eulogy, praise, congratulations, compliments, or insults, reproaches, criticisms, accusations, slanders, etc." (1985, p. 729). Such a system of social logic should interest
literacy teachers and researchers precisely because it helps us to understand students' actions as part and parcel of a larger ongoing struggle for selfhood and position in their social worlds.

In this fifth-grade classroom, which was a social field with its own logic and its own valuations of capital, tracing students' symbolic capital meant analyzing my data with attention to the kinds of capital each student had in relation to other students' capital. Each student's power was dependent on the weight and value of their capital; in turn, its relative weight influenced their attempts to maintain, or increase, their capital in the classroom. I have assumed that each student's place in the classroom is based on the "overall volume of the capital they possess" and the "composition of their capital" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). In this analysis, I use the term symbolic capital purposefully to refer to the "prestige, reputation, renown" of individuals (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724), as well as the form taken by economic, cultural, or social capital when those are given value or weight by others in any given field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

DeAndre, who called himself the "most popular" boy in the school, had the most symbolic capital in the classroom. His family had little economic capital, but his cultural and social capital weighed heavily in his peers' total assessment of his symbolic capital. Cultural capital, a person's "knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions" (Thompson, 1991, p. 14), may be converted into economic capital, as when the acquisition of a degree leads to job advancement or a raise. In the classroom, cultural capital often appeared in the form of access to certain kinds of music, professional sports games, or the location of one's home, but in some cases, as with DeAndre, high test scores increased cultural capital as well. Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual . . . by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). DeAndre's social capital, his durable and long-standing web of relationships with adults and peers at school, lent more weight to his symbolic capital in most school settings. Although symbolic and cultural capital are not (necessarily) converted into economic capital in the classroom, they are valuable for the ability to grant power to those who hold them.

Generally, theories of social reproduction suggest that capital is maintained by those who have it from one generation to the next, leaving almost no hope for advancement on the part of those who have little of it; the classroom is one social space where this theory can be examined. If we attend to power struggles in the social field of the classroom and look at how students use capital to create identities or represent selves, we begin to see how capital is distributed amongst students and see the "relative weight" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724) of different kinds of capital in a particular classroom. I have understood students' positions in the social hierarchy relative to each other, and will later discuss the possible effects of
social struggles on students’ actions. However, when I analyze children’s behavior in literacy events—occasions where a piece of text is central to human interaction (Heath, 1982)—I turn to sociocultural theories that help us see how students use texts and events to mediate their representational work and their relationships with each other. Viewing such events in this way adds an element of agency, of individual choice and possibility, for which theories of social reproduction have little room.

**Mediating Agency: Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy**

The philosopher Charles Taylor links our modern concepts of identity and authenticity to the “fundamentally dialogical character” of human life (1994, p. 32, emphasis in original). Without others to witness our identity performances and to measure them against their own, we would have no identity politics. No struggles for recognition. As speakers (or writers and readers) negotiate meaning with others, their inner meanings (which are actively taken up from social sources) are filtered through the forms available to them. People draw on these available forms (e.g., knowledge of various dialects and espousal of particular ideologies) to share meaning through visible or audible symbols like writing or speech (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). For example, participants engaging in a dialogue (whether with another individual or with a whole classroom full of people, in writing or in speech) use their word knowledge, linguistic knowledge, knowledge of literary styles and genres, of basic concepts of print, of encoding systems, and more, to mediate both between their own ideological inner meanings and the forms available to them for expression, as well as between themselves and their dialogic partner(s). These inner meanings do not exist apart from the social within particular realms of practice; they are internal, and only visible when they are spoken/written/performed, when they become part of the dialogue.

In this classroom, teacher and student talk was linked to the talk of peers, families, school district employees, and other members of the sociocultural communities to which they belonged. There is room for action and change through language (via what Bakhtin refers to as language’s “centrifugal force”) as well as maintenance of the status quo (via “centripetal force”). This view of language as living, ideologically laden, and interconnected in thought, speech, and writing is at the core of sociocultural understandings of language and literacy development, and is also at the core of identity politics. From a sociocultural perspective, it is difficult to avoid tensions when we speak, read, or write, because the words people use are always ideologically laden and burdened with past histories and present discourses (Holland et al., 1998). With a combination of these two perspectives—seeing the social world as a site of struggle (Bourdieu), and relationships as mediated by texts that are also sites of struggle (Bakhtin)—we can then build a multidimensional picture of events.
Combining Social Reproduction Theory and Dialogism

Bourdieu's theories on social exchanges, on the relationship of individuals' and groups' social, cultural, and economic capital in a variety of fields, do not always mesh well with sociocultural perspectives on literacy development. In one sense they go hand in hand: the social—interactions between people—are at the heart of both theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu's ideas about social reproduction are compatible with the developmental perspective of many literacy theorists, because the latter group seeks to understand how literacy practices, symbolic power, and capital interact. Individuals' literacy practices and ideologies about the world develop over time through their interactions with others around texts; the roles of the habitus and the accumulation of symbolic capital in reproducing inequalities is seldom touched upon (Dyson's work [1997, 2003] offers a counter-example). It is increasingly clear that we must define students as active agents and see that they work with the capital they have to make their way in the world; only then will we learn about literacy's role in the construction and maintenance of children's social worlds.

Some recent studies show different ways in which children and adolescents use the resources at their disposal, from language choice (Moje, 2004) to magazine choice (Finders, 1997), to portray themselves as certain kinds of people. In these studies, the problem of identity formation—the way children identify as certain kinds according to identity markers of gender, race, class, etc.—is taken up by examining the texts children use to create identities and position themselves socially. Attention is paid to classroom hierarchies (especially in Dutro, 2003; Finders, 1997; Leander, 2002; and Lensmire, 1994) and identity is conceived of as the differences produced through individual identifications, sometimes with peers, but not necessarily in relation to the social order.

Shuman's (1986) landmark study of adolescents' oral and written narratives introduced storytelling patterns that I saw in Room 126; for instance, the storytelling I recount here was indicative of the concepts of entitlement and tellability, and I focus on the rights to speak that participants have (or do not have). I am equally concerned, though, with the ways that individuals and groups used storytelling to manipulate and control the social hierarchy. Dutro (2003) used Bourdieu's concepts of capital and hierarchy to describe how a group of fifth-grade African American boys performed and "read" each others' masculine identities during literacy events. Those boys whose masculinity was not perceived as hegemonic by other boys had less freedom in their textual choices, so their curriculum and social power were circumscribed at the same time. In a study of the participation of two African American boys in a variety of literacy events in a third-grade classroom, Maloch (2005) found that the boys' life experiences afforded them particular kinds of capital, but not necessarily the kinds of capital privileged in school, especially in the literacy events she studied.
What we as researchers and teachers do not yet know, and what I examine here, is how children maintain the classroom social order during literacy events by capitalizing on their own ideological understandings of how differences (in race, class, and other markers) work to produce symbolic capital, status, and the "right" to speak. Without this close look, we are missing a valuable piece of the puzzle about children, identity, and literacy: broadly speaking, how children may use literacy in the service of furthering their own social needs, at the expense of others in their space. The symbolic violence engendered by such maneuvering is often left unaddressed, and yet its consequences—on students with more and with less symbolic capital—can be far-reaching. In order to elucidate some of these consequences, I next describe the site of the research, discussing data collection and analysis in the larger study first, and then describing the participants.

Methods for Analyzing Social Hierarchies and Literacy Events

The literacy events reported in this article were observed, audiotaped, and transcribed as part of the data collection in a year-long ethnographic study of gender and identity in literacy events in a fifth-grade classroom in California. Gonzales Elementary is an urban, racially diverse northern California school with 235 students. Roughly one-third of the students were African American, one-third Latino/Latina, and one-sixth each White and Asian American. The school celebrated multiculturalism and Civil Rights, and the principal was a long-time activist in the community and the city. I taught kindergarten at Gonzales for three years, and about half of the students in the larger study, including DeAndre, John, Arturo, and Marcus’ twin sister Maya, were once in my kindergarten class (5 years ago). I chose this classroom because I was interested in the ways that a diverse group of students engaged with the multicultural, social justice curriculum.

In the larger study, I wanted to know what the salient identity categories for the students were, and when they mattered to participants in literacy events. I also asked how the texts that students read and composed produced and/or reflected their multiple identities, and, by extension, their positioning in relation to issues of gender, race, and class. Finally, I also explored the ways that these children conducted their identity work, and developed their identities, in relation to both the curriculum and their social hierarchies. I took up these latter concerns in relation to specific students in this particular analysis, where I also focus on the symbolic "rights" to speak and to tell stories that were negotiated in this literacy event.

Data Collection

In my site visits, I paid particular attention to literacy events in the language arts and social studies periods because I had come to Gonzales asking research questions about the relationship between literacy and identity. Drawing on detailed field notes and in-depth participant interviews, I moved to my more specific questions about the ways children’s symbolic capital was weighted in the
social field of the classroom as I watched the events presented in this article. Although I only use two vignettes in this article (in the introduction above, and the findings section below), it is the depth and breadth of my data that have allowed me to make a rich analysis of these specific events. In the larger project, I made two to three site visits per week, for 3 hours per day; the majority of these visits were during the language arts and social studies periods, but I also attended math and science classes, sat in the cafeteria for lunch and on the playground for recess, and followed students all over the school. I also attended five after-school functions.

I took detailed field notes of all events that I observed, and rewrote them into longer notes at home using audiotapes of events to clarify events and verify dialogue as needed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Over the course of a year, I amassed eight notebooks filled with scratch notes, 55 sets of 15-20 page typed field notes, and copies of approximately 250 pages of student writing (including copies of the stories the boys read in the vignettes in this article). For the events in this article, I also made a separate transcription of the audiotape, which I set alongside my written field notes during my analysis. For the larger study, I chose eight focal students to represent a variety of class, race, and linguistic backgrounds (DeAndre was one of these eight). I conducted approximately three individual interviews with each of these focal students (for a total of 24 interviews) and four interviews with teachers to add “coherence, depth, and density” (Weiss, 1994, p. 3) to my interpretations. I used photographs, student-made maps, and video to document and analyze children’s patterns of spatial and geographical organization. I also visited the homes of several focal students and followed each one throughout the entire school day once. Following Dyson’s urging to look outside of the classroom (1997, 2003), the study also had a popular culture component, which included reading children’s self-reported favorite books, listening to their music, watching movies, and playing video games. For the specific analysis presented here, I was able to draw from the full set of data.

Data Analysis
These data enabled me to conduct a multi-level analysis that focused on both the immediate context (the literacy event) and the surrounding influences or sets of relationships, as well as larger contexts. Here, I briefly review my analytic tools for the larger study because the resulting findings relate to the analysis of the event presented here, and then I discuss the ways that I analyzed this particular event. As mentioned above, my research methodology drew on anthropological notions of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), interpretive methods (Erickson, 1986), and a sociological analysis of social structures (Bourdieu, 1985; 1991). In exploring the interrelatedness of several elements of students’ identities in this classroom, and thereby exploring classroom culture, I aimed to render such a setting accessible and intelligible (Geertz, 1973), and remain centered on the “meaning interpretations” made by participants in this study (Erickson, p. 127).
I began my analysis soon after I began collecting data, writing analytic memos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) about issues that came up in my fieldwork in the first two months. I first wrote extensive memos about possible focal children (including DeAndre and Marcus), and went on to write memos about specific literacy events, including the event I report on below. These memos gave me a sense of what was happening, but they remained on a descriptive, rather than analytic, level. Over the course of several months, as I finished data collection, I continued to refine my analytic categories. Through thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in the larger study I created two sets of analytic terms, one to describe the ways students and teachers talked about difference, and the other to explain how students conducted their identity work in and out of the classroom. These terms describe significant actions that required precise terminology, which I have delineated elsewhere (Zacher, 2005; 2007a).

With this second set of terms I labeled the ways students intermingled their identity politics with literacy practices across the school day. Most of the students' identifications were ongoing acts of position-taking or identity maintenance, in which they unconsciously referred to ideas (about racism) and material things (like favorite books) in ways that positioned them as certain types of people. The students almost always signified their affiliations as they did something else; that is, they hardly ever came out and said, “I claim an African American identity.” Instead, I coded instances of students claiming identities in the following ways: by signifying affiliations with particular groups of people, making what I referred to as people connections, by signifying choices of cultural interests in particular music, books, and clothes, via performances and silences, and, finally, separate from these signification practices, by using texts as mediators of affiliation. In sum, I saw students' self-positioning in talk, action, dress, and choice of entertainment (for instance) as efforts to “identify,” a majority of these identification attempts occurred in literacy events.

The specific analysis presented here required that I undertake and write up what Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2005) might term a “conjunctural analysis” (p. 53) of the many factors that converged in the event. In the literacy event described below, almost all of the social work undertaken by the boys fell under two categories, or could be described by two of my analytic terms: performances and the use of texts as mediators of affiliation. That is, DeAndre, Arturo, and Marcus each performed their affiliations in their words and actions, and each of them used texts to mediate their relationships and their social affiliations. Conjunctural analysis, which “involves scrupulously mapping an event—say a literacy event—for the multiple, and often contingent, discursive and material forces that intersected to produce the event and its truth effects” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 53) thus seemed a perfect tool with which to approach this event.
To go about this analysis, I read and reread my field notes of the event, complete with coding labels from my larger-scale analysis of the entire data set. I then assembled and read each of the interviews I had conducted with each of the participants (six transcripts, with different participants in each one, but always at least one of the four boys), which had also been coded. In addition, I reread the original texts the boys had read from in the event (their weekly "spelling story" homework). Finally, in this initial phase I reviewed my understanding of the classroom hierarchy, noting where each of the boys stood relative to the others, and where they stood in the larger hierarchy and web of classroom relationships, jotting down notes about what kinds of capital marked their status (for me and the other students to see).

Then, I reconstructed the entire scene, interspersing my understandings of the boys’ status with their words, their written texts, and their physical actions in the classroom, in what Bourdieu calls the “multi-dimensional space of positions” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724) of the classroom social field. I saw how each boy attempted to impose his own view of the social world on his peers, and how some succeeded more than others. I was able to link their written texts to both their actions and their understandings of one another’s capital and power, creating a portrait that interweaves both social and literacy theory. Ultimately, I found that this particular set of stories-within-stories was the ideal platform upon which to describe how well Bourdieu's understanding of social space complements Bakhtin’s dialogic theories to explore literacy’s role in students’ social identity work (Zacher, 2007b). Before I move into the stories, I will introduce the participants through descriptions of their self-positionings and of the structures of their lives as I saw them.

**Participants**

The four main students in this event, one Latino and three African American boys, had been friends since kindergarten, when all but Marcus were in the same classroom—my own—together. I had taught Marcus’ sister Maya and watched DeAndre, John, and Arturo befriend Marcus on the playground. In subsequent years, the four were split up and regrouped at various grade levels. In individual interviews, when these boys listed their friends, they included one another’s names first. Over the years, they had gone to one another’s birthday parties, sat together at lunch, played and fought together at recess; in sum, they were friends. Below, I draw on field notes, interviews, and their written texts to provide sketches of each boy. In addition to being one of my focal students, DeAndre was one of my two main informants for the study (the other was a White student named Christina, DeAndre’s best female friend); as such, I have the most data on him, but I have endeavored to provide equal information about all of the boys. A sketch of each boy follows, in order of his appearance in the vignette.
Arturo

Author of the stories that spawned this event, Arturo was born in California of working-class Puerto Rican parents, and lived in a distant urban area. He had lived in the city in his early primary years, but when his parents divorced his mother moved to another urban area for cheaper housing. This area had a very poorly funded public school system, so his mother applied to have him continue at Gonzales since she continued to work in the city. Arturo and John were tied for the middle spot in status in this group of four boys who formed the “popular” group of male students in this class. Arturo could be congenial and friendly, and often was, but his temper was quick to flare, and he got in trouble for fighting at recess about once every two weeks. Arturo was somewhat removed from the socioeconomic ranking because he lived so far away and therefore his neighborhood was not comparable to the other boys’ more local homes. He claimed to have more material goods than any of the other boys (e.g., the latest Sega PlayStation, a family computer, music CD burning capabilities), but these items seldom came to school with him. The other members of the group, participants in the event, are listed below.

John

Protagonist of the first piece that Arturo read, John was African American and lived in “the projects” in the same city neighborhood as DeAndre (see below). John had a twin sister and several other younger siblings, all in school at Gonzales. John’s grandfather lived in a house about an hour outside of the city, and John kept a dog there, so although he may have lived in the projects, he had a second “home” that was a “big house,” in his description. He was a year older than the other students because he had missed part of his first kindergarten year and had retaken it with them. John was generally graceful, smiling, and full of good humor, and he took his role as the semi-hero of Arturo’s first story in stride. John and Arturo were in the middle of the hierarchy of their friendship group; he and DeAndre, the highest-ranking member of the group, lived fairly close to each other, played on the weekends, had the occasional sleepover, and attended the same church when someone in their families took them.

DeAndre

The leader of this friendship group, DeAndre was an African American boy who had recently been returned to his mother’s care after living for five years with his paternal grandmother. They lived in a privately owned rental apartment paid for by Section 8 funding, which allowed his family to live on their own, choose their neighborhood (within financial constraints), and not live in actual Federal housing projects where John and Marcus (see below) lived. DeAndre was one of the two students in the class identified as “gifted,” and was charismatic and compelling when he chose to be. He said he was “the most popular boy in the
school,” defined as someone whom “everyone knows” and who is “cool,” and he may have been right. He was definitely the “leader” of this group of friends. Like Arturo, his temper was quick to flash, and he and Arturo were often in trouble for fighting with each other. DeAndre’s family nickname, one that he allowed his close friends (and adults like myself) to use, was “Shorty” because he had been short for his age as a baby; he was of average height in this classroom. Finally, as mentioned above, in addition to being one of my focal students, DeAndre was one of my two key student informants; I routinely checked my assumptions about his friends and his actions with him throughout the year.

Marcus
The final member of this group of four, Marcus was an African American who lived in the city’s worst public housing project, one that was geographically far from John and DeAndre’s neighborhood. John and DeAndre once described these housing projects as “the projects, the baad projects,” to me, and Marcus had agreed. He lived with his mother, twin sister Maya, two other younger siblings, and occasionally his mother’s boyfriend. He was the lowest-ranking member in this friendship hierarchy. Like John, Marcus often wore clothes that were noticeably older or shabbier than other students’, and they were often too big for him. On more than one occasion I saw him tie his pants up with a ribbon, piece of string, or other makeshift belt, after his teacher told him to pull up his pants. Marcus was roughly the same age as DeAndre and Arturo, but emotionally he often acted like a much younger child, especially in terms of his attention span during school tasks. Nevertheless, he was wise in the ways of the world to some extent; he could sing hip-hop song lyrics, talk trash about his friends, and was a mean break dancer. I believe that it was the combination of his socioeconomic status and the fact that he did not do as well as his close friends (and many others in the class) on regular schoolwork that made his friends—and me and other adults—generally perceive him as the lowest ranking member of this group.

Classroom Teacher
Ms. Linda, the teacher at the time of the events I focus on here, was a Latina in her thirties who had taken over the class in March when the regular teacher went on maternity leave. Linda was a long-term substitute in the school who had personal ties to other teachers and staff, and was well-known by the students. Like Ms. Jean, the “regular” classroom teacher, Ms. Linda was dedicated to teaching about “social justice.” This commitment included reading historical fiction, talking with children about racism, sexism, classism, and other “isms,” and going on field trips to local peace rallies and marches (Zacher, 2005). She was as helpful to me in my data collection as Ms. Jean had been, and was always willing to talk with me about my interpretations of classroom events like the one I analyze below. As a new teacher, Ms. Linda’s pedagogy was a work in progress, but she generally had control
over the classroom and the students worked well under her direction. For example, by the end of the year, Ms. Linda had taught the students all of the books that Ms. Jean had left for them.

**Researcher Role**

Because of my long-term association with these students and the school (I had known most of them since kindergarten, when I had been their teacher), I had unusually high levels of access in and around the research site. I was privy to students’ private conversations, was told in confidence by them about their personal views, and knew firsthand about many of their family histories. I was able to visit several homes and conduct many interviews because of the trust generated by my discretion and my long-term connection with the school and its students. I spent the majority of my time at the site as an observer, always taking field notes, usually audiotaping events, and moving away from students if my presence caused a disruption (over time, this helped students to view my presence and my note-taking as unexceptional).

In the beginning of my fieldwork stage, I told students that I would not countenance them hurting others, but I also said that I was not their teacher and it was not my job to tell them what to do. In several instances I was privy to students’ secrets, or witnessed events for which I would have reprimanded students had I been a teacher; unless someone was getting hurt, or was going to physically or emotionally hurt another, I watched and never “told on” students. Of the four boys, I had the closest tie with DeAndre, and this gave me greater access to his thoughts and feelings. This tie also forced me to look very closely at his behavior and my interpretations of it in this analysis, to be sure that I did not gloss over his actions in too favorable a light. As his kindergarten teacher I had had great affection for DeAndre in particular, and we maintained our relationship over the years; he frequently referred to me as his “mom” and always hugged me hello and goodbye. In analytic memos I occasionally noted the ways that I had been susceptible to his charm and had given him the kinds of leeway that I report Ms. Linda giving him in the event below.

I am a White, upper middle-class, former teacher in my thirties at the time of this research; as kindergarteners and later as older volunteers in my kindergarten classroom, these children had in many ways acculturated me to teaching children who were socioeconomically, racially, and linguistically different from me. Some of their families had helped me learn Spanish; others had taught me about foster care and community support. They knew that I spoke Spanish—some spoke it with me occasionally—and seemed to know that I was White. They also thought of me as “rich” because I conducted several small group interviews during pizza lunches; as DeAndre said when I ordered him, Arturo, and John their second slices, “Miss Zacher, you’re rich.” After he labeled me this way, none of the boys made other references to my socioeconomic status. I cannot say what the students thought
of me, and how they perceived my identities relative to theirs, but I can say that the amount of data I gathered, and the access to personal thoughts, and feelings that participants granted me, suggested that my differences were not obstacles to learning about these students' lives. In the following scene, which I have reconstructed from field notes, transcripts of an audio recording, and students' written artifacts, I sat in the back of the classroom taking notes in my usual way, an adult whose note-taking presence was, in this instance at least, taken for granted.

Findings: Telling Stories in Homework Sharing Time

Arturo Tells His First Story

This event began on a normal school day, and was over in approximately fifteen minutes. I have indented my field note-based descriptions to separate them from my analysis, which I intersperse with descriptions of the events as they unfolded.

On a Thursday morning, the 24 fifth-grade students had turned in their homework and were sitting at their tables, waiting for their teacher, Ms. Linda, to get them started on their work. She said that since the spelling stories that the kids had written using all of the spelling words from the week's lesson were so good, she thought students should have a chance to read them to the class. She stood at the front of the room, the stories she had collected that morning in her arms. Elisa went first, and read her story, which garnered some applause. Vanessa went next, then Arturo volunteered. He read the following story, titled "The Broken Window."

He began reading haltingly, and Ms. Linda said, "You wrote it, Arturo," with a smile. After two false starts, he read from a page titled The Broken Window: "There was a kid named John who was playing kickball with his friend named Shorty." DeAndre, nicknamed Shorty, laughed at this, and Arturo acknowledged the laugh with a nod, and then continued to read. "John was up [to] hit the ball. It hit a window. John broke a window that cost forty-four dollars. He hit a home run but was still in trouble. Plus he was frightened. He knocked on the door and said "sorry." They said it was accepted. John's family paid for the broken window. Then he got the whipping of his life." DeAndre. John, and several other students laughed during the story and clapped when Arturo finished.

At first, this seemed to be just another routine homework-sharing event. The teacher had suggested that any and all students read their spelling stories aloud, and several students did so, boys and girls, from different friendship groups. Arturo's story about John was funny, but it did not evince further comments by the student audience (beyond a few laughs). In retrospect, in his performance Arturo positioned John as the whipping boy/hero of the piece and set Arturo and John up as friends in solidarity at the middle level of their peer group. He did this by writing John as the protagonist who had fun and did well in sports but also got "the whipping of his life."
What I did not understand until after I had observed, taken notes about, and audio-taped this event and had read over the stories was that Arturo had modified his story for this public event. His written text was as follows:

*There was a kid named John [who] was playing kickball with his friends. John was up a [sic] kick the ball. It hit a window. The window was broken. He was frozen. The window cost forty-four dollars. He hit a home run but he was still in trouble. Plus he was frighten [sic]. He knocked on the door and said “sorry.” They said it was accepted. John’s family payed [sic] for the broken window. Then he got a wipping [sic] of his life.*

Arturo’s many subtle alterations highlight the performative (Blackburn, 2003) nature of this simple literacy event. For instance, although Arturo had read aloud that John was playing kickball with “Shorty,” his written version indicated only that John was playing with his “friends.” In addition, in the classroom event, Arturo eliminated one sentence (“he was frozen”) and read John’s name into the text more frequently than he had written it, substituting John’s name for the pronoun “he.” Finally, not everyone in the class would even try to call DeAndre “Shorty” because to be able to call DeAndre by his nickname meant that you were either his social equal, in the case of Arturo and John, or someone emotionally close to him, in my case. For example, Marcus was in DeAndre’s friendship group, but they were not social equals, and he would never call DeAndre “Shorty.” So, by using the nickname “Shorty” on the fly, Arturo was able to demonstrate that he and John were both linked to DeAndre, a topic I take up again when Arturo tells his second story.

**Marcus Reads “His” Story**

After Arturo sat down, Ms. Linda said Marcus could come up and read his own story, titled “My Story,” and he did. Although he dropped a few lines (marked off below by parentheses), he otherwise read it aloud, as it is written here:

*Once upon a time there was a boy that is living with his dad. The boy went to a baseball game. The person that was up hit a home run. The person that hit a home run was number forty-four. The boy went home and went to sleep. And he woke up and went to school. He came back home and did his homework. His mom went to work and she said goodbye. Then the boy went to the swimming pool and had a waterproof watch. And they bought pizza for themselves. (They went home. And the boy’s room was downstairs.)*

A few students clapped, and Marcus sat down. I read Marcus’ telling of this story as his attempt to write himself into a caring, busy family where the father took him to sports games and bought him waterproof watches, and where Marcus had his own room that was “downstairs.” In reality, Marcus seldom saw his real father, and his stepfather rarely participated in such activities with him or any of Marcus’ siblings. Marcus also did not have his own room at home; he shared a room with at least two other siblings. In addition, Marcus seldom turned his home-
work in on time, if at all, and he rarely had an excuse—he just did not have very much time, space, or support at home.

Again, Marcus’ peers acknowledged his reading with a smattering of applause, but nothing else was directly said or done about his story. In the following moments, Arturo got permission from Ms. Linda to read aloud the second spelling story he had written. For my own dramatic storytelling purposes I will not reproduce the written text here, but instead report his reading of it in transcript format, with my analyses interspersed throughout. I include his entire written text after the vignette ends.

**Arturo Tells a Second Story: “The Stolen Shoes”**

Arturo got up again to read his second story, titled “The Stolen Shoes.” He started slowly, and said “what?” a couple of times as he began. He continued, “There was shoes that were 44 dollars. Then a kid named Shorty bought the—.” Arturo was interrupted as Marcus, Saria, and a few others turned in their seats to look at DeAndre, aka “Shorty,” and giggled. But Arturo continued, finishing his sentence, “Shoes.”

DeAndre said angrily, “Don’t put my name in there!” However, Arturo continued on, without pausing to acknowledge DeAndre’s comment, “Then a kid named Marcus came by and saw the shoes. He wanted the shoes, so one night he planned to steal the shoes.” At this mention of Marcus, DeAndre and a few others laughed, and DeAndre yelled to Marcus, “Ya thief!” Marcus looked towards the front of the room, avoiding the gazes of his peers.

Although Marcus’ story—about a boy with a father who gets to do fun activities and own things like waterproof watches—was largely ignored by the student audience when he read it, it acquires a certain poignancy when we juxtapose it with Arturo’s second story. In the first part of “Stolen Shoes,” Marcus, who had written himself as a beloved and cared-for boy, became a would-be thief, someone who coveted the shoes of his very own friend. To make matters worse (from Marcus’ perspective), DeAndre’s casual labeling of Marcus as a “thief” went uncontested by anyone, including the teacher.

Arturo continued after DeAndre’s comment, reading “Shorty, who had bought the shoes, went to bed, then the—wait—then Marcus stole the shoes. It was a scary event.” At this point, Marcus interrupted, asking “I thought I stole the shoe?” Arturo, without acknowledging Marcus’ question, read “He could steal more stuff like homework. Before Marcus left he said ‘say goodbye to your shoes.’” At this line, Keisha, DeAndre, and Saria giggled. Arturo continued on, “Then he, Shorty, awakened and saw that Marcus was wearing his shoes.” Several students and Ms. Linda laughed, and Arturo said “So—” but before he could continue, Marcus yelled “SHUT UP!” Once again Arturo ignored Marcus, reading his closing lines with a verbal flourish: “So, the, so DeAndre beat up Marcus and gave him a black eye with a fat lip too, so that’s what you get for stealing shoes.”
Here, Arturo’s story ended. The story itself had funny touches—the thief paused to tell the boy he was stealing from “say goodbye to your shoes”—but from Marcus’ standpoint, it would have been best if Arturo would have just “shut up!” Arturo, intent on reading the story, ignored Marcus, and so did everyone else, for the moment.

Although Arturo later told me he had not thought explicitly of Louis Sachar’s novel *Holes* (1998) when he wrote this story, he and several other students in the class had indeed read the book. In *Holes*, a young homeless boy steals a pair of expensive tennis shoes—almost without thinking about it—because he really, really wants them. He tosses them over a bridge when he is pursued, and although the rest of the story is too complicated to go into here, the themes of stolen shoes, old shoes, and new shoes are carried throughout the book. Arturo was clearly re-voicing ideas and themes from *Holes*, populating his version “with his own intention, his own accent” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

In the end, Arturo borrowed more than the plotline from *Holes*. Like the novel, his story had an explicit moral: you get beaten up when you steal shoes. It also had an implicit moral: it is very hard to disrupt the established structure of the peer group. From a Bourdieuan perspective, then, this event was one of a series of “struggles in which agents clash over the meaning of the social world and their position within it” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729). Arturo cast DeAndre, the leader of his peer group, as an owner of expensive shoes and a victim of thievery. At the same time, Arturo made explicit his opinion of Marcus, by exacting righteous vengeance—in the form of a fat lip and black eye—from the thief. In this and other events, Marcus “clashed” with Arturo over his position in the social world.

In this story performance, Arturo completed the social work he had begun in “The Broken Window,” where he claimed parity with John, and again implied, through the use of the nickname “Shorty,” a strong relationship with DeAndre. As the writer of “The Stolen Shoes,” he made definitive statements about DeAndre’s superiority to Marcus, and, by the act and fact of his authorship, placed himself above Marcus on the peer group social ladder. The only protests Marcus made during this entire story were brief, and were dismissed out of hand by everyone in the classroom. In the first protest, he attempted to clarify something about his role in the story (“I stole the shoe?”), perhaps trying to make light of Arturo’s casting choice and remind Arturo of their friendship. In the second, he told Arturo to “Shut up,” but both this and his prior comment were ignored. One more scene completes my retelling.

**Marcus and DeAndre Compete for Storytelling Rights**

By the end of Arturo’s story, DeAndre was smiling and laughing. Marcus, who had scowled at Arturo during the story, wore a vague smile. Linda called on DeAndre to go next—he had turned in a story earlier—but Marcus bounded to the head of the classroom. Once there, he stood in the same spot Arturo had just vacated and held up a
pretend piece of paper. As he held up the “paper,” he said “I got a story. John beat up Arturo and gave him two black eyes, and a bloody nose.”

Ms. Linda cut Marcus off, told him to sit down, and said that if he did not, he would be “on the bench” at recess. She said she did not “appreciate” his addition, and he yelled out in angry protest. She said matter-of-factly that the presentations were “free-form writing, expression,” and reminded Marcus that he did not have a written paper.

Marcus might have been the lowest on his group’s totem pole, but he had an idea about how to change his status, and for a moment, while he stood in front of the class reading his story, using his fictional text to try and mediate his social status, he appeared to have defended himself against the “insults . . . accusations, [and] slanders” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729) dished out by Arturo in his social hierarchy maintenance. By casting John and Arturo in his story, and by making Arturo the victim, Marcus also momentarily leveraged himself onto their social level. But, he did not cast DeAndre in his story at all; based on my observations of their interactions over the year, DeAndre, especially when nicknamed “Shorty,” seemed too far above Marcus.

To get on the classroom stage, Marcus used his imaginary text as a “ticket” (Dyson, 1997), but he did not have a chance to reposition himself because he did not have a paper copy of the story at hand. Ms. Linda asked him to sit right away, and threatened him with “benching” at recess; her treatment of him, combined with hers of DeAndre in the next scene, shows at least an unconscious awareness of Marcus’ social status. Because I did not realize the pivotal nature of these scenes until after the school year had ended and I reread my data, I did not have a chance to interview Ms. Linda about her brief role in this scene. The rapidity of events argues against any overt decisions on Ms. Linda’s part about how to best treat any of the participants. Like many adults at Gonzales, Ms. Linda was predisposed to give DeAndre, widely know to be a “gifted” student as well as a popular one, more freedom of movement and more latitude to make mistakes than she gave to Marcus. This predisposition, which was related to her sense of the social field and the symbolic capital of children within it, surely influenced her differential reactions.

Ms. Linda then asked DeAndre again if he wanted a turn, and he said yes. He swaggered up to the front of the room and said “this one is about Marcus.” Ms. Linda asked him if he was going to read it, saying that, like Marcus, he wasn’t allowed to read it without a paper. DeAndre said “no” and turned back around, gracefully enough, and went back to his seat.

Apparently DeAndre had not wanted to use the story he had turned in for homework credit; like Marcus, he, too, had intended to just make one up. Marcus and DeAndre both tried to “read” a nonexistent story, but they were denied access in markedly different ways. Where Marcus cast John and Arturo, DeAndre wanted
to cast Marcus, and there was little doubt in my mind that his story would not flatter Marcus. In the end, instead of castigating DeAndre for not appreciating the “expressive” nature of the activity, as she had done Marcus, Ms. Linda allowed DeAndre to go back to his seat with his head unbowed.

Solving Textual Puzzles
There are two more strands to the event that simultaneously complete it and draw attention to the truly inventive nature of Arturo’s performance. Below is the actual text that Arturo wrote at home, his spelling story titled “The Stolen Shoes.”

There was shoes that were forty-four dollars. Then a kid bought the shoes. Then a kid came by and saw the shoes. He wanted the shoes. So one night he plan to steal the shoes. The kid who bought the shoes went to bed. Then the other kid stole the shoes. It was a scary event because he could steal more stuff, like his homework. Before he left, he said say good-bye to your shoes. Then he was awaken and he saw that his shoes were gone. He saw the kid wearing his shoes, so the kid beat him up and gave him a black eye with a fat lip too. So that’s what you get for stealing stuff from people.

Arturo’s original written text that he turned in to the teacher about an hour prior to the read alouds included no names for characters in the story. His first written story, about John breaking a window during the kickball game, did include John’s name as the protagonist. After Arturo read the story about John and was given the chance to read another of his stories aloud, Arturo literally read his friends’ names into the text as he performed the story aloud. In hindsight, this improvised addition of character accounted for his occasional pauses and stumbles over names and words: he was inserting them as he went.

Issues of addressivity and agency are at the heart of this analysis, and were visible in Arturo’s choices to substitute names of his peers on the fly. He neither wrote Marcus in as the thief nor made DeAndre the victim/hero, until after he had seen the response of his audience to the first story about the broken window, and, of course, until after he learned that he would have the chance to read the story aloud. As this analysis shows, these deceptively straightforward performances showcase students’ agentive choices, and show us how even such brief literacy events afford students time and space to reproduce—and contest—elements of the social order.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion: Answering Research Questions
My first guiding question asked how the texts that these boys wrote and performed were sites of ideological and identity production in relation to issues of gender, race, and class. Second, I wanted to know in what ways the texts themselves were sites that reflected inherited ideologies and symbolic capital. My analysis shows that it is
critical to see the productive and reflective aspects of their texts simultaneously; the texts suggested striking assumptions about gender and class, although the category of race seemed to have little salience. I discuss the production of gender, class, and race ideologies here, and then make some notes about the ways these ideologies and students’ capital were reflected in their texts. Finally, I answer my third question, in which I asked what symbolic rights to speak, to tell stories, were negotiated in this particular event.

**Gender Ideologies**

Ideologies about being male were visible in each story in this series of stories, and also in the gender performances (Blackburn, 2003; Butler, 1999; Urciuoli, 1995) that the boys enacted as they told their stories and maintained the hierarchy (or, in Marcus’ case, tried to disrupt it). In their texts or stories, in which few females were named (e.g., Marcus had a “mom” in his first story), the boys had assigned specific roles and actions to their male characters. These actions ranged from fatherly outings to violent retribution to morally justified punishment. Arturo cast “kids” and “thieves;” one of his “kids” broke a window playing ball and got “the whipping of his life,” while the other got “a black eye with a fat lip too.” Both of these corporal punishments were doled out to the boys because “that’s what you get” for breaking windows with balls or for stealing shoes. In the latter case, it was another boy, the thief’s victim, who meted out the punishment. In turn, Marcus later cast John to beat up Arturo, giving him “two black eyes, and a bloody nose.” These perspectives on masculinity are certainly not the only ones the boys held, but they were the dominant ideologies present in this series of stories, and certainly Marcus’ decision to cast John as his own avenger was caused by the violence towards Marcus that Arturo introduced in his performance of “The Stolen Shoes.”

It is in the performance of these stories—and the performances linked to them—that we see a second layer of gender ideologies being produced and reflected. While the boys seemed to think it was fine to wreak textual violence on their peers, in person they eschewed brutality for humor, swaggering, and yelling. Each of the boys performed a certain masculinity as they read, one that varied according to the text they were reading and the masculinity(ies) reflected in it. Arturo joked, included his friends, and seemed to take pleasure in getting away with metaphorically beating Marcus up. Marcus’ first reading marked him as a mundane, nice boy, but later, he yelled at Arturo to “shut up,” and then visibly defended his honor by bounding to the front of the room and reading his violent story from an imaginary paper. Finally, DeAndre, the leader of this group of boys, laughed at John and Marcus’ plights (when John got his “whipping” and when Arturo cast Marcus as the thief), ordered Arturo not to put his name in the story, and brought Arturo’s fictional story into the classroom by accusing Marcus of being a “thief.” He later swaggered up to the front of the room, his walk the opposite of Marcus’ bounding, to read his own unwritten story, but was unruffled when Ms. Linda told him
to sit down. In short, the “hegemonic masculinity” (Dutro, 2003) that he performed in this event for his peers was loud, laughing, powerful, and not afraid of the others, or, it seemed, of anything.

Class Ideologies
As James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) note in a discussion of the place of children in urban areas, “the city itself is anything but neutral with regard to social experience and creates a new set of parameters in relation to the child” (p. 47). In this classroom, most children were aware of the city’s neighborhoods, their place(s) in them, and the tangible connections between their possible social identities and those spaces. Students in Lensmire’s (1994) study were just as liable as these children to weigh their awareness of their peers’ socioeconomic status in their hierarchy maintenance; he describes the nearly total separation of a girl named Jessie, who lived in the trailer park and who was “the least popular person in the class, and the least desirable with whom to work” (p. 75). Throughout, I saw these boys produce class-based identities through their texts, mostly by cataloguing desirable (e.g., boy at baseball game with father) and undesirable (e.g., thief) class-based identities in them.

In interviews and casual conversations, DeAndre and his friends often mentioned the distinctions they made between the larger majority-African American city district in which John and DeAndre lived, the suburb from which Arturo commuted, and Marcus’ home, the “baaad” housing project. As I discussed above, he called me “rich” when I bought pizza as part of a lunchtime interview. When asked what “poor” meant to him, DeAndre explained that it usually meant that a person’s family did not like to buy them clothes, and, although this may seem simplistic to adults, to DeAndre and his peers, clothes—new clothes, clean clothes, well-fitting clothes, clothes from certain stores—were signs of economic status. It was therefore no accident that the boys’ social hierarchy incorporated an element of social class so blatantly. Because the boys were only ten years old, their semi-adult understandings of socioeconomic class were often un-problematized. They made choices based on their understandings of something like class status, which was itself determined on the basis of clothing and other markers, as DeAndre’s comments show. Yet, they did not necessarily link their decisions to the larger social structures that, for instance, placed Marcus in a particular “baaad” housing project.

Race Ideologies
Race, seldom an issue amongst this group of African American and Latino boys, did not seem to be salient within the storytelling event, although it was indeed salient at other times. For the purposes of this discussion, I was unable to draw any firm conclusions about the boys’ ideologies about and understandings of race. Unlike class and gender, clearly visible categorization and hierarchy-maintenance
tools, race was seldom mentioned in these texts, and even less remarked upon in their performances of the texts.

**How Texts Reflect Ideologies and Capital**

DeAndre, whom many might call “disadvantaged,” was not unaware of his (and others’) economic status. As Stuart Hall might say, he was not a “cultural dope” (1997). His favorite insult—to boys and girls alike—was “You guys are poor! You don’t have any money!” In addition to being true most of the time (DeAndre chose his teasing victims well, for their subordinate status and for holes in their defenses through which he could attack), comments like these, repeated as they were throughout the year, illustrated his ability to discern who had more, and who had less, and who was the most sensitive about it. Students’ ideologies about gender and class, and the symbolic capital that they ascribed to themselves and each other based on such ideologies, were reflected in their stories.

Arturo and DeAndre’s understanding of Marcus’ place in the social hierarchy, based on their assessment of Marcus’ symbolic capital, were reflected in Arturo’s casting choices, and in DeAndre’s brief, cruel description of Marcus as a “thief.” Marcus’ first story reflects his attempt to write himself a seemingly stable family home in which sporting events and gifts were, if not plentiful, at least occasionally given. Perhaps these material objects represented his perceived good life; certainly, through them, he tried to create a less poor textual self. Marcus’ latter text, in which he enacted a gendered, violent retribution, reflected other ideologies that circulated in the classroom. This analysis shows that ideologies and capital are somewhat fluid in children’s worlds; because of this potential for change, it is critical to see children’s texts as both sites of identity and ideology production and as reflections of existing ideologies and capital.

**Who Had the “Right” to Speak?**

My third question asked what kinds of symbolic “rights” to speak, to tell stories, were being negotiated in this literacy event. Marcus negotiated for the right to speak, to be heard, in the classroom, and he eventually lost that right to Arturo and DeAndre. In turn, DeAndre and Arturo maintained their status as powerful boys. For Marcus, his participation in this literacy event was as an equal, someone who was allowed to read his homework story aloud just as Arturo had done before him. Even so, when Arturo read “The Stolen Shoes,” Marcus’ further participation turned into a defense of himself, first when he tried to interject himself into Arturo’s reading, and second when he tried to “read” his own nonexistent story about John beating up Arturo.

We also saw DeAndre and Arturo wield their symbolic power to corral Marcus in what they may have assumed was his proper place, thus relieving him of any “right” to speak. Arturo was certainly using his text as a “ticket” (Dyson, 1997) for social group maintenance work, and Marcus and DeAndre intended to use their
unwritten stories in the same way. Yet their maneuvering went beyond simply the use of text to gain the floor. Nor were they attacking Marcus’ character, although he was justified in being upset at being cast as a covetous shoe thief. Behind Arturo’s playful storytelling, in which he slotted his friends into certain roles at the last moment, lay purposeful (conscious or unconscious) planning to police the hierarchical boundaries of the friendship group, to ensure that everyone remembered the difference between “those who exercise power and those who submit to it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170).

There are both short- and long-term consequences of these kinds of interactions for Marcus and his peers. In the short term, his attempts at self-defense could have been moments in which his position in the hierarchy was solidified; alternatively, they could have been ones in which he felt he had stood up for himself and made a stand against his friends’ judgments about him. The boys’ friendship was not destroyed by Arturo’s defamations of Marcus’ character in his story; in fact, later on that day they were all playing ball together, storytelling apparently forgotten. However, Marcus was subject to this kind of treatment on more than one occasion, and such moments came more regularly towards the end of the school year. Beginning even before the dominoes episode with which I opened this article, I saw him slighted or excluded from a classroom activity, or even games, by his friends on several occasions. For Marcus, and for other classroom members, this event was just one in a series of performances that accustomed them all to assigning Marcus the kind of role that was consistent with that of shoe-stealer in Arturo’s story. Blackburn, writing about “literacy performances,” claims that “it is in the series of performances that literacy has the opportunity to reinforce but also interrupt power dynamics” (2003, p. 469); this event, in which more reinforcement than interruption took place, was only one of many across the years.

Similar hierarchy maintaining performances occurred during whole group book reading sessions, as the students did Internet research for term papers, in small groups sessions, in math class, and in the after-school program. Marcus was not always the one who came out at the bottom—there was space for negotiation, and in different situations with different actors he occasionally had more symbolic capital with which to work—but the long-term consequence of such treatment was, at the least, that he frequently found the status quo reinforced to his detriment. In the long term, students like DeAndre, who participate more, and with more freedom, will probably have better access to teachers, higher quality attention and instruction, and may fare better in and out of school over time (Oakes, 2005).

In light of these findings, the answer to my research question about the kinds of rights and selves being negotiated here seem very clear and stark. The consequences for their immediate and future classroom participation varied according to who was able to amass the most symbolic capital and who was able to wield it
most effectively in the classroom. Each boy wanted the right to author his own social position, and none were above using routine classroom literacy events—and the texts produced therein—as vehicles for their self-promotion. In this sense, these events were routine, and their long-term consequences kept Marcus at the bottom of the social hierarchy and allowed DeAndre, and Arturo and John to some extent, to continue on as perpetrators of symbolic violence. I should note that such events, and their attendant exposure of taken-for-granted social hierarchies, were also not limited to this group of boys, but were spread between and among friendship groups, and took place both in and outside of school.

**Implications: Organizing Classroom Instruction**

These findings suggest several things for the way we organize classroom instruction. Ms. Linda’s approach to teaching was what Sleecter and Grant (2007) describe as “multicultural social justice education” (p.184). As the above scenes show, although she did not always manage to involve students in democratic decision-making (a component of such an approach), she did organize the curricular content around issues of critical social importance. She had chosen to work at Gonzales because, like most of the teachers there, she had social justice goals.

Following the original classroom teacher’s lead, the texts she had students read included *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) and *Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a Woman?* (McKissack & McKissack, 1992). These books, and the other activities in which I often saw children engage, had strong and clear themes of oppression, freedom, and justice. They also emphasized individual human kindnesses (Lowry, 1989) and perseverance in the face of daunting odds (McKissack & McKissack, 1992). In their responses to these books, the students’ talk in discussions (and writing about the books) demonstrated their eloquence; when talking about injustices that happened to other people, it seemed, they were able to show great empathy and kindness (Zacher, 2005; 2006).

To be sure, Ms. Linda had instances, like the entire scene above, in which she did not see her own possible role in maintaining the social hierarchy, or did not catch on to the social maneuvering going on in front of her; as teachers and researchers, we have all had such moments. The crux of the matter lies in this question: what do we do about such instances after they occur, how do we right social wrongs in the moment and on a larger scale, and, most importantly, how do we help students see these nuances? First, they should—as Ms. Linda did, at one point or another—foster conversations about why students should not write, read, or share stories about others that might hurt their feelings. Such preemptive work on feelings might forestall some symbolic violence in the classroom. In the same vein, forbidding students to use the names of their peers in stories, or insisting that students read their work aloud exactly as it is written on the page, seem like possible ways to forestall such problematic events. However, as Dyson (1993) would
argue, we cannot keep children’s social lives out of the classroom. Forbidding students to use their peers’ names might shut down valuable creative writing opportunities, or might just cause them to use pseudonyms when they install their friends—and enemies—in their stories. The boys’ moves to contest or maintain the social hierarchy would have occurred in other ways, in other literacy events, even if Ms. Linda had banned the use of names, or banned spontaneous read-alouds.

Instead of interfering in students’ social lives, and trying (most likely in vain) to separate classroom literacy events and practices from students’ attempts to amass symbolic capital through their social relationships, teachers might tackle these issues from another angle. They could more productively have students examine their own racial, social class, gender, and other identities, and study the ways these identifications play out in classroom and out-of-school situations. Sleeter and Grant (2007) suggest that teachers help each student analyze “the circumstances of one’s own life” (p. 199). Ms. Linda could have held a discussion about the “baaad” projects in which Marcus lived, a discussion that might have fostered a student investigation into housing project funding, the city’s racial segregation patterns, and the implications of both on their own life pathways (not just Marcus’, as the only denizen of the “baaad” projects in the class).

This kind of research project, sponsored by a teacher who is attempting to right some wrongs in and out of the classroom, would take the individual label of “poor” off a student like Marcus and share its burden with the class. The goal of such projects, and indeed of multicultural social justice education, is to help teachers already interested in social justice issues merge their students’ impersonal, historical knowledge with their personal, present knowledge and understandings. In this way, provided they see the injustices that occur in the first place, students (and teachers) can gradually interrogate their hierarchies and choices, in the service of a social justice curriculum. The results of such inquiries might make their way(s) into new texts, texts through which students could reflect and eventually produce different ideologies and identities.

Conclusion: Balancing Power and Agency

In this article, I have used a double theoretical lens of Bourdieuan (1977, 1985, 1991) and Bakhtinian (1981, 1986) perspectives on social space and the dialogism of everyday literacy events to analyze and discuss a classroom literacy event. It is not my wish to pose the social order and its maintenance, or reproduction, against individual identity order(ing); if we did that, we would be left balancing arguments about structural power (à la Bourdieu) and individual agency (à la Holland et al., and Bakhtin), with no understanding of how they are linked. With the combination of these two perspectives, we can see that what is often at stake in literacy
events such as these is “the very representation of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 723). There is some room for social maneuvering and social change, but in the main, my findings indicate that in such cases, literacy is used not to emancipate, but to re-order and/or maintain hierarchies. Below, I review some finer points of these implications from these two perspectives.

**Understanding and Analyzing Symbolic Capital from a Literacy Theory Perspective**

Bourdieu’s understanding of how capital works, how it circulates in social fields, offers many possible avenues for literacy researchers to explore. There are several reasons for trying to understand students’ symbolic capital and their resulting places in the social hierarchy of the classroom and/or school. First, by looking closely at students’ symbolic and cultural capital, we can understand the contextually contingent salience of race, class, gender, and other identity categories for students in discrete events and across time. For example, as above, we can see when particular masculinities matter, or when class status is salient to children, instead of merely assuming their importance based on our own possibly incomplete readings of a situation. Second, to observe the ways students calculate capital in the social field of the classroom, we must begin to gauge the weight students grant to out-of-school texts (see Dyson 2003), or gauge what counts to students in their valuations of capital. From the outside, for instance, many students with relatively low levels of economic capital might have higher degrees of symbolic and cultural capital in the classroom, as was the case with DeAndre, for certain. He drew on a variety of sources, including his vast knowledge of rap musicians, his very neighborhood, and his father’s incarceration, to constantly uphold his own levels of capital in the classroom. Thus, in the same way that skills acquired in school like writing in cursive, or using a dictionary, are “reconstituted and remediated in relation to variable fields of power and practice in the larger community” (Luke, 2003, p. 140), the values—the composition—of cultural and symbolic capital in any given elementary classroom are themselves tied to fields of power and practice in children’s larger communities.

Every day, teachers conduct literacy programs of various stripes, and students (usually) follow directions, write papers, take tests, and turn in homework. Symbolic struggles take place amidst these mundane routines, struggles “where what is at stake is the very representation” in all senses of the word. Bourdieu later says, “of the social world and, in particular, the hierarchy within each of the fields and among the different fields” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 723). A focus on the social field of the classroom, and the hierarchy within it, allows us to see who has the “right” to speak and be heard; from there, we can imagine how to better structure them and/or be aware of the social maneuvering that influences students’ participation (see Dutro, 2003; Lewis, 1997). I gained such an understanding in this particular class-
room by conducting a careful analysis of my field notes, observations, interviews, and self-reports by students, to understand the "position of a given agent [the student] within the social space" of the classroom (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). Next, I turn to the ways that these understandings can reflect back on, and magnify the depth of, analyses of literacy events.

**Understanding and Analyzing Literacy Events from a Social Reproduction Perspective**

From here, we can see symbolic violence when it occurs in literacy events, and recognize it as part of the struggles students engage in to order their own social worlds. Attacks like the one Arturo launched on Marcus are but one example of such violence (see also Leander, 2002), and girls may be just as likely as boys to engage in these struggles (Simmons, 2002; Zacher, 2007b). Without identifying such attacks as part of students' larger struggles for representation in the classroom field, we will not be able to adequately address and ameliorate damage done by them. For instance, had Ms. Linda told Arturo not to call Marcus a thief the moment after he did it, before he continued with his story, she might have stopped the immediate attack on Marcus, but the underlying reasons for the struggle would have remained unaddressed.

Students reproduce larger social inequalities without entirely understanding what they are doing; they have agency, and do make choices, but they may not see the extent to which their choices are based upon *habitus*, on their dispositions and existing frames of reference. The immediate power struggle absorbed DeAndre, Arturo, John, and Marcus' attention; none of them was conscious of the ways that their struggle was a smaller version of the same struggle being played out on a larger social canvas and was, in turn, reproducing larger social inequalities. As noted above, teachers may step in at such points to connect students' struggles to larger social fields. Finally, though, without a clear sense of the ways students reproduce inequalities in their struggles to maintain or change the social hierarchy, we cannot see how they may also use texts to struggle against hierarchies and claim new identities for themselves. Without both perspectives, we are ultimately blind to struggle and agency.

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ENDNOTES

1. All names in this paper have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research site and subjects.

2. All classroom scenes presented are reconstructed from both written field notes and transcribed audiotapes of events. Quoted words are exact quotes. Italics represent stressed words, CAPITALS indicate loud voices, and ellipses ( . . . ) indicate pauses in speech.

3. I have also italicized student writing where applicable. In reporting events, I have also underlined the week's spelling words so that the reader may note which words were required and may or may not have influenced the content and messages of the students' stories; some misspelled words have been corrected for ease of reading.

4. The spelling words for the week were: accept, broken, downstairs, event, forty-four, frighten, frozen, goodbye, home run, homework, organize, realize, themselves, stolen, waterproof.

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