

1-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Compton-Lilly, Catherine (2000) "Exploring Reading Identity: Urban Parents Defining Themselves As Readers," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1226>

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# Exploring Reading Identity: Urban Parents Defining Themselves As Readers

by *Catherine Compton-Lilly*

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As part of a teacher-research study I interviewed ten of my urban first grade students and their parents about reading. One parent, Ms. Webster, referred to people who read a lot as "bookworms" and "bookish people" who "don't have no fun." She explained, "All they do is sit in the house and read books all day long or sit outside and read books. . ."

I was surprised to hear Ms. Webster describe avid readers so negatively. In fact, during this same interview Ms. Webster describes herself as enjoying reading; however, she clearly separates herself from bookworms. Interestingly, Ms. Webster's description is typical of how the parents of my students distance themselves from reading despite the their own accounts of themselves as competent, enthusiastic readers.

Over the twelve years I have taught in urban schools, I have witnessed many staffroom conversations about the parents and the families of my students. Teachers often complain that the parents of our students can't read, don't read, or don't help their children with reading. I have frequently heard teachers berate and belittle parents that I personally know to be concerned and involved. Unfortunately, the ways teachers describe the parents of our students often reflect stereotypes about poor urban families that are supported by media representations and mainstream assumptions. It was the discrepancy between the staffroom discourses about parents and my own personal experiences with the families of my students that lead me to design a study that would explore the ways my students and their parents view reading and the experience of learning to read.

As I planned this study, I gave very little attention to parents' identities as readers. However, as the interviews progressed, parents spontaneously spoke about the ways they viewed themselves as readers. They told stories about themselves as readers, and made connections between their past experiences and the role reading currently plays in their lives. These comments led me to ask all of the parents in my study about their identities as readers.

In this article, I will document and examine the ways the parents of my first grade students identify themselves as readers. I will suggest that identity, and specifically reading identity, reflects much more than individual interests and attitudes. Lois Weis (1990) describes identity formation as the development of "a sense of self in relation to others" (p. 3); it is a process by which people grow to see themselves as both individuals and as members of particular communities. However, as Fairclough (1989) maintains, people are generally unaware of the

ways social realities shape identity; people tend to view identity as an individual, non-political, construction.

In the past, identity formation was generally assumed to be an individual construction. Stuart Hall (1991) describes traditional conceptions of identity formation as based on the intrinsic content of each individual, which people explore through an "inner dialectic of selfhood" (p.42). A second conception of identity denies the possibility of this "fully constituted, separate and distinct identity" (Grossberg, 1994, p. 13). This conception locates identity within intersections of dynamics of difference and representation; identity formation is both a process of identification with others who are like ourselves and a process of differentiation from those we perceive as different (Hall, 1991).

Finally, a third conception of identity focuses on "otherness" rather than difference (Grossberg, 1994, p. 13). Rather than defining one's own identity in terms of what one is not, identities based on "otherness" are based in a sense of belonging that people share and the shared spaces they inhabit (Grossberg, 1994). It is this third conception of identity that best explains the ways the parents of my students describe their own reading identities. As the following pages demonstrate, the parents of my students resist defining themselves as "real" readers. Instead they emphasize the social aspects of their lives, often contrasting these with solitary and socially estranged depictions of "real" readers.

Recognizing the socially constructed nature of identity and the role of community, Nancy Fraser (1994) writes of the need to understand "identity construction in relation to a public sphere" (Fraser, 1994, p. 97) that extends beyond the individual and the family. Thus, identity formation occurs within a complex intersection of social dynamics that occur within a particular context. In the words of Henry Giroux: "What is generally ignored is how these identities are taken up and engaged within particular histories, locations and zones of everyday life as both a pedagogical and political issue" (Giroux, 1994, p. 52).

Peggy Miller and Jacqueline Goodnow (1995) explain that people's identities are linked to cultural practices within a particular community. It is within this cultural context that the skills and knowledge possessed by a particular individual are displayed. Knowledge and skills are valued or not valued and defined as appropriate or inappropriate by participants within that particular social context. As Miller and Goodnow (1995) explain, cultural practices have consequences for individuals and their communities as people play out their lives within social groups that share particular cultural practices.

## **The Study**

The research described in this article is part of a larger teacher-researcher study that examines the concepts about reading held by urban first grade students and their parents. Four times over the course of a year, I interviewed ten of my first grade students and one of each of their parents about reading and schooling. The interviews were transcribed in full, with the exception of clearly off-task comments. Generally, interviews with parents occurred at the families' home while interviews with children were completed at school. The children/parent teams were selected randomly. Questions for the interviews focused on the experience of learning to read,

the role of reading in people's lives, and the ways living in an urban community might affect people's reading habits. All names of participants and places have been changed to protect the anonymity of my students and their families. The theme of identity emerged early as a strong and powerful theme across interviews and over the course of the study.

My students attend a large urban elementary school (over 850 students) that serves the poorest community in a mid-sized northeastern city; ninety-seven percent of the children at Rosa Parks Elementary School qualify for free or reduced lunch. The focus families in this study included: three multiracial children (either African American/Caucasian or Hispanic/Caucasian), one Puerto Rican child, and six African American children. Their parents represented a broad range of individuals; some parents were unemployed, others had long-term steady jobs. Some parents were receiving welfare, others had not received welfare since they were children. One parent had earned an Associate degree; other parents had not graduated from high school. The parents I interviewed grew up in cities, were raised "down South," had lived in suburban communities, or were raised in small towns. Some were single parents, some were grandparents raising grandchildren, others were married or had long-term relationships. One parent was Puerto Rican, three parents were European American, and six were African American. Most of the parents I worked with had returned to school at some point in their lives.

## **Reading Identities**

The stories my students' parents tell reveal the ways their views of themselves as readers are caught up in their life experiences and their understandings of the world. Within this dynamic, there exist "cultural models" or "pictures of prototypical worlds in which prototypical events occur" (Gee, 1990, p. 87). Cultural models related to reading are generally accepted understandings about readers and reading within a local community. These cultural models play a role in the development of reading identities, as people define themselves as readers with reference to shared conceptions of reading and readers. For example, there are prototypical models of good readers that people within local communities may individually and/or collectively reject or accept. Prototypical depictions of reading and readers may contradict or support cultural practices within local communities.

Within this study, the parents of my students used a variety of terms to describe people who read extensively. Parents referred to "bookworms," "bookish people," and "those certain people who read all the time." People who read a lot were described as being people who "thirst for knowledge," "loners," and "professional people." They were described as people who "look at things with different eyes," keep a "book on them at all times," "want to know everything they can possibly know about," "read everything under the sun," and always "have a pad or something to write on." In this article, I will refer to the type of person that reads a lot as a "real" reader.

While describing literacy as a valued skill in American society, Kathleen McCormick (1994) also recognizes a cultural suspicion directed at people who enjoy reading. The average American is portrayed as more likely to watch TV or "surf the net" for information than read a newspaper or book. Reading is often viewed as an intellectual, solitary activity. From Icabod Crane to Diane Chambers (from the sitcom "Cheers"), those who read a lot are often depicted as strange and socially estranged.

This suspicion may be particularly strong in struggling urban communities, where life experiences have demonstrated to residents that reading is associated with people other than themselves. Negative school experiences and low level employment opportunities distinguish urban residents from people they perceive to be "real" readers. Furthermore, being a "real" reader is perceived to entail adopting attitudes and behaviors that can collide with local cultural practices and values.

In this article, the reading identities of my students' parents will be explored in terms of their views of themselves as readers, their past experiences with reading, and the importance of the relationships they had with their teachers. Interviews with parents reveal the ways reading identities are contextualized within people's lives and their understandings about the world.

### **Reading Competency Versus Being a "Real" Reader**

Parents in this study view reading as an essential, highly utilitarian skill, as a means of getting somewhere, and as an escape from everyday life. Parents learn, practice, and utilize reading within particular social groups; it is within these groups that people define themselves as readers.

Although all of the parents in the sample described themselves as competent readers who are able to read materials necessary for functioning in their daily lives, most parents did not define themselves as that "certain" type of people who are "real" readers. In fact, the parents of my students describe people who are "real" readers as different from themselves. Ms. Horner associated "real" readers with "professional people, like doctors, lawyers, definitely teachers."

Ms. Green seemed to know these types of people well; she explains:

But see there's the type of people, you know the type they go, they never stop thirsting for knowledge and want to know everything and anything. They never stop and I don't know what you call 'em. That's what they [Ms. Green's parents] were.

Ms. Lilly: That's what your parents were?

Ms. Green: Yeah. They would listen to the classical music station and all this stuff. Watch PBS. Watch that what-cha-ma-call-it McNeil Lehrer stuff on TV, still. My mother watched the whole contra stuff on TV everyday. All that. Vietnam stuff too. I mean they had Time in there, Newsweek, they had the New York Times. But they did teach me one thing. I do not think that you necessarily have to stop learning. You learn at every age. School stuff.

Ms. Green describes her parents as "real" readers and notes their unending search for knowledge. Consistent with the view of reading as a cultural practice, Ms. Green associates being a "real" reader with more than reading behaviors; being a reader encompasses a range of activities and attitudes. Activities such as watching PBS, the McNeil Lehrer news show, the Iran-Contra Trials, or coverage of Vietnam do not require reading, but are cited as evidence of being "real" readers. To Ms. Green a "real" reader engages in behaviors and attitudes that include yet also extend beyond reading activities.

Mr. Sherwood identifies "real" readers as "loners" who don't want to be bothered with things other than their books." While Mr. Sherwood expresses a certain appreciation for his friend, whom he describes as smart because he reads a lot, he also conveys concern that too much reading isolates people from their peers. Mr. Sherwood's friend is described as a loner for whom reading has replaced both social relationships and the real world.

As a matter of fact um, I, I got a guy at work that's all he do. He go [Mr. Sherwood picks up a newspaper off a nearby table and hides his face behind it] and he reads. That's, you know what? Let me tell you, he can um, he can like to talk about strange things. I'm serious, I'm talking about science fiction and you know this and this going to happen and you know and very smart cuz he, cuz he reads . . . . You know when a person's a loner they all read. All loners read. But he don't want to be bothered with [anything] except this stuff right here. [Mr. Sherwood points to the paper again as he speaks the last sentence indicating that the text is the reader's only interest].

Mr. Sherwood associates being a "real" reader with being anti-social and strange.

Providing a thought-provoking example of the way reading may be viewed as anti-social, Ms. Webster explains that the demands of daily life and interruptions prevent her from reading more. In particular, she contrasts reading with spending time with her boyfriend. While Ms. Webster attests to enjoying reading, she explains that her boyfriend discourages her from reading.

Ms. Webster: Kids, job, cleaning, boyfriend. If I had a day, just a day all to myself, I mean and get me some books, I could read all them books in one day but it's like you got so many interruptions. "Ma." "Susan, what are you doing? Come sit with me." You know it, it's like if I'm sitting here in the night and I be reading, he'll flip the light off on me. He'll turn the light off.

Ms. Lilly: Just to get your attention?

Ms. Webster: Just to say quit reading, OK? You're supposed to spend time with me and not read books. That's what he does. Cuz he, he says to me more than one time, put the light off. And I'll go in the kitchen or in the bedroom and read.

Like Mr. Sherwood's description above, being a reader is juxtaposed against being social. Pursuing her desire to read requires her to isolate herself and risk annoying her boyfriend.

Despite Ms. Webster's statement that she will "go in the kitchen or in the bedroom and read," she still does not consider herself a "bookworm."

Ms. Webster: I mean cuz I love to read. And I never used to read when I was a kid. But you give me a book, a good book, and I'll sit there and read the book until it's done.

Ms. Lilly: Do you consider yourself a bookworm or a . . .

Ms. Webster: Bookish person? Mmm, no, no, not as much as a bookworm. But I like to read, I do. I mean I enjoy reading

Although Ms. Webster is willing to temporarily disrupt her social life to read, she does not view herself as a bookworm. In fact, while most participants describe themselves as enjoying reading, most do not describe themselves as "real" readers. Of the nine parents who were asked, four participants believe they definitely are not among those "certain people." Four others explain they like to read but qualified their response with a comment similar to Ms. Johnson, ". . . when I get a chance" or Ms. Mason, "Well, sometimes when I have the time."

Only Ms. Rodriguez calls herself a "reader", but she also qualifies her remarks saying, "I have to be. . ." based on her many years of continuing education. In contrast to other participants who described reading as a solitary and isolating practice, Ms. Rodriguez recreates the animated exchanges she has with her friends when they trade novels:

[Laughing] "Got a good novel?" "Ahhhhh, did you read so and so? So and so?" "No? You got it?" "Yeah." "You should check it out." "Send it by so and so or I come and get it." [Directed back to me] You know, stuff like that.

Ms. Rodriguez believes that she is a "real" reader; she presents her experiences with reading very differently, emphasizing the social aspects of reading, such as exchanging books and sharing opinions.

Despite their denials of being "real" readers, participants describe the important role reading has played in their lives. Participants show me novels they finished reading the night before and explain how reading has helped them in times of stress and challenge. Reading is something they can do and often enjoy but it is not a central aspect of their identity. Those people who are "real" readers belong to another world, a professional world of loners who don't have any fun.

Ms. Green is a particularly interesting case. When Ms. Green was growing up she was part of a highly literate, white, middle-class, suburban family. Her mother was a teacher; her father had a master's degree. She describes her early years as a reader, ". . . I liked the books. But the thing I found out, when you started reading um, you didn't have to be, here you are on your bed; reading you're off in India somewhere. That's what I liked." In terms of school, Ms. Green remarked, "That [school] was my thing. I liked going to school." However, as Ms. Green explains in a halting and rather exasperated tone:

This is a long time ago. Ummmm, I think, see, with me, I'm not sure, I mean it took, it took me so much just to keep um, I don't know. I can't spend my time reading, it, I can't even find anything, I don't know man [end of tape].

With the social and economic changes that occurred in Ms. Green's life due to her mental illness also came changes in her identity as a reader; ". . . in my past lives or whatever, I did a lot of reading" and in a later interview "But I don't know. I mean right now with me I just mostly watch TV." Ms. Green acknowledges that she has plenty of time to read and cannot understand or explain why she does not read. Her identity as a reader was strong when she was surrounded by a middle-class literate environment but diminished greatly when her social and economic situation changed and her mental health declined.

The reading identities of the parents I interviewed are caught up in the social aspects of their lives. People define themselves in relation to social relationships; defining themselves as "real" readers would potentially deny these social relationships. Among parents in this community there is a sense that they are not among the "real" readers of the world. Being a "real" reader involves more than enjoying reading. Being a "real" reader involves a complex of behaviors and attitudes that include certain preferences in music and media viewing, and a limited social life. To many of the parents interviewed, being a "real" reader would require them to disrupt or redefine the social relationships they value and to challenge accepted social practices within their community.

## **The Role of School in the Development of Parent Reading Identities**

When parents talk about themselves as readers, they often tell stories about their school experiences. School and classroom practices affect people's attitudes about school, learning, and reading; the ways in which reading is presented to children either support or discourage children from viewing themselves as readers. The reading identities of the parents of my students are caught up in their school experiences. The words of the parents recorded in this section suggest some of the ways parents learned that academic pursuits, including reading, are for people other than themselves. In the following section, I will present the words of parents who described school as boring and reading as a solitary, sedentary activity. These parents talked extensively about teachers being unable to meet their needs as readers.

Many parents describe school as "boring" (see Fingeret, 1982a, 1982b). As Kunjufu (1986) explains, the word "boring" is often used as a marker for other issues related to schools' inability to challenge and engage youth. When schools fail to engage students and confirm their identities as learners, school learning, including reading, becomes defined as the property of "other" people. When school tasks involving reading are experienced in this way, the identities of students are constructed in contrast to school rather than within the social expectations of the school.

Several parents comment on how schools, curricula, teachers, and pedagogy fail to be interesting and relevant to students. Ms. Rodriguez suggests that teachers should "find out what the kid is interested in." "Like he's (pointing to her high school aged son) more interested in music, in videos and stuff like that. I guess if it were something he was interested in, he wouldn't be so bored." Ms. Rodriguez advocates a child-centered pedagogy that takes into account students' interests. She would like the teachers to "find out" what children are interested in and use this information to guide instruction.

Ms. Rodriguez then describes her own experiences in school. She explains, "Me? Personally I liked novels and stuff like that, so if (you) want to make a child read just give them something that they like to read." She describes one of her sons who learned to read with comic books.

Ms. Webster suggests that teachers of younger children should "make it [learning] like a game." Ms. Webster advocates a pedagogy that is engaging and entertaining. She recognizes that children love games and believes that schools should capitalize on this to prevent students from becoming bored.

Other parents describe reading itself as boring. Ms. Holt explains that to her reading is both sedentary and solitary. Ms. Holt contrasts herself and Bradford with her older children: "I'd never even think of reading a book that thick, with a thousand pages. I mean they'd [her older children] just sit hours and hours and just read. Bradford sit that long? I guess he can't sit still that long. I guess."

To Ms. Holt, reading a thousand pages means sitting still for a long time. She explains that her main interest in high school was sports and expresses disbelief at her older children who sit "hours and hours and just read." Her use of the phrase "just read" reveals her sense that, rather than reading, they could be doing something else - perhaps something more productive, more active, more interesting, or more fun.

Parents also commented on the ways schools failed to meet their individual needs. Ms. Rodriguez found the regular work of the classroom to be too easy. Her teacher did not challenge her.

Ms. Rodriguez: Them books was sooo- easy and I used to breeze through them and then it's just like I said if she could be looking at me I'd be looking at her. And she's like, so what are you up to? It's like you don't want to know. Can I get another book?

Ms. Lilly: So she let you go ahead at your own rate.

Ms. Rodriguez: Yeah. Then she let me go at my own speed cuz she knew anything, I was bored and she was trying to keep my interest but it wasn't working.

While Ms. Rodriguez was successful with reading, she was not personally and purposefully engaged in school reading tasks. School reading was not connected to her life or to her own purposes for reading. Reading experiences at school demonstrated to her the separateness of school reading and her own life. Interestingly, Ms. Rodriguez is the one parent who now describes herself as a "real" reader. While her school reading tasks were described as having been imposed and obligatory, Ms. Rodriguez now enjoys a personal reading life that is grounded in social relationships and personally satisfying experiences with books.

Ms. Holt describes how she liked school but disliked the "reading part": "I didn't like it cuz it was hard, I guess it was the reading part that I didn't understand. You know, so it made it difficult." At our first interview, Ms. Holt explained that she did not remember much about learning to read. Although she knew that she never enjoyed reading, she recalled very few details. Ms. Holt's involvement in these interviews inspired her to talk with her older sister about learning to read. Her sister reminded Ms. Holt of the difficulties she had had. Ms. Holt explains that she had forgotten how difficult it had been.

Yeah, yeah, I was asking [my sister] about how I was when I was young. She said Amanda, you know when you were coming up your reading never was that good. You know, I said really? She said remember. This was locked inside there [motions to her heart]. I say OK, I remember those days . . . . Couldn't try to make me read and I just, you know. I guess they don't have the programs now as they had you know back, we're talking thirty, forty years ago.

When asked why she doesn't like to read, Ms. Holt spoke of being "made to read" required books. Attesting to the trauma of her early reading experiences, Ms. Holt described the people around her as not being able to "make" her read. To Ms. Holt, learning to read entailed people making her do things - making her learn, making her read "certain books," and making her respond to these books in particular ways (i.e. book reports).

I didn't like to read that much. That's what I'm saying it is nothing that I really enjoy doing and I don't, you know, I knew certain books when we were going to school that you had to read. Like Shane and Old Yeller and those you know back in my days were the books [laughs]. Well I'm just saying that I read them and had to write a book report on them and that was it.

Although data was not collected to collaborate Ms. Holt's recollections of her school experiences, and further research would be needed to document the specific ways in which Ms. Holt's school experiences related to her current reading practices, issues of control and power appear to be critical to Ms. Holt's views of herself as a reader.

Mr. Sherwood describes how school created reading difficulties for him that his mother, who is a teacher, has helped him overcome.

The worst thing I had in my lifetime was when I used to be at the school. You know, they used to have the seats split up on this side, on this side people be studying [motions with his arm to one side] and the ones that couldn't read that good was on this side [motions to the other side] and they [those who could read] were on this side. So um, you know you had the, um the teacher, [we] used to get up and read it [the book] in front of all those people. You know you'd come out and say "Ahhh, man" [when you did not do well]. Especially when you get to the words that you don't even know, that was what hurts, you know. And he'd [referring to himself] try to figure it out you know, that hurts real bad.

The teacher and the classroom practices demonstrated to Mr. Sherwood that reading was not for him; he was made to sit on the side of the room with other children who couldn't read. According to him, the teacher did not work with the children, instruct the children, or help the children; the children were just expected to read. Although Mr. Sherwood explains that, thanks to his mother who is a teacher, he reads "pretty good now," the stories he tells about himself as a young reader continue to revolve around his initial school experiences with reading.

From the perspective of participants, it appears that schools have done things to show them that reading is not for them. Ms. Rodriguez was not challenged. Ms. Holt was forced to read books that were unrelated to her life or interests. Mr. Sherwood was placed with children who could not read and was just handed the book.

At other points in the interviews, both Ms. Holt and Mr. Sherwood described times when reading was enjoyable to them and they did learn to read. Ms. Holt described choosing books from the bookmobile as a child and reading them. Mr. Sherwood explained that despite his early experiences he did learn to read: "with my mother's help, I think I'm pretty good now." Reading itself was not always a negative experience, but reading in school was painful. School reading experiences were described as impersonal, unconnected to students' interests and lives, and

insensitive to their needs. When reading is presented in this way in classrooms, it is not surprising that students do not identify themselves as "real" readers.

## **The Relationship Between Teachers and Students**

Although Ms. Hudson described her own experiences in school as boring, she attributed being bored to the students' attitude. "The kids' gonna be bored if they gonna be bored. You know it's not the teacher, it's the kid." Ms. Hudson suggested that being bored in school is an individual's problem. If a child is bored in school, it is not the fault of the teacher or the school; it is the child's own problem.

However, the majority of parents disagreed. They felt that teachers play a critical role in children's school experiences. Ms. Hernandez reflects on what could have prevented her from dropping out of high school.

Maybe if the teachers like more get into it with the students or something. Maybe it would have been better. Cuz some of the classes were boring.

Ms. Webster describes some teachers as being "stuck on the work."

Some teachers you know, they, they make it, some teachers can be like stuck on the work, you know. But the other teachers make it fun for the kids to learn. And when they feel it's fun to learn that's when you know they try to pick it up . . . . There's certain ways that teachers can really make a child, you know, want to learn. I mean like you. She, she loves you and she, she was learning, you know. She was learning and she enjoyed it, but then with Miss Gellman it's like she was stuck on her work.

Ms. Johnson describes some of her older children's high school teachers:

. . . well, I know at Washington [name of a local high school] a lot of the teachers just don't care. You know they're there to do a job and if the kids don't take advantage of what they are doing then that's not their problem. And I've actually had a couple of them say that.

In each of these examples, teachers are criticized for not being more intimately involved with their students. Ms. Webster's phrase "being stuck on the work" captures the tendency for teachers to focus on academic content and completing instructional tasks rather than on children as individuals. As Ms. Johnson notes, some teachers do not care; whether or not a child learns is the child's problem.

Almost every parent mentioned a teacher who positively affected them. These descriptions generally did not focus on academic issues. Rather, memorable teachers were described as people who cared. Teachers demonstrated their caring for students in many ways. Some teachers invited children to stay at their homes; others made home visits to the student. A caring teacher is "tough" and "strict" but she cares and the students "love her for it." Caring teachers use games in the classroom to make learning fun and exciting. They "get into it with the students." Ms. Horner

describes her second grade teacher, ". . . she just looked after me, um, made me feel real special."

Many parents also indicated that the teachers they most respected were those who "stay on" the kids. Parents believed that teachers have an obligation to "stay on" their students. Ms. Mason describes a teacher who really cared about her:

I used to tell my kids about this teacher I had when I was in about eighth grade. She was the type of person that if you didn't learn nothing she not going to let you pass. Before any kid leave out of her class that kid learned how to read. And that showed the kids right then that she really cared, cuz some teachers they don't care. And this lady I'm talking about her name was Ms. Dill and she was a great teacher . . . cuz she stayed on you. If she figured that you were playing around and stuff she'll let you get away with it for a while, then she'll tell you straight up, hey you gonna learn before you leave out of my classroom . . . but every kid that went through her [class], they did learn.

Ms. Holt describes her third grade teacher as being "hard" but also having confidence in the students' abilities:

She was hard, I mean she was hard! But she, she was one, she was one, she was one of those teachers you gonna do it, you gonna do it. There's not no, I'm not going to hear the [words] "You can't." Can't, I don't believe can't was in her vocabulary. "You can and you will."

This teacher insisted that the children "do it." This teacher did not accept excuses; the teacher believed that children were competent and insisted that they meet her expectations.

Ms. Holt contrasts this third grade teacher with other teachers she has known:

Ms. Holt: . . . some teachers give uh, give their all to help these children. But some teachers they just . . . [pause] [Speaking as the teacher] "I'm here, I'm here, you're here and so hell, I'll have um, I'm, I'm going to get paid whether you do it or not."

Ms. Lilly: Yep.

Ms. Holt: You know because in my travels I've, I've ran into teachers, some teachers that gave me that attitude . . . I didn't care for those teachers.

Mr. Sherwood made a similar comment. He said that "to many [teachers] it's like a, a job to them;" he went on to explain that these teachers do not take time with their students.

Parents clearly value teachers who are both caring and tough. They want teachers who will "stay on" their children to make sure they learn. They also value teachers who take extra time and make extra efforts to make learning interesting. By making school interesting and insisting that children learn, teachers demonstrate to students that they care. The parents I spoke with believe that the teacher plays a critical role in helping children to learn.

## Conclusions

People's reading identities are constructed with reference to their own past experiences with reading and to the ways they view people whom they consider to be "real" readers. Although parents describe themselves as competent readers who generally enjoy reading, they resist labeling themselves as "real" readers. This resistance reflects stereotypes described by the parents that define "real" readers in particular ways. To the parents interviewed in this study, being a "real" reader involves more than reading; it involves adopting a complex of behaviors that includes not only reading but certain tastes in music, media, and a tendency toward solitary and anti-social behavior. These stereotypes about readers are in conflict with cultural practices within this community that tend to value social relationships over the solitary act of reading. However, the distance parents maintain between themselves and "real" readers does not deny the value parents in this community place on reading and the enjoyment many parents get from reading.

Often it was the school that demonstrated to parents that they did not belong among the "real" readers of the world. Parents describe school as boring and impersonal; teachers fail to build on children's interests and make learning fun. Parents describe situations in which teachers were unable to meet their individual needs. School reading is often experienced as a painful and frustrating task. However, parents also talk about the importance of the teacher/student relationship and emphasize the difference particular teachers have made in their own lives. They are adamant about the importance of teachers in their children's education.

Accepting negative stereotypes about readers is not unique to the parents of my students; defining readers as socially isolated and of professional status is a mainstream discourse that has been and continues to be promoted through the media and the mainstream culture. The ways the parents in this study view themselves as readers are significant not only because of the ways their school experiences with reading positioned them as non-readers or incompetent readers, but also because of the larger social context that defines and positions people from particular social groups in particular ways. It must be remembered that, unlike their middle-class counterparts, who also may not view themselves as "real" readers, the families of my students are members of particular social groups who have historically been deemed to be intellectually inferior, unsuited for professional occupations, chronically undereducated, members of "pathological" families, and uninterested in academic concerns.

Current accounts that define poor urban families as non-readers, incompetent readers and uninterested in reading, are often disguised manifestations of these same historical stereotypes. In contrast, many white, middle-class students are also not avid readers. Many suburban students prefer sports to their studies, their social interests over the academic agendas of schools, and/or active hands-on experiences over reading. However, these students are not necessarily defined as unsuited for college or professional level employment.

While it may be acceptable for middle-class students to choose not to be avid readers, when poor urban students define themselves as unenthusiastic readers, the act of not reading is socially defined as evidence of the inability or unwillingness of lower class urban students to read and to their general incompetence in academic and professional pursuits.

It is this relationship between historical views about reading and the parents' current views of themselves as readers that is significant. Parents resist the adoption of stereotypical conceptions of reading that emphasize the solitary and socially estranged nature of "real" readers. Instead they emphasize the importance of the social relationships within their lives. Historic attitudes about poor and ethnically diverse people are played out within the reading identities of the parents of my students. However, despite this subject positioning, the parents of my students are readers and, by their own accounts, reading has played a significant role in their lives.

Certainly the school experiences of parents did little to contradict these cultural expectations about their reading potential. Completing this research project has raised several questions about my role in helping my students to become capable and enthusiastic readers. Most importantly, what does a close examination of the reading identities of my students' parents mean for me as their child's teacher? What can I do to help children to critically examine the roles reading plays in their lives and to be able to become critically aware of the ways reading is used both to provide them with opportunities and also to demonstrate to them their own perceived inadequacies? How can I help children to view themselves as readers when the historical and socially constructed expectations of the larger society challenge this possibility? Furthermore, how do the institutional expectations of a school that is desperately working to improve test scores under the wrath of the state education department collide with my efforts to support my students in becoming competent, enthusiastic readers?

Fortunately, the words of parents suggest several possibilities.

- Challenge existing stereotypes about poor urban families; the parents in this study without exception were extremely interested in their children becoming competent readers.
- Treat reading as a social activity; capitalize on the ways reading can be used to create and maintain social relationships.
- Strive to make reading interesting and enjoyable to students; capitalize on the interests children bring to school and provide opportunities for children to enjoy reading for their own purposes.
- Address the needs of the children. When children experience difficulty with learning to read, actively seek ways to support them; likewise, challenge those children who find learning to read easy.
- Finally, recognize the importance of developing rich personal relationships with children and their families.

These recommendations are not new; in fact they are typical of the types of issue historically raised by progressive educators. Based on their own experiences as readers, the parents of my students are also challenging the types of traditional, highly scripted, and skills-based reading methods that are commonly implemented in urban schools situated in struggling communities. The parents of my students want curricula that engage their children, capitalize on their interests, meet their needs, and are presented by teachers who genuinely care about their children. Parents understand that, as long as curriculum is viewed as boring and irrelevant, students will fail to view themselves as connected to schools and school-related tasks; schools will continue to be viewed as the property of "the other" and their own identities as readers will not be nurtured.

## Note

At the time data were collected, Rosa Parks School was cited by the State Education Department for chronically low reading scores on state exams. Both teachers and students were under extreme pressure to improve reading achievement; this pressure was fueled by the threat of losing our school's charter and the threat of the school being disbanded at the end of the school year.

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