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## The Silenced Voice in Literacy: Listening beyond Words to a “Struggling” Adolescent Girl

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*This paper shares the story of a “struggling” seventh grade girl, Tara. Using the Listening Guide, a qualitative, feminist, relational, voice-centered method of analysis, helped me reach my goal of understanding adolescents and their literacies. Tara spoke of a relational dynamic of knowing, and the feelings of trust and connection she needed to learn in her English language arts classroom. This paper emphasizes and explores the Listening Guide as a methodology that enabled me to hear the complexities of Tara’s voice, and the ways she uniquely made meaning and understood her life and her literacies. Second, I share Tara’s story, shedding light on the relational dimensions of knowledge construction in the classroom, as well as the controlling contexts of school environment. Last, I share practical implications for classroom use and for future research, highlighting the need for more personalized relationships between students and teachers.*

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Living in “new times” that require complex, changing, multiple literacies, it is essential that we comprehend the challenges faced by adolescents as they negotiate official and unofficial literacy practices (Alvermann, 2001; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). As I engaged in extended ethnographic research with middle school students through the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, my focus was to illuminate the lives of those students who were identified as “struggling” with literacy practices. My research colleagues and I agreed that, “(r)eading difficulties do not occur in a vacuum. Adolescents’ personal identities, academic achievement, and future aspirations mix with ongoing difficulties in reading” (Moore et al., 1999, p. 7), and we examined this mix in a diverse middle school in the Northeast.

As I engaged in this research, I was often struck by the test-driven culture in which we live and teach. It is not difficult to allow one’s self to become completely discouraged by the constant pressures and what may be perceived as the

“dehumanized” (Johnston, 1997) literacy education with which we are forced to contend. In fact, it sometimes seems that we have retracted so far from the human beings we teach, that little attention has been paid to the first-hand voices of adolescents as they reflect on how they make sense of their lives and their learning (Brown, 1991, 1999; Finders, 1997, 2000; Lloyd, 1998; Luttrell & Parker, 2001).

Instead, I began my research with the belief that middle school students would be knowledgeable about their own lives (Alvermann, 1998; Oldfather, 1995) and could be my “native informants” (Hubbard, 1989, p. 291) as I explored middle school life. I also upheld the belief that researchers and educators must really hear and heed the actual voices of adolescents to glean deeper insights regarding how to most effectively educate adolescents in English language arts classrooms (Alvermann, 1998; Lincoln, 1995; Oldfather, 1995).

Over two years I shadowed middle school students and their teachers in their English language arts classrooms and across the school day at this middle school. The

state characterized this school as one with “high student needs in relation to district resource capacity”. In the 2002-03 school year, 3.3% of the students were identified as being Limited English Proficient, 50.8% of the students were eligible for free lunch, and 69.9% of the students were identified as Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander.

The school, like many others, was struggling to meet state standards, and as a result, was attempting to raise academic achievement through an emphasis on basic skills and discipline. During my time at the school I wrote detailed field notes, audio and video taped class sessions, interviewed informants informally and formally, and collected documents including: questionnaires, student schoolwork samples, school notes and handbooks, and students’ more personal literacy artifacts to compile case studies for each of the twelve selected focal students identified. From these case studies of twelve students, I chose to highlight one-- "Tara" (Pseudonyms have been used through this article to protect identities).

### *Selection of Informant*

Tara pushed my understandings of voice, silence and her lived expression of middle school life as I specifically focused on interpretations of my interviews with her, using the Listening Guide (LG) (e.g. Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Tolman, 2002; Way, 1998), a qualitative, feminist, relational, voice-centered method of analysis. Tara, a bi-racial seventh grader of African American and Puerto Rican descent, struggled throughout her time as a student at the school, and was even expelled for a short time because of her perceived behavior.

I found that the LG afforded me a great deal toward my goal of understanding

adolescents and their literacies. This feminist methodology, which has traditionally been used in the field of psychology, provided me with the space to hear the intricacies of what several struggling middle school girls told me about their lives and their literacy practices.

In my interviews with Tara, I heard her speak of a relational dynamic of knowing, and the feelings of trust and connection needed to learn in the English language arts classroom. I also heard her complimentary and conflicting voices about how she understood herself as a research informant, a student, a reader, a writer, a friend, a person of color, a young woman, and the many other social identities (Gee, 1996) students like her live in their middle school worlds.

Further, I was able to examine my own voice as a researcher and the co-construction of meaning within the relational context of our interviews. This feminist, reciprocal, dialogic research design is rooted in the students’ self-understandings, providing an avenue for adolescent voices to participate in the study’s construction and validation (Lather, 1991), yielding rich insights for literacy educators and researchers.

This paper emphasizes and explores the LG methodology. The voice-centered aspect of the LG enabled me to hear the complexities of Tara’s voice, and to share the ways she uniquely made meaning and understood her life and her literacies. Second, I share Tara’s poignant story, especially in the ways she shed light on the relational dimensions of knowledge construction in the classroom, as well as aspects of the voices and silences of students, and the controlling contexts of her school environment. Last, I will share practical implications for English language arts classrooms and for future research in this domain, highlighting the need for richer,

more personalized relationships between students and teachers.

### The Listening Guide

The LG is a qualitative, relational, voice-centered, feminist methodology primarily used in the analysis of interview data. While I was engaged in ethnographic research (Merriam, 2001) at the middle school, using traditional means of study, the major thrust of my data sources for the purposes of this particular paper were the interviews I had with Tara. The interviews were unstructured and informal (Merriam, 2001), consisting of open-ended questions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), which created a discourse that was collaboratively constructed by Tara and myself (Mishler, 1986, p. 52). Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with the LG method.

The LG differs from other means of analysis in that it places emphasis on the psychological complexities of humans through attention to voice. It does so through the creation and special analysis of voice poems, and by attending to silences. The LG is distinctive in its emphasis on the importance of human relationships, and its feminist grounding provides spaces to hear those who have been traditionally silenced.

"It is distinctly different from traditional methods of coding, in that one listens to, rather than categorizes or quantifies, the text of the interview... In other words, listening for an aspect of experience that has been rendered invisible by an oppressive ideology, such as learning about girls' [ideas, thoughts] within the context of patriarchy, involves an interpretive process that weaves together the speaker's words and other aspects of her storytelling that the Listening Guide forefronts" (Tolman, 2001, p. 132). "The Listening Guide method provides a way of systematically attending to the many voices

embedded in a person's expressed experience... allow[ing] for multiple codings of the same text" (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch, 2003, p. 30).

This LG methodological approach allowed me the freedom to uphold the belief that knowledge is constructed within the context of relationships. The relational construction of knowledge does not in any way dismiss the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978), but instead adds emphasis on the dimension of the relational dynamic between one's self and others that contribute to the knowledge gained in socializing an experience (Gilligan, 1996; Malaguzzi, 1993).

Within the relational construction of knowledge, attention is paid to the textures of quality and trust in relationships (Raider-Roth, 2005). This LG method allowed my knowledge, my reservations, my informant's knowledge, and the paths of the questions to evolve. Since interviewing is a relational process, I needed a method that could help me discover both the relational energies of Tara's life and literacy practices, as well as the relational energies in our interviews (Raider-Roth, 2005).

In addition, this LG methodology is voice-centered. It enabled me to hear and respect the complexities of Tara's voice with a carefully designed analysis. With special training in color-coding interview transcripts, I was able to attend to the nuances of the informant's words and moments of quiet. I placed emphasis on voice and silence because they are deeply embedded in the intricacies of confusion, resistance, ideology, and knowledge. I listened to and for voice in my efforts to establish patterns of quotes, to bring out nuances and cadences, and to explore meanings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Once interviews were transcribed, I analyzed them with several "listenings" or

re-readings of the interview transcript. The theory behind the multiple listenings is to allow researchers to truly hear the nuances of informants' stories, and to provide researchers with opportunities to unravel and pay close attention to the important themes and relationships that emerge from the data. The procedure behind the LG calls for each interview to be listened to at least four discrete times.

In the first listening, the objective is to attend to the stories that the informant shares. The researcher is to articulate a succinct, yet rich synopsis of the basic trends and themes emerging from the first listening, in order to hear the general scope of the informant's story. It is imperative for the researcher to understand the informant's main story lines, and this is referred to as "listening for plot" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Raider-Roth, 2005).

In the second listening, my focus was on how the informant described herself and her relationships with herself, others, literacy and schooling. Since the voice of self is often expressed as the first person "I," I followed Tara's use of the first-person pronoun by creating what Gilligan et al. (2003) refer to as a voice poem.

The purpose of constructing voice poems is twofold. First, it provides a systematic way for researchers to listen to an informant's first-person voice and to attend to any distinctive patterns within it. Second, this methodical attention to voice provides researchers with opportunities to hear how an informant speaks of herself, in relationship to herself and to others.

According to Gilligan et al. (2003), two rules manage the construction of an "I poem." First, one is to extract every first person "I" within the given excerpt, along with the verb and any seemingly important accompanying information. Second, one is to maintain the precise sequence in which the phrases originally occurred in the

person's story. As the researcher extracts the sequenced "I" phrases, she places them in separate lines, like the lines of a poem.

Often, "I poems" capture concepts not directly stated by the informant, yet central to the meaning of what she has said. In any case, the "I poem" attends to an associative stream of consciousness carried by the first-person voice running through a narrative, rather than being contained by the full structure of sentences. Focusing just on the "I" pronoun, and at times, its relation to other pronouns, brings the informant's subjectivity to the foreground, providing the researcher with the opportunity to attend just to the rhythms and patterns in the informant's relationships to herself and to others as expressed in her narratives.

Third and fourth listenings, referred to by Gilligan et al. (2003) as contrapuntal, are a more in-depth way for a researcher to re-visit the research questions by examining the color-coded transcripts and creating voice poems to explore the ways that themes or voices either melodiously interact or are in tension with one another.

Once themes or voices are decided upon by the researcher by first "listening for plot" (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Raider-Roth, 2005) and by secondly sketching a trail of evidence (Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989; Raider-Roth, 2005; Taylor et al., 1995) to substantiate claims that those voices are indeed demonstrative of an informant's way of making meaning, then the contrapuntal third and fourth listenings are a way to further examine the voices and how they relate to one another.

The LG provides spaces for the voices of those populations that have traditionally been silenced, such as middle school students, and especially female students, and students of color. The LG provides ample opportunities for the researcher to systematically and constructively attend to the many

dimensions and tenor of voices, as well as make sense of the intertwining and complex relationships in a study such as this. The feminist, voice-centered nature of the LG can provide spaces for the voices of adolescent girls, a traditionally silenced population, as well as lend space to hear about their literacy practices, many of which have previously been deemed unofficial (Finders, 1997).

In terms of the generalizability of this study, I realize that the story of one adolescent girl cannot reflect the vast diversity of our nation, and the myriad of feelings of other girls that will differ from my informant. On the contrary, I sought to "...document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, ... [I was] very interested in the single case because [I] believe that embedded in it the reader will discover resonant universal themes...The scientist and the artist are both claiming that *in the particular resides the general*" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 14).

Although the use of this particular methodology will not lead to absolute truths or vast generalizations, it was Brown and Gilligan's (1992) intention that the LG be used to hear the voices of those populations who have traditionally been silenced, and to glean understandings from those informants that may be "worthy of others' attention" (p. 23).

### Listening to Tara

I found it essential, yet puzzling to address this confusing notion of what it means to be a "struggling" reader and writer right from the start in my attempts to describe Tara. Although Tara had been identified by her school and by her teachers as struggling, it was perplexing to me because I saw Tara as a bright, passionate

thirteen-year-old girl. Was Tara in fact struggling, or was she a prime example of the countless adolescents who simply do not match the criteria of what it means to be successful in today's American schools?

Indeed, Tara had no cognitive deficits, yet her background experiences and life outside of school did not fit the ideal test-taker and homework producers that today's schools want their students to be. It is to be understood, though, that these words are not simply my incessant ramblings, but instead were Tara's words, as well as the expressions of her peers. I took the time to carefully listen to the actual voices of students like Tara, to know more about why *they* think they are failing in their English language arts classes.

Both in the moment, as well as in retrospect, it was glaringly apparent that Tara was crying for help, with not just school and literacy, but also with basic needs such as love and attention. Tara used wild, sometimes violent words and actions to express her voice in a world that did not know how to listen (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

In this voice-centered description of Tara, three themes are emphasized. First, Tara was trapped in a complex cycle of anger, which was perpetuated by the failure of those around her to truly listen to her attempts to be heard. Second, there was a theme of self affirming, identity shaping qualities in Tara's statements about her literacy practices and how she negotiated her quest to be heard, as well as in her stated notions of peer relations, romantic and familial love, and her background set against the culture of schooling. Third, there was a theme of Tara's need for trusting relationships and for supportive school contexts. The controlling nature of her school environment did not nurture the types of contexts Tara needed to really be heard and to learn.

*Anger at Failing to be Heard*

Tara was someone easily described as “spunky” or bold. Her embracing, comical disposition coupled with her natural curiosity, fearless stories, and “ready to tackle anything” attitude were a winning combination for her. In English language arts class, she would occasionally tell funny, earnest stories that appealed to the senses. One could always count on Tara to be honest and to “tell it like it is.”

Tara was a pretty girl, tall, slender, and physically mature. She often wore form-fitting clothing that showed off her womanly shape, about which I often worried, considering the streams of inappropriate attention she received from boys. Her choices in fashion were common for an urban teenaged girl in 2003-- close-fitting jeans, thick-soled aggressive shoes, gold jewelry, and snug leotard-like shirts. With a smooth complexion like creamy coffee, and round, richly brown eyes, Tara was open about her bi-racial heritage.

Tara was consistently affectionate with Sharon, her English language arts teacher. They openly enjoyed their complimentary personalities. With her sparkly smile and brassy stories, Tara also seemed to be well liked and respected by her peers. When researchers asked Sharon about the ways in which Tara was struggling, the teacher replied that Tara was “needy... needing attention.” Tara had trouble turning in assignments on time, some of which were major papers.

One day, as Tara and I walked down the hallway together after gathering our lunches in the cafeteria, Tara began telling me about a journal she used to keep. She knew that I was interested in her unofficial literacies, practiced outside of school. Tara said that she used to write and draw in the journal when she was angry. When I asked

her what she got angry about, Tara explained to me that she had been teased a great deal last year about her mixed racial background. Tara described how enraged she used to feel last year when teased about it, and that the journal helped to release and to sort through her confused emotions.

Like, I would say, stuff like, man, I can't believe, I cannot believe that I did that. Like, when I get angry, I would do stuff, and not mean to. But after that, I feel so bad that I did that, or said something that I wasn't supposed to say.

In her own words, Tara went on to explain that the journal was essentially her history last year, in 6th grade. People would treat me different, 'cause of nationality that I am. I'm Puerto Rican and Black. So, I'm like, what's the difference? I don't really care! I care about my nationality, and I care about my history, but, I just don't care that you feel that you have to pick on me, just because I'm different. So, a lot people just talked about me behind my back and I didn't like that, so I would tell every single last one of my friends, if you do have something to say to me, just say it to my face. Don't go spreading rumors.

Since the focus of my research was on how the informant described herself and her relationships with herself, others, literacy, and her notions of struggling in the middle school setting, I decided to place a firm focus on the voice of the self in Tara's statements. In the two excerpts above, this voice of self is expressed as the first person “I.” In order to follow and hone in on how Tara spoke of herself in relation to various notions, I followed Tara's use of the first-person pronoun by creating what Gilligan et al. (2003) refer to as a voice poem. The following voice poem is constructed from all of Tara's “I” statements above, beginning with “Like, I would say...”

I would say  
 I can't believe  
 I cannot believe  
 I did that  
 I get angry  
 I would do stuff  
 I feel so bad  
 I did that  
 I wasn't supposed to say

I am  
 I'm Puerto Rican and Black  
 I'm like  
 I don't really care  
 I care  
 I care  
 I just don't care  
 I'm different  
 I didn't like that  
 I would tell every single last one of  
 my friends

In this voice poem, Tara was expressing two essential notions. First, she was glaringly clear in conveying that she wanted to speak freely, but in her openness, which was often fueled by anger, she was left regretting some of her actions, feeling as though she hurt others with her frankness. Second, she engaged in a range of “I” statements that were self affirming and identity shaping, especially with regard to her nationality and her efforts to be heard. This was particularly apparent in the first lines of the second stanza, such as “I am, I’m Puerto Rican and Black, . . . I care, I care, I just don’t care, I’m different.”

In the beginning of the poem, with statements such as “I would say, I can’t believe, I cannot believe,” she was attempting to sort through the confusing emotions of having been hurt, and somehow communicate that pain to others. Tara got angry, yet in that rage, became more irritated with herself and with her actions, as heard in, “I get angry, I would do stuff, I feel so bad, I did that.” Perhaps the most

poignant line was the last “I” statement of that stanza, in which Tara said, “I wasn’t supposed to say.” Tara struggled with, in her perception, what she was and was not ‘allowed’ to say.

### *Literacy as Self Affirming and Identity Shaping*

Tara used her journal to author herself into a private space where she could contemplate her background, as well as identify her needs and desires as she embarked on adulthood, in a mostly confidential fashion, without offending or disrupting others any more than she felt she already had. Tara’s journal was a mediational tool as she negotiated the dichotomies felt in navigating the boundaries between school worlds, private or out of school worlds, and her working class values vis-à-vis much of the middle class structure encountered in official contexts such as the English language arts classroom.

Tara wanted to speak, but more importantly, she wanted to be heard. She wanted to say what she felt, without offending others, but it became a vicious cycle for her in not being heard. In not being heard, Tara led herself to potentially more enraged statements in her yearning for someone to finally listen. In the end of the poem, it was obvious that Tara had no problem telling her friends exactly how she felt, “I would tell every single last one of my friends.” What I was left to contemplate was whether anyone in Tara’s life was understanding Tara’s messages.

Tara continued to explain her ethnicity in truly identity shaping ways. “And I feel that I’m more Puerto Rican than African American,” Tara said next. She explained that even though she spent much more time with her African American mother than she did with her Puerto Rican father, that she acted just like him anyway.



Tara then went directly into an explanation of how she dealt with anger much like how her father had done, by doodling with pen and paper, making drawings or notes. “Or, if I’m really, really, really mad, I’ll just sit there and lay back and look at you just like I cannot believe you just did that.”

Again, Tara’s deep anger was apparent. What also became obvious in those identity-shaping statements was Tara’s yearning for a father figure and for a more unified support system to provide her with the love and attention she deserved. Through more extensive interviews, it was quickly determined that Tara’s family was complex. She first brought up her father. She had spoken of her father in classroom discussions as well. She appeared to perhaps long for him, and unfortunately, as is often the case with young girls, Tara sought male companionship in inappropriate and unsafe ways.

She did not live with her father, and her mother had re-married. Tara said that she loved her new stepfather, but that she did not live with her mother and her new step-dad. Instead, Tara lived with her grandparents and her uncle, who all worked long hours in physically demanding jobs, such as janitorial service. Tara’s quest for love, affection, and attention was no longer a puzzle, but the ways of dealing with Tara’s reactions to this lack of support, especially in school settings, were complicated, especially when considering Tara’s immense anger and the ways it played out in school, frequently relating to her intense attempts at being heard.

Tara went on to discuss that she was often in physical and verbal fights in school, and that her mother had taught her to stand up for herself. Although it was not personally witnessed by researchers, Tara explained that she had even recently stood on top of a cafeteria table during lunch to assert herself with friends “who weren’t

listening!” Again, this was indeed a powerful image of the ways Tara quite literally screamed out in her need to be heard.

In later conversations, I attempted to discern whether any other literacies, besides her journal, were a source of comfort and support to Tara. Quickly, Tara told me that she thought reading was boring. When I reminded her of all of her outside, unofficial literacy practices, she quickly clarified by saying that it depended on the book, and that she loved the book *Wolf Rider* they had recently read in the English language arts class. I asked Tara,

**So, not all reading is boring then?**

No. ‘Cause I don’t like to be forced to read. I like, I’m starting to like to read this year. ‘Cause last year I used to hate reading. It used to be so boring.

Yet, Tara went on to explain that she generally did not enjoy English language arts class, or the reading they did in the class. In fact, Tara clarified that even when she did enjoy a book in English language arts class, that the class itself was boring because of the in-class activity. Tara articulated that she enjoyed doing hands-on activities, and that English language arts class was “ho-hum, just sitting around talking” in what she perceived to be a regimented manner.

Tara then went into an elaborate explanation of full-length books she was reading outside of school. Not only did she read regularly outside of school, but she was also excited to share plot lines and vivid emotional responses with me. At the time, Tara was reading *A Child Called It*, a best seller about a boy at the hands of horrid physical abuse. Tara indicated that often times, she would pick up books around her home that relatives had read, and that was commonly how her interest was stirred. Tara added that she loved to spend hours on the Internet, e-mailing and doing Instant

Message chatting with friends, even when it angered her grandmother because she was tying up the phone line with the Internet connection.

### *The Need for Supportive Contexts and Relationships*

Tara always had a clump of notes from classmates in her jeans pockets. When I asked her to elaborate on the notes and what role they played in her life, she said that note reading and writing played two major functions: to spread gossip, and to navigate romantic relationships. The notes were constant, and Tara clarified that the girls her age loved to talk frequently about relationships. In other words, relationships were the “hot topic.”

Tara proceeded to share with me the tangled web of boys in which she was interested, had dated, or wished to date. Often times, her romantic interests overlapped with those of other female friends, causing fights. According to Tara, much of this web was negotiated through note writing. Some classmates would even “tattoo” the names of the boys they liked on their hands and arms with ink pens.

Tara was apparently a much sought after 7th grade girl, explaining that at that time, at least five boys wanted to “go with her.” A few months prior, one boy broke up with Tara, saying that she “was getting a little too loud for him.” Again, there was yet another example of the ways Tara was trying to express herself freely, while countless people around her did not know how to listen, nor did they know how to deal with Tara’s intense needs.

One day, when I asked Tara what kind of music she enjoyed, she indicated that she loved rap, and we discussed the rap star Eminem for a while, citing his controversial nature. She seemed to know a lot about the details of his life and his abusive background. When Tara mentioned that

Eminem had run away from home when he was young, she told me about how she, herself, had run away from home two years prior. Immediately, I asked her, “Why?”

Tara shared a touching story about how she felt that she did not get the love and attention she needed. It sounded as though her grandmother (her primary care giver) was completely over-worked and over-extended, attending to the needs of the several grandchildren she appeared to be raising. Tara’s grandmother worked two full-time jobs, six days per week. Only off on Wednesdays and understandably exhausted, Tara’s grandmother tended to sleep all Wednesday long, each week. With tears in her eyes as she shared this intimate story with me, Tara tenderly told how she confronted her grandmother about the situation.

So, like I confronted her one day. And I tell her how I felt. And she sat down with me and we talked. And she told me how she felt. And I was like, well if any of it is my fault, I could try to change that part. It’s my fault or whatever.

Like so many children dragged into the problems of an adult world, Tara had taken on the troubles of the adults in her thirteen year-old world, and was taking responsibility for actions over which she had no control. Obviously and justifiably troubled by her unstable home life, Tara sought attention and love in places like school, in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. When I first told Sharon, her English language arts teacher, that I had chosen Tara as a focal student, Sharon responded favorably, stating that ‘Tara could really use some extra attention. She seems starved for constant attention and love.’

I asked Tara, **Do you feel that you're getting the love and attention you need now?**

Sometimes. Not all the time, though.

**But you need it all the time and you deserve it all the time.**

I, I, I don't know what it is about me. I need love. Every, every hour of the day.

**We all do. You deserve it.**

I need love. 'Cause I'm a good person.

It's not like I go around hittin' people.

I explained that adults have problems in their adult worlds, and that unfortunately, adolescents get dragged into those adult-problem worlds, but that it is never the adolescents' faults. I was not sure if what I had said mattered, but it must have, because Tara responded, "The thing is, she (grandmother) tries to squeeze her life schedule into mine."

The feminist methodology in place for analysis allowed me to see how the relationship between the researcher and informant was of utmost importance, especially in the ways we co-constructed knowledge on such sensitive topics. The layers of trust were essential. Furthermore, the LG provided me with a way to more closely attend to Tara's important sharing. In order to more closely examine this emotional part of our conversation, I constructed a voice poem from the excerpt above, beginning with Tara's "I don't know" statement.

I, I, I don't know.

I need love.

I need love.

I'm a good person.

It's not like I go around hittin' people.

This was a compelling example of how strong statements become even stronger messages when analyzed with the LG, because it allowed me to follow the trail of the first-person statements, while still embedded in their important context. This

was a rewarding way of systematically attending to the many voices embedded in Tara's expressed experience... allow[ing] for multiple codings of the same text (Gilligan et al., 2003). For example, in this poem, Tara began by stammering over the phrase, "I don't know." The phrase, "I don't know," has been studied by others, such as Brown and Gilligan (1992), to illustrate a form of silence, when a person is struggling with what they truly want to say.

Tara clearly needed to express her deeply felt desire for more love and attention from others. "I need love, I need love." In reaction to my statement that she deserved love, Tara rationalized that she was indeed worthy of the need for love in saying, "I'm a good person. It's not like I go around hittin' people."

In retrospect, these last statements were startling, considering what occurred shortly after Tara and I had that conversation. Not long after that particular interview, Tara violently set fire to a female peer's hair while they were riding the bus. This was incredibly disturbing news for me, considering my many interviews with Tara, coupled with my realizations that Tara had been yearning to be heard in a world that did not know how to listen to her cries for help. In my vision, the fire was just another way of Tara screaming to be heard, while engulfed in the unhealthy cycle of anger in which she was trapped.

Tara was sent to a special, detention-centered school as a disciplinary measure. However, Tara was not at the special school for long. She was released early because she had been receiving a great deal of inappropriate attention from the older boys, who were also there on disciplinary measures.

As soon as Tara returned to her middle school, I rushed in to see her. There was a new sophistication in her voice, and a heightened, matured articulation of the

injustices she had recently faced. When I asked her about how she felt she was perceived by her teachers in light of all of the recent occurrences, Tara replied, "I think they underestimate me too much."

Tara went on to explain notions of humiliation and injustice in the school system, especially in the ways the teachers and staff spoke to students as a whole student body, rather than as individuals. Tara and I had both witnessed teachers and staff often yelling at students in front of classmates.

They don't ever give us no credit. They put us down, point out all our faults, instead of what we do good. They use summer school as a threat. All of a sudden they're trying to say I'm not doing good. How is that possible? I respect teachers who respect me and explain to me when I'm doin' stuff wrong, instead of just slingin' a detention on me.

Tara concluded by explaining how she often had to put her hand in the air for a long time and no one would call on her or respond to her in any fashion-- yet another way Tara was unheard and lost in a pool of inattention.

The last question I ever asked Tara was a bit of a joke, because we had often laughed together at the ways our culture paints unfair pictures of the notions of "good girl" versus "bad girl" in our society. I finally asked Tara if she thought of herself as a good girl or as a bad girl. The very last thing Tara uttered on my tape recorder at the conclusion of our research was a statement that was sadly, all too illustrative of Tara-- a statement still soaked in complex layers of anger.

I think I'm a little bit of both. Because sometimes I can be really, really mean, and really, really devious. And say stuff like 'I hate you'.

So, was Tara a student struggling with literacy? With conviction, I say no. Instead, Tara was struggling with voice and silence in the controlling, middle class context of schooling. Conversely, she needed an educational environment of more support; one that understood her need for relationships built on trust, through which she may have been able to more fruitfully construct the relational dimensions of knowledge.

#### Implications for Classroom Use and for Future Research

As a committed teacher educator, I am dedicated to providing practical applications of my research for classroom use. With respect to the first theme, of anger at failing to be heard, I was inspired to share Tara's story because by listening to her, I have been able to show countless colleagues that by truly hearing the voices of middle school students, we can more effectively educate them. In the past, few literacy researchers have used the LG, and it seems that there may be unexplored intricacies in the field as a result.

In contemplating the second theme, literacy as self affirming and identity shaping, I found that despite numerous, eye opening studies about the significance of adolescents' out-of-school literacies (e.g. Finders, 1997; Luttrell & Parker, 2001), we must pay more attention to students' hidden, unofficial literacies and their boundless possibilities to bring in-school curricula alive with personal meaning for students. As teachers, we must honor those literacy practices that relate to adolescents' lives; there is still such a stark disconnect.

It is imperative that teachers become more aware of and respect the everyday literacy practices of girls. Since some adults assume that adolescents rarely read and write, it can be more constructive to

understand how and why students are doing the reading and writing that they do (Luttrell & Parker, 2001). When teachers focus on how students think and feel, what their purposes and values are, what rules might govern their literacy practices, and how those practices may be hindered by school, teachers close the negative gaps between students' everyday literacies and their school literacies.

There is no one recipe that will "fix" the literacy learning of all children and adolescents. Instead, teachers, parents, and other adult leaders must be educated on how to *read* students as individuals, with individual dreams, hopes, and fears. Teachers can *read* students' class, gender, and racially specific lives in ways that are more literary (Hicks, 2002). "From teachers' discerning readings of children's histories and language practices, I argue, emerge the teaching actions that draw on listening, watching, feeling, and understanding. This is how I view critical literacy practice" (p. 13).

With regard to the third theme, the need for supportive contexts and relationships, Tara's voice was a reminder for all teachers to treat each student as an individual, with respect. I was consistently struck by the controlling, constrictive nature of the middle school. This environment had a large, direct impact on the students and their negative perceptions of schooling, and their growing apathy.

Many of our students are "struggling" because we are not attending to what is important and purposeful in their lives. We are not listening to them to discern where their problems originate and how the difficulties are perpetuated. Where are the democratic societies we all claim to promote? It is obvious by listening to students like Tara that we are not raising academic achievement through an emphasis on basic skills and discipline.

As a result of my work, I wish to emphasize the need for creating learning environments more conducive to the relational construction of knowledge. As a researcher, teacher, and learner, I relate to Rose's (1989) illustration of how his learning was embedded in the social relations and identities he formed with others, as particular literacies became a part of his life history. "Teaching, I was coming to understand, was a kind of romance... You... invited a relationship of sorts" (Rose, 1989, p. 102). Relationships give meaning to practice (Hicks, 2002, p. 151).

In conclusion, we cannot underestimate the vast difference we can make in the lives of students like Tara by not only listening to them in a systematic way, but also by nurturing genuine, compassionate relationships with each of our students.

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