Exploring Teachers’ Lived Literacies: Disrupting Hegemonic Conceptions of Literacy in Schools

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Exploring Teachers’ Lived Literacies:
Disrupting Hegemonic Conceptions of Literacy in Schools

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by Katie F. Whitley
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Exploring Teachers' Lived Literacies:
Disrupting Hegemonic Conceptions of Literacy in Schools

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Abstract

In schools, literacy is often positioned as a fixed set of reading and writing skills. This can limit what counts as an academically acceptable literacy practice despite the complex and nuanced ways people communicate in their personal and social contexts. With this tension around conceptions of literacy in mind, I wondered how teachers thought about literacy in their lives and in what ways (if any) their personal conceptions of literacy crossed the boundary into their classrooms. Thus, this study examines three secondary English language arts teachers’ conceptions of literacy using a feminist approach to new literacies as the theoretical framework as a foundation for my research. Using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ (1997) portraiture as the foundation for my methodology, I crafted the story of each participant’s literacy history and conception of literacy through interviews, class visits, written and audio-recorded reflections, and artifacts shared from their personal lives and their teaching. The findings of the study suggested that English language arts teachers may hold complex conceptions of literacy that do, in fact, cross the boundary into their classroom. However, these findings also revealed the tensions and barriers these teachers navigate as they face deficit-based models of literacy common in the educational system.

Keywords: literacy, feminist pedagogy, new literacies, critical literacy, portraiture, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, boundary crossing, epistemologies of friendship
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I dedicate this dissertation to Brad for being by my side with love, patience, support, and many good meals every step of the way.

It is also dedicated to my mom; my very first storyteller and teacher.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have always been interested in stories. Storytelling has been central to the literacy practices I have developed throughout my life. As a child, I created and acted out stories with my father at bedtime or on weekends. These were ongoing narratives with characters and storylines that he and I picked up and built upon whenever his complicated adult life allowed him to spend some time in the little world we had created. We never wrote these down. They were oral histories of the lives of two small rabbits—named for my brother and me—and the adventures they embarked upon. My father, however, was not my only storytelling partner. Stories permeated both sides of my family. It takes only moments for me to conjure the image of my maternal grandfather, sitting at the kitchen table in my grandparents’ apartment, which was just above our own, humoring me by imagining new stories about the Gobots and G.I. Joe, cartoons he watched with me daily when my parents were at work.

While my father and grandfather created stories with me, my mother and grandmother were my personal storytellers. My mom and I sat up each night reading out loud to each other. Taking turns through books in the Sweet Pickles series, and later The Babysitters Club, Matilda, and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. With my mother, I learned to love books and the ways in which they could bore into my imagination where they would play out behind my eyes. It was my maternal grandmother who unraveled the stories of our family bit by bit while teaching me to play canasta or rolling yebret or drinking tea and eating crackers with cream cheese. I heard stories of our family’s journey from Aleppo, Syria to Paterson, NJ. I know the Arabic names that were changed upon arrival at Ellis Island and the connection between my grandmother and grandfather’s family who were both from Aleppo even though my grandparents met as young adults in the United States. I know how my mother’s cat, Butch, took a spin in the dryer,
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emerging as a frightened ball of fluff. I know funny stories held dear, and I know of tragedies
and losses. These were the stories that shaped me—both the stories I enacted with my father and
grandfather and the stories I absorbed through my mother and grandmother. This is how my love
of stories was born and that love has shaped the conception of literacy and the literacy practices
that I carried with me into classrooms, as well as my work as a teacher-researcher. Thus, my
study of teachers’ conceptions of literacy had to be tied to storytelling. Stories, specifically told
through the medium of portraiture, became the vehicle through which I could collaborate with
other educators and examine the way their literacies developed in their lives and classrooms.

With this in mind, I had to begin with a story. As I attempted to contextualize the
complexities surrounding literacy in schools, I could not help but think of Luke—a student in a
recent twelfth grade English class who loved (and continues to love) anime. Luke was in a class
for students whose test scores indicated they needed additional support in reading comprehension
and writing. Luke was not consistently seen as a reader, and Luke himself would claim he was
not good at reading and writing. This is where anime became significant to Luke’s literacy story.

While reading Paulo Coelho’s (1993) *The Alchemist* in our English class, Luke and I
discovered we shared an interest in the anime series *Full Metal Alchemist* (2003–2004). It could
be said that this discovery was alchemical, as it began to transform my understanding of Luke’s
literacy practices. Upon learning that I enjoyed this series, Luke assigned himself a mission—to
educate me in the world of anime. He recommended series to me and told me which ones I was
not “hardcore” enough for yet. He did not want to see me get in over my head. We debated:
Should anime be watched with *subs* (in Japanese with subtitles turned on) or *dubs* (with the
dialogue dubbed into English). Though I typically watched the dubbed version of anime, Luke

1 All names of individuals and institutions throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.
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came down passionately on the side of subs, insisting that viewers had to hear the dialogue in Japanese while using the subtitles to understand the plot. It occurred to me during this debate that Luke was constantly reading. Although his school-defined and tested literacies had been deemed insufficient, and though he did need assistance finding written words that could match his insightful and complex thoughts, Luke was engaging in a series of literacy practices every time he sat down to watch anime. These practices, however, could not be demonstrated through the standardized tests that were used to label him.

I had the chance to experience this first-hand during a class period late in the school year when, for one reason or another, nearly his entire English class was absent. Luke saw this as an opportunity to continue my anime lessons by sharing the series Code Geass (2006) with me. How could I say no? With the blessing of the two other students in the room, we put the day’s lesson plans aside and pulled up episode one. Subtitles on, we were ready to read the dialogue in English, interpret the images on screen, and allow the sound of spoken Japanese to inform our interpretations of this text. Luke was my tour guide, my instructor that morning; breaking down the lore, analyzing the subtitles, and pausing to explain the references he thought I might miss. The anime was entertaining, but the real show was watching Luke take it in and share it with me.

This interaction has come back to me frequently while working with teachers to unpack conceptions of literacy in our lives and in our schools. Luke did not perform well on standardized tests. Luke sometimes lost focus reading long texts that did not hold his interest. Luke had creative insights that he found difficult to put into written words even when he could explain them clearly out loud. Thus, in school, Luke was positioned as deficient in literacy. What was missed, however, was that Luke had a rich set of literacy practices that he engaged in regularly. The problem was that these practices were not accounted for in the more rigid
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conception of literacy skills that are commonly reflected in educational standards and standardized tests. These observations regarding Luke, though influential for me, were not unique. In fact, the limitations of school defined literacy that I observed in my own interactions with students like Luke have also been echoed by the colleagues with whom I work.

Over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to plan and facilitate professional development sessions for teachers in the school district where I teach—a county-wide district of technical high schools serving students from a variety of cities and towns. One such workshop session focused on curriculum development and stemmed from a district-wide initiative to analyze and revise curriculum across subject areas using the lens of culturally relevant teaching. This particular session was part of a menu of professional development options, and a collection of sixteen teachers from a variety of content areas came together to examine curricular concerns. The participants in this session included math, science, social studies, English, and visual arts teachers, as well as a literacy coach and a teacher who provides one-on-one support to English language learners by both pushing into their classes and meeting one-on-one.

Our group gathered via Zoom to collaborate for the afternoon. Before our meeting, I asked teachers to bring in a unit or set of lessons to share with colleagues in small groups as a collective planning session. We aimed to analyze not simply what is included in our course content, but how the content is framed and how it might be revised using a culturally relevant lens. As we engaged in a full group discussion around the why behind the content we teach, the reproduction of potentially oppressive norms within current approaches to curriculum and instruction, and the voices and experiences that might be missing within our content areas, a common theme emerged: sometimes we want to make significant shifts to our approaches to content in our curriculum in collaboration with students and other educators, but the system of
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school creates a barrier to that change. This theme reverberated as we dove more deeply into our curriculum analysis in small groups, and though the session was not specifically focused on literacy, the “stuff” of literacy—what we read, why we read it, and the forms of writing and communicating that are deemed acceptable—permeated our work. As we collectively reflected through these small and large group conversations, we were faced with the reality that even in our schools, where what might be thought of as radical revisions were supported, the dominant forces of power that our district, and all schools, operate within create challenges that can leave us treading water. Examining curriculum across our varied subject areas left us each raising questions around reading, writing, and communicating in our classrooms and beyond. We realized we could not think about the equitability of our curriculum without also challenging what it means to be appropriately literate in school.

Through our discussion, we noticed that “college and career readiness” rhetoric is used to justify the emphasis on essayist, school-based literacy that influences, and perhaps confines, teachers as they develop curriculum for their students. The in-school norms for reading, writing, and communicating often go unchallenged because teachers and students alike have been conditioned to see these rules as necessary for success in the world outside of school. However, opportunities to examine curriculum, such as the one I engaged in with colleagues last spring, can create space to ask significant questions about why we approach literacy practices in a particular way and who decided that these norms are the only means through which individuals can be seen as appropriately literate.

The tensions described above directly impact young people, like Luke, as hegemonic beliefs around what constitutes appropriate literacy practices lead to deficit views of students who deviate from normative, unstigmatized ways of reading, writing, and communicating (Gee,
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2015a, 2015b; Greene, 1991; King, 2019, Street, 1995, 2011, 2016). Gee (2015a) described this tension as the problem of the literacy myth through which he challenged the notion that reading and writing alone have the power to make humans “more intelligent, more modern, and more moral” (p. 27). When we endow the acts of reading and writing with this type of power, literacy becomes hierarchical, and those who read and write better are thought of as more advanced or civilized. As we seek to reach the pinnacle of this intellectual hierarchy, we move further away from questioning who established the rules around what is considered appropriately academic reading and writing (Gee, 2015a; Greene, 1991). This, in turn, has the potential to limit what students and teachers imagine is acceptable reading, writing, and communicating in academic and professional spaces. The beliefs teachers hold around literacy and the pressures they face as they navigate educational policies and testing standards may affect the ways in which students come to think about and enact their own literacies. Greene (1991) asserted that policies and expectations around school-based literacy have interrupted teachers’ “visions of worlds that would be opened up by various kinds of literacy—by imagination” and that these visions have been replaced by the functional literacy expected in schools, which keep teachers from asking themselves “about the difference literacy makes in various lives” including their own (p. 130). Working with my colleagues and hearing their frustrations regarding meaningful reading, writing, and communicating in our curriculums brought me back to Greene’s words. Teachers’ more imaginative visions of literacy and their thinking about literacy as something that exists in their own lives may be interrupted by educational policy and expectations, which is precisely why I am interested in opportunities for us to examine our conceptions of literacy—to question where they come from and how they show up in our teaching. In doing so, we may uncover our own assumptions about what makes a person literate and how literacy practices are hierarchically
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positioned in school environments. In sociocultural contexts, literacies are seen as tied to identity—the social practices we engage in as we do literacy are informed by who we are and the contexts we are navigating (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). Therefore, this study, which took place in the district of technical high schools where I currently teach, focused on teachers’ conception of literacy, as related to their own lived experiences and the ways in which literacy is enacted in their classrooms and school environments. As Knobel (1999) noted, including bridges to students’ everyday contexts in lessons does not guarantee that the desired learning will take place, but “effective approaches to language and literacy teaching begin with experiences and practices familiar to students before they are introduced to more abstract concepts pertaining to language practices” (p. 188). Thus, through considering our own lived literacies, we may also think about the ways in which personal experiences—our own and those of our students—create an access point for exploring various literacy practices in our classrooms.

Contextualizing School Literacy

Within schools, reading and writing skills, commonly referred to as literacy skills, are often positioned as a set of strategies any student can learn in order to read texts well and produce good writing in order to be successful in society (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Greene, 1991; Kalman, 2008; Muhammad, 2020, 2023). These measures of success and quality are rooted in hegemonic beliefs concerning which sorts of language use will lead an individual to be employable in the professional world (Gee, 2015a; Kalman, 2008). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, educational policy in the United States was (and continues to be) concerned with a literacy crisis for young people. In response to this so-called crisis, policy-makers looked for ways to assess student literacy through sets of skills that could be identified, taught, and tested (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Greene, 1991; Janks, 2010).
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skills and their associated strategies are tied to what Gee (2015a) referred to as “essayist” prose, which is characterized by, “a heightened emphasis on truth value . . . [with] the necessity to be quite explicit about logical implications” (p. 51). This style of prose also requires the removal of the writer’s self—emphasizing, for example, that personal pronouns like “I” should not be used in what is typically referred to as formal or academic writing—which acts as a way of privileging one type of written communication in the name of objectivity (Gee, 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; Janks, 2010). This essayist style is the dominant form of speaking and writing K–12 students are expected to recognize and adhere to as successful prose both in classrooms and on standardized tests. Thus, literacy in schools involves “negotiating among various literate repertoires that are differentially valued, and which work to position students as more or less successful literacy learners” (Ghiso, 2015, p. 190). In an effort to assess students' adherence to essayist literacy, young people become subjects rather than persons. Their humanity—the value of their personal literacies—may be secondary to their ability to serve as sources of evidence that there is indeed a literacy crisis and to measure how well the system of education is combating it (Greene, 1991; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Janks, 2010).

The emphasis placed on reading and writing in standardized testing—like the Accuplacer, as well as high school proficiency exams, Advanced Placement tests, and college placement exams like the SAT and ACT—has an influence over curriculum development, as teachers face pressure to prepare students to read and write in the ways these tests demand. Subsequently, students' proficiency with school-based, essayist literacy skills has become the focus of teacher evaluations, school-wide curriculum initiatives, and professional development (Dover, 2016; Kosnik et al., 2017; Mosley Wetzel, 2010). The use of standardized tests to assess students’ reading and writing skills may influence the way individuals construct their understanding of
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what literacy is and how it is practiced by limiting their conception of literacy to the narrow set of practices that are highlighted in SATs, ACTs, and state-mandated assessments.

In this study, I used the term conception to describe the process of constructing an understanding of a particular phenomenon—in this case, literacy. My conception of literacy is grounded in a sociocultural view of “reading and writing as but pieces of larger practices” that people learn “by being embedded (apprenticed) as a member of a social practice,” which involves interacting with texts in specific ways and through a particular set of values (Gee, 2015a, p. 60). With this in mind, I will not simply discuss literacy as a noun, but instead will consider the literacy practices people enact in their varied social, cultural, and institutional contexts (e.g. Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Heath, 1983; Kalman, 2008; Knobel, 1999; Street, 1995, 2016). Secondary school teachers in all content areas are expected to be teachers of literacy regardless of their conception of what literacy is or their feelings about their own literacy skills. And, while we are all readers, writers, and communicators (regardless of the subject areas we teach), the systemic focus on fixed skills and testing to determine what counts as effective literacy may create additional tensions for English language arts teachers as they work with students.

The conception of literacy as a set of skills concerned principally with reading and writing that tends to dominate U.S. schools does not sufficiently capture the complexities of language in use within people’s personal and social contexts (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Collin & Street, 2014; Freire, 1970/2000; Gee, 2010; Gee, 2015a, Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Muhammad, 2020). The oversimplification of literacy—its reduction into numbers and rubrics—also plays a role in the relevance of studying high school teachers’ conception of literacy and how this connects to their pedagogical practices. When looked at through a sociocultural lens,
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Literacy is connected to ways of seeing and reading the words within the world as we get things done as social beings. It is also associated with access to social goods and services in ways that go well beyond considerations of school success to encompass larger systems of power, privilege, and exclusion (Freire, 1970/2000; 1998; Gee, 2010, 2015a; Heath, 1983; Kalman, 2008; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). Though schooling plays a role in the particular ways in which many individuals learn to read and write, when reading and writing are thought of only in the context of skills that are learned in schools, the significance of the greater social context in shaping how literacy is used in a range of social events in people’s everyday lives may well be missed (Freire, 1970/2000; 1998; Gee, 2010, 2015a; Heath, 1983; Kalman, 2008; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Muhammad, 2020, 2023; Street, 2011). In this way, there is a tension between educational systems’ conception of literacy as reading and writing skills that can be used to assess both students and teachers and the theoretical positioning of literacy as access to thinking that questions and disrupts systems—a tension that influences approaches to literacy instruction within schools and teacher education programs alike.

Due to the nature of technical high schools—where students begin ninth grade with a distinct major and potential career path in mind—students’ coursework focuses directly on preparing students to work towards a specific, post-high school goal, which may involve higher education or an immediate placement in a career related to the technical area they have studied (e.g., culinary arts, environmental design, information technology, visual and performing arts). Educational policies, such as the Common Core Standards in the United States, draw a direct line between reading and writing development in school and success in college and careers. For example, the Common Core Standards for Reading are designed to “define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college
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and workforce training programs ready to succeed” (Common Core Standard Initiative, 2022, Introduction — key design consideration, para 1). These standards set the expectation that all teachers will be teachers of literacy and that the reading and writing skills students learn in school must prepare them for both the workforce and higher education (Alvermann & Moje, 2013). In a technical school district, such as the setting for this study, the amplified focus on college readiness and real-world preparation offers a particularly interesting context to investigate teachers’ conceptions of literacy in their own lives and in their classroom practices.

Situating the Study

While the work of educational scholars throughout the twentieth century (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1997; Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Greene, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1994) contributed to a shifting and expanding definition of literacy, schools have maintained a skills-based view of literacy that continues to privilege white, middle-class modes of communication (Gee, 2015a; Heath, 1983; Janks, 2010, Rogers, 2013; Street, 2011). As Street (2011) explained, the argument around what literacy is, what factors lead to inequitable access to literacy development, and how policymakers approach these issues, “depends crucially on who has the power to name and define what counts as literacy and what theoretical and conceptual frames they draw upon” (p. 581). When those in positions of power hold a normative conception of literacy and promote schools as the institution through which students will gain “basic skills necessary for entering the workforce, vocational or professional training and, eventually, placement in the job market,” it becomes difficult for the public to question the way in which literacy is being defined and the purpose of schooling beyond preparation for the workforce (Kalman, 2008, p. 524). Given the emphasis on literacy in education policy and the powerful role policymakers play in determining how literacy is conceptualized in the field of education, I will provide an overview of the shifts
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in U.S. policies and approaches to literacy from the past two decades in order to address the historical implications embedded in the current literacy debate.

Shifts in K-12 Reading Standards

The early 2000s saw a changeover in education reform in the United States with George W. Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was “built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility” (2005, para 2). The first two pillars placed greater emphasis on standardized testing with the intent of using test results as the quantifiable data to determine school district and teacher accountability in regards to student learning. The legislation stated:

Under No Child Left Behind, each state must measure every public school student's progress in reading and math in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once during grades 10 through 12 . . . These assessments must be aligned with state academic content and achievement standards. They will provide parents with objective data on where their child stands academically. (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, para 4)

However, these testing requirements brought with them. In fact, after nearly a decade of No Child Left Behind’s testing requirements, “71% of elementary districts nationwide have reduced time spent on subjects other than reading and math” (Lapp et al., 2012, p. 110).

The consequential decline in time dedicated to subject areas other than reading and math led to yet another shift in educational reform in 2010 with the Common Core Standard Initiative, which placed greater emphasis on reading across the curriculum. The expectations outlined in the Common Core Standard Initiative English Language Arts Introduction—Key Design
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Consideration “insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school” (2022, para 7). This emphasis on cross-curricular responsibility for the development of student literacy skills is reflected in the standards for grades 6-12, which are divided into two categories: one that outlines the development of literacy skills in English language arts classes and a second set that addresses history, social studies, science and technical subjects (Common Core Standard Initiative, 2022). According to the Common Core Standards for Reading, “the CCR standards anchor the document and define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and workforce training programs ready to succeed” (Common Core Standard Initiative, 2022, Introduction — key design consideration, para 1). The wording here asserts that the primary role of literacy is preparation for the future participation in the workforce, which is in conflict with conceptions of literacy, and more generally of learning, as liberatory practices that are essential for participation in a democratic society (Dewey, 1938/1997; Freire, 1998; Labaree, 1997).

This limited view of literacy is tied to inequities within the system of education, and can have detrimental effects on students, particularly if linguistic differences are misinterpreted as reading and writing difficulties (Rogers, 2013). For instance, in the overview of the Common Core English Language Arts Standards (2022), policymakers repeated their emphasis on preparing young people for the workforce and prioritized literacy as the path through which “students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas” (para. 2). While this wording may appear innocuous, the standards for what is and is not considered effective language-in-use are derived from hegemonic ideals for communication that are steeped in racist, classist, and patriarchal traditions that use literacy to
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“set up distinctions that advantage some children at the expense of others” and often “bear little relation to the literacy practices rooted in children’s lives and in their communities” (Janks, 2010, p. 3). The danger is that students who do not adhere to standard (i.e. white, middle class) language usage may be mislabeled as lacking in proficiency, which may influence how they are tracked and classified in school (Dharamshi, 2019; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rogers, 2013). This potential for mislabeling and deficit views of student literacy is echoed in the conflicting models of literacy at work in educational theory and practice.

Conflicting Models of Literacy. In order to situate my work in the field of New Literacy Studies, it is important to briefly delve into the historical context of the term “literacy” within education. Early conceptions of literacy in modern education defined a literate person as someone who could complete tasks including: signing documents, reading and writing without assistance and within one’s daily responsibilities, reading and writing in order to effectively function within the community, and passing at least a fourth-grade level reading comprehension test (Kalman, 2008). In this conception of literacy, one that may be tied to the ways in which reading and writing are assessed through standardized testing, literacy is seen as a skill—the ability to read, write, and do arithmetic, for the purpose of completing necessary tasks. Approaching literacy from this perspective allowed benchmarks for the development of reading and writing skills to be set and assessed. An individual's abilities could be labeled as above or below these benchmarks, and, subsequently, value judgements could be made about said individual based on their proficiency with the basic reading and writing skills described above (Janks, 2010; Kalman, 2008; Muhammad, 2020; Street 2011). These notions of literacy continue to be connected to educational policies, including the previously mentioned Common Core State
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Standards, and remain tied to the approach to literacy instruction referred to as the autonomous model (Alvermann & Moji, 2013; Cho, 2015; Kalman, 2008; Street, 1995).

In the context of the autonomous model, “reading and writing are neutral processes, irrespective of context and larger social, historical, cultural, and political influences” (Alvermann & Moji, 2013, p. 1074). This model grew out of an effort to address how to develop greater levels of literacy for students, and in the 1950s and 1960s a push from The National Council of Teachers of English led to the initial research initiatives in this area (Alvermann & Moji, 2013). These research initiatives looked at the cognitive processes related to reading strategies used by proficient readers, some of which include: activating prior knowledge (or schema), metacognition, and developing vocabulary in context (Alvermann & Moji, 2013; Daniels & Zemelman, 2014; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Findings were associated with the cognitive processes that aid individuals in meaning-making as they read. Thus, the autonomous model was grounded in the assumption that this “universal set of cognitive skills, when properly taught, can account for an individual student’s motivation and literacy achievement” (Alvermann & Moji, 2013). As a result, factors such as experiences at home, as well as sociocultural influences and practices were not taken into account as significant in students’ literacy development. A consequential side-effect of this conception of literacy is the perpetuation of the myth that students who work hard at adhering to a specific set of strategies will naturally develop the skills required to be successfully literate (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Kalman, 2008).

Challenges to the autonomous model began to emerge in the late twentieth century. Street (1995), who popularized the term autonomous model in the mid-1980s, argued conceptualizing literacy as something that can have one autonomous and natural state creates a power imbalance. Those who adhere to this one set of natural literacy practices are privileged while those who do
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not are seen as lacking (Street, 1995, 2011). Gee (2015a, 2015b) added to this critique explaining that reading research and instruction grounded in the autonomous model tended to see reading and writing as a mental process that exists only in an individual’s mind. He challenged this notion arguing that literacy is not merely cognitive, but “social, cultural, historical, and institutional, as well” and noted that we do not just take words from a text into our minds, but make meaning out of them as we talk about and share them with other people. In looking beyond the autonomous model, Gee (2015b) asked “What determines how one ‘correctly’ reads or writes in a given case?” and answered, “Not what is in one’s head, but, rather, the conventions, norms, values, and practices of different social and cultural groups” (p. 36). Street (1995, 2011) and Gee (2015a, 2015b) did not aim to dismiss the teaching of reading and writing strategies or position these teaching practices as inherently negative. Rather, they challenged the notion that there is one set of natural strategies and skills that lead to proficient reading and writing and pushed for a conception of literacy practices that did not just privilege individuals’ cognition but also their lives and social contexts.

Throughout the late 20th century, research on literacy shifted beyond the autonomous model resulting in some broader definitions of literacy including oral language practices, abstract thinking, as well as digital and visual literacies (Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Heath, 1983; Knobel, 1999; Street, 1995, 2011). However, it continues to be difficult to understand “the nature of ‘knowledge and use,’ and how they relate to each other, to communicative purpose, and contexts” (Kalman, 2008, p. 527). Heath’s (1983) *Ways with words*, an ethnographic study of children from two neighboring communities in North Carolina, was a seminal text that guided educational professionals and researchers to a definition of literacy that stretched beyond the cognitive processes commonly associated with reading and writing. Her study addressed
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children’s socialization into particular literacies or *ways with words* and began to call attention to
the limitations created by looking at reading and writing skills without consideration for the
personal and social contexts in which a person is communicating. As Kalman (2008) explained,
“Reading and writing have social and individual consequences and their outcomes are closely
related to the situatedness of their use and are not strictly inherent to text genre or formal aspects
of written language” (p. 524). In other words, literacy, as in the processes of reading and writing,
are not neutral, but are situated in “the language life of different social actors, and immersed in
beliefs about how the social world works” (Kalman, 2008, p. 524). In this conception of literacy,
referred to as the *ideological model*, reading comprehension development should focus not only
on the cognitive strategies used to figure out a text, but also on the reader doing the
comprehending, the text that is to be comprehended, and the activity through which the
comprehending is meant to happen (Alvermann & Moji, 2013; Greene, 1991; Muhammad, 2020;
Rosenblatt, 1994; Street, 2011). Factors such as power dynamics, personal experiences and
ideologies, and sociocultural context all influence an individual's ability to make meaning from a
given text (Alvermann & Moji, 2013; Heath; 1983; Kalman, 2008; Knobel & Kalman, 2016;
Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Muhammad, 2020, 2023; Street, 2011). In this respect, literacy is not
simply a cognitive process, but a transaction or exchange that happens within specific social,
cultural, political, and personal contexts (Rogers et al., 2016; Rosenblatt, 1994). Rosenblatt
thought of transaction as a way “of a continuing to-and-fro, back and forth, give-and-take
reciprocal or spiral relationship in which each conditions the other” and added that transaction
also referred to “individuals' relations to one another, whether we think of them in the family, the
classroom, the school or in the broader society and culture” (Karolides, 1999, p. 160). Reading is
an exchange between the reader and the text, writing is an exchange between the writer and their
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audience, and as we make sense out of our reading and writing, we often do so through
conversational exchanges with other people that occur within specific personal, social, and
historical contexts (Karolides, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1994). As with Street (1995, 2011) and Gee
(2015a, 2015b), the intent here is not to suggest that the operational aspects of literacy be
abandoned. The problem does not lie in the discussion of the skills associated with reading and
writing. However, limiting the conceptualization of literacy to only a skills-based set of rules
without delving into the more complex ways in which individuals make meaning may keep us
from interrogating where the rules of literacy come from and who decides which practices and
modes of communication are most valuable and why.

Because of the tensions around conceptions of literacy within and beyond the context of
school, I set out to examine the ways in which teachers’ thought about literacy throughout their
own lives and across a range of social contexts. My research questions, addressed in the section
below, grew out of the aforementioned tensions around what counts as literacy, and these
questions guided my exploration of K-12 English teachers conceptions of literacy in their
personal lives and classrooms.

**Research Questions.** Throughout this study, I explored whether these conceptions of
literacy cross the in-school/out-of-school boundary to inform their approach to literacy in the
classroom. As the push to prepare older students for the “real world” after graduation is directly
tied to the ways in which literacy pedagogy is positioned in schools, I honed in on the
experiences of secondary English language arts teachers. I drew on Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1997)
use of portraiture as well as feminist research practices, which I will describe in detail in the
methodology sections that follow. The questions driving this research design are:

1. What are teachers’ conceptions of literacy both in school and in their day-to-day lives?
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a. What conceptions of literacy do teachers hold from their personal literacy history?

2. In what ways do teachers’ day-to-day conceptions of literacy cross the boundary into their classrooms?

This study was organized to first address the ways in which literacy is currently conceptualized and enacted in school settings. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of the development in approaches to literacy throughout the twentieth century in order to establish a foundation for current work in this field. I followed with Chapter 2 focusing on the theoretical framing for the study and a review of recent literature related to conceptions of literacy in teaching and teacher education, cross-curricular literacy, and pedagogies associated with New Literacy Studies, as well as feminist and critical theory. My methodology, including data collection methods and analysis with attention to the trustworthiness of the research are detailed in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 was dedicated to telling the stories of the participants through the portraits I constructed. Finally, in Chapter 5, I shared the conclusions and implications that emerged through the work I undertook with these three generous participants, colleagues, and friends.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study draws on poststructural feminism and New Literacy Studies in order to examine teachers’ conceptions of literacy and the ways in which their day-to-day conceptions may (or may not) cross the boundary into their classroom. New Literacy Studies and critical literacies were largely developed—particularly in their early phases—by white men. However, a poststructural feminist framing of these fields foregrounds the patriarchy that is pervasive in our schools and that exacerbates one-way thinking around reading, writing, and communicating that creates deficit views of the young people whose development schools are meant to support (Ellsworth, 1997; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Luke & Gore, 1992; Saint Pierre, 2000). Feminist pedagogy grew out of a need to examine limitations for girls in school, particularly in areas like science and math (Luke & Gore, 1992). Over the last several decades, feminist educational researchers have shifted their attention to the policies and practices prevalent within the patriarchal system of schools, and subverted them by emphasizing the value of lived experience, vulnerability, and emotion as meaningful ways of knowing. In this chapter, I detailed the theoretical framework for this study, which is a feminist construction of new literacies. Next, I presented a review of the literature beginning with the conflicting conceptions of literacy represented in educational research followed by an examination of approaches to literacy and literacy practices, in teacher education programs, as well as in the classroom. Recent studies captured the tensions between ideological approaches to literacy in teacher education programs and the autonomous model that remains dominant in schools—conflict that is often tied to pressure to adhere to expectations reinforced in standardized testing.
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Theoretical Framing

The field of New Literacy Studies challenges skills-based understandings of literacy and is grounded in the construction of literacy as something that is not merely a cognitive process, but as practices that are social, cultural, historical, and institutional (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Street 1995, 2016). With this in mind, new literacies—also referred to as “literacy as social practice”—focuses on the “nature of literacy in use” (Street, 2016, p. 336). While literacy is a noun, centering literacy practices places emphasis on new literacies as a theory of action concerned not simply with what literacy is, but with what individuals do as readers, writers, and communicators (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Street, 2011, 2016). The plurality of literacy, or literacies, is of utmost importance, as “there are different literacy practices that carry with them different values and affordances” (Street, 2016, p. 336). Rather than determining one correct way to read, write, and communicate, new literacies scholars examine how our modes of communication, and our language-in-use shift based on the sociocultural context and the communities with which we are engaging (Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Street, 2011, 2016). Despite the predominantly skills-based standardized practices for teaching reading and writing, understanding literacy as social practice pushes researchers and educators in this field to acknowledge that there is no one set of skills and practices through which a person learns to read. Instead, there are practices that apply to a particular context and particular kind of text, and we learn to approach our reading and writing through the varied sociocultural contexts we traverse.
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Schools and classrooms are arguably the most prominent sociocultural setting in which individuals learn to read and write, and approaching New Literacy Studies as a feminist researcher demands a deliberate examination of literacy within the context of the patriarchal, hierarchical system of schools that emphasizes standardized curriculum and high stakes testing. Roots in poststructural theory, particularly the work of Foucault, pushed literacy researchers to deconstruct hegemonic norms for literacy that could be surveilled, measured, and used to reinforce societal systems of domination and subordination (Janks, 2010). For example, as Ghiso (2015) noted in her study of argument writing in early elementary school, feminist scholars “emphasize how dominant patriarchal structures marginalize ways of knowing that draw on emotion, intuition, and experience as informed by gendered (and raced and classed) oppression, which are positioned as ‘subjective’ in relation to a masculinist ‘objective’ rationality” (p. 188). Poststructural feminism looks to problematize “foundationalism, absolute knowledge . . . power, [and] a transcendent rationality” (Saint Pierre, 2000, p. 506) and positions identity as discursively constructed (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Luke & Gore, 1992). Though feminist researchers resist fixed definitions, concepts central to feminist pedagogy include a view of reading that goes beyond the written word, valuing experiential knowledge and multiplicity, as well as challenging hegemonic norms and power structures (Coia & Taylor, 2014; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; McCusker, 2017; Saint Pierre, 2000; Taylor & Coia, 2019). By valuing individuals’ lived experiences, feminist educational researchers have the opportunity to center the funds of knowledge that students and teachers bring into the classroom (Greene, 1991; Moll et al., 1992). These foundational ideas crossover with New Literacy Studies, as does the prioritization of experiential knowledge and the push for research studies to lead to action. Because I situated this study in a feminist approach to new literacies, as depicted in
Figure 1 below, in the sections that follow, I focused on concepts including reading beyond the printed word, socially constructed experiential knowledge, multiplicity, and disrupting hegemony, each of which is central to feminist and new literacies research.

**Figure 1: Theoretical Framing Feminist New Literacies**

*Reading Beyond the Printed Word*

Critical literacy scholars, particularly those with a foundation in a Freirean view of education, contended that instruction which “truncates the curiosity of the student in the name of efficiency of mechanical memorization hampers both the freedom and the capacity for adventure of the student. There is no education here. Only domestication” (Freire, 1998, p. 58). From this perspective, the ability to read and critically examine the texts we read is an act of liberation from the banking model of education that aims to deposit knowledge into students' minds while they passively receive it. Resisting this banking model means creating opportunities for teaching and learning to become acts of freedom (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; hooks, 1994). Connections to critical pedagogies, specifically Freire’s (1970/2000, 1998) concept of reading the word and the
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world, can be seen across poststructural feminist theory, New Literacy Studies, and critical literacies, and there is some agreement amongst scholars in these fields that a specific focus on words alone is limiting. Poststructural feminist scholar Saint Pierre (2000) troubled the idea that “there is a correspondence, an identity, between a word and something in the world” (p. 480). She argued that language is limiting—that “If words point to preexisting things in the world, then language simply names and reflects what it encounters;” however, there are not “enough names to match all the different things in the world, so often we are forced to group things/ideas/people that are similar but significantly different into the same category” (p. 480). Here, Saint Pierre (2000) asked us to consider the ways in which language leads to labeling and categorization and underscored that rather than passively accepting the language we use to word the world, we—the individuals doing the reading—have the power to take on a more active role. She acknowledged that “we word the world . . . we have constructed the world as it is through language and cultural practice,” but added the crucial piece that “we can reconstruct and deconstruct it’” (p. 483).

Through this conception of language and reading, words are not static and neutral. In turn, literacy does not simply involve the comprehension of the words we are given to describe the world, but the active taking apart of these words in order to examine where their meaning comes from and how it shifts or is reframed over time.

Critical feminist scholar Janks (2010) helped to build upon an approach to reading that both references and examines the limitations of words alone. She noted, “reading the word cannot be separated from reading the world” but also insisted that our understanding of reading must be “applied metaphorically to other modes of encoding meaning” including “film, clothing, gestures, pictures, photographs, bodies” rather than simply to words on a page (Janks, 2010, p. 19). Like Saint Pierre (2000), Janks (2010) saw that letters are not the only signs or symbols to
which we attribute meaning. The perspective on language and literacy in both Saint Pierre (2000) and Janks (2010) aligned with New Literacy Studies’ views of reading and texts that are not limited to the written word and include examination of images, materials, and people themselves as they interact with one another in the world, expanding the definition of text to include more than those made up primarily of written language (Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). As we examine texts from a variety of modalities and include our own bodies as texts that can be read, we, again, are called to read by deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings we associate with these signs (Saint Pierre, 2000). This method of reading beyond the printed word in order to challenge hegemonic, essayist conceptions of literacy also requires a more in-depth understanding of literacy as a way of constructing knowledge, as well as the plurality of literacy each of which will be addressed in the sections that follow.

**Constructing Knowledge Through Literacies**

Feminist and new literacies scholars also emphasized that any reading of the world—whether we are reading documents, film, images, or other people—is situated in an individual’s personal experiences and relies upon practices that have been socioculturally constructed (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; hooks, 1994; Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Saint Pierre, 2000). Additionally, scholars in these fields reinforced that what we read—the texts we examine in the world—are not neutral and cannot be limited to those that include language alone (Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Muhammad, 2020; Saint Pierre, 2000). As he defined New Literacy Studies, Gee (2015b) specifically highlighted that people read texts in different ways for different purposes and this reading is not passive, but active. Echoing Saint Pierre (2000), Gee (2015b) argued that readers do not just take in the words of a text, but make meaning out of them in conversation with others. Therefore, I draw on
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feminist and sociolinguistic approaches to literacy that value the influence of personal experience on literacy development and see knowledge as socially constructed in order to expand the examination of literacy beyond the essayist skills privileged for reading and writing in school (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Freire, 1998; Gee 2015a, 2015b; hooks, 1994; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Muhammad, 2020). Though essayist literacies may be part of the practices in which individuals engage, we are not limited to these practices alone. As we read and interpret the world, we bring our personal experiences, including our embodied ways of knowing, to the various social contexts in which we communicate. Thus, with this feminist new literacies construction of literacy studies, I do not look to fix what is wrong with students’ reading and writing skills, but instead to question and deconstruct the ways in which reading, writing, communicating, and texts are positioned in academic spaces.

**Experiential Knowledge**

Feminist scholars value lived experience as an essential part of the learning process. In *Teaching to transgress*, hooks (1994) wrote extensively about the dangers of silencing or erasing individuals’ lived experiences when they come into a classroom or learning environment, and noted that classrooms have the potential to be a “radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12) when educators take a liberatory approach to education that puts the growth of students and teachers at the center—at the heart—of schooling. For hooks (1994), this *engaged pedagogy* involved teachers’ willingness to be vulnerable with students and to bring “narratives of their experiences into the classroom [to] eliminate the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (p. 21). As instructors invite students’ lives into the classroom, they too must be prepared to share their own emotional lives with their students as a way of making sense out of the world through stories that highlight their experiential knowledge. Like hooks (1994),
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Coia and Taylor (2013) emphasized the role of storytelling in the process of learning, claiming, “We are the stories we tell and are told. In telling our stories, we come to a deeper understanding of how we can be and who we can become” (pp. 3–4). These feminist scholars not only acknowledged how stories of experience make up who we are and what we come to understand, but also connected the personal to literacy practices by noting that “The very process of writing our experience informs our understanding of that experience, and our understanding is informed by other stories” (Coia & Taylor, 2013, pp. 3–4). A feminist literacy, therefore, creates space for us to write our way toward understanding as we examine the ways our personal experiences parallel, intersect, and clash with the concepts about which we are learning.

In the context of sociocultural literacy studies, experiential knowledge is often tied to individuals’ day-to-day literacies. Teachers and students alike have a variety of language and literacy practices they employ in their everyday lives, which may include normative essayist literacies, but are not limited to this one way of communicating alone. Even within a school environment, we move between all sorts of communication—from peer-to-peer social interaction to reading aloud in a class to gaming or using technology to engaging in team activities, and we know how to go about these differing language practices because of our experience enacting them in our everyday lives (Knobel, 1999). However, whether these practices are recognized as funds of knowledge or remain unseen depends, at least in part, on how literacy is conceptualized in classroom and broader school contexts (Heath, 1983; Knobel, 1999; Moll et al., 1992).

Heath’s (1983) previously mentioned ethnographic study of literacy practices within two communities in North Carolina highlighted the influence of both personal experience and social construction of knowledge, especially when it came to how young people’s learning was evaluated in schools. Students from two different communities—one predominantly Black and
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one predominantly white—brought their modes of communication from their homes into the classroom with them, and these were interpreted through the lens of the teachers’ personal understandings of what is and is not good literacy. One of Heath’s (1983) significant findings was expressed in her chapter on children’s approaches to storytelling in the classroom where she highlighted the adults’ “preconceived ideas about the stories they want children to tell” (p. 301). When teachers asked children to tell a story to the class, they consistently valued stories that were straightforward and chronological retellings of events from children’s lives. The White students tended to tell stories “with a tight adherence to chronicity” and few embellished details (p. 301). Heath observed that the Black children, on the other hand, told stories that typically did not follow a tight chronological structure but took time for setting the scene and developing main and side characters. The White teachers looked for stories that recounted facts, which aligned with the expectations for storytelling that white students brought from their homes. However, the storytelling style the Black students brought from their home community were more subject to teacher criticism because they typically did not match with the expectations of their school context. Heath’s ethnographic work in the field of literacy pushed educational scholars and professionals to examine the assumptions made about students’ ability to read, write, and communicate, and to question the ways in which their own lived experiences influenced their interpretation of student growth.

Heath’s (1983) work inspired literacy scholars to ask whose literacies are valued as good and who gets to decide how good literacy should be defined? (Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019). Gee (2015a) spoke directly to this problem within literacy education when he asked, “How could a child bring a language practice to school that was so socio-historically and culturally recognizable and significant and yet, nonetheless, construed as a failure, indeed a
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failure of language?” (p. 11). Heath’s ethnographic study, along with the questions around literacy instruction that grew out of it, fueled new literacies’ attention to the value of personal experience. Bostock et al. (2016) discussed experiential knowledge in the context of a Thirdspace that “supports the inclusion of languages discourse/Discourses, experiences, resources, funds of knowledge, and individuals not often ‘welcome’ in schools” (p. 46). In this work, D/discourse and funds of knowledge both serve as conceptual frameworks that involve individuals' ways of knowing and ways of being in the world (Bostock et al., 2016; Gee, 2015a; Knobel, 1999; Moll et al., 1992). While capital D, D/discourse, refers to a specific way of talking or acting that is aligned with a particular groups’ values, beliefs, and social practices (Gee, 2015b; Knobel, 1999), Moll et al. (1992) defined funds of knowledge as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Bostock et al. (2016) argued that a Thirdspace is possible when D/discourse and funds of knowledge— in other words, students’ language-in-use and home knowledge—are invited to cross the boundary between personal life and school life. Conversely, when these literacy practices are not valued in schools, curriculum can “reduce literacy to the dry dismembering of language—not alive; not communicative at all” particularly when said curriculum does not create space for students' experiential knowledge and interests (Rose, 2005, p. 110). In cases such as these, “children would fail at the kind of literacy activities the school system had woven throughout the curriculum and turn off to reading and writing in general. But that didn’t mean they were illiterate” (Rose, 2005, p. 110). As with the children Heath (1983) studied, the value educators place on students' lived experiences and the space they create for these experiences in the classroom can directly influence whether students are seen as appropriately literate.
**Experience and Embodiment.** In examining the role of experiential knowledge in literacy pedagogies, it is important to highlight the role of emotion and embodied ways of knowing. Rather than accept academia’s cerebral focus, feminist scholars aimed to deconstruct the binaries of mind vs. body and thought vs. emotion (Fleckenstein, 1999; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; hooks, 1994; Klein & Taylor, 2023). Forgasz and Clemens (2014) removed the separation between mind and body and illuminated their interconnectedness, stating, “Feelings are impulses in which thought is felt and feeling is thought” (p. 62). Thoughts and feelings inform one another. As I read, for example, I may experience emotion, and pausing to acknowledge that emotion may lead me to a deeper understanding of my thinking. Instead of seeing emotions through a patriarchal professional lens that deems feelings irrational, uncontrolled, and characteristically female in nature, Forgasz and Clemens (2014) argued, “our emotions [are] both a form of knowledge and a process of knowing. Such framing positions the emotions of everyday, embodied experience as significant and instructional” (p. 64). Emotional and embodied ways of knowing do not need to exist in opposition to academic and professional conceptions of knowledge. Feeling and knowing are not binary, but work in concert with one another in order to shape understanding and help individuals to meaningfully engage in the process of constructing knowledge (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; hooks, 1994; Klein & Taylor, 2023). hooks (1994) discussed this as “an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit” (p. 19)—one where emotion, including that which is rooted in our suffering or pain “is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience” (p. 91). In this sense, literacy studies can involve student expression. For many of us, that road to discovering our self-expression will involve guidance that is tied to the skills of reading, writing, and communicating,
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but through a feminist new literacies approach, those skills are not the desired end-product. They, along with personal experience, emotion, and vulnerability, are tools that learners can employ as they seek to communicate their ideas to others.

Like feminist theorists, new literacies scholars also included embodied ways of knowing as part of the construction of knowledge. Gee (2015a) explained that embodied cognition is a process through which “humans store the experiences they have had in their minds. Then they use these experiences to prepare for future action . . . to see if any are good guides for how to act or think in the new situation” (pp. 77–78). Though feminist scholars such as Forgasz and Clemens (2014) honed in specifically on the role of emotion in our thought development, their understanding of embodiment crosses over with Gee (2015a) as they each reject the binary positioning of the mind and body as separate entities. Instead, action, experience, and understanding are intrinsically linked. Our experiences give meaning to the words we use to describe them and these meanings are also influenced and interpreted “out there in the social world and its myriad practices” (Gee, 2015a, p. 82). This connection between personal experience and social contexts and practices will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Social Construction of Knowledge. While our lived experiences inform our understanding of the world and influence the literacies we enact, the knowledge we construct through these experiences occurs in the context of our sociocultural environments. Kalman (2008) explained the involvement of both personal experiences and social interaction in individuals’ literacy practices noting that “Speakers or readers/writers bring their world view, language practices, history, and experience” into a given communication event (Kalman, 2008, p. 528). However, readers, writers, and communicators such as students “become independent
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language users as a result of their contact with others, through co-constructing knowledge and know-how together, not just from individually ‘processing’ written text” (Kalman, 2008, p. 531).

Therefore, learning is not a solitary process, but one that is brought into being through interactions with others. New literacies scholars highlight the collaborative nature of learning through the role of social practice and social context in our understanding of literacy. Social practices are the actions and behaviors we engage in as we do literacy, and these practices are informed by our identities and the contexts we navigate (Gee, 2015a; Gee, 2015b; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, 2019). These social practices can also be tied to the affinity spaces in which we participate. As defined by Gee (2018), affinity spaces act as a home base for people with similar interests, values, and activities. Additionally, interactions within these spaces are motivated by a desire for problem-solving which can lead to teaching and learning within the group (Gee, 2018). New Literacy Studies scholars distinguish their approach to literacy from the autonomous model by asserting that the ethos of new literacies is a “more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less “published,” less “author-centric,” and less “individual” [approach] than conventional literacies” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, p. 98). Here, value is not placed on the learners’ ability to adhere to one, rigid form of literacy, but rather on the sharing of ideas through multiple modes of communication within an established social context.

Affinity spaces and participatory culture are central to new literacies’ social practices. Through the sociocultural lens of new literacies, literacy practices are defined as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy in their lives” but also includes “how people talk about and make sense out of literacy” both individually and in community with
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As with feminist scholarship, the sociocultural view of literacy practices as inherently participatory in nature also challenged hierarchies by “attending to the interests and knowledge of others, recognizing that quality is judged by groups rather than appointed experts, welcoming diversity of opinion in decision-making, and so on” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, p. 98). This collaborative approach to learning aligned with feminist pedagogies and the emphasis on co-constructing knowledge in community with others (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; McCusker, 2017; Pallapathou, 2018). Additionally, it is reminiscent of hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogies. hooks (1994) used her time as a Women’s Studies student as an example of the ways in which engaged pedagogies can create a participatory classroom culture that invites students and teachers to “acknowledge a connection between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices” and to share knowledge with one another (p.15). Feminist pedagogies and engaged pedagogies, alongside new literacies scholarship, position learning as a social practice. Scholars in these fields see classrooms as spaces where knowledge is constructed collaboratively and students’ and teachers’ personal experiences add to the learning environment (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Gee, 2015a; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; McCusker, 2017; Street, 2016). An epistemological approach to literacy that is informed by poststructural feminism and the field of new literacies will explore the ways people read, write, and communicate through the lenses of their personal experiences as well as their sociocultural contexts and practices, and challenge the hegemonic mold of literacy that is dominant in school environments.
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Multiplicity and Challenging the Status Quo

The constructions of knowledge outlined in the previous section act as a foundation for literacy education that creates space for multiplicity and challenges hegemonic, patriarchal conceptions of knowledge—based on the right/wrong binary—often promoted in academia and in schools (Britzman, 1995; Coia & Taylor, 2013; hooks, 1994; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Pallapothu, 2018). In order to address the ways in which feminist new literacies challenge normativity and hegemony, it is essential to more specifically define the plurality of modern literacy practices.

Multiliteracies. Attention to multiliteracies is one-way literacies’ plurality is expressed in this field. The term multiliteracies refers to using multiple literacy practices which may shift depending on the domain, or context, in which an individual is operating. (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Pahl & Roswell, 2012). Multiliteracies is also closely connected to multimodality—the understanding that texts may be made up of a combination of modes (such as text, sound, and image), can exist in multiple formats (i.e. print or digital), and can be shared through “cloud-based interfaces [where] multiple authors can work on a ‘text’ simultaneously” (Knobel & Kalman, 2016, p. 6). Multimodality adds to opportunities for participatory groups to collaborate and co-construct knowledge. Thinking about multiliteracies and multimodality also pushes our conceptualization of what it means to read and write. Reading, in this context, is not just decoding words on the page, but the process of interpreting the meaning of texts in any modality (Janks, 2010; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Pahl & Roswell, 2012). Similarly, while the term writing remains largely restricted to the formation of letters into words and sentences in our vernacular, the multimodality of modern texts requires us to also consider design, or “the production of texts that use multiple sign systems” (Janks, 2010, p. 18). Texts are no longer easily divided into neat
categories like print, web-based, or film, and many people have access to create and share texts publicly (Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014), so multimodality and digital communication require us to think about reading and writing as acts of interpretation involving various kinds of symbols designed together to suggest a possible meaning or message.

**More than One Way to be Right.** Feminist new literacies intentionally problematizes the binaries of literate and illiterate, *good* writing and *bad* writing, and, more broadly, *right* and *wrong* ways of reading, writing, and communicating by looking to understand how individuals read the multiple worlds they navigate and how this reading is influenced by our cultures and experiences (Moll et al., 1992). In challenging these binaries in favor of a more multiplicitous conception of literacy, I must first acknowledge that students (and most of us have been students) are indoctrinated into a system of education that reproduces dualistic thinking and hegemonic views of normalcy. This system “. . .requires students to climb upward through a sequence of grade levels and graded institutions and to face an increasing risk of elimination as they approach the higher levels of the system” (Labaree, 1997, p. 52), and their success or elimination is contingent upon whether or not they find the *right* answers, from the *right* texts, and communicate these answers while behaving the *right way*. Students are operating in a world that communicates something is either right or wrong; either this or that—a system where they “often learn the rules of social conformity through pedagogies that encourage docility and obedience, and even more thoroughly than they learn the subject matter” (Meyer & Tilland-Stafford, 2016, p. 4). Thus, there is pressure on students and teachers alike to conform to the expectations around literacy that are reinforced through policies, standards, grading systems, and standardized tests, particularly when we consider the risk of othered, excluded, or marginalized for deviating from the status quo.
With this value on *rightness* in mind, framing literacy research through a feminist new literacies lens is an act of resistance against the push to fix children’s literacies with a one-size-fits-all set of rules and practices. Instead, we can look to problematize the ways in which fixed beliefs about literacy have positioned some students as lacking or *at risk* because they deviated from long unquestioned norms around what makes a person acceptably literate (Gee, 2015a; Luke & Gore, 1992; Martino, 2017; Rose, 2005). Fixed constructions of individuals based on identifiers including race, ethnicity, and gender have led to “discourses which write their differences as at risk and in need of recovery, remediation, special inquiries, and policies” (Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 7). By rejecting literacy pedagogies focused solely on weaknesses and remediation, educators and literacy scholars can explore ways to leverage the multiplicitous experiences and modes of communication our students bring to the classroom.

Knobel and Lankshear’s (2019) paper on theoretical approaches to teaching language learners addressed hegemonic expectations for language-in-use and challenged the right/wrong binary in regards to grammar by offering an alternative viewpoint. This piece focused on an examination of grammar through the lens of social languages and argued that there is more than one way to define language proficiency. In traditional schooling, evaluations of language proficiency rely on what Knobel and Lankshear (2019) referred to as “grammar 1” or the specific set of rules around linguistic features such as parts of speech, punctuation, and sentence structure. They went on to explain, however, that this is not the only form of grammar with which to measure an individual’s language-in-use, noting that “A social languages approach focuses on situated language/language in use, as distinct from linguistic systems. From this perspective, there is no single, unified, “correct” (or even ideal) way of being a native speaker in any language” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2019, p. 161). Because our identities are multiplicitous, we
each have different ways of speaking and acting as we move from one social context to another, and it is arguable that knowing how to, “think, act, believe, dress, feel, speak, write, and relate in different ways” has greater relevance in our communication with others than traditional grammatical features alone (Knobel & Lankshear, 2019, p. 161). Though features of language associated with grammar 1 play a role in our various modes of communication, their effective use may depend on the situation we are in. This is where ‘grammar 2’, or the act of using “formal grammatical units (nouns, verbs, phrases, etc.) to create patterns within language in use” comes into play (Knobel & Lankshear, 2019, p. 162). From this perspective, grammar 1 is not the singular correct way to speak or write but serves as a foundation for effective communication that can be used in combination with grammar 2 as we make decisions about how to speak or write in the context of a particular language event. Hegemonic, essayist conceptions of literacy elevate the emphasis on traditional grammar in our schools, which is problematized by Knobel and Lankshear’s (2019) use of social languages to suggest a more nuanced understanding of effective grammar and language-in-use.

An approach to teaching and learning that embraces multiplicity would move beyond what Britzman (1995) referred to as the “study of limits” by providing room for multiple truths and challenging a system that is made up of imposed standards that dictate what is “right” or “true” and what is not (pp. 156–157). When educational scholars and practitioners disrupt the right/wrong or normal/abnormal binaries in this way, we also create space for the previously discussed construction of knowledge through personal experience and collaboration. hooks (1994), for example, aimed to create a classroom environment where experiential knowledge was used to deepen discussion by creating links to facts and abstract ideas. The objective in feminist classrooms such as this is not to determine whose experience is right so that others can be
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deeded *wrong*. Instead, the stories we bring into the classroom are there to illuminate our understanding of difficult or complex ideas by grounding them in our lives. In this way, “personal experience, for instance, is not only recognized as a valid form of learning but also as a valued form. Using personal experiences (unique or shared) as a basis for learning can demystify canonical knowledge” (Pallapothu, 2018, para 6) thus providing an access point through which students and teachers can explore modes of communication, concepts, and perspectives that may have previously felt unknowable or othered (Britzman, 1995). Fixed beliefs around rightness reproduce stereotypes and deficit mindsets regarding individuals and groups that fall outside of the boundaries of so-called normalcy (Britzman, 1995; Labaree, 1997). However, using feminist new literacies as the framework for this study will allow me to engage with participants in an examination of literacy practices that exist outside the limitations of skills-based, essayist conceptions of reading, writing, and communicating.

**Literature Review**

In this literature review, I addressed current research on conceptions of literacy and approaches to literacy across content areas. I honed in on researchers whose work aligned with conceptions of literacy that are tied to Street’s (1995) ideological model, many of whom also drew from feminist pedagogies, new literacies, critical literacies, or a combination of these theoretical frameworks in order to situate their work. Much of the existing literature in the field of New Literacy Studies “focuses on young people ‘doing their thing’ in a range of social contexts [which] has generated a rich store of insights into how young people learn and engage with literacies, many of which contrast markedly with how they learn and ‘do’ literacy in schools” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, p. 99). Studies grounded in feminist theories and critical literacies also cited new literacies, and definitions of critical literacies regularly referenced
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foundational concepts from new literacies (Ghiso, 2015; Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Mosley-Wexel, 2010). Research in these related fields tended to examine reading, writing, and communicating in educational settings in ways that look beyond fixed sets of skills and strategies.

In light of the large body of empirical research related to literacy instruction, I limited my search to the databases Academic Search Complete, Eric, Education Research Complete, and JSTOR and included search terms such as: conceptions of literacy, literacy in teacher education, cross-curricular literacy, student literacies, and feminist literacies. While some seminal works in the field of literacy studies are referenced, I focused primarily on reviewing studies conducted after the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in 2010.

The literature review was organized to first provide an overview of researchers’ ideological conceptions of literacy to examine the foundational definitions in which this work is grounded. Next, I looked at findings related to navigating the tensions between these ideological approaches to literacy in university programs and the skills-based expectations typically privileged in K-12 school environments. In doing so, I offered a snapshot of the conflicts that may arise when teachers, especially novice teachers, bring alternatives to the autonomous model into their school settings. I followed this examination of the tensions for teachers with a focus on students’ experiences with literacy in schools. Although my study will focus on teachers’ conceptions of literacy, they enact their literacy practices in the classroom in community with students. Therefore, it is also relevant to present research that both addresses the more liberatory approaches to literacy work with students and the ways in which literacy instruction can police students’ actions and bodies in the name of skills and strategies. I ended the review with a discussion of boundary crossing and highlighted the gaps in the literature that led to this study.
Research focused on conceptions of literacy within teacher education programs suggested that methods courses were commonly aligned with the ideological model of literacy and drew upon Freirean understandings of literacy as a tool for liberation (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Street, 1995, 2011, 2016). Researchers in these studies conceived of literacy as social practices. They acknowledged that “contests over meanings, definitions, boundaries, and control of the literacy agenda” are prevalent throughout the educational system (Street, 2016, p. 337). They also contested that when we accept that there are many literacies embedded in our everyday practices, we also challenge hegemonic structures that hold up school literacy as the only way in which to be literate (Gee, 2015a; 2015b; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Street, 2016). Conceptions of literacy rooted in the ideological model remind us that the ways teachers and students interact is in itself a social practice, and the power dynamics inherent in that relationship and in the larger structure of school affect what students are learning about literacy and the ideas about what it means to be literate that both students and teachers develop (Gee 2015a; Street, 2016). In the next section, I detail how the studies in this review presented researchers’ ideological understandings of literacy, which involved definitions of texts that stretched beyond the written word and an emphasis on challenging power structures and hegemony.

A comparative examination of the conceptions of literacy across the studies revealed a number of commonly identified characteristics. First, researchers often situated their work within Freire’s (1998) notion of literacy as reading the word and the world and emphasized the importance of using this reading of the world to provide students with a social justice orientation that would involve taking action beyond the classroom (Cho, 2015; Kelly, 2020; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rogers, 2013; Rogers et al., 2016; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018). Cho
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(2015), for example, defined critical literacies as political in nature and "espouse[d] the belief that education should foster social justice by helping students question how language and literacy are influenced by and influence social relations and power around them" (p. 70). Similarly, Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2015) directly referenced Freire in their title, “Reading the world while learning to teach,” and defined their feminist approach to critical literacies by noting that “reading and writing [are] embedded in one’s social world and connected to identity, agency, and power” (p. 61). Their work within teacher education, like Cho’s (2015), aimed to explore how teacher education programs could use literacy studies as a means through which pre-service teachers could question the status quo and take action toward social change.

Studies grounded in the ideological model also embraced multiliteracies asserting that language and texts need to be understood within their sociocultural and sociopolitical context. In some studies, multiliteracies related specifically to digital spaces, technology, and multimodality (Bostock et al., 2016; Rosaen & Terpstra, 2012) Others, however, focused more generally on multiplicitous modes of communication that included, but were not limited to technology (Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Wissman, 2011). Whether researchers focused specifically on the digital turn in literacy studies or a broader sociocultural conception of language-in-use, there was agreement across the researchers that meaning-making was not restricted to singular right answers, but subject to multiple interpretations dependent upon factors such as context and personal experience (Bostock et al., 2016; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rosaen & Terpstra, 2012; Wissman, 2011).

These multiplicitous, sociocultural, and sociopolitical conceptions of reading, writing, and communication were often held by researchers who saw literacy as tied to an examination of power structures, which also led to a concentration on literacy as a tool to challenge norms and
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hegemonic values traditionally embedded in educational systems. The ideologies of these researchers included that language and literacy are not neutral. The power dynamics in our school structures affect what students are learning about literacy, as well as the beliefs both teachers and students hold about what it means to be literate (Bostock et al., 2016; Cho, 2015; Ghiso, 2015; Kelly, 2020; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018). Bostock et al.’s (2016) conception of literacy called for a Thirddspace that would “nurture all voices, discourses/Discourses, languages, and funds of knowledge” in order to eschew “traditional social roles and power structures that situate students in subordinate roles in the classroom” (p. 48). Ghiso (2015) challenged normative expectations around argument writing in schools by calling attention to “how dominant patriarchal structures marginalize ways of knowing that draw on emotion, intuition, and experience” and position these ways of knowing as inherently feminine, and therefore, subjective, illogical, and irrational (p. 188). She focused her work with elementary school teachers on bringing embodied ways of knowing into the classroom—a subject that is addressed in more detail in a subsequent section of this review. Here, I use Ghiso’s (2015) attention to embodiment to emphasize how her ideological stance on literacy challenges hegemony and power structures, which is echoed in the work of Kelly (2020) who studied the literacy practices of two Black teenage girls trying to self-advocate within an oppressive school environment. In each of the instances detailed here, researchers' ideological conceptions of literacy included an emphasis on social action, a multiplicitous understanding of literacies and texts, and the desire to examine and challenge power structures and limited, normative approaches to reading and writing in schools.
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The Ideological Model in Teacher Education

The conceptions of literacy detailed above often informed the approach to literacy in teacher education programs. However, it is the autonomous model of literacy that remains dominant in the educational system (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee 2015a; Janks, 2010; Street, 2011). Thus, teachers may develop an approach to literacy education in their university settings that comes into conflict with the expectations of the school environments in which they work. Exploring this tension between literacy in teacher education settings and literacy in schools requires attention to pre-service teachers’ experiences in teacher education programs.

Constructing Conceptions of Literacy. Researchers who worked with teacher-educators and/or postsecondary teacher candidates consistently suggested that when methods courses in literacy instruction approached reading, writing, and communicating as socially constructed practices that are dependent upon context, preservice teachers would be exposed to foundational teaching practices that place greater emphasis on the complexities of language-use-in context, rather than language as a set of neutral skills (Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Kosnik et al., 2017; Mosley-Wexel, 2010). For instance, Kosnik et al. (2017) conducted an interview study of literacy teacher educators (LTEs) in order to examine common “elements of a pedagogy of literacy teacher education” and uncover opportunities for LTEs to help pre-service and novice teachers develop their conception of literacy beyond quick tips for skills and strategies (p. 59). The researchers reported the conceptions of literacy participants communicated included the belief that literacy is not one, fixed set of skills that one can acquire and then be done with. Most participants saw literacy as plural, and individuals use different, complex literacies that may continue to change as our contexts evolve and change. Several were also critical of national standards that define literacy as a set of fixed skills, and though they did not ignore national
standards with pre-service teachers, they positioned these standards as a “floor rather than a ceiling” (Kosnik et al., 2017, p. 69). Through interviewing their twenty-eight participants, Kosnik et al. (2017) suggested LTEs in university settings commonly shared three main elements in literacy education: valuing and responding to diversity; use of a range of texts; opportunities for authentic reflection. They found “LTEs invited [novice teachers] to explore the relationship between traditional literacy practices, those who benefit from traditional practices and those marginalised from those practices (which often led to deficit views)” (Kosnik et al., 2017, p. 65). Participants also used a range of methods and modes of communication to highlight voices beyond the mainstream and create opportunities for reflection in the course they designed for pre-service and novice teachers. The literacy teacher-educators in this study used an ideological model of literacy to design coursework and hoped to broaden their conception of literacy beyond traditional skills.

This model of literacy teacher education was echoed in Jones and Enriquez’s (2010) study of preservice teachers participating in a methods course. Jones and Enriquez (2010)—who filled dual roles of course instructor and researcher—presented their student-participants with a construction of literacy as an “antiessentialist and democratic practice” that had to include space for multiple identities and perspectives (p. 149). They followed their participants from preservice education courses into their careers as teachers and examined whether the critical, feminist conception of literacy developed in their coursework could create a habitus of critical literacy that they would bring into the field. This study related to Mosley-Wexel (2010) who studied students in a practicum as they worked on designing and implementing lessons to teach reading. Data from studies such as these suggested that preservice teachers could develop conceptions of literacy that deviate from school-based, autonomous models through their experiences in teacher
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education programs when teacher educators designed curriculum that aligned with the ideological model (Cho, 2015; Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Kosnik et al., 2017; Mosley-Wexel, 2010).

Rosaen and Terpstra (2012), however, were outliers in studies focused on broadening preservice teachers’ understandings of literacy. The stated purpose of their self-study was to examine themselves as teacher-researchers as they “worked to help preservice teachers expand their conceptions of literacy and their knowledge of how to incorporate new pedagogies into K-6 literacy teaching and learning” (p. 36). While their study was grounded in new literacies and multiliteracies, terms which they used interchangeably throughout their article, Rosaen and Terpstra’s (2012) foregrounded the technological components of new literacies rather than those more closely tied to sociocultural and critical conceptions of literacy. This self-study of their work with pre-service teachers revealed the potential limitations of their pedagogical orientation. Roasaen and Terpstra (2012) tasked students with developing lessons that explored an abstract literacy concept and incorporated a new technology. However, they found that the focus on digital technologies seemed to distract their students from the true purpose of their coursework, which was to engage in a broadened understanding of literacy as a socioculturally informed set of practices. This disconnect between their course objectives and the actual course outcomes came through in teacher candidates' reflections on their project, many of which focused primarily on the skills connected to the technology they used rather than the collaborative or creative opportunities for meaning-making that such mediums offer. The researchers saw this as a flaw in their design explaining:

Because we did not make explicit to teacher candidates that the project was asking them to explore two new literacies (digital and one other), it may have confused their
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interpretation of the main goals of the project, with many concluding that the project was really about technology. (p. 44)

Though the young people teachers worked with lived in an increasingly technology-driven world, a focus on digital literacies without an explicit foundation in collaboration, meaning-making that is open to multiple interpretations, and disruption of binaries and hegemony may still perpetuate an autonomous, skills-based conception of literacy. Attention to this outlier study informed my own work as I considered the key concepts associated with the feminist new literacies framing for this study.

Navigating Teacher Candidates’ Experiences as Students. In research involving university teacher education programs, teacher educators often worked to support preservice and novice teachers as they examined their own experiences within the system of school as an institution of power. In these instances, teacher educators aimed to help students to critically examine the assumptions and biases they brought into the field from their own time in school as they developed the conception of literacy they would take into their teaching (Cho, 2015; Dharamshi, 2019; Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016; Rogers, 2013; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018). Since all of us who enter the field of teaching were at one time students who sat in classrooms of one kind or another, we bring our personal experiences of schooling with us into our work. As teacher candidates in literacy-based methods courses are exposed to the theories and practices associated with literacy instruction, they may find their own experiences as readers, writers, and students influence their responses to their coursework (Dharamshi, 2019; Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015).

Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2015), instructors in separate literacy methods courses, collaborated to study what could happen when preservice teachers were invited to draw on their
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early experiences as students in order to inform the development of their practices and pedagogies. These researchers leveraged preservice teachers’ experiences in school to help them “question their assumptions; re-see their experiences within widening understandings of historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts; and articulate both their critiques of the status quo and their desires for more humanizing practices for themselves and their students” (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015, p. 61). The process of re-seeing led student-participants to uncover previously unexamined limitations in their own schooling, including: lack of diversity in the reading curricula, mismatch in expectations for high school and college writing, and divisions created through the early categorization of good and poor readers (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). Additionally, preservice teachers’ reflections on their personal experiences with literacy in schools revealed their love of reading and writing often diminished in a school setting, which influenced thinking about their own teaching and what teachers need to do instructionally in order to engage students in meaningful literacy practices (Riley & Crawford-Garrett; 2015).

Similarly, Dharamshi (2019) included participants who reread their experiences in school with a critical lens, however, in this study, the participants were not preservice teachers, but literacy teacher-educators who approached teacher preparation from a critical stance—a teaching philosophy that challenges “the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo" (p. 91). Through the semi-structured interviews conducted by the researchers, participants reported memories from school that shaped their views and approach as teacher educators. One participant reflected on her experiences as an English language learner who had been placed on a “low” track in middle school and was later moved into honors courses as a high school student. Her critical rereading of this experience shed light on how power structures in schools that position students as intelligent or unskilled had informed her approach to teacher education. She
aimed to challenge pre-service teachers’ views of literacy in order “to unpack uses of language, power, and class with her student teachers” revealing that her own ideological approach to literacy was rooted in her personal experiences as a student (Dharamshi, 2019, p. 94).

Studies examining the ways in which personal conceptions of literacy from one’s early schooling appeared to inform preservice teachers’ and teacher-educators’ commitment to ideological conceptions of literacy. However, this remains an emergent topic in educational research suggesting that there is room for further study to gain insights into the ways in which self-examination and rereading school experience translate to pedagogical practices within the classroom.

**Conceptions in Conflict**

Research on the approach to literacy studies in teacher education programs revealed that teacher candidates are likely to be immersed in the ideological model in university settings. In these settings, literacy teacher educators may have preservice teachers reflect on their own experiences in school, as well as practice planning, implementing, and revising sociocultural, critical, and/or feminist approaches to literacy as they work with K-12 students in practicum and student teaching experiences (Cho, 2015; Dharamshi, 2019; Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016; Rogers, 2013; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018; Wolfie, 2010). However, this body of research also addressed the tension between teacher educators’ conceptions of literacy as socially constructed and the prevalence of the autonomous model in schools. This tension created barriers for teachers, especially novice teachers, as they tried to enact literacy pedagogies grounded in feminist theories, critical literacies, and/or new literacies.

In studies that followed teacher candidates into the classroom, researchers had the opportunity to examine how (and if) literacy pedagogies from university courses were applied
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within school settings. Several of these studies addressed the gap between responses to the ideological model in teacher education programs and the application of this model in the field. Though there was some overall success in shifting teacher candidates’ approaches to reading and writing across these studies, this shift did not necessarily influence teacher candidates’ own conceptions of literacy instruction or their view of themselves as literacy teachers (Mosely-Wexel, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018; Wolfie, 2010). It is worth noting that teachers in several of the studies did resist the autonomous model as they brought what they learned through coursework into their own classrooms (Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018; Wolfie, 2010). Notably, a case study conducted by Rogers et al. (2016) focused on Jonah, a preservice teacher committed to bringing activism into the classroom. The coursework involved pairing preservice teachers with elementary school students from a local school to work on literacy development. The researchers were interested in discovering what happens when pre-service teachers are invited to bring critical literacy into their teaching, and the researcher-instructors “drew from the New Literacy Studies and Critical Language Awareness movements” to ground their work (Rogers et al., 2016, p. 296). Researchers found that Jonah’s personal experiences—both his activism and his “experiences as a cultural and religious minority shaped how he viewed actions for social justice” (p. 300). Thus, when Jonah planned his literacy-based lessons, researchers observed that he used an “asset-based approach,” shared power with his young student as they worked through books together, and employed multiple modes of communication and meaning-making—including singing, dancing, and acting out ideas—as part of his pedagogy (Rogers et al., 2016, p. 306). This study represented one of several where university courses that invited teacher candidates to consider
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their own personal experiences and adopt an ideological conception of literacy appeared to influence their work with students.

However, despite instructor modeling and opportunities to plan, revise, and practice their critical, feminist, and sociocultural literacies within the classroom, participants did not consistently commit to adopting this pedagogical approach in their own teaching (Jones & Enriquez, 2010; Mosely-Wexel, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016; Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018; Wolfie, 2010). While some, like Jonah, brought their ideological conception of literacy into their work with students, others reported enjoying the coursework but did not see it as transferable or applicable to their own teaching. For example, one math preservice teacher noted that she enjoyed the process of using reader-response theory to share interpretations of texts, but added that while this approach might be “super useful for English-minded people,” she did not feel she fell into that group and could not see herself using this method with her future students (Shanahan & Dallacqua, 2018, p. 51). Shanahan and Dallacqua (2018) concluded that preservice teachers need multiple, consistent opportunities to experiment with critical literacies, and added that more research on this conception of literacy in cross-curricular or interdisciplinary contexts is needed.

Jones and Enriquez (2010) also followed students from their coursework into the field, focusing on two participants who had been students in a graduate class taught by Jones. The results of this study demonstrated both the potential for developing conceptions of literacy to move into the field with novice teachers and instances where this was not the case. These researchers asked if a cultural, critical, social-justice-oriented conception of literacy in graduate courses could build a habitus that teacher candidates would take with them into the field. One participant, Brooke, continued to define literacy beyond the autonomous model noting that it is
"as a way of being in the world, both an intellectual exercise and a moral stance" (Jones & Enriquez, 2010, p. 160) even after she had moved from a graduate student to a classroom teacher. Brooke enacted this ideological approach with her elementary school students even though she began her graduate work with very little knowledge of the critical and feminist pedagogies that served as the foundation for Jones’ work with teacher candidates. However, Jones and Enriquez (2010) found that Rebekkah—who used critical and feminist theories in her personal approach to literacy—did not bring that habitus into the field. After finishing her graduate courses, Rebekkah worked in a gentrified school district that privileged an autonomous approach to literacy, and through adherence to a more skills-based literacy pedagogy, received significant praise in her school community. In an interview, Rebekkah shared that she did not feel like she knew how to bring her critical approach to literacy into an actual classroom. Researchers added that “she regularly leaned on the literacy instruction requirements of the school as a reason for not teaching critical literacy practices” and posited that her “commitment to the mandated curriculum helped to generate her exceptional practices in the workshop approach, winning her praise and distinction” (Jones & Enriquez, 2010, p. 163). Literacy research on conceptions developed through university coursework suggested that it is possible for instructor modeling and experience with ideological literacy practices to push beyond skill and strategies to influence pre-service teachers’ beliefs about literacy in the classroom. However, these studies also offered instances where personal beliefs about literacy and the environment teachers are in once they enter the field may conflict with their undergraduate or graduate studies.

Additional examples of the tensions between in-school literacies and university programs came from Cho (2015) and Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2015). In these studies, preservice
teachers showed genuine interest in developing student literacy through critical and sociocultural lenses but were also worried about how to enact these kinds of literacy practices in school environments that relied on the autonomous model (Cho, 2015; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). This conflict was particularly concerning to pre-service teachers who had already faced pushback from colleagues and mentors while trying to approach literacy as a social practice in their field placements (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). Similarly, Cho (2015)—who studied practicing teachers participating in a graduate program and online professional development course—reported that participants expressed interest in infusing critical literacies into their curriculums but pressure to prepare students for standardized assessments left educators feeling like they did not have the time or flexibility in their curriculum to make meaningful changes. Comments from both in-service and preservice teachers spoke to the struggle many teachers face as they try to balance standards-focused curriculum guides with sociocultural and ideological approaches to literacy.

In response to the conceptual conflict around literacy, Kosnik et al. (2017) raised concerns about the wide variety in content and pedagogical practices used to prepare novice teachers for the classroom. They noted students “may graduate with markedly different understandings of literacy and may have been exposed to a particular set of literacy theories and pedagogies” (p. 63), and argued that when novice teachers are exposed to a narrow view of literacy—one that is skills-based and tied to policy and standardized testing—they may resort to teaching as they were taught despite the evolving conception of literacy in educational research and literacy pedagogies. Therefore, in their findings, Kosnik et al. (2017) argued that “Being explicit about the changing nature of literacy will help student teachers understand why they must ‘unlearn’ and grow beyond their previous understanding of literacy” (p. 69) in order to
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value and respond to diversity, using a variety of texts, and create opportunities for reflection;
suggestions that echoed findings from Dharamshi’s (2019) study of literacy teacher educators
rereading their own experiences in school.

**Literacy Practices in K-12 Classrooms**

A full picture of the aforementioned conflicts between ideological literacies in teacher
preparation and essayist or skills-based literacy in schools must include a closer look at work
with students. Studies grounded feminist, critical, and sociocultural literacies involved teachers
working with students to develop their literacy practices by engaging their personal experiences
and interests, using social-justice lenses, and valuing multiplicitous ways of knowing, reading,
and writing (Dover, 2016; Ghiso, 2015; Kelly, 2020; King, 2019; Wissman, 2011). While much
of this research centered on the positive results of employing ideological conceptions of literacy
in work with students, some also revealed the limitations both teachers and students faced when
they tried to enact their literacy practices in school with a fixed, autonomous orientation (Kelly,
2020; King, 2019; Wissman, 2011).

**Students ‘Doing their Thing’ in the Classroom.** Knobel and Lankshear (2014) noted
that new literacies researchers often focused on “young people ‘doing their thing’ in a range of
social contexts” (p. 99). I would argue that this assertion extends to research in related fields
where the study of student literacy is grounded in the ideological model. Studies framed by new
literacies, feminist pedagogies, critical literacies (or various combinations of the three) often
involved: bringing personal experiences and interests into the classroom, attention to the role
digital spaces, gaming, and social media played in students’ literacy practices in school, and
making connections to the real world through social justice and/or social action (Bhatt, 2017;
Dover, 2016; Ghiso, 2015; Kelly, 2020; King, 2019; Wissman, 2011). Bhatt (2017) studied the
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use of students’ literacies, particularly their digital literacies, in school-based writing assignments. Bhatt (2017) argued that “practices of digital literacy can emerge from worlds far beyond the classroom and be mobilized to create something new” (p. 129). In this case, the something “new” is a piece written in the context of a school assignment. Bhatt’s (2017) study used screen capturing to observe the moves students made while developing a research-based report. The researcher included the ways in which participants used their outside-school digital literacies to navigate often unseen tasks of the writing process. Bhatt (2017) used the work of a particular student, Paolo, to demonstrate how students had to engage in a series of nested tasks in order to complete the research-based report they were assigned. These smaller tasks included shifting between a series of websites, listening to teacher instructions and reminders (and deciding whether to comply), reviewing their own notes/research, and following the rules laid out in the rubric for the assignment. Observing Paulo move through this process shed light on the “interconnectedness of in-class and outside-class literacy practices in student writing” (Bhatt, 2017, p. 146).

While Bhatt’s (2017) research focused specifically on the interplay between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices in the context of digital literacies, attention to student writing emerged in several other studies. Ghiso (2015), for example, wanted to challenge curriculum that reduced writing to a core set of skills and strategies that can be transferred from teachers to students in order for children to produce writing that complied with Common Core Standards. This paper, which grew out of a larger ethnographic study of first-graders, zeroed in on an argument writing unit where students were invited to bring their personal experiences and their feelings into the writing process (Ghiso, 2015). She found that moving away from dominant
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constructions of argument—ones that privilege neutrality and objectivity—allowed students to think about how the issues they were writing about showed up in their own lives, noting that:

The ways that the first graders in this study engaged with the practice of argument presented an alternative rationality characterized by privileging collaborative inquiry and difference of opinion in formulating claims…and basing arguments in real-world concerns and in the service of social change. (Ghiso, 2015, p. 198)

As with Bhatt (2017), the students Ghiso (2015) studied were encouraged to bring pieces of themselves into the writing process, as the teachers they worked with balanced the features of genre writing with the lived experiences and social contexts of their students.

The Personal Gets Political. Several studies also foregrounded equity and social justice as a key part of student literacy practices. This research included work with students that challenged hegemony while also negotiating the limitations of school resources, expectations and policies (Dover, 2016; Kelly, 2020; Wissman, 2011). Dover (2016) focused on social justice orientations in language arts classes. Though she looked at teachers’ conceptions of social justice rather than literacy, her work centered using language arts skills and content to examine issues of equity and injustice. In this study, Dover (2016) looked at how teacher-participants thought about social justice and how their social justice orientation was (or was not) implemented in their classrooms. Teachers in this study commonly saw literary analysis as a way to engage students in discussions of equity and justice while also adhering to the reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language standards outlined in the Common Core. For example, students working on the skills associated with speaking and listening did so through discussions and presentations tied to social justice topics that encouraged students to take action. The effort to balance the skills-based expectations of the Common Core with a social justice orientation was not without
challenges and called further attention to the tension between standards aligned with the autonomous model and the desire to privilege a conception of literacy that creates space for a variety of social practices and sociocultural lived experiences. Curriculum mandates, administrative expectations, and the wording of the standards themselves—which privilege Standard English without questioning who decides what counts as standard—come into conflict with the social justice work teachers aimed to commit to with students.

Wissman (2011) also examined coursework that aimed to engage students in literacy tied to social justice. In her study of young women of color participating in an in-school elective focused on the literary traditions of African American women, Wissman (2011) looked to lift up Black, female subjectivities, centering the lived experiences of the students in the course and co-constructing a space of resistance with her students. In this course, students drew on their lived experiences to read and create poetry and share interpretations with their peers. The literature for the course included works that challenged hegemony, uplifted the voices of Black, female poets, and fit with the themes “Where am I from” and “Self-Portraits” (Wissman, 2011, p. 413).

Wissman’s (2011) major takeaways were twofold. First, her work with students emphasized the power of hegemony, particularly when a reader’s lived experiences caused them to miss the disruptive message of the text, and reinforced that inclusion of counter-hegemonic texts alone is not enough to combat the normative assumptions that may influence a reading. However, when misinterpretations arose due to hegemonic reading of a text, the discussions her students had were able to push each other’s thinking and showed that collaboration, collective meaning-making could help to challenge misinterpretations. Wissman (2011) also found that students' lived experiences informed the poetry they wrote and shared with their peers. Participants Jasmyn and Maya noted, “Our individual poems emerged from our past and present
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experiences, the problems we face as young females trying to make a way, and the way we are being represented” and in her analysis of this statement, Wissman (2011) added “that the course afforded them [the students] a space to read, write, and be in the company of other young women; to say what is often ‘left unsaid’ in school; and to facilitate their journeys in "making a way" as young women of color” (pp. 429–430). In saying what was “often left unsaid” the students and instructor were able to co-construct a space within a school building where they could use their in-school and outside-school literacy practices to examine their identities in ways that resisted hegemonic power structures.

Like Wissman (2011), Kelly’s (2020) study focused on the literacies of young, Black women. These young women were students in the same school where Kelly was one of three Black teachers and was sparked by her awareness of the marginalization Black students—particularly Black, female students—experienced in this school. Kelly was interested in how participants “navigated and challenged the racial oppression within school structures and practices in a predominantly white school environment” (p. 460). The data collected revealed that the critical literacy practices of two students, in particular, had been challenged by both peers and adults in school. Unlike the students in Dover (2016) and Wissman (2011), the young women in this study did not have a classroom space that valued their justice-oriented literacy practices. As they attempted to enact their critical digital literacies by seeking out information on their own, social media activism, collage-making, and poetry writing, they often were met with punishment and resistance—pushing them sometimes into silence and sometimes into more subversive forms of expression. These students enacted literacies that aligned with the ideological model, but because they did so in ways that questioned normative beliefs, their practices were not valued. While teachers and students may hold broader conceptions of literacy,
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when the system of school rejects these practices, students and teachers face resistance and limitations.

**Embodied Literacies**

The discussion of student literacies often involved references to embodiment and the role our bodies play in reading, writing, and communication. Therefore, in considering conceptions of literacy in schools, it is important to take note of the research regarding both reading and controlling bodies. Studies focused on literacy and the body emerged in the 1990s. Through the lens of poststructural feminism and critical linguistics, Kamler (1997) “examine[d] educational genres as both embodied practice and textual practice” (p. 371). This body of work expanded the definition of text to include our bodies as visual texts and examined the literacies of reading our own bodies and the bodies of others (Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Jones, 2013; Kamler, 1997). Scholars interested in embodied literacies addressed the manifestation of thoughts and emotions in our bodies as we interact with text (Ghiso, 2015; Jones, 2013; Kamler, 1997; King, 2019). In educational contexts, they also looked at the ways in which bodies are policed and subjugated in schools through dominant understandings of what it looks like to read, write, and communicate well or appropriately (Ghiso, 2015; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Jones, 2013; Kamler, 1997).

**Reading Bodies.** Several studies addressed the lack of attention to reading, writing, and communication as physical acts. King (2019) argued that as we talk to students about the practices that support them as readers and writers, we can’t separate the corporeal from the material—the thought from the body. King pointed out that when students report something like “I need to find a quiet area to do my work” or “I have begun to highlight as I read as well as turning off my phone” we see that the act of reading is one of the body as well as the mind (p. 96). Yet, instruction found in textbooks often approaches reading and writing as disembodied
exploring teachers’ lived literacies

acts. This is the case not only for the composition textbooks about which King (2019) wrote but also for texts commonly used to instruct preservice and novice teachers on literacy practices. Works on cross-curricular literacy development like Daniels and Zemelman’s (2014) *Subjects matter: Every teacher’s guide to content area reading*, Gallagher and Kittle’s (2018) *180 Days*, or *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies that work* by Fisher and Frey (2023) offer chapters on literacy practices, skills, and strategies, but do not attend to the corporeal component of the strategies and literacy tools provided. Feminist approaches to literacy, on the other hand, “emphasize the body as a way of knowing” (King, 2019, p. 97) and call us to consider that “literacies and bodies are inextricably linked” (Jones, 2013, p. 525). Studies such as these pushed for educators to ask what it means when we tell students to *pay attention* as they read and to look at what happens in the body as one pays attention. Research on embodiment asked: what does it feel like as we make the decision to underline or highlight something? What does that physical act add to the process of reading? How do we feel physically as emotions arise while reading and writing? (Ghiso, 2015; Kamler, 1997; King, 2019). While New Literacy Studies and critical literacies call attention to the processes of the mind, feminist literacy adds our mind-body connection as we interact with texts (both digital and print) in order to make meaning in a social context and through the lens of our own lived experiences.

**Controlling Bodies.** While some studies focused on students reading their own bodies as part of their literacy practices, others examined how student bodies were read, and sometimes controlled, within schools. These studies consistently addressed how certain physical actions are associated with effective reading strategies, and also addressed the ways bodies are read through the lenses of race, gender, and other aspects of identity (Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Kamler, 1997; King, 2019).
Kamler (1997) examined morning talk sessions in primary school and asserted that these sessions “initiate[d] and position[ed] novice students as gendered subjects in their new school community” (p. 373). During morning talk, the teacher communicated lists of rules for students to follow and offered an evaluation of how well or poorly they used their bodies to show that they were ready to learn. These bodily rules included instructions on how children should sit, where they should keep their hands, and what their eyes and mouths should be doing. For example, teacher Mrs. T, a participant in Kamler’s study, might say something like “Can I have your eyes” or “I want to see all those legs crossed” (p. 374). Mrs. T also gave feedback such as, “Con could you sit up nicely please” and “Karen I like the way you're sitting up there beautifully with your hand up” (pp. 374-375). In her analysis of interactions like this one, Kamler pointed out that the girls were often praised for sitting while the boys were acknowledged for not sitting. She explained, “this does not mean that there are not also girls transgressing or boys complying. It does mean that such actions were often not seen/read/spoken or named in the teacher discourse” (p. 375). Kamler’s (1997) feminist analysis foregrounded the patriarchal school rules that reinforced gender binaries. She noted that “the teacher gaze itself is constituted within the male-female dualisms and what is seen and named is always partial” (Kamler, 1997, p. 375). Thus, whether students were read as capable learners was tied to their ability to position their bodies in a particular way.

Hughes-Decatur (2011) referred to rules like the ones mentioned in Kamler (1997) as the “grammar of the body” and added that docile bodies were often praised while bodies that did not meet the set criteria were disciplined. She argued that we read bodies as a text—socioculturally and through the lens of our own experience. We are taught:
how to talk, walk, sit, stand, gesture, eat, not eat, pray, love, dress, laugh, muscle up, slim down, clear away: to be better, to be enough . . . [and] these cultural practices that chip away at our bodies . . . disciplining them to read our own and others’ bodies accordingly [and] are transmitted through various popular culture mediums, teaching us all day, every day, that our bodies are broken and in need of repair in order to be more. (Hughes-Decatur, 2011, p. 77)

King (2019) added to this discussion by directly addressing “normate-oriented” expectations of readers that influence the ways in which teachers evaluate students’ literacy practices. Thus, when students’ bodies are read this way in school, the feedback they receive from adults or peers may influence their experience as learners. If bodies are policed and students are subsequently silenced in the name of obedience and conformity, then there is potential for conflict between the expectations of the classroom and the reading, writing, and communicating students can engage in.

Summary

Much of the literacy research related to ideological conceptions of literacy focused on preservice and novice teachers developing the literacy pedagogies they would bring into their classrooms. These studies involved teacher educators modeling feminist, critical, and sociocultural approaches to literacy education, and engaged teacher candidates in reflection on their own schooling to create opportunities for their understanding of literacy to shift and grow. Research on literacy practices in K–12 environments reinforced the tension between the ideological model and policies grounded in skills-based conceptions of literacy. Researchers in university and K–12 settings showed both the potential for ideological conceptions of literacy to take hold and create opportunities to challenge deficit views of students’ modes of reading,
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writing, and communication. The concept of boundary (or border) crossing—which also
involved Thirdspaces and funds of knowledge—was interwoven throughout several of the
studies included in this review as researchers discussed the interplay between individuals’ lived
experiences and their participation in schools and classrooms. However, discussions of boundary
crossing and lived experiences focused primarily on leveraging students’ experiential or outside-
school knowledge, and examined the ways in which these funds of knowledge were interpreted
in their school environments. Studies that delved into adults’ experiential knowledge did so in the
context of undergraduate and graduate teacher education courses, and there was little research on
conceptions of literacy that examined what boundary crossing looked like for practicing teachers
with experience in the field. Although there is a significant body of research in the field of
literacy studies, there is an opening to examine teachers “doing their thing” (Knobel &
Lankshear, 2014, p. 99) in various social contexts in order to see if the ways they conceptualize
and enact literacy in their out-of-school lives crosses the boundary into their in-school contexts.
This study was conducted using qualitative methodologies. As noted by Moll et al. (1992), a qualitative approach to the study of literacy practices “offers a range of methodological alternatives that can fathom the array of cultural and intellectual resources” participants will bring to our work together (p. 132). In a qualitative study of teachers’ conceptions of literacy, my primary objective was not to discern how much teachers are reading and writing with students, but to examine what they thought about literacy practices in their own lives as well as in their teaching. I conducted this examination through portraiture, a method of narrative inquiry developed by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis to “capture the complexity and aesthetic of human nature” and “trace the connection between individual personality and organizational culture” (Lightfoot, 2005, pp. 5–6). This method of inquiry aligns with my feminist new literacies framework, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) claimed portraitists work to understand human experience within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, and value the lived experiences the participants and researchers bring into each part of a given study. This methodology was initially conceived of in order to “document the culture of schools, the life stories of individuals, and the relationships among families, communities, and schools” and through this work, portraitists are pushed to do boundary crossing work—to connect with an audience that extends outside of the walls of the academy and to move beyond deficit models of research that seek to document failure by beginning with the question “what is good and healthy here” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9). This is the spirit through which I engaged with the teachers who agreed to participate in this study. Through an exploration of their conceptions of literacy and the ways in which their lived experiences with literacy may (or may not) cross the boundary into their classrooms, I looked for “evidence of
promise and potential” that could inform future approaches to literacy in schools, while also remaining attuned to the systemic barriers the participants grappled with in their work (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9).

As a portraitist, the researcher shapes their narrative interpretation in dialogue with the participants and through close observation using multiple data sources. I used a variety of data sources to construct portraits capturing the ways in which the participants' conceptions of literacy played out in their lives and in their classrooms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This involved “intensive, holistic description and analysis” of the data associated with each of the four participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 232) as constructing a narrative portrait of each participant relied not only on examination of the data collected in classroom visits and interviews, but also on detailed description of the settings, both the larger institutional environments and the intimate settings, such as the classrooms in which visits and interviews took place (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Travis, 2020).

Through this narrative inquiry, I looked to understand teachers' experiences with literacy, as well as the way they thought about literacy as a phenomenon. From a phenomenological perspective, I was interested in participants’ lived experiences and focused on “the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 25–26). In other words, by inquiring about teachers’ direct experiences with literacy in their day-to-day lives within and outside of their classrooms, I hoped to uncover how participants thought about literacy as a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In alignment with feminist epistemologies, portraiture also left room for unfixedness and the acknowledgement that there are “no certainties in any one position” (Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 5). In “searching for what is good and healthy,” in the beliefs, practices, and experiences of the participants, I, the portraitist, also
acknowledged that “the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” and that space for complexity and vulnerability was essential to this work (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9). Rather than seeking one foundational truth regarding the right way to do literacy in schools, this work was an opportunity to deconstruct the sociocultural structures that have built existing conceptions of literacy and to consider how this plays out in our classrooms and beyond (Janks, 2010; Luke & Gore, 1992; Saint Pierre, 2000). Throughout the study, I conducted a series of interviews, visited participants during their class sessions with students, and collected artifacts and participant reflections in order to “understand social life from the perspective of participants” and highlight their experiences as expressed in their own words (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 146). In the following sections, I have provided a detailed description of the context and setting for the study. I also outlined the participant selection process and presented detailed descriptions of my relationships with the three participants: Albert, Jane, and Sebastian. The literacy stories of these three individuals are set within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, which must be understood for their portraits to be fully realized (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Travis, 2020). This chapter concludes with explanations of my data collection process and the methods of analysis that I employed to address my research questions.

**Research Context and Setting**

The study took place in a county-wide technical high school (or magnet school) in the northeastern United States—a district in which I currently teach. Although this county is typically thought of as affluent, the demographics of the four secondary schools in this county-wide school district range in diversity as related to race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. The district’s approximately 2,000 students have applied and been accepted into one of these four
high schools based on their interest in technical areas including, but not limited to, traditional vocational trades such as building and carpentry, automotive, animal care, and cosmetology, as well as specialized fields in humanities and sciences including: law, media production, theater and dance, medical science technology, and engineering. The “major” focused environments of these technical high schools place additional emphasis on college and career readiness and real-world preparation; a focus that affects not only the students who learn in these schools but also the faculty and staff who design and implement the curriculum.

In creating a clear picture of this setting, it is relevant to note that two of the schools in this district, STEM High and Humanities High are ranked among the top ten schools in their state due, in part, to student scores on standardized tests, particularly the SAT, that are well above the state average score of 1080 (2023 Best U.S. Schools). A third high school in the district, Engineering High, maintains average to slightly above average test scores and offers a variety of advanced placement courses (2023 Best U.S. Schools). However, a fourth school, Tech High, which focuses primarily on traditional vocational areas of specialization and serves the largest population of students of color and students with disabilities in the district, reports scores that are below state averages and, despite a high graduation rate and other measures of student success, has been consistently left off of the U.S. News and World Report’s school rankings list (2023 Best U.S. Schools). I acknowledge the hierarchical nature of words like rank and ranking and use them here to demonstrate the ways in which such rankings are complicit in perpetuating potentially harmful, deficit views regarding students and their engagement in the learning process. The standardized tests used to determine such rankings rely on the skills-based model of literacy to make determinations about students’ college and career readiness and to assess not only teachers’ effectiveness but the effectiveness of schools as a whole through their
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students’ scores. For these reasons, the demographic makeup of this district, as well as the differences in their perceived levels of success—based on state and national school rankings—made for an especially interesting environment in which to study teachers’ experiences with literacy in their personal and professional lives.

Research Participants

This study focused on three participants from Tech High, one of the secondary schools in the northeastern United States described in the previous section. I initially planned to select participants across a variety of subject areas including, English language arts, history/social studies, mathematics, and science using purposeful sampling to bring together a group of participants who represented a variety of lived experiences that would lead to information-rich data (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the call for participants was sent out to teachers in the previously mentioned subject areas across all four high schools in our district. However, through the participant selection process, I identified three English language arts teachers with distinct life experiences and personal backgrounds, defined conceptions of literacy and literacy practices, and a marked interest in taking a closer look at the ways in which these conceptions of literacy show up in their lives and in their classrooms. The process of narrowing to these three particular participants is detailed in the following section.

Participant Selection

I began the selection process with a call for participants that was sent to faculty in the aforementioned departments across the four secondary schools in this technical school district. A brief questionnaire accompanied this call and was designed to gather potential participants’ demographic information, as well as initial responses regarding their conceptions of literacy. The questions were as follows:
1. Describe your personal understanding of the term "literacy." What does this term mean to you? What practices or actions come to mind when you think of this term?

2. What ways of teaching or teaching practices do you associate with literacy?

3. In what ways are literacy practices a part of your day-to-day life?

4. In your opinion, what contributes to successful schooling outcomes in reading and writing?

5. In your opinion, in what ways are literacy practices a part of the out-of-school lives of your students?

This tool guided me as I narrowed to the final set of participants that I interviewed and visited in order to construct the portraits detailed in the findings of this study. The data collected via this literacy questionnaire, suggested English language arts teachers’ conceptions of literacy consistently aligned with the ideological model, while responses from teachers in other subject areas—social studies, math, and science—were more varied. Of the twenty-one teachers who responded to the survey, six were currently teaching English language arts courses, and two had previously done so but had shifted to teaching social studies. The remaining respondents included: two additional social studies teachers, three math teachers, six science teachers, and two math/science teachers. While most respondents referenced reading and writing in their personal definitions of literacy and literacy practices, the three participants I chose explicitly stated that literacy goes beyond reading and writing words on a page, as reflected in Table 1 below.
### Table 1: Summary of Responses Conceptions of Literacy Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Conception of Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Literacy means more than being able to just read and write. As much as those skills are important, they are useless if students do not see their application in their daily lives. I would define the term &quot;literacy&quot; as the ability to analyze, decipher, and engage with meaning in all aspects of life. The practices and actions that come to mind when I think of &quot;literacy&quot; are the previously mentioned verbs, but also making sure that students see the connection with what they are learning in school and how it connects to their lives outside the academic environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>The approach to reading and writing. Practices that come to mind are close reading, analysis, identifying literary devices, narrative writing, and annotation. Students are constantly taking in information all day long, and I think it's important that they are able to use literacy skills to sort through that information to make sense of it and be conscious consumers of media and information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Literacy to me means the ability to decode any text, picture, video, meme, or any other information to learn and analyze.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I initially intended to select participants from multiple subject areas to examine the ways in which teachers’ conceptions of literacy may cross the boundary into their classrooms. However, review of this preliminary data revealed that the potential participants who had the greatest
interest in examining literacy practices beyond reading and writing were the respondents who identified themselves as English language arts educators. Of the twenty-two survey respondents, ten communicated that they would be interested in participating in a larger study addressing teachers’ conceptions of literacy—one math teacher, three social studies teachers, and six English language arts teachers. Continued review of the survey data indicated that English language arts teachers commonly identified nuanced ways of looking at literacy. They mentioned literacy practices that included: reading non-traditional texts, analyzing, interpreting, making personal connections, and finding real-world applications for in-school literacies. The variations in conceptions of literacy in social studies, math and science, while interesting in their own right, were beyond the scope of this study, and would offer an opportunity for additional exploration of teachers’ conceptions of literacy in future research.

With this in mind, I invited the three English language arts teachers featured in Table 1 to collaborate with me throughout the bulk of this study by allowing me to craft portraits of their conceptions of literacy. Though these participants taught the same subject area in the same school district, their personal histories, as well as their educational and teaching backgrounds represented a range of experiences, and provided reasonable input, feedback, and data to examine teachers’ conceptions of literacy and approaches to literacy in their classrooms through the construction of narrative portraits (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As a member of the school community in which the study took place, I also had to consider my insider-outsider and outsider-within status as I designed my approach to this research. Although the call for participants extended beyond my school building and was sent to individuals in multiple subject areas, each of the individuals who ultimately became the participants in this study was a colleague and friend. Working with these colleagues from Tech
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High, where I am also part of the English faculty, allowed our researcher-participant relationship to grow out of the pre-existing foundation our shared experiences and existing rapport provided. However, my added positionality as researcher rather than colleague also complicated our power dynamics, and I had to mindful to build in time these colleagues and friends to talk through their questions, concerns, or expectations as we entered into this new facet of our relationship, particularly as interviews naturally brought up conversations of work we had done together and classroom visits highlighted our shared relationships with students whom we have all taught (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the spirit of portraiture, I contextualized my existing relationship with each participant as a way to begin to write myself into the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I included a description of each of these relationships in the section that follows.

**Participant-Researcher Relationships**

Although I did not enter into this study with the plan of inviting Albert, Jane, and Sebastian to participate, when they each volunteered as part of the pool of possible participants, it was clear that there was much to learn from their knowledge and experience regarding literacy practices both in and out of school. However, I also had to reflect on my pre-existing, layered relationship with each of these teachers. As teachers, these were the individuals with whom I work most closely. Even when we are not all teaching the same courses, I collaborate, share ideas, and problem-solve with each of them, and occasionally, all four of us work together, including the spring of 2022 when we co-created a personal professional development plan around Dr. Bettina Love’s (2019) *We want to do more than just survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Although we each have different perspectives and
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experiences that we bring to the table, we share an approach to teaching that is grounded in care for students and their personal and academic growth.

The shared values and collaborative work relationships that Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I built have also led to friendship. Therefore, I was able to apply an epistemology of friendship to our work throughout this study (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Taylor & Klein, 2018; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). I prioritized the existing foundations of collaboration, care, cooperation, interwoven ideas, and space for individuals to create and share that support our relationships as colleagues and friends. As partners in teaching, we have used our mutual bonds to “promote[s] socially just initiatives for more than just ourselves at our institution but for all who are mechanized by the system” (Taylor & Klein, 2018, p. 101). As noted in the following detailed descriptions of my relationships with the participants, Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I have collectively taken actions to push for more socially just learning experiences for students, and in doing so, have supported each other through the difficulties that can come along with challenging the system in which we work. Thus, joining with Albert, Jane, and Sebastian to conduct this study was another way for us to challenge “academic, patriarchal norms of individualism and competition” understanding “that our epistemology of friendship empowers us to disrupt the institution” while shining light on the power that comes from the trust we have built with one another (Taylor & Klein, 2018, p. 101). Being in close relationships with participants did not come without challenges, and I aimed to document these nuances and tensions throughout the study as well. In the sections that follow, I introduced Albert, Jane, and Sebastian. In these sections, I outlined my personal history with each participant to help situate the study in the context of our existing professional relationships and friendships.
Albert. Albert is in his early thirties and had been teaching for nine years at the start of this study. When asked to provide his demographic information, Albert described himself as a white, heterosexual cisgender man of European descent. Professionally, Albert is an English teacher who also holds a Teacher of Students with Disabilities (TOSD) certification. I first met Albert during his interview process for his current job in our district as his demo lesson was conducted in one of my English classes. Right from our earliest email communications as he planned his demo lesson, Albert was interested in collaborating. While he could have decided on any topic for this lesson, he was eager to know what the students in my class were learning and wanted to ensure that his lesson would be relevant to them in some way. In these early interactions, he came across as someone who wanted to be part of a community of learning.

When he joined our English Department, Albert and I did not teach the same courses or grade levels, but quickly developed a rapport that turned into a friendship. We, along with colleagues like Jane and Sebastian, shared our pedagogical philosophies, brainstormed ways to reach out to students, and worked on expanding approaches to texts throughout our English curriculum. When Albert agreed to be a part of this study, he worked solely in eleventh grade classes. He taught four sections of English that were designed to offer a small group experience to students who may need additional support as readers and writers. He also co-taught one class with Sebastian to ensure students in a larger grouping had access to individualized attention from teachers.

This was the role Albert was in when I conducted our initial interview and class visit in the Spring of 2022, and this seemed like a relatively uncomplicated relationship for us to navigate throughout the study. We were colleagues and friends who collaborated, but did not teach the same courses. However, in the summer of 2022, we learned that Albert’s schedule for
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the 2022-2023 school year would change, and that he and I would co-teach one twelfth grade class, designed as a college level writing course where students earned college credits. This was a new layer to our relationship. Now, we were colleagues, friends, teaching partners, as well as a researcher and participant engaged in the study of teachers’ conceptions of literacy. We had to take time to talk about each of these partnerships we share. As Albert and I negotiated what we wanted our co-teaching partnership to look like, we also worked through questions regarding how this partnership might affect the study. We decided together that I would use the classroom visit from the 2021-2022, and agreed that in interviews, it might be necessary and natural for him to use examples from our shared class as he talked about literacy practices in school. Throughout the study, we have returned to these discussions often. During interviews, it was common for Albert to ask, “Is it okay for me to . . .?” or “Can I . . .?” when it came to details around the work we do together with students, and I aimed to continually encourage Albert to feel in control of what he chose to share or not share. Ultimately, this opportunity to work together in the classroom and in this researcher-participant capacity strengthened the depth of our collaboration as teachers and our pre-existing relationship invited vulnerability into our interview sessions that may have taken much longer to build if Albert and I were not friends who already work together closely at the start of the study.

 Jane. Jane is a petite and energetic woman who was in her late twenties at the time of this study. She described herself as a white, heterosexual cisgender female who had been teaching for six years when we started this research. In addition to her bachelor’s degree in K-12 education, Jane completed a master’s in literacy three years ago and hopes to eventually collaborate with teachers as they develop their literacy practices with students. Jane is a powerhouse as a teacher. She is passionate, kind, and assertive. She is dedicated to her students’
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well-being and holds them to high expectations, consistently encouraging them that they can
meet the challenges that may be presented. When Jane and I began working together, we both
taught ninth grade and twelfth grade English. She was an early career teacher, and I had just
joined our suburban district after teaching for ten years in an all-girls’ school in a nearby city.
Although I had more years of teaching experience, I had much to learn from Jane, particularly
when it came to acclimating to this different work environment. She was a friendly and
welcoming presence through a transition I found to be quite difficult, and I was drawn to
opportunities to work more closely with her. We found a reciprocity in our collegial relationship.
As time passed, we teamed up to push for changes to the ninth and twelfth grade curriculum and
worked together to create approaches to texts that would invite students to make deeper
connections to their own lives.

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified our relationship as both colleagues
and friends. Jane and I were desperate to figure out ways to reach out to our students across the
digital divide and through the chaotic circumstances into which we had all been thrown.
Together we struggled through the questions that arose while teaching from home, and
experimented to devise new plans to communicate with our students—to connect with them and
provide spaces for them to connect with each other. Jane and I went from teachers with similar
schedules who enjoyed working together to full-on partners in teaching. While we never co-teach
classes, we plan everything as a team, and entrust each other with ideas to try out with our
students. Although I am older and she had been in our district longer, our relationship was not
hierarchical in nature, but an exercise in power sharing. Sometimes that power sharing happened
naturally, and at other times we felt concerned about stepping on one another’s toes, but our
relationship was grounded in our ability to communicate about our concerns and needs (Klein &
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Taylor, 2023). Jane tended to take the lead on the ninth grade curriculum while I did the same with the twelfth grade materials. However, there were no hard boundaries around who owned which project. We lived in shared documents—quite literally finishing each other’s sentences and leaning on one another’s creativity and pedagogical philosophies as we planned. We debriefed daily by text or dropping by one another’s classroom. Our conversations often centered around questions like: What worked? What didn’t work? What can we adapt? How are our students responding? And, there is no doubt my teaching has been enriched by the experience of partnering with Jane.

As with Albert, our already close and collaborative relationship allowed Jane and me to dive right into interviews and class visits. In similar fashion, we also had to navigate that relationship as we talked about the study. Because of the manner in which Jane and I work together, when she spoke about her teaching in our interviews, she often pulled examples that were born out of our collaboration. At times, we had to acknowledge that I already—at least partially—knew how she would respond to questions that I asked about literacy practices. However, we also quickly learned that by discussing these ideas in the context of our interviews, new details of her experience were revealed. Throughout the research process, I had to make sure to continue to ask what may have seemed like obvious questions given our relationship because there were deeper layers through which we could explore Jane’s conceptions of literacy.

Sebastian. Sebastian described himself as a queer\(^2\), cisgender, Hispanic man. He was in his mid-thirties at the time of this study and had been teaching for nearly ten years. Sebastian and I started teaching in our current positions at the same time. We met at teacher orientation and

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\(^2\) Sebastian wanted to note his preference for the term queer saying, “I like the term queer because I am different and I’m proud of that. I am a gay man, but I also prefer queer because it shows more solidarity with my LGBTQ+ family” (Follow-Up Reflection, August 2023).
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were drawn together during our first year in this new environment. We had each come from different schools and had to navigate a new terrain. Although we did not teach any of the same courses, we both had ideas that we wanted to bring to the table with our new colleagues. Each time Sebastian offered to share materials with the department or made suggestions about writing strategies or new texts that might diversify our curriculum, I felt a kinship with him. I saw my own desires for change in his. Administrators noticed this as well, and asked us to team up with teachers from another department to engage in a long-term cross-curricular writing initiative. It was through that project that Sebastian and I began to bond. Through collaborating on writing lessons to share with other teachers, creating a style guide for students, and co-facilitating professional development sessions for peers in our district, we became friends. Our lives have become deeply intertwined. We work together and enjoy music together. We befriended each other’s partners. We check in on each other in difficult times both in school and out, and we support each other’s professional and personal aspirations.

While my pre-existing relationship with Albert and Jane quickly opened the door to vulnerable sharing as we entered into this study, the waters were muddier with Sebastian. Because of the closeness of our friendship and our intense desire to support one another’s endeavors, Sebastian was primarily concerned about making sure I got what I needed from our interviews and class visits. For example, as we arranged for me to sit in on one of his classes, he was nervous about choosing when I should come in. He asked what I wanted to see, and my initial response that I was happy to come into any lesson he invited me to (barring a test session) was too open-ended to quell his concerns about which class to choose. He had been a shoulder to lean on throughout nearly four years of doctoral work, and understood—perhaps more than anyone else we worked with—the importance of this study. As a friend, I was moved by
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Sebastian’s level of care. As a researcher, I needed to impress upon him that just by agreeing to participate in the study, he was already supporting me. Furthermore, I emphasized that he could be of the greatest assistance by worrying about me as little as possible throughout our journey as researcher and participant. As we talked through this, I realized that providing clearer parameters for classroom visits and interviews could put Sebastian at ease. I asked to come to lessons that he saw as opportunities for me to see students engaging in literacy practices. Before recording our initial interview, we spent some time together just chatting as friends, and prior to hitting record, we talked through what I was hoping to learn from the study. This gave me a chance to reinforce that I was not looking for any specific right answers from participants but hoped to learn from their experiences in their lives inside and outside of the classroom.

As a feminist researcher whose work is grounded in collaboration, negotiation, care, and vulnerability, I see my relationships with Albert, Jane, and Sebastian as a gift. Working with them meant I could focus on coming together to define and negotiate our newfound researcher-participant relationships rather than constructing a barrier between myself and the study’s participants in the name of objectivity (Ahmed, 2017; Fleckenstein, 1999; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Klein & Taylor, 2023). Acknowledging not only our working partnerships but also our friendships throughout the study created space for us to address their concerns and questions. I entered into this experience intent on tending to our friendships throughout the research process (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Taylor & Klein, 2018). I knew the stresses in their lives, the time constraints they were navigating, the pressures from work and home—and they knew mine. This knowledge informed when and how and how much they participated in the study. Bringing our friendships into this research was an anti-patriarchal act of subversion as it challenged notions of hierarchy and objectivity. By bringing our friendships into the study, we were able to, as Taylor
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and Klein (2018) suggested, *change time* and *engage as full humans* by pushing back against the “hamster wheel” of academic life, leaving room for each other to have bad days, need to reschedule, or share personal news or vent a disappointment before diving into an interview. I learned through our work that “Together, we have the strength and determination to challenge the patriarchal structures and epistemology of the university” (Taylor & Klein, 2018, p. 111). Although Taylor and Klein (2018) wrote this in reference to their collaborative writing, I was able to resist patriarchal academic structures in the development of the study because of the strength our friendships afforded me and the vulnerability with which Albert, Jane, and Sebastian were willing to enter into this work.

**Data Sources and Collection**

The primary data sources used for this study included: three audio-recorded interviews of each participant and two-three classroom visits[^3], the term I will be using in place of observations, over the course of a year. During this period, I also collected document data, such as email correspondence, classroom artifacts, and participant reflections. Each of these was described in turn below. Throughout the research process, I also kept a research journal as part of what Saldaña (2016) described as the process of reflection and refraction. This journal was a space to “[write] about the problematic, the ambiguous, and the complex . . . as a heuristic that may lead deeper awareness of the multifaceted social world, and as an initiating tactic to refocus the blurry” (p. 54). Follow-up reflections in multiple forms (audio recordings, writing, and one-on-one discussions) were conducted later in the study as member checking in order to add to the trustworthiness of my findings (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Data Source 1: Semi-structured Interviews**

[^3]: I conducted one classroom visit with Albert due to the aforementioned scheduling change for the 2022-2023 school year that paired us as co-teachers.
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Exploration of the research question for this study required data in the form of participants’ personal experiences. As a qualitative researcher, I valued “people's subjective experiences and how people attribute meaning to their own lives and within a broader context,” and interviews created the opportunity for participants to share “rich descriptions of social life and exploration of phenomena”—specifically, experiences around literacy—not merely as teachers, but in facets of their lives both in and out of the classroom; both current and from the past (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 137). Therefore, interviewing was a method of data collection for this study because it provided the opportunity to gain insights into individuals’ unique perspectives on the subject being studied—in this case, teachers’ conceptions of literacy across varied sociocultural contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The aim of these in-depth, semi-structured interviews was to collect involved descriptions, stories, and examples from a small group of participants so that the data included a varied set of lived experiences through which the research question can be explored (Leavy & Harris, 2019). To conduct these interviews, I prepared open-ended interview questions as a starting point, but also wove in probing questions like Can you tell me more about that? or Do you have a story about that? as opportunities to access more detailed descriptions as they arose (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first interview with each participant focused primarily on teachers’ conceptions of literacy outside of the context of their own teaching, as well literacy practices in schools and in their own teaching. Questions for subsequent interviews built on topics we broached in the initial interview, and were also generated to allow for discussion of pertinent moments from my visits to their classes.

The interview questions, a sampling of which have been provided in Table 2, were designed to prompt conversation between myself (the researcher) and the participants around
topics that were grounded in my research question and the study’s purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Table 2: Sample Interview Questions**

| Interview 1: Conceptions of Literacy | When you think of the word “literacy” what comes to mind?  
Growing up, did you see yourself as a reader? As a writer?  
What were reading/writing like for you in your early schooling?  
Where do you think your ideas about what we mean by “literacy” come from?  
Did your teacher education program involve any specific classes that dealt with literacy or with teaching reading/writing in your subject area?  
   If yes — What was that like? Did you bring anything from that course (those courses) into your teaching?  
   If no — Did anything in your experience in your bachelor’s [or master’s] programs influence your approach to literacy in the classroom as a teacher?  
In what ways does “literacy” show up in your classroom? Does it show up in any other way beyond reading and writing? |
| Interview 2-3: Reflections on Class Visits | What literacy practices did you notice in the lesson(s) I observed?  
Can you tell me about a recent experience in your classroom that centered around literacy?  
Can you tell me more about [a particular moment from the observation]?  
Is there anything that you’ve thought about from our previous sessions that you want to share or expand on? |

These interviews were conducted in person in locations chosen by the research participants—most often in their classrooms. While the questions above offered a useful jumping off point, I followed the participants’ lead when unexpected topics of interest arose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, I also had to be mindful to “keep focused on the research questions” and “be vigilant in underscoring the central themes of the inquiry” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Audio recordings of the interviews were collected and transcribed for later analysis with the participants’ permission.

**Data Source 2: Class Visits**

Along with interviews, I also visited participants’ classrooms during lessons twice for the opportunity to see firsthand the ways in which literacy was enacted in their lessons. While interviews created opportunities for participants to share narrative explanations of their lived literacies, “observation makes it possible to record behavior as it is happening” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139) and to examine those behaviors in more detail through further interviews and participant reflections. For the purpose of this study, I used the term *visits* in place of *observations*. This decision was made in conjunction with the research participants in order to shift our thinking away from the preconceived notions and concerns that are tied to the word *observations* in the context of schools and teaching.

These visits and the collection of related artifacts, including lesson plans, materials, and student work, offered insights into participants’ classroom literacy practices with students. As an outsider looking in, my time in participants’ classrooms afforded me the opportunity to look beyond what participants brought up in an interview setting, thus creating further chances to work together to understand literacy in their classroom later in the interview process (see Table 2 for sample interview questions). These visits were intended to be non-participatory observations where I acted as an observer participant. Rather than taking on an active membership role with the participants and their students, my primary focus was to listen, watch, and craft detailed descriptions of their class communities (Leavy & Harris, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, my role as a colleague working in the same English department as each of the participants, at times, made it difficult for me to maintain a completely non-participatory role in
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their classrooms. Their students knew me, and on occasion tried to engage me in their group conversations. In Albert’s classroom, for example, a boy asked about the Shakespeare lessons he had seen my ninth grade class working on. Concerned that I might distract from Albert’s plans, I responded to the student’s question by making a connection back to the novel his class was studying in an attempt to use my interjection to guide the student back to the lesson at hand. Additionally, my first visit in one of Jane’s twelfth grade classes involved a lesson she and I created together. When a student asked a question about the myth they were studying, Jane responded and invited me to add on to what she had said, thus briefly shifting me from observer-participant to a more active role of participant-observer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Despite infrequent deviations from my planned role as observer-participant, these visits allowed me to pay particular attention to the people involved in the class community, their conversations, interactions, class activities, and the physical environment. While my audio recordings captured the verbal interactions in the classroom, I used my time in these spaces to write detailed, narrative field notes describing the look of the classroom, as well as the ways students interacted with one another, the teachers in the room, and the space. I also reflected on whether what happened or did not happen in the classroom fit with what I expected prior to the visit and how my own presence and behavior may have affected the scene I observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As part of the post-observation reflection process, I debriefed with participants so we could each share our impressions of the lesson. This also acted as a form of member checking, as participants were able to comment on the accuracy of initial write-up on the visited class (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each visit was audio-recorded and transcribed. For the class visits, I drew on the transcribing methods typically associated with classroom discourse analysis, particularly the work of Cazden (2001) and Rhymes (2016); aiming to capture the overlapping
nature of conversational dialogue. Thus, I used the following transcription conventions to replicate participants’ speech patterns. I noted sudden stops in speech using — at the end of the final word an utterance. Words and phrases with added vocal emphasis were shown in *italics*, and overlapping utterances were represented as shown in the example below:

**Alex:** See, that’s the thing,  
**Alex:** Yeah, yeah.  
**Jordan:** No, I just be myself.  
**I will happily just put in**  
**my headphones and listen to music . . .**  
**Jordan:** If you don’t like me, I’m not gonna sit here, I’m not gonna sit here tryin’ to be, like, a different person, you know.

I pulled this brief dialogue from Albert’s portrait in chapter 4. Here, students Alex and Jordan speak simultaneously building on each other’s points. Their first lines were said at the same time, but Alex’s “yeah, yeah” indicated he heard Jordan’s comment “No, I just be myself” and wanted to add onto it. However, as Alex added on (as shown in the left-hand column), Jordan continued to explain why he chooses to just be himself. The classroom discourse analysis transcription methods enhanced these classroom-based sections of each portrait by replicating the rhythm of the students’ and teachers’ language-in-use (Cazden, 2001; Rymes, 2016).

I analyzed these transcriptions in conjunction with my field notes to document my impressions during the observation and describe the physical setting. These notes will also include reflective comments like initial hunches, questions, feelings, and reactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Data Source 3: Document Data**

In addition to the interviews and observations, I collected document data, including artifacts, from participants. These physical objects related to the study, such as email
correspondence, literacy-based lesson plans, or personal items related to participants' literacy stories, provided additional insights into the participants' conceptions of literacy and their lived experiences as readers, writers, and communicators both in their personal and professional lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To capture participants' stories and experiences beyond the interviews and observations, I also invited participants to write and/or record reflections throughout the research process. As with my own feminist reflective process, which I will capture in my research journal, participants’ reflections acted as a space to search for meaning as contradictions, questions, and uncertainties arose (Coia & Taylor, 2017). These documents and artifacts also served as further topics of discussion throughout the interview process, and added to the pool of data used to construct Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s portraits. Each of the aforementioned data sources is summarized in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Data Collection Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviews</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Three 60-minute interviews per participant conducted over the course of one semester of the school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One focus group/group interview.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Throughout my data analysis, I aimed to resist the patriarchal tendency “towards pathology and suggesting remedies” by asking “what is happening?” rather than “what is wrong?” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I took an iterative approach to analyzing the data collected throughout this study as I focused on the *goodness* that could be found in the
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interviews, visits, and artifacts Albert, Jane, and Sebastian shared. Portraitists focus on goodness not to ignore flaws, but to “allow for the expression of vulnerability, weakness, prejudice, and anxiety—characteristics possessed to some extent by all human beings, and qualities best expressed in counterpoints with actors’ strengths” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis; 1997, p. 141). Therefore, as I analyzed the data collected from Albert, Jane, and Sebastian, I also looked for opportunities for us to delve more deeply into imperfections and tensions that arose.

As previously noted, all interviews and class visits were audio-recorded and transcribed. Preliminary data analysis was conducted throughout the interview process using analytic memos, which portraitists also refer to as impressionistic records, allowing me to use writing as a means through which to think through the data, and informing the question design for later interviews (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Saldaña, 2016). Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) recommended this method of analysis to “become increasingly focused and discerning in our work” encouraging the “development and dialogue of ideas and the convergence of phenomena” (p. 188). Additionally, these impressionistic records helped to indicate when we were approaching a point of saturation or redundancy “by hearing the same responses to interview questions…[with] no new insights forthcoming” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101). Through memo writing, I was able to record my initial impressions and emerging interpretations, which guided my planning for subsequent interviews, class visit, requests for artifacts, and member checking (Leavy & Harris, 2019).

Because this study centered the participants’ personal conceptions of literacies, I used in vivo coding for the initial analysis of the interview and observation transcriptions in order to look at participants' specific words for a “heightened awareness of [their] unique circumstances” regarding literacy practices in their day-to-day lives, their own schooling, and in their teaching
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(Saldaña, 2016, p. 73). During this phase, I also used open coding to analyze document data such as lesson plans and personal artifacts related to participants’ literacy history, participant reflections, and my researcher journal. Open coding, sometimes referred to as initial coding, was a means through which I could “break down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examine them, and compare them for similarities and differences” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115). In subsequent rounds of analysis, I went back through the data using values coding as this was particularly useful constructing narrative portraits where researchers may need to assess the interplay between participants' stated attitudes, values, and beliefs.

My data analysis was directed by concepts tied to my research questions, including but not limited to: conceptions of literacy and their observed actions reading and texts, funds of knowledge, literacy as social practice, and boundary crossing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Following the portraiture model of Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), I used guiding questions to “draw out the patterns and refrains” that would aid in the construction of these narratives (p. 185). Although the guiding questions were specifically tailored to each participant, they consistently included the questions shown in Table 4 below.
Table 4: Guiding Questions for Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Class Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What experiences were foundational to participants’ view of literacy?</td>
<td>• What literacy practices from the participants’ conceptions of literacy are present in the lesson?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What words/ phrases do participants use to describe literacy in their own lives? In school?</td>
<td>• In what ways (if any) do participants take opportunities for students to see they are already doing literacy in their day-to-day lives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What actions come up when participants describe literacy practices?</td>
<td>• What types of questions do participants ask students throughout the lesson?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What comes up when they talk about their students’ literacy practices? In the classroom? Out of the classroom?</td>
<td>• What actions do students take throughout the lesson (either on their own or through prompting from the teacher)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What literacy practices from the participants’ conceptions of literacy are present in these artifacts?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do the artifacts in any way trouble or conflict with the participants’ stated beliefs around literacy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do the artifacts reveal about participants’ experiences with literacy in their lives and in their classrooms?</td>
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Throughout each round of analysis, I used these questions to develop “the emerging map of what is happening and why” in the stories of these participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186). I continued to develop my impressionistic records, which helped me to document my “impressions, ideas, and emerging understandings” of participants' conceptions of literacy and the ways in which these conceptions are (or are not) cross the boundary between their personal lives and their classrooms. (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 157).
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Drawing on methods consistent with portraiture, I used the aforementioned process to conduct both *within portrait* and *cross portrait* analysis. The *within portrait* data analysis focused on identifying the themes that emerged from analyzing and developing a written portrait of the individual participants' conceptions of literacy and literacy practices (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, I used these portraits to examine the themes that emerged from across the data, with attention to the similarities and variations across the narratives (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focusing on multiple portraits also enhanced both the trustworthiness and generalizability of the study by looking at a range of responses to a phenomenon, in this case, literacy practices, in the context of real-world situations (Merriam, 1998).

**Trustworthiness**

In establishing credibility for the findings in this study, I want to acknowledge my pre-existing beliefs and experiences regarding literacy practices and education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I am an English language arts teacher with a personal passion for storytelling. My conception of literacy aligns with the ideological model, and I see the phenomenon of literacy as a socioculturally constructed set of practices in which people engage in order to read, write, create, and communicate (Gee, 2015a, Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Street, 2011, 2016). My research journal acted as a space for reflexivity where I enacted “a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of [my] positionality” specifically in regards to my personal experiences, beliefs, and ideological stances around literacy (Berger, 2013, p. 221). Through this process, I considered my “own reactions to respondents and to the way in which the research account was constructed” in order to monitor how these impressions may have affected the outcomes of this research. I also “sketch[ed] [myself] into the context . . .
making [my] presence explicit by continually reflecting on the way my voice—my assumptions, chosen framework, questions, narrative style—shaped the portraits I constructed with my participants” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 50).

Member-checking (referred to in chapter 4 as follow-up sessions and reflections), triangulation, and peer examination were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the data analysis process, participants were asked to take part in member checking where they had the opportunity to provide feedback on some of the preliminary findings in order to assess whether the analysis “rings true” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I began by asking each participant to take part in at least one debriefing session where they shared feedback on emerging findings, as well as on their experience as a participant in this project. However, as the project developed, the participants engaged in multiple member-checks including follow up conversations, audio recorded reflections, and written reflections. Additionally, we collaborated on the construction of their definitions of literacy and co-analyzed the artifacts they provided for the study. I used feedback from these sessions to inform continued data analysis and make modifications to the project, as needed (Leavy & Harris, 2019). The multiple data sources for this study—interviews, class visits (observations), document data, and reflections—allowed for “comparing and cross-checking the data” across these different data points (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). To strengthen the credibility of my data analysis, I also regularly consulted critical friends to review pieces of the data, offer their perspectives, and to compare our interpretations of the participants’ stories.

Throughout this chapter, I detailed the choices I made throughout the research process including my participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods. To establish
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trustworthiness, I provided accounts of my pre-existing relationship with each participant, explained the triangulation of data sources, and addressed the multiple forms of member checking Albert, Jane, and Sebastian took part in. Chapter four features the stories of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian which grew out of this data. The chapter is broken into three major sections featuring each participants’ portrait. All three portraits include the following parts: 1) a description of the participant’s classroom to establish the setting, 2) participant’s literacy history, 3) defining participant’s conception of literacy, 4) participants sharing literacy with students, 5) school-based conceptions of literacy, and 6) navigating the tensions of in-school literacies. However, the content of these sections is tailored to each participant’s individual story in the context of their personal conceptions of literacy.
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Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter is organized into detailed portraits of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian. I began by reiterating the role of boundary crossing in the study—both the expected boundary crossing as personal literacies crossed the threshold into the classroom and the less expected boundary crossing as my friendship with each participant made its way into the research. After this introduction, I detailed each participant portrait. Rather than aiming to move chronologically through these descriptions, I considered how participants’ experiences related to their core conceptions of literacy, and wove together parts of their stories to illuminate their personal literacies. As noted in chapter three, while each portrait consists of the same six parts, they have been tailored to the participants’ individual stories; stories that included examination of the ways in which Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s conceptions of literacy did and did not mesh with the school settings in which we worked.

When I embarked upon this exploration of teachers’ conceptions of literacy in their lives and classroom, I was drawn to the idea of boundary crossing. I wondered, in what ways, if any, did teachers consciously see literacy practices in both their in-school and out-of-school lives? Did teachers’ conceptions of literacy in their lives differ from the ways in which they conceptualized school literacies? What were their own experiences as readers, writers, communicators, and creators, and did they bring pieces of themselves from these lived experiences into their work with teenagers? What barriers, if any, did they grapple with when it comes to the ways literacy is positioned in school? And, what did they envision for their students when it comes to literacy practices in their lives in and beyond school? I wondered if the essayist definitions of literacy that are common in our schools could be made blurrier and less confining when teachers had the opportunity to reflect on the ways their personal conceptions of literacy
had been shaped. This was the type of boundary crossing I had in my mind at the start of the research process, and although my work with participants certainly delved into the intricacies and nuances involved in conceptualizing literacy, boundary crossing also took on an unexpected meaning.

In selecting participants with whom I shared close working relationships and friendships, I invited a different form of boundary crossing into the study. The lines between our working relationships, our friendships, and our work as researcher and participants were as blurry as the definitions of literacy we looked to problematize. The study popped up in personal conversations, and our collaborations as educators became examples Albert, Jane, and Sebastian used in interviews with me. Classes I visited often involved lessons we had co-planned, materials we had co-created, and students we each taught. Though our relationships were newer, like Taylor and Klein (2021), these friendships “exist[ed] at the crossroad of our personal and professional lives, and therefore [were] the ideal vehicle for meaning-making across the boundaries, messiness, and contradictions” involved in this research (p. 97). Our friendships were a part of our work together and our work often came up in our shared experiences outside of school. It would have been impossible for Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I to authentically explore their respective conceptions of literacy while compartmentalizing our friendships, working relationships, and research-participant relationships into separate boxes. That boundary had to be crossed. Thus, the emotions in which our existing relationships were rooted also crossed the boundary into the study, opening the door to vulnerability while simultaneously creating complications that needed to be consistently negotiated. At times, I received texts and emails from Albert, Jane, or Sebastian as I was analyzing data from our interviews and visits, shifting momentarily from my role as friend to my work as researcher and back again. When one
of us challenged a deficit-based statement during a meeting, another spoke up to have our back. We checked in about each other’s’ tough days and celebrated each other’s’ milestones. Occasionally, we navigated opposing viewpoints or feelings, and had to build in time to debrief before interviews and class visits related to the study. We trusted each other to boldly and compassionately make room to face the aspects of our complex and intersecting relationships that it would have been easier to ignore (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Taylor & Coia, 2020; Taylor & Klein, 2018; Taylor & Klein, 2021; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). We could do this because our care for each other was also entwined in all of our collaborations. I knew when they were stressed and they knew how important this work was to me. We had to navigate the desire to please each other versus feeling guilt over not wanting to infringe on each other’s’ busy lives. As portraitist, it was my responsibility to maintain the agreements we made as researcher and participant—making my expectations and needs clear and consistently reiterating that Albert, Jane, and Sebastian should feel free to tell me if something was not working for them so we could adjust accordingly (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

It would be easy to romanticize our relationships in the writing of these findings, but studying friends did not automatically come with ease. It was complicated. At times, I felt afraid while inviting our friendships into my work. I have long struggled with the simultaneous desires to have my voice heard and to be liked. I have often been described as unlikable when I drop the higher voice and sweet smiles I put on as a protective fortification against words like “bully,” “control-freak,” and worse. What if I said or wrote something that hurt their feelings? What if Albert or Jane or Sebastian—people who I care about and admire deeply—did not like my work or felt misrepresented in some way? These questions pushed their way into the front of my mind demanding to be examined, and when they did, I called myself back to Lacy M. Johnson’s
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(2018) talk “On Likeability,” reflecting on her words, “The truth is: sometimes I am afraid of what I write. You should be a little afraid of the story you are telling, too. And if you’re not afraid that someone won’t like it you’re still not telling the truth” (para. 19). There were many times when I felt afraid or tentative as I wrote these portraits, but if I was to do justice to Albert, Jane, and Sebastian—to trust in our friendships and respect the openness with which they had been willing to share their stories with me—I had to be willing to take the risk of writing the multiplicitous and sometimes contradictory truths that surfaced (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Johnson, 2018; Taylor & Coia, 2020; Taylor & Klein, 2018; Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

I wrote chapter with the intent of sharing portraits of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s literacy stories. My foundation in feminist new literacies pushed me to combine my own narrative writing with creative contributions from the participants in the form of essays, poems, comics, creative writing, and even a dance performance to bring their portraits to life with both words and imagery. As we explored their conceptions of literacy, we invited this multimodality in as an act of disruption, and we did so with the previously described vulnerability, collaboration, and friendship at the heart of our work.

**Portrait 1: Albert**

As previously mentioned, Albert is a white, heterosexual man of European descent in his early thirties. He is tall, bearded, and nearly always wears a dress shirt and pants to work. When I first met Albert, he came across as reserved, but I quickly learned that he has a penchant for quips and a bit of a sarcastic edge, which emerged in the opening moments of our initial interview, as I eased in with “I’m wondering, just kind of broadly, how did you end up being an English teacher?” and he replied, “[laughing] Ugh, you said, this was going to be a short interview. It’s a long answer” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 1). Responses such as these
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were sprinkled throughout our interviews, and are common in our day-to-day conversations as well. In the context of our researcher-participant discussions, these comments were most likely to pop up as Albert spoke about emotional topics, particularly when addressing the damage that the system of school can inflict on young people. The first time I asked him, “How do you think literacy is defined in school or in the system of school,” he laughed and then commented that I should include in my notes, “Albert laughed maniacally” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 16). This moment was humorous for both of us, but also signaled Albert’s dissatisfaction with the conception of literacy in schools, which he delved into quite seriously as our laughter faded. These quippy moments of deflection served as a pause for Albert to take a breath before forging into serious terrain. Albert’s humor felt like a protective barrier over the deep caring and sensitivity that lived just below the surface, qualities that were notable in the way he spoke about his childhood experiences, the educational system, his students, and the environment he aimed to create in the classroom.

Our Classroom: A Backdrop for Albert’s Literacy Story

Albert and I shared a classroom, the setting where we worked out ideas as colleagues, met together as researcher and participant, taught together every day, welcomed in students who just needed somewhere to be, and chatted as friends. Digging into what Albert brought to our shared space helped to define who Albert is as a teacher and provided clues regarding his life beyond the classroom. Taking the time to set the scene and talking to Albert about the why behind the posters, books, and other artifacts he added to our classroom was a way of crafting a rough sketch of what would grow into a clearer portrait of Albert’s literacy story—an approach I followed as I began Jane and Sebastian’s portraits as well (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Rodriguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020; Travis, 2020). Albert and I had never discussed the design
choices either of us made in our classroom, and it was possible he would say that this was all just *stuff* he had accumulated over time. It turned out, however, that Albert did have a thought process behind the displayed items and this gave shape to the way he thought about teaching and approached literacy with students.

The bulletin board and wall on his side of our room were adorned with literary paraphernalia, most notably an illustrated poster of Holden Caulfield in his reddish orange winter hat, smoking a cigarette with the smoke morphing into birds in the sky above Holden’s head.

*Figure 2: Albert’s Classroom Poster Holden Caulfield*

* Catcher in the Rye* was Albert’s favorite book, a fact he was eager to share with anyone who inquired about the poster. When pressed to explain why, Albert came back to Holden’s growth
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throughout the text. The character’s feelings of alienation and his desire to preserve the
innocence of others as he struggles with the loss of his own was a narrative to which Albert felt a
deep personal connection. Albert explained:

    I think that archetype of, like, a character who’s disillusioned and feels alienated, I can
relate to a lot . . . Holden Caulfield is certainly that character. My favorite movie in high
school was Donnie Darko. It’s that character that just kind of seems out of place, out of
time and is trying to find themselves but also grappling with . . . the guilt of not being
pure anymore. (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 21)

Through our discussions of Albert’s literacy history, I came to learn that he grappled with
feelings of isolation and loss of innocence throughout his formative years, and reference to this
can be found in Albert’s words above. Albert’s Holden Caulfield poster was one way he allowed
pieces of his life to subtly cross the boundary into the space he shared with students.

    Albert had previously mentioned that he included this poster from his favorite novel as a
way to “be personable” with students and continued by explaining, “I feel if I’m vulnerable with
my students, they might be vulnerable with me” (Albert, Follow Up Session 1, December 2022,
p. 11). In a later follow-up meeting, I asked him more directly, “When a student asks you about
your Catcher in the Rye poster, what would you hope to chat about?” Albert explained:

    My goal would be, hopefully, they would read it and give it a chance and if they don’t
like it, that’s cool. If they like it, that’s awesome too. Just to have a conversation . . . one
of my past students . . . noticed that I had that poster and they actually read the book, and
we had many conversations after school as they were reading it, so it was almost like it
became a class outside of class . . . So, it’s making it personal. About myself, but at the
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same time, kids who wish to try to make that bridge and that relationship, they can use that as a way to bond. (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 23)

The poster displayed a piece of who Albert was, not simply as a teacher but as a person, and acted as an invitation for students to share pieces of themselves as well. It also signaled his belief that books could become a part of who we are and connect us with others.

Although Albert was not well-versed in feminist pedagogy, his comments on vulnerability brought me back to hooks’ (1994) words in Teaching to transgress, “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). I read him hooks’ words, and he expressed that he tries to “take off my mask as a teacher to be like, ‘I’m a human being.’ . . . it’s important for them [students] to see us as vulnerable people” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 24). It became increasingly clear throughout the development of Albert’s portrait that he aimed to use literacy as a means through which he and his students might learn and grow together. I did not know what would be revealed when I asked him about the items he brought into our shared classroom, but the intentionality behind each piece, along with the way his personality and beliefs were embedded into those items, were a reflection of what I would learn about and see firsthand in the classroom as we explored Albert’s conception of literacy together.

Albert had also inherited a bulletin board directly behind his desk where he chose to display the items shown in Figure 3.
I was first drawn to the one featuring a drawing of Lorraine Hansberry with the quote, “Never be afraid to sit a while and think.” Spending time with Albert—interviewing him, visiting his classes, working closely with him co-teaching, and teaching many students previously taught—reinforced that Albert was not afraid to sit a while and think and genuinely hoped his students would not be either. For him, encouraging time to ponder was an opportunity to spend time with an idea without the pressure of looking for a right answer. He pointed out that making space for
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students to sit a while and think was also a way of saying, “It’s okay not to have an answer, and it’s okay to say I don’t know” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 11).

As we discussed the additions Albert had made to our room, we discovered that there was a theme to his posters—a theme he described saying, “It’s okay to wait on things” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 11). He pointed to the Ralph Waldo Emerson quote “Adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience” which was gifted to him by a previous colleague he greatly respected. He noted that this message felt similar to Hansberry’s adage on thinking, and drew my attention to a final poster with a simple depiction of William Wordsworth’s (1807) poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” which he saw as a reminder to enjoy the moment, and to reflect on those moments of enjoyment in more pensive periods. Albert found inspiration in these words, and appreciated being surrounded by lessons from writers whom he admired. He hoped that displaying these words in his classroom would be a source of inspiration and comfort for his students as well. Perhaps they would look to those words and invite in more opportunities to think without the pressure of having to be right or come up with a definitive answer. The shades of his conception of literacy—one that invited contemplation in lieu of correctness—began to emerge just by talking through the images he chose to display.

When Albert moved into our shared room, he also brought with him a sizable collection of books—everything from a set of Penguin Classics, to Marvel comics, young adult fiction, contemporary novels, and political nonfiction. While he added most of them to the space I cleared on the bookshelves in our room, he chose to display a few—notably The Odyssey and The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus. As we merged our classroom libraries, I asked Albert if there was any particular reason for the books he included in his classroom library. The class we co-teach is a survey course, and we often read excerpts from longer classical works that address
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the themes, questions, and concepts we are studying. Albert explained that he chose to display books that we have investigated in class with the hope that “They [students] might ask to take it home and read it on their own” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 9). He wanted to try out being “a little more forceful with this stuff” by putting books in students' hands for them to take home just in case they might decide to read them (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, 9). Albert wanted to encourage students to take ownership in the classroom by giving them the feeling that the things in the room were there for them to use freely as they saw fit. As we discussed Albert’s conceptions of literacy, it became clear that he wanted to share his love of language, art, and philosophy with students. On one hand, he hoped students might pick up a book from our room, read it, and discuss it with him, but on the other, the books were simply there as a discussion starter. If he was willing to show that he loved literature, poetry, and art, he might be able to dialogue with students about the texts they loved too. He wanted to be vulnerable enough to share his love of stories with students, a love that was born out of his experiences as a child.

Albert’s History: Literacy as Expression

The first lines of Albert’s portraits were drawn through exploration of our shared space as co-teachers. The next involved constructing a clear picture of how Albert grew into the approach to literacy and teaching he had come to embody. It is rare to meet someone as certain about their professional path as Albert. His journey to life as an educator began when he was still a little boy. There is a caricature—one of those boardwalk drawings—depicting Albert as a school teacher. In this image, Albert’s bespectacled, cartoon form points to a blackboard displaying the ABCs. The inspiration for this drawing was the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And, even at age five, Albert’s answer was a teacher.
Albert came from a self-described “long line of teachers.” Though he was not always certain what kind of teacher he wanted to be, he saw this profession as his calling. After working with children as part of a summer camp program, Albert found himself thinking, “I love writing and I love working with kids, how can I combine these two things? Teacher. Right” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 5). Albert “grew up in love with literature,” and as he shaped his image of his future self, he came to the realization that he wanted to share that love with others (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 2). I would learn that he had, in fact, been sharing that love
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with others from a very young age, and his foundation as a writer and creator played a significant role in the ways he constructed his personal conception of what literacy is and what it invites us to do.

**Young Albert the Comic Creator.** Although his love for working with children was discovered when he was closer to adulthood, Albert started to explore his love of writing as a way of making sense out of the world in elementary school. Albert “got into writing when [he] was in the fourth grade” as he and a close friend collaborated to write about their experiences in comic form. Albert was responsible for the words while his friend took on the illustrations, and they used these comics to make sense out of “the small world in the town in which I grew up” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 12). Albert went into further detail, saying creating comics was a way to, “Make sense out of my place in my class because I’m, you know— I liked reading. A lot of other people do not find reading enjoyable. But, it was always funny because making those comic books…” Albert paused for a moment, before saying: “People look[ed] forward to them because they were shared” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 12). Here, Albert’s story lived both in what was said and in the silences. When Albert pivoted mid-sentence, moving from “because I’m, you know” to the comment that he liked reading, which was not always a popular pastime for those around him, he seemed to hint that he felt out of place among his peers. And yet, as Albert took that silent moment, he reflected that his comics—which certainly fell into the category of something to be read—were anticipated by those very same peers from which he felt disconnected. Creating texts in partnership with his closest friend opened up the opportunity for Albert to explore his place in a community of his fellow fourth graders.

Later, when I read the actual childhood comics Albert sent me, I was struck by the title—*The Super Losers*—a detail he had not mentioned in our early interviews, and one that
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reinforced my reading of his “because I’m, you know—” pause. As I read his stories, I could
picture young Albert, pencil in hand, working out the feeling of being different from the group
while reclaiming the word “loser” for himself and his friends, and using it to transform them into
the heroes of their own stories. This was the boyhood version of the young man who would
deeply connect with Holden Caulfield’s sense of alienation and the adult teacher who hoped to
make connections with students as they forged their way toward adulthood.
Figure 5: The Super Losers Opening Panels
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The opening panels of the Super Losers depicted our bespectacled hero alone. He introduced himself to readers as a self-proclaimed “loser” before listing his super powers. Notably, intelligence is the first one—superseding both heat vision and flight. Even at nine or ten, Albert valued the ability to “sit a while and think.” Perhaps the most telling panel on this page was the final one. Four hands reached for each other in the same way members of a team might throw their hands into the middle of a circle before cheering and running into battle. This team of heroes may be facing a lurking evil that threatens the safety of the world, but in Albert’s story, while “Saving the world is not easy . . . with the help of friends, it could be” (Albert, Super Losers Opening Panels). This introduction to the wider Super Losers world reinforced the foundations of Albert’s conception of literacy as a collaborative practice through which he and his friends could make sense of the world. Though the comic had been created due to a feeling of otherness, he also noted that this was his “first glimpse of, like, sharing literacy with other people” adding “But it was my experiences, really” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 12). For Albert, literacy was a source of connection, as well as a way to work out his individual emotions and relationships in collaboration with others. He was working out feelings and relationships in an attempt to understand his inner self. By writing, drawing, and collaborating with a friend, Albert was able to express his emotions and enter into the process of becoming himself. Skills-based literacy tasks like reading and writing were part of this process, but his literacy practices were not limited to these skills alone. Instead, Albert’s childhood creative writing aligned with the ideological model of literacy and the tenets of feminist new literacies. He engaged in literacy as a social practice that was informed by his specific context—the world of a nine or ten year old elementary school boy (Gee, 2010; 2015b; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). He looked to come to a deeper understanding of himself and his place among his elementary school peers through
constructing stories of his life experiences (hooks, 1994; Coia & Taylor, 2013; Rose 2005). The medium he chose—comics—was a way for him to use his day-to-day literacies as a means of self-expression (Heath, 1983, Janks, 2010; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Rose 2005; Rosenblatt, 1994). And, he did so vulnerably, letting out feelings of anger and exclusion alongside hope and friendship and boldly sharing those feelings with classmates by passing around his work for others to enjoy.

So much of the Albert I know today was represented in his comics, drawings, and writing. The works he shared embodied his simultaneous vulnerability, compassion, and self-deprecating deflections. Much of the writing Albert shared with me was packed with emotion. As our discussions of his stint as a comic creator continued, Albert told me that sometimes in his stories, he was “expressing rage” and other emotions he felt at the time (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 13). The little boy who felt like an outsider wrote and shared comics about the power of intellect and friendship. The young man who sometimes felt “too smart for his own good” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 12) briefly toyed with a character called Mr. Know It All to recapture his youthful mode of self-expression while also working out skepticism about his intelligence’s ability to do good, explaining that when he looked at this drawing now, he saw it as a self-deprecating attempt to examine a part of himself he saw as a flaw. There was a throughline in all of the drawings and writing Albert shared. He looked for himself in the drawings, the words, and the worlds he created, a method of self-exploration and emotional release that made its way into his adult life as well.

**Albert the Poet.** When Albert got older, his writing interest shifted from comics to poetry, and the content of his writing continued to explore his personal experiences, relationships with others, and sense of his place in the world. Early in his teaching career, Albert led a poetry
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club, which brought him back to his writing roots. He told me that writing with students led him
to fall in love with writing poetry again (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, pp. 13-
14). He was deeply inspired by the students in that group, even reciting a short poem from
memory called “Sleeves” that one of his students had written.

   When you are cold, you pull me close
   But as you get warm, you push me away.

   (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 28)

After recalling the short poem, Albert reflected, “I was like damn. That was a three-line poem
and it, like, crushed me” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 28). Albert was in awe
of the meaning packed into the brief lines of his student’s poem. And, as I watched him speak
about her, I could see the throughline from his childhood literacies to the present. Writing and
creating remained a form of connection, relationship building, and self-discovery (Janks, 2010;
Knobel, 1999; Muhammad, 2020; Rose 2005; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Albert was generous in the artifacts he shared with me, and as I sifted through comics,
shorts, articles, and poems, his piece “The Fifth Wheel,” written during his time moderating the
aforementioned poetry club, stood out as significant. I asked Albert to guide me through the
inspirations for the poem, the thoughts and feelings embedded in it, and the connections he saw
between his poetry writing and conception of literacy. Albert’s emotional connection not only to
the poem, but to his time with the poetry club was palpable. He began by explaining, “I was
looking at [the poem], actually, this morning to prepare and I got kinda choked up and I had to
stop reading it” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 26). Albert is an honest and
open friend, and had been vulnerable throughout our interviews as well as with our students in
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our co-taught class, but I was still struck by his candor as he spoke about a poem that held multiple layers of meaning for him.

Figure 6: Albert’s Poem The Fifth Wheel

Like the other works that Albert created and was drawn to, “The Fifth Wheel” embodied the tensions between feelings of alienation and desire for connection that Albert described throughout our interviews. He explained, “It’s about fighting off that alienation and holding on to something” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 31). It was about nostalgia and looking to recapture the sense of youthful rebellion that he experienced with a close-knit group of friends during their formative years. He noted the theme of rebellion in the way he played with references in lines like “Judases of all trades” and “playing monopoly where nobody wins”
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explaining that he had found ways to be “rebellious against the system, the rules in place” alongside these friends (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 32). Albert was full of sighs and awkward laughter as he looked back at his work. He looked at the poem as both a rejection of the nostalgia he aimed to hang on to and a tribute to the rebellious group of friends about whom the poem was written, which was encapsulated in the line “suppressing nostalgia only to give birth to regret” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February, 2023, p. 31). When he read that line to me, he chuckled briefly, but then reflected, “That’s the thesis of this paper. Literally, that’s what this stanza is. It’s me” and followed these statements by reading the complete stanza he had just referenced aloud:

*I am* the fifth wheel,

The convertible jockey who never felt at home,

Until I rode with the horsemen,

Now I am just a *record keeper*,

Suppressing nostalgia only to give birth to regret.

(Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 31)

I italicized the words Albert emphasized in his reading in an attempt to capture his tone. After the words "*record keeper,*" Albert added a “ha ha” commenting on his own pun—one that I had not noticed when reading the poem on paper despite my knowledge of his extensive record collection. Albert’s penchant for simultaneous vulnerability and deflection came through in this line. He used the pun to add humor while also admitting he was the keeper of the memories that tied this group of people together.

What was most revealing in examining this poem together was when Albert called out this stanza saying, “It’s me.” This stanza encapsulated his feelings about himself at a specific
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moment in time. He was the outsider until he found his place within a group of people who also
had the desire to buck the system. And yet, by the end of the stanza he depicted himself as the
one left holding onto the memories of the past. Like Super Loser, the speaker in “The Fifth
Wheel” used connections with others to become more himself. Allusions and figurative language
were not the center of the literacy practice Albert engaged in as a creator. Instead, they were a
means through which he could make sense out of his longing for a time that had passed. The
skills of putting words and images together guided his self-expression, but the skills alone were
not the main event (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee 2015a; hooks, 1994; Knobel & Lankshear,
2014, Street, 2016). These ruminations on himself were also vulnerably shared with others, and
unlike his comics, the audience for these poems was made up of his students rather than his
peers. He was willing to let the poetry club see the feelings he held beneath the surface. Albert
used his writing to get at what Rose (2005) called “the real stuff of literacy: conveying
something meaningful, communicating information, creating narratives, shaping what we see,
and feel, and believe within written language” (p. 109). Reflecting on this reminded me of our
discussion of his classroom posters and Albert’s hope that if he was open with his students, they
would feel comfortable being themselves as well. This too was a sign of Albert rebelling against
the system. Ideally, the classroom could be the “game of monopoly where no one wins” by
putting aside hierarchical approaches to student-teacher relationships and aiming to create a safe
space for self-exploration (Freire 1970/2000, 1998; Muhammad, 2020, 2023; Rose, 2005;
Rosenblatt, 1994).

As I continued to add new brush strokes to Albert’s portrait, his conceptualization of
literacy practices came to life through his personal history and his actions both in and beyond the
classroom. Getting to know Albert through his creative writing from childhood into adulthood
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revealed that understanding the self was at the heart of his conception of literacy. He discovered a means through which he could express his emotions, particularly the ones he found most difficult to say out loud. A clear example of this could be found in our co-analysis of “The Fifth Wheel.” While he struggled with the emotions that came up, he had chosen to share it as a piece that was significant to his conception of literacy. The poem—like his comics—exposed a feeling of otherness or alienation, and added a longing for a past that seemed to be slipping away. For him, the possibility for people to be more fully known through the truthful sharing of images, words, and sounds was the most important function of literacy in our lives.

*Defining Albert’s Conception of Literacy: A Journey of Self-Actualization*

When we began this research, Albert and I did not yet share a classroom. It was towards the end of his first year working in our current school. We were new friends—still in the stage of getting to know each other and although I felt like he and I shared similar commitments to students and learning, we had only just started to talk about these shared beliefs in a focused way through our previously mentioned book club examining Love’s (2019) *We want to do more than just survive*. I did not know much about Albert’s personal history or the path that led him to become an educator, and I was eager to learn more from him.

As we sat down to talk literacy for the first time, Albert invited me into the classroom he inhabited before he moved into our shared space. This was a room that Albert had been assigned at the start of the 2021–2022 school year, and he spent part of the day there and the rest in another room co-teaching with Sebastian. Though there were some pictures on the wall, Albert reported that he had not done much to make the space his own. The fast-pace of a new job had pushed him to leave the classroom largely in the same condition it was in upon his arrival. We sat across from each other on a set of couches that acted as a reading nook and student hang-out.
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spot. As with all of our interviews, we had already been through a full workday, but Albert was generous with his time, and when he spoke about education, he became energized—as if a fire had been ignited—even after a long day.

The story of Albert’s conception of literacy came into focus throughout our interviews, and was echoed in his interactions with students, as well as through the artifacts he chose to provide. While reading and writing were mentioned as part of Albert’s conception of literacy, his definitions extended well beyond those two conventional skills, aligning closely with feminist new literacies despite having never explicitly discussed this model of literacy with me. I used Figure 7 (below) to summarize the defining characteristics of literacy that Albert returned to throughout our interviews. The model shown in Figure 7 was developed in collaboration with Albert. I created an initial draft and shared it with him after which we discussed my impressions of his conception of and revised the model based on this discussion (Leavy & Harris, 2019). I detailed this negotiation in my explanation of Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Albert's Literacy Model
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The inner circle of Figure 7 represented the core belief—the heart—of Albert’s conception of literacy practices as acts of sense making that ultimately guide us closer to self-actualization. I used the concentric circles to communicate the nonlinear nature of Albert’s literacy practices. There was no set starting place, no prescription for the exact literacy practices that had to be employed, and no set product that was prized as a more valuable creation. There was, however, a hope that the act of creating would, at some point, offer the creator opportunities for self-reflection and growth.

When I first developed this figure, making sense out of the world was at the center, as this was a phrase that Albert continually used when describing literacy practices. However, when I showed the diagram to Albert in a reflection session, he felt that, ideally, we use our multiple literacies to make sense of the world around us in order to discover more about ourselves and our place in the world (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 2). Thus, he felt that self-actualization was the true core of his conception of literacy and that making sense out of the world was better placed in the first ring that surrounded the center, as this ring contained the actions he believed had the potential to lead individuals closer to their true self.

For Albert, the actions associated with reading, writing, creating, and communicating in a variety of mediums were all ways that people could work out their emotions as they examined the world around them and their place within it—a role that literacy had played in his life since his childhood. As previously noted, there was no set starting place or ending place for the literacy practices depicted in Albert’s literacy model. I used these circles to group like practices together but not to prescribe a linear process for self-expression through literacy. In constructing Albert’s conception, the first ring around the center was reserved for those actions that are the most personal—our expression of our beliefs, emotions, and personal experiences along with the
use of our imaginations were the practices that brought us closest to our inner selves. These personal forms of expression could be applied in the various literacy practices in the third and fourth rings from the more abstract practices like recognizing patterns, sharing ideas, breaking down arguments, and employing rhetorical strategies to the more tangible formats through which those actions could be taken—including traditional reading and writing, as well as texting, creating art and music, making conversation, engaging in storytelling, and reading other people’s bodies and tones. Albert’s conception of literacy—both in his life and in his classroom—aligned with feminist new literacies. He embraced multiple forms of expression as valuable texts (i.e. books, comics, songs, text messages and social media, conversation, film), which disrupted the essayist notion that some texts and modes of communication are more appropriate than others (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Rose, 2005; Saint Pierre, 2000). Albert also placed emphasis on emotions and personal experience as valuable ways of knowing—asserting that the practices of literacy (i.e. analyzing, interpreting, inferring, creating, collaborating, and questioning) could be informed by our feelings and experiences as we entered into the practice of sense making (Coia & Taylor, 2013;Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Gee, 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Klein & Taylor, 2023; Moll, 1992; Rose; 2005). Like Janks (2010), who drew inspiration from Freire (1970/2000, 1998), Albert’s conception of literacy could not separate reading the word from reading the world.

Early in our initial interview, I asked Albert how he would define literacy and we had the following exchange.

**Katie:** I just wondered if you could try to put into words: When you think of literacy, what comes to mind and in what ways would you define it?
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Albert: I think literacy is kind of a vague topic for me, because I like to think of it as trying to make sense out of the world around us. So, taking information that we learn and taking experiences, and trying to apply that in a real world setting and vice versa. Using real world settings to apply to a fictional world as well. (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 7)

Albert’s response here was quick. Although he used the word “vague,” it did not signal the lack of a personal definition for literacy. Instead, this word indicated that Albert did not see literacy as something as simple and concrete as reading and writing words. Literacy was the way we try “to make sense out of the world around us.” Whether Albert was taking in real world information or examining a fictional, he saw literacy as a path to interpreting and understanding both the information and himself. However, when I continued by asking Albert about literacy practices, his first thought stuck more closely to the autonomous, school-based conceptions of literacy as a set of skills.

Katie: So, if literacy is a thing that we do to make sense of the world, what are some literacy practices? [pause]

My pause was meant to leave space for Albert to respond. When he did not, I continued.

Katie: One of my mentors, Dr. Knobel, would always talk about “doing literacy,” so, like, how do we “do literacy?”

Albert: I think teaching skills to our students. You know, like reading comprehension and taking ideas that . . . Hmm. (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 7)

While listening back to our talk, I noticed that there was an extended pause after Albert’s “Hmm.” He seemed dissatisfied with the impulse to discuss literacy practices in terms of school-based skills, and wanted to say that doing literacy is something more than reading
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comprehension, but needed to parse out the thought. I encouraged Albert to take his time because he expressed, “I feel like I’m on the clock,” and at his request, I rephrased the question, asking, “What are some of the things that we do to make sense out of the world that you might call literacy?” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, pp. 7–8). This time, the response flowed quickly.

Albert recounted a recent conversation with students where he explained:

I don’t care if you remember who Scout’s brother is in *To Kill a Mockingbird* twenty years from now. It doesn’t matter. What matters is . . . can you analyze people based on the evidence that they're giving to you. Right? Can you take the fictional practice of a narrator telling you all this information, telling you what they look like, how they dress, things of that nature? Can you take those skills and apply it to relationships you have in the real world, to help navigate and see patterns that emerge with real people? (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 8)

This was a moment in our discussion where his beliefs around literacy snapped into focus. While minutes before, Albert was hesitant about his response to my question, now, he spoke with certainty. As Albert broke down his understanding of what a literacy practice is, he did not mention conventional school tasks, such as writing essays or decoding words. Although the literacy practices he mentioned could be useful in school-based tasks, his conception of literacy was inherently tied to the world beyond school, and beyond words written on a page. Albert did not see literacy as a simple skill used to decode and comprehend a text typical of the autonomous model of literacy. Rather, his take was closer to the ideological model where a person’s literacy practices were recognized as embedded in their sociocultural contexts (Gee 1999, 2015a, 2015b; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Lankshear, 2919; Street 1995, 2016). He was interested in the ways individuals learn to analyze people, break down an argument, see the difference between an
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emotional opinion and a fact, identify and interpret patterns, and apply all of this to real people, in the real world with whom we have real relationships. This analysis could be communicated through a wide range of expressive modes from conversational communication to audio-visual mediums, school-style essays, or creative writing depending on the individual’s preference in their particular context. We included of the practices referenced above in Albert’s model of literacy in Figure 7 because he saw them as a means through which the self might be known more clearly; just as the literary devices in his poem “The Fifth Wheel” had acted as a way for Albert to know and share a piece of himself with the poetry club. Throughout his own development from childhood to adulthood, Albert relied on these practices to forge connections with others and work out complex feelings about himself and his relationships. He drew inspiration from these personal literacies as he developed his educational philosophy, inviting his outside of school literacies to cross the boundary into his classroom. Although Albert was not consciously enacting feminist pedagogies, his approach to literacy in school prioritized self-expression, sharing ideas, multiple forms of rightness, and vulnerability over a fixed set of autonomous skills (Coia & Taylor, 2013; hooks 1994; Janks, 2010; Saint-Pierre, 2000).

Sharing Literacy: Albert and His Students

As a child, Albert sought out creative ways to express himself, connect with others, and examine the world. These became the foundation for his approach to teaching and literacy. Before Albert and I taught together, he invited me to visit one of his eleventh grade English classes. The class was a small group—typically four young men and one young woman, although on this day, the only female student was absent. The students in this small class had been identified as in need of additional support in reading and writing and were placed in a small grouping to create opportunities for more individualized attention. When Albert and I reflected
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on my class visit in a later interview, his appreciation for this group of students and his belief in
their individual talents was palpable. Albert felt that grouping these students based on a
perceived ability level derived from test scores was limiting, especially for students who had
been labeled as struggling, deficient, or below grade level in reading and writing. When talking
about this class, he said, “I think when they realized, I guess, their perceived ability level, they
performed to that perceived ability level” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 4).
Albert recognized that deficit positioning if students who did not adhere to normative ways of
reading, writing, and communicating limited the students' opportunities in school and negatively
affected their view of themselves as students (Dharamshi, 2019; Freire, 1998; Gee 2015a; Heath,
1983; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; King, 2019; Kosnik et al., 2017; Love, 2019; Muhammad,
2020; Rose, 2005). He was concerned that no matter how high his expectations were and how
much he tried to demonstrate that he believed they were capable of deep thought and
communication, he would not be able to overpower the story of being less than that had already
been ingrained in their minds. Albert went on to say that a more diverse grouping of students
would “challenge or even encourage” those who struggle, and that students who are placed in
classes that were labeled low “achieved low expectations in order to fulfill the role they’ve been
given” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December 2022, p. 5). As Rose (2005) argued, “students
will float to the mark you set” and those who are tracked as low achieving will take on this
identity as an act of self-protection (p. 26). Albert shared this concern, reflecting, “By lowering
my expectations, am I limiting my students?” and ultimately thought that schools should “Stop
trying to put students in boxes like ‘this is what you can do’ and ‘this is what you can’t do.’
[And,] instead push outside of that way of thinking” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 1, December
2022, p. 7). Albert’s students had been placed in a box. They were labeled deficient in reading
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and writing, and in his mind, this label became a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially since they were excluded from opportunities to learn alongside other students who had not been labeled in this way (Heinrich, 2013; Heyder & Kessels, 2017; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020; Rose, 2005). Albert, however, valued the ideas, experiences, and interest his students brought into the classroom and was interested in the ways their experiential knowledge could cross the boundary into their academic spaces (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Bostock, 2016; Knobel, 1999; Moll, 1992; Rose, 2005). The problem did not lie within students' capabilities, but within the system’s narrow definition of literacy, and Albert hoped to create an environment of high expectations and care that would allow students to see that they were, in fact, capable of examining texts and formulating insightful interpretations and connections.

Although this section of the portrait is focused on my initial visit to Albert’s classroom, as I wrote about the experience, I was also compelled to share moments from our interviews where Albert unpacked our daily interactions with our students. In our shared classroom, I had a front row seat to Albert’s approach to teacher-student relationships. Students from our co-taught English class came to float ideas by both of us in the morning, as well as during the study hall he moderated in our room during my lunch period. He was consistently ready with why and how questions for them—inventing them to work out their ideas along with him. He supported students without telling them what to think. He emphasized their voice as writers, speakers, and thinkers and prompted them to uncover answers (or further questions) for themselves. This was also the case months before we started teaching together upon my visit to the aforementioned eleventh grade class.

**Exploring the Secrets of the Universe.** I joined Albert and this small group of students on a warm afternoon in June when they were close to finishing Benjamín Alírè Sáenz’s (2014)
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novel *Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe*. The room was organized with tables in rows that faced the SMARTboard and two couches in a reading nook off to the side; the same set of couches where I had interviewed Albert the week before. As students trickled into class for the day, they greeted Albert in a friendly manner and one directed a “Good morning” to me, also asking “How are you doing?” and “you’re Ms. Whitley, right?” Another student asked to see the nurse to re-bandage an injured finger, joking “Don’t miss me!” before promising to “be right back” (Albert, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 1). Three out of four students settled into seats at tables spread out across the room—one next to the window with his feet propped up on an extra chair, one in the spot closest to Albert’s desk, and one in the middle of the space. The fourth student—the quietest of the four boys—took a seat on one of the couches.

The mood in the room was comfortable. It was clear that the boys had a rapport and routine with Albert as they readied themselves for the day’s lesson. All of them took out their books and computers and turned their attention to the question Albert had posted on the board to open the lesson. The question was a quintessential example of Albert’s view that literacy involved the exploration of personal experience and emotion. It read, “On pages 252–256, Dante cries. Based on your reading, why does he do so?” Albert did not ask students to recount the plot from their solo-reading. In fact, he told them the key event from the moment in the text up front before asking his question. This brought me back to the moment in our first interview when Albert shared that he did not care if students could remember the characters’ names in *To kill a mockingbird* twenty years from now. He cared about what they *thought*—about what they *felt*. As the students considered his question about Dante’s crying, Albert nudged them, saying, “you could revisit it if you need to, alright? To refresh your memory of your reading” (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 2). Albert knew students in the room may not have done the homework
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reading, but because he was not concerned with their memorization of the text, this posed no problem. What Albert cared about was the students’ reading of the characters’ experiences and emotions, and he was willing to point them towards the places in the text that might help them to think through these details.

The class was an invitation for students to explore not only the characters’ emotions but their own. Through the literacy practices embedded in the lesson—reading, writing, dialoging, making sense, sharing personal experiences and feelings—Albert was subtly disrupting hegemonic, patriarchal notions of set skills, mastery, and right versus wrong answers. This could be seen from the opening of the lesson where rather than asking students questions with one possible right answer in order to determine whether or not students had done their homework, Albert told students what happened in a vulnerable moment of the text where one of the main characters cried. He was not looking for them to recall one objective fact of the text—the plot point that Dante cried. Instead, he wanted them to think about why that crying occurred. As Ghiso (2015) noted, patriarchal structures often dismiss emotion and intuition as feminized (and therefore less credible) ways of knowing, but in Albert’s class, emotion was the center point of the lesson. Through the questions he posed throughout the discussion, Albert challenged students to do more than report on a character’s feelings. He asked them to consider multiple possible reasons behind those feelings and invited students to make connections to their own lived experiences.

Emotion was present not only in the content Albert and his class addressed, but in the way he interacted with his students. For instance, as the boys revisited the text and wrote about Dante’s crying, Albert circulated the room to check in with the class, asking: “how are we doing”
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to the whole group before stopping to talk to every student individually. After speaking with each student, Albert said:

Let’s look at the end of Chapter 4. Let’s open up our books real quick. So, we’re lookin’ at page 252 real quick. [pauses to wait while the boys find the page]. Everybody has their book? Book? Book? Book? Book? [checking with each student]. Page 252, 252. On page 252, can I have somebody read where it says, “You know, Dante said.” (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 4)

It is difficult to get across on the page how friendly and caring Albert sounded as he interacted with each boy. Albert's way of speaking felt more like an invitation than a demand. Students followed his directions, but there was a casualness to the group. Albert suggested that they “look at the book real quick” and everyone joined him, even Tim, who was sitting on his own, accepted the invitation that Albert had extended. Moments like this one brought me back to Albert’s claim that if he was vulnerable with students they might be vulnerable with him. He cared about these students. He checked in on each of them. He set his expectations for participation through encouragement. And, ultimately, he aimed to create an environment where students might feel comfortable expressing themselves through reading, writing, creating, and communicating.

Albert’s request for a volunteer to read was quickly answered by Alex who jumped in without hesitation. The moment in the book centered around one of the titular characters, Dante, explaining to the other, Aristotle, that he does not think he will ever be able to love a girl. The character is trying to work out how to talk to his parents about his sexuality, and as he turns to his friend for support, he cries. As Alex read, Albert perched on the edge of his desk to listen.

Alex: [reading from p. 252 in Aristotle and Dante] “When we finally got quiet again, I hear Dante’s voice and he seems so small in the desert night.” “I have to tell them, Ari.”
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Why? “Because I have to.” “What if you fall in love with a girl?” “It’s not gonna happen,
Ari.: ‘They’ll always love you, Dante.’” (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 5)

At this point, Alex paused, audibly gasped, and proclaimed “Dante’s coming.” This was
followed by another loud gasp before he continued the text. For another kind of teacher, this
could have been a gotcha moment. Alex’s surprised reaction confirmed that he had not
completed the previous night’s homework. However, Albert remained quiet. He created space
for Alex and the other boys in the class to access ideas in the text, react, and make sense out of
them. Albert’s waiting invited Alex to pause, react, and then continue reading one the more
emotional parts of the text.

Alex: [reading] “He didn’t say anything. And then I heard him crying, so I just let him
cry. There was nothing I could do except listen to his pain. I could do that. I could hardly
stand it but I could do that. Just listen to his pain. Dante I whispered, Can’t you see how
much they love you?” “I’m gonna disappoint them. Just like I disappointed you.” “You
didn’t disappoint me Dante.” “You’re just saying that because I’m crying.” (Albert Class
Visit, June 2022, p. 5)

As Alex read, I wrote in my field notes that his voice was “smooth and engaging” and that he
was “telling us the story as he read” (Katie, Field Notes, June 2022, p. 1). When he arrived at the
final part of the passage, Albert thanked him for reading and posed the question again: “So,
Dante cries. Why?” Alex responded without hesitation, “Because he comes out and he's scared
they're not going to accept him” (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 5). Albert emphasized that
this was the first time in the book where Dante and Aristotle had a face-to-face conversation
about sexuality, and used the characters’ vulnerability to make space for the boys to consider
their own desire to be accepted for who they are. In the exchange that followed, Albert attempted to open the door to sharing even as the boys side-stepped the question in their responses.

**Albert**: Don’t we have similar fears sometimes when we’re with other people?

**Alex**: Not really.

**Albert**: No? You never feel like there's a chance that you won't be accepted or loved or respected back? (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 5)

At this point, a second student, Jordan, interjected. Jordan and Alex spoke rapidly, overlapping one another and affirming each other’s claims that they did not feel any fear regarding acceptance from others.

**Alex**: See, that’s the thing,

**Alex**: Yeah, yeah.

I will happily just put in

my headphones and listen to music . . .

**Alex**: Yeah, I don’t do that two-faced, all happy now, sad later. Nah. If I’m in a bad mood, I’m in a bad mood. But if I’m happy— [pauses] Well, see, that’s the thing though. I have a very low social battery, so when it dies, you just see my headphones on, hoodie up . . .

(Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, pp. 5-6)

**Jordan**: No, I just be myself.

**Jordan**: If you don’t like me, I’m not gonna sit here, I’m not gonna sit here tryin’ to be, like, a different person, you know.

**Jordan**: Yeah

**Jordan**: Yeah. I’m not gonna do that.
Albert did not interrupt the boys’ exchange, but waited for a lull to respond. While he could have tried to steer the boys back to feelings of acceptance or love, instead, he chose to meet them where they were. He picked up on Alex’s admission that he has a “low social battery” as a kind of vulnerability, even if it was not the discussion he planned for, and asked for clarification on that comment.

**Albert:** What does that mean? Like, you’re more introverted?

**Alex:** Yeah.

**Albert:** Like you shut down after a little while?

**Alex:** Yeah. Shut down everybody.

**Albert:** Gotcha.

Jordan responded here, but his voice was difficult to hear. This time, he was quieter than when he was speaking in tandem with Alex. Still, Albert responded.

**Albert:** Jordan, you’re the same way? Like, when you’re done with people, you’re just headphones on, you could just . . .?

**Jordan:** Yeah, I feel that. [followed by an unintelligible comment]

**Albert:** Oh yeah? And you’re just tapped out. “My battery is done, I need to recharge.” I got you. [pauses] Hmmm. So, I would say that’s probably— That’s awesome that you guys feel that way and that you can, you know, know and recognize when you need to do that. (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 6)
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From the start of this exchange, it was clear the two students who responded to Albert’s question rejected the idea that they had ever been afraid of not being accepted, loved, or respected by others. If the boys had experienced this type of fear, they were not prepared to reveal those feelings in the moment. Albert, however, neither abandoned the discussion nor invalidated their feelings. He took a third path by listening to what they were saying and taking the opportunity to ask about the emotions they did express. What struck me was the way Albert praised the boys for recognizing when they needed more space and knowing how to cope when those feelings arose. Although the students’ responses indicated a desire to maintain their masculine identity in front of the other boys in the classroom, Albert’s responses to them ran counter to patriarchal norms by remaining in the emotional realm and deviating from fixed notions of rightness. Although the wording of his question, “Don’t we have similar fears sometimes when we’re with other people?” suggested that he expected students to respond affirmatively, students were not positioned as wrong for answering in an unexpected way. Instead, Albert allowed the boys’ responses to become a path toward knowledge construction and self-expression (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; hooks, 1994; Klein & Taylor, 2023, Muhammad, 2023). As Alex and Jordan rejected the notion that they felt a desire for acceptance, Alex ended up reflecting on his own social battery and need for space. In that sense, the literacy practices the group engaged in during this section of the class deviated from dominant conceptions of school literacy that privilege autonomous skills and objectivity (Bhatt, 2017; Ghiso, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Additionally, Albert did not hesitate to continue to bring vulnerability into the lesson as the discussion continued. When Dante and Aristotle kiss later in the text, Albert did not shy away from delving into the characters’ emotions with the four boys in his class even when students
interjected with deflections at first. Alex volunteered to read again, but showed signs of discomfort with the text as soon as he read the line “Well, maybe you don't really like kissing guys. Maybe you just think you do. I think we should try an experiment” laughing loudly and stopping to interject, “I don’t want to read no more.” Albert’s response was a simple “Why?” His tone maintained the same warmth and friendliness that had been present throughout the lesson. Though Alex continued to laugh and replied with “I don’t like where this is going,” he followed that statement with a quick “Alright, anyways” and went back to reading the passage without hesitation or the need for further comment from Albert (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 9). That single-word question, “why,” was an acknowledgement of the student’s impulse to reject a romantic scene between two boys but was executed in a way that did not directly accuse Alex of homophobia. Instead, Albert put the onus on Alex, giving him the responsibility of choosing whether or not to expand on his dislike of the scene.

Though some tense, quiet laughter persisted as Alex read the description of Dante and Aristotle’s first kiss, Albert was not deterred. He saw this moment in the text as an opportunity for their small class community to be real with one another—to talk about identity, relationships, and the risk of rejection. Much later, I sent Albert an excerpt from this part of the class visit. I realized I knew how he responded to his students in the moment but that we had not gotten to the heart of why he responded this way or how he felt when tensions around topics such as gender, sexuality, and race arise in the classroom. Albert wrote that as a “white, cisgender, heterosexual man” it was important for students to see him “stepping in to challenge those ideas and not put the burden on another student who may feel attacked or not seen in those moments” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 2). Albert surmised that Alex, “was reacting in a way that he thought would be more accepted (heteronormative) than the one being portrayed in the text . . .
merely a reflection what he thinks society expects of him and how to react” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 2). Albert saw his younger self in this student. He recalled times when “I was reactionary just like them. I knew in those moments all I needed was someone to show they cared enough to push me” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 2). Through his initial question of why and continuation of the discussion about romance and emotions, Albert, in his mild-mannered way, disrupted the heteronormative expectations he felt had dictated Alex’s reaction to the text. In this particular class, that disruption paid off.

During this class session, Albert could have moved on to a different scene once the possibility of homophobic comments developed. Instead, Albert continued to ask questions about intimacy, such as, “Why would Dante want to kiss Aristotle?” as well as about consent, pointing out, “He’s [Aristotle’s] allowed to say no and he’s allowed to stop” as they talked through Aristotle stopping the kiss and Dante’s feelings of rejection (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 11). Over the course of a few minutes, the masculine posturing faded, and the boys—with Albert’s care and guidance—drew closer to revealing themselves through their interpretation of a story. Tim, who had been quiet throughout most of the class joined the discussion to point out that they only get the story from Aristotle’s point of view. As they broke down the moment of the kiss, Albert pointed out that Aristotle said “no” to the kissing experiment four times before standing up, and another student, Mike, interjected, “And yet, he still does it” which prompted Alex to add, “Maybe he [Aristotle] was questioning himself” (Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 11). This was an interesting turn since Alex was the only student to verbally object to the kissing scene as he read it. Yet, as Albert persisted in presenting questions about the text, Alex’s more resistant commentary was replaced with interpretations of the scene that grew into personal connections.
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Albert: Aristotle says you won't be rejected, right. No one is going to reject you. Then, in the next chapter, Dante kisses Aristotle. Aristotle eventually pushes him away, what basically just happened?

Mike: [comments quietly—unintelligible on recording]

Albert: Right? That's rejection, I mean granted, he’s allowed to say “No” and he’s allowed to stop.

Alex: [interjecting] I mean, it’s not rejection to the fullest ‘cause he still kissed him.

Albert: Yeah.

Alex: If he, if he was sat there and was like, “I’m sorry, I’m not doing that at all.” That would have been a little bit more. But, I see where you’re still going, but it’s not completely rejection.

(Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 11)

Here, Alex showed signs that he was thinking through the complexities of this interaction between the characters in the book. He was also comfortable challenging an idea posed by Albert and another student. Alex did not see the moment as a complete rejection of Dante’s advances. Aristotle tried out the kiss, which for Alex was a kind of reciprocation. Just as he had done in the class’s earlier discussion of the desire for acceptance, Albert listened to the students’ comments and followed their train of thought. Rather than insisting that Aristotle had fully rejected Dante, Albert picked up on Alex’s thinking and posed another intimate question, which sparked the following dialogue.

Albert: Why would he want to kiss Aristotle?

Alex: Cause he’s in love with him.
Albert: Right. He’s in love with him. He likes him, right? Imagine that. And then, and then, the person saying you know what, I’m done. You’d be a little hurt.

Jordan: Yeah. You’re hurt.

Albert: You might not be, like, devastated, but you’re gonna be a little, like, hurt.

Alex: But at the same time, he shoulda, he should kind of like knew about that because, like . . . [pauses]

Albert: Yeah. I think he knows the risk he’s taking.

Alex: Yeah, that’s what I mean. Like, you have to know, especially if you know he’s not really into you like that.

Albert: Mm. Hmm.

Alex: That’s like talking to a girl that, you know, is like, not into you. Like, you’re obviously gonna, push and shoot your shot, but there’s a higher chance of you missing than scoring.

Albert: Sure.

Alex: [continuing] So, at the end of the day, you can’t really be mad at yourself for that.

(Albert, Class Visit, June 2022, pp. 11-12)

Albert, along with three of the four boys in the class, commented on the feelings of the characters in this scene from love and affection to rejection and risk-taking. Notably, Alex connected Dante’s attempt to express his feelings for Aristotle as a risk that the character should have been aware of and one that was worth taking. When he reframed the scene as one between a boy and a girl—a context which he could more directly connect to—he was able to see things from Dante’s point of view and affirm that if a person has feelings for someone else, it could be
worth it to “shoot your shot” even if the end result might be rejection. In spite of his discomfort with the act of two boys kissing, Alex ended up on Dante’s side. If he were advising Dante, he would assert that he should not be mad at himself for taking a risk with his feelings. Albert noted in our interviews that developing a point of view through evidence was a valuable literacy practice. Here, this skill of selecting evidence to develop a point of view merged with the practice of making a personal connection. At first, Alex’s reaction to the scene was that of discomfort, but as Albert gently pushed the discussion forward, Alex was able to pull examples from the text and see his own life played out through the lives of characters he initially saw as quite different from himself.

Throughout this class session, Albert and his students talked about the desire to be accepted, kissing, sexuality, boundaries in moments of physical intimacy, love, rejection, “shooting your shot” and taking the risk of being hurt, and the added challenges of coming out as queer in the context of the 1980s. I felt witness to a special moment, and I could see Albert’s personal conceptions of literacy not only crossing the boundary into his classroom, but firmly embedded in his approaches to text and interactions with students. Through literacy practices like writing, reading, making conversation, developing an outlook, pausing for reflection, and questioning ideas, Albert and his students worked together to make sense—not simply out of the plot of a text—but out of their own feelings and ties between the world of these characters and the real world in which Albert and his students lived. Albert’s role as questioner and listener created space for his students to express themselves. Albert was able to challenge Alex and Jordan when they resisted content that deviated from hegemonic norms of masculinity, and he did so in a way that did not alienate them from the discussion, but actually invited them into moments of self-reflection and consideration of alternate points of view. In this moment, Alex
and Jordan were able to let the mask of masculine posturing slip and simply be themselves while sharing their feelings with one another. The literacy practices highlighted in this class session also crossed the boundary into our shared classroom as Albert and I worked together to create opportunities for students to discover more about themselves and the world in our literature class.

**Facing Resistance to Self-Reflection.** In the previously described class session, Albert’s personal literacies guided his pedagogical moves as he and his students worked to make sense out of an emotional scene in *Aristotle and Dante Explore the Secrets of the Universe*. Months later, I would see Albert push back against what he identified as toxic masculinity under much different circumstances. Martino (2017) described the power of the rules of masculinity and the policing of boys’ bodies in order to judge them against heteronormative expectations, he refers to the “policing of masculinity through abjection and repudiation of the feminine” (p. 18). Toxic masculinity showed up as pressure to reject any quality or action that might be deemed feminized (Kristeva, 1982; Martino, 2017; Miller & Gilligan, 2017). In Albert’s experience, this pressure kept young men from “taking the time to think about who you are” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 37).

My second interview with Albert took place early in the 2022–2023 school year. We spoke in our shared classroom at the end of the school day—one where we had experienced some difficulty engaging a couple of students in our co-taught class. I did not ask Albert any questions about our class during the interview process, but it was part of his teaching story, as was our relationship as friends who taught together and shared a classroom every day. We were discussing self-actualization—the core of Albert’s conception of literacy—and what it looks like for that aspiration to cross the boundary into a school setting. He started to talk about gently
pushing back when students put up a wall. This was the sort of caring push I witnessed him enact on that day in early June as he and his male students navigated their response to the kiss between Dante and Aristotle. During this interview, however, Albert used our class experience to break down his point of view.

Our students had watched, read, and discussed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) TED Talk *The Dangers of the Single Story* and were working on writing a personal narrative where they examined the concept of single stories in their own lives. Albert recounted that as he conferenced with two of our students who were struggling to find a focus for their writing, he asked them if they could think of a time where this idea of a single story had been part of the experiences. Both insisted that they had *never* been misunderstood. No one had ever had a limited view of who they are and they could not think of any time when they had misunderstood or stereotyped someone else. He used questioning to try to push the boys to reflect—even asking them “No one has ever said ‘act like a man’ or ‘act like a boy’ to you before?” Albert explained that every question was met with a “No.” Albert felt the students’ responses were influenced by “toxic masculinity” adding that the students were reluctant to “take the time to think about who you are” and that he felt like they were “putting [themselves] in [their] own box” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 39). Albert asked these young men to reflect on their experiences and emotions, and their staunch “no” reflected their desire to maintain the status quo by refusing to take part in feminized acts such as discussing, analyzing, sharing vulnerability, and writing about their emotional experiences (Britzman, 1995; Kristeva, 1992; Martino, 2017; Miller & Gilligan, 2017). I asked what we do in the face of these moments where students reject the invitation to be more themselves, and he immediately said “push back” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 38). His voice became more passionate and serious as he talked through this
interaction with our students. He told me that what he wanted to do was “call them out on their bullshit,” but the tone in his voice made it clear that this was meant with love (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 38). Calling them on their bullshit was a way to free them from the walls they were building around their true selves. His reflection on the lesson from the previous June was relevant here as well. He wrote “I expect that my students push through the limitations that they set for themselves” also acknowledging, “It’s a tricky balance, but I think it is established from a classroom built on respect, care, and love” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 1). Although he tried to use his questions to help push these students through the limits they set for themselves, he walked away from the writing conference feeling like he had not been able to crack the barrier the boys had constructed—that “the single story had already been put on [them] and [they’ve] accepted it as gospel” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 40). As a friend and colleague, I shared his frustration and reminded us both that the class was only just getting to know us, and we were still building our community of respect, care, and love. We agreed that, for some, accepting the invitation to be themselves would take time.

As I reflected on this discussion, it stood out that Albert did not need any prompting from me to bring up the role of toxic masculinity in the lives of his students. He saw toxic masculinity as a place of retreat for students who would rather choose not to “be themselves” than risk being seen as vulnerable and Other (Britzman, 1995; Kristeva, 1982; Martino, 2017; Miller & Gilligan, 2017). As Albert saw it, the purpose of literacy was ultimately self-expression and self-knowledge, and for young men, toxic masculinity was a force that could keep them from fulfilling this purpose. Even though Albert was a model of an open, vulnerable cis-white male, he was still up against the powerful rules of “heteronormative messaging [that] leads to negative sense of self, fear, and living in a state of defense” (Miller & Gilligan, 2017, p. 222). This was
one of the moments where he felt pushing the students would be more beneficial than giving them space to think. He felt that, with these particular students, the time had come for push back and, perhaps, a push toward the vulnerability they were avoiding. While his questioning and listening during the *Aristotle and Dante* lesson from the previous June created space for Alex and Jordan to, at least momentarily, let go of the heteronormative defenses they put up in response to romantic affection between two male characters and share their own lived experiences and emotions. Although the result differed in the case of the single story personal narrative, Albert remained committed to leveraging literacy practices to guide students to express themselves. This was evident towards the end of our discussion when he followed my comment “The opportunity is out there. They can join us or not, and they’ll have the experience they have based on the choices they make” with the more hopeful response, “I think they’ll eventually feel compelled to join” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 42).

Though he did not directly say it, the act of challenging toxic, heteronormative expectations of masculinity seemed personal for Albert. He was also on a journey to combat the confines of toxic masculinity. His deflections during the more vulnerable moments in our conversations were part of his discomfort with expressing emotion, but he always pulled himself back into a space of open sharing. Twice in our interviews he noted not wanting to get into too many details about the circumstances surrounding his own writing, but he also continually entrusted me with difficult feelings like embarrassment, loneliness, and sadness throughout the course of our discussions of literacy. Albert had also grown up in the confines of rigid, patriarchal expectations. Reading, writing, creating, and using his imagination were the means through which he had learned to push back against these expectations, and in turn, become more like himself. As a teacher, Albert aimed to offer an environment where students could choose to
do the same, but alongside this hope, he held deep-rooted skepticism concerning what was really possible within the system of school and acknowledged areas in his teaching where systemic limitations and expectations overshadowed his personal philosophy of education.

**School Based Conceptions: Literacy is a Numbers Game**

It is tempting to paint a picture of Albert and his experiences as a teacher using only the colors that represent his vulnerability, care for students, and belief that, in school, we should be able to work in collaboration with students as we all become more ourselves. To do this, however, would ignore the more fraught pieces of Albert’s story that arose when he spoke of the barriers to self-actualization that have been constructed by the system of school. We spoke about this in every interview, in every follow-up session, and in many casual conversations as we co-planned or spent time together as friends. One morning, as we settled into our desks in our shared classroom, Albert asked me if I had read Freire’s (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which he had just started. Reading about the banking model was one of the first times he saw his own frustration that school was too focused on depositing information into students instead of creating a space for students to make discoveries so clearly represented in a text. Albert wanted to be “anti-banking,” to “give [students] control of their education as opposed to me wanting to hear exactly what I’ve taught to the class” (Albert, Follow-Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 3). However, our interview revealed that he often felt institutional expectations pushed teachers to make deposits that would align with state testing rather than disrupt the system by sharing power with their students (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Cho, 2015; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rose, 2005).

The first time I asked Albert how he thought literacy was defined in schools, or in the system of schools, he laughed. The tone of this laugh was rye rather than playful. I told him, “I’ll
note in my transcript, ‘Albert laughs,’” and he responded, “Albert laughs maniacally.” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 16). That was how our discussion of literacy in schools began. His laugh said it so much. The laugh alone indicated Albert had concerns about the ways literacy is positioned in schools, and the conversation that followed this laughter confirmed what the initial laugh suggested.

Albert’s response to my questions about literacy in the educational system revealed that he did not see his own conceptions reflected in the ways in which literacy was measured in schools. He honed in on standardized testing and their focus on objective right and wrong answers. Albert, on the other hand, believed that there is an inherent subjectivity to the processes individuals employ as they take in and use evidence in order to make sense out of the world. He saw reducing literacy to a set of measurable skills that could be assessed through multiple choice questions as a “numbers game” that was meant to “teach kids to think the way the system wants” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 17) rather than encouraging them to think for themselves. To illustrate this point, Albert brought up the passages that are used in standardized assessments of literacy asking:

What is the system saying by picking certain passages out or picking what is the ‘best’ evidence to define something. And who is it? Who decided? Who is the committee? . . . I think when the test is being portrayed as this is objective, this is the truth, it does some damage, right? (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 17)

With this set of questions, he problematized the claim that these tests can objectively assess student ability, and his questions echoed those of literacy scholars who also challenged the power educational systems attribute to standardized testing (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Dover, 2016; Gee 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; Greene, 1991; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Janks, 2010; Kalman,
Albert was skeptical of results from these types of assessments because they did not account for the learners’ personhood and life experience as part of their overall literacy picture (Green, 1991; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Janks, 2010). This idea also came up in a later interview as Albert described a workshop he attended where the presenter led teachers through standardized test taking strategies. Albert expressed deep frustration with this process, referring to it as “Orwellian” as he explained:

There's four choices. Two of them are absolutely wrong. One is kind of right, and one is more right. Like, how do you teach that to a student? [mocking tone] Yeah, it’s right, But there's a better answer . . . It's bologna. It's, it's stupid. Right? How do you— How do you teach that concept? That's a right answer, but there’s a better answer.

Albert continued, intensity building in his voice as he spoke:

How do you defend yourself? And then the next question is, “Use the evidence that best fits to answer” to the first part. Well, if you got the first part wrong, you have no opportunity. So once again you're molding the kid into what you want them to say, and you don't really give them the opportunities to explain themselves. (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, pp. 22–23)

This moment added to Albert’s comments about systemic damage from our initial interview. Albert felt certain that this kind of testing—this “numbers game”—perpetuated a fixed notion of rightness and removed the humanity from the process of reading and constructing a point of view, and in Albert’s view, this had the power to condition students to believe there was only one acceptable way to think.
Albert’s vision for literacy practices in school and beyond ran counter to the model reproduced in standardized tests and other so-called objective assessments. He felt that students needed to have the opportunity to dialogue about their thinking and suggested that instead of being told they are wrong, students needed to experience more interactions like the example below:

“Why do you think that's the right answer?” And then, [they] explain. And then you’re like, “Okay, I see where you come from. And that makes sense to me when you explain it to me that way” . . . If [students] get an opportunity to explain themselves, you can give them that opportunity to feel like, “Okay. What I was thinking was good, productive. It might not have been like the exact answer the teacher was looking for, but at least I contributed. And that's me.” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 24)

Here, Albert tied his critique of normative school-based literacy to his own conception of literacy practices. Earlier in this interview, Albert had looked at a stanza from his poem “The Fifth Wheel” and noted “That’s me.” Here, I saw he wanted the same for his students. He wanted them to contribute, feel heard, and think “that’s me” as they reflected on what they had shared. If students felt like their thinking was thoughtfully considered by their teacher and peers—even if it deviated from an expected right answer—then they had the chance to feel a sense of satisfaction for the piece of themselves they shared.

For Albert, meaningful literacy practices could not simply be reduced to a set of skills that could be measured through multiple choice questions and transformed into test scores (Damico, 2005; Freire, 1998; Gee, 2015a; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rose, 2005; Saint-Pierre, 2000). Albert’s model of literacy was a path to self-actualization and needed to involve opportunities to construct a point of view, defend it, and share it with others. While Albert’s
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preferred modes of expression were creative (as seen in his comics and poems) the mode through which point of view were shared was up to the individual. Like Saint-Pierre (2000), Albert recognized that there were not “enough names to match all the different things in the world, so often we are forced to group things/ideas/people that are similar but significantly different into the same category” (p. 480) and criticized institutional structures, such as standardized tests that devalued the process of thinking and communicating through simplified categorization. He asserted that when we arbitrarily reduce literacy to a limited set of measurable skills that are either acceptable or unacceptable—high or low—we create a hierarchy that is potentially damaging to students (Gee, 2015a; Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Saint-Pierre, 2000; Street, 2011). While in his classroom, Albert was able to “meet students where they are” and worked with them to find ways to grow towards a particular goal, he was acutely aware that all of his students would be held to a bar he worried was arbitrarily set—that they would be “hit with a score,” find out if the number meant they were considered below average in some way, and then think to themselves, “‘I guess I’m just not a reader’ and shut the whole door for the rest of their lives.” And, for the students who felt most traumatized in these scenarios, “never pick up a book again” (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 20). Albert, who “fell in love with reading” as a child was saddened by the notion that the love of reading could be stolen away from young people. He used the words “damage” and “trauma” frequently when he talked about the consequences of this numbers game, and when I asked what we can do for students who have already been traumatized into believing that they are not good at literacy, he replied:

Help them have a positive experience with a teacher, right? . . . You know, I think about how reading is so important to me. To think that there are kids who have had that
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experience and that love stripped away from them and some kids will never go back to
that, breaks my heart . . . ‘Cause you think about it, every kid has an imagination, every
kid has some positive experience of reading and writing. It might not be the system's way
of looking at it. (Albert, Interview 1, May 2022, p. 23)

Albert felt it was his responsibility to “challenge [students] and rope them back into that love,”
and the urgency with which he felt this was clearly highlighted in the passage above. Albert
believed teachers were, at least in part, in this profession to help young people see the best parts
of themselves and ignite their love of imagination, creation, reading, and writing. The problem,
for Albert, was not students’ literacy skills, but the educational system’s limited conception of
what counts as meaningful literacy practices.

Albert’s comments aligned with the concepts from feminist new literacies. He saw
literacy practices as more about navigating and making sense out of the world rather than about
adhering to fixed notions of right and wrong (Britzman, 1995; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1998; Knobel
& Lankshear, 2019; Pallapothu, 2018). His concerns about the damage that can be done might
also be seen as a rejection of the deficit views of students whose test scores do not align with the
numbers that have been deemed appropriate for their age group (Gee, 2015a; Knobel &
Lankshear, 2019; Meyer & Tilland-Stafford, 2016). When Albert talked about school literacy, he
focused on the barriers essayist models created for students, and his language was consistently
protective of kids. He talked frankly about the damage that standardized testing inflicted on
students and teachers as we were pressured to adhere to numbers-based standards, and he
problematized the idea of proficiency—pushing back by noting that the system chooses to
measure proficiency overgrowth without taking students’ backgrounds and lived experiences into
consideration. He was concerned with the equity of holding all students to the same bar without
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considering the social, cultural, and experiential knowledge they brought into the classroom with them. He suggested, instead, that schools and teachers should meet students where they are and help them figure out how they want to grow while also acknowledging what students did well.

Albert’s love of learning, commitment to teaching, and care for students’ well being permeated these conversations around educational barriers. Before the study began, I already admired my friend Albert as a model of a compassionate and dedicated teacher, and the invitation to talk with him about education, visit his classroom, and co-analyze artifacts from his life reaffirmed this admiration. Albert [and I], however, were also part of the system he so articulately challenged. He felt pressured to adhere to expectations that are imposed on teachers, and wrestled with how best to serve his students and navigate his position within the structure of a school community.

Navigating the Tensions: Literacy of Self-Actualization versus Literacy of Limits

Pressure and tension were other dark spots that tinged the vibrancy of Albert’s literacy story. Albert’s care for his students and his passion for education was evident in our interviews, my visits to his solo classroom, as well as through the teaching we continue to do together. Just as palpable, however, was Albert’s frustration. He was simultaneously hopeful about the potential of his students and doubtful about the educational system’s priorities. As a self-proclaimed rebel, Albert looked for ways to challenge normative conceptions of student literacy and the deficit-based beliefs that were often tied to them. He wanted his classroom to be that game of “monopoly where nobody wins” (Artifact, “The Fifth Wheel). Thus, he was excited to find opportunities for students to bring their own lives and experiences into the classroom and felt shackled by the hierarchical demand for students to produce certain test scores and the pressure to adhere to conventional, essayist approaches to literacy. This tension was most
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intensely expressed when I prompted Albert to expand upon a claim he made in our initial interview—a discussion I delved into below.

**Imagining In-School Literacies Beyond Systemic Limits.** As previously noted, Albert felt that the central role of literacy in our lives was to lead towards self-actualization. Through our reading of texts in all forms, the world around us, and each other, we could be free to become more ourselves, embracing the Freirean notion that literacy is a gateway to freedom (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). In our first interview in May of 2022, Albert asked, “Are we teaching students just to become teachers, or are we teaching students to become more like themselves?” (p. 17). Upon reflection, I wished I had asked him to imagine what this would look like in the classroom. In our second interview in September of 2022, I posed the question: “What do you think it means for students to learn to be more like themselves?” (p. 21). I expected Albert to jump in with an immediate answer, but to my surprise, he appeared stumped. After an extended pause, he responded with the barriers to this approach to teaching rather than with an account of what it could look like to help students become more like themselves.

I don't know. Honestly, I don't know if kids even know themselves. I feel like when I'm thinking about our class in particular . . . When we're conversing with our students about certain topics, I feel like I'm not talking to them. I feel like I'm just talking to a collage of parents, media, and other students that are not them. (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 21)

This interview took place early in the school year, during the aforementioned period when we were both grappling with feelings of discouragement that were tied to our efforts to meaningfully discuss Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk *The Dangers of the Single Story* with students who continually claimed no one had ever misunderstood them in any way. We had to begin by
unpacking Albert’s comment, wading through the frustration he was carrying as he entered our interview. He hoped our class would be a place where students would feel free to engage in self-reflection, and we were both impatient for the whole class to take us up on the invitation to do so.

After spending some time to acknowledge that shared frustration, I returned to the question at hand, first noting that we cannot force students to become more like themselves, and then asking, “What does it look like for us to make that offer? What does it look like for us to approach literacy practices in a way that offers opportunities for [students] to learn to be more like themselves?” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 21). Albert responded quickly this time, suggesting that teachers could focus more on finding ways for students to explore their own ideas. However, his tone shifted almost immediately, audibly sighing as he said, “It’s a systemic problem, the more I think about it” turning back to the barriers that prevent students from using literacy as a means to become more themselves—multiple choice questions, standardized tests, simplistic views of right and wrong, and the fear all of these can build in students (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 23). Thus, I attempted to push him again, which led to the following exchange:

**Katie:** You’re very clear on the barriers to that kind of teaching. But if you had it your own way, or even if you think about things you've done in your classroom at any point in your teaching experience, what does it look like when you use literacy practices to give students the opportunity to learn to be more like themselves?

**Albert:** Hm. I feel like I’m never given an opportunity to do that. (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 23)
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This was a shock. I had seen Albert work with students. I had planned curriculum with him. I knew that Albert regularly created opportunities for students to bring themselves to the classroom through texts we read together, the questions he posed in discussions, and the types of writing prompts he crafted. It was notable, therefore, that Albert did not necessarily see this in himself.

Though the conversation was more halted than our typical dialogue, I continued to ask him to imagine the literacy practices that could open the door to self-discovery. As we spoke, he kept coming back to creating space for students to think without being pressured for an answer, writing prompts that included reflection and personal experience, using open-ended questions rather than fixed right answers, and inviting chances for students to make decisions about the parts of a text that spoke to them most. This was what it meant for students to have the chance to become more like themselves. He did not suggest that there was one fixed self for us to become, but that literacy practices could open the door to exploring the multifaceted pieces that make up who we are. When I asked him if he saw himself encouraging these sorts of practices with students, he said: “I think I’m more and more becoming that kind of teacher” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 28). I could not help but notice his use of the word “becoming.” Though he did not intentionally draw this parallel, I could see that Albert’s vision for his classroom involved a state of becoming for all of us. In the best moments, as Albert’s students were becoming more like themselves through the literacy practices they shared, so too was Albert. However, when Albert tried to imagine his classroom as a space for becoming, he was continually blocked by fixation on institutional barriers.

Albert’s unexpected difficulty in describing a classroom where students could become more like themselves highlighted the power systemic tensions held over him. Albert’s active
imagination was evident through his history of writing and storytelling, yet the barriers constructed by dominant, essayist conceptions of literacy blocked his imagination as he tried to picture what it looks like for students to consistently use literacy practices to become more like themselves. I asked Albert to imagine his ideal classroom where literacy invited students to become more like themselves four times throughout this second interview. Each time, he started with a few hopeful words and then shifted back to the limitations created by the system of school or moments where students resisted the invitation to engage in a process of learning that did not prioritize rightness, competition, or grades. This interaction blurred the boundaries between our researcher-participant roles, co-teacher partnership, and our friendship. As a researcher, collaborator, and friend, I was privy to the doubts and frustrations Albert felt. As these three roles converged, so did my desire to both hear Albert’s concerns and encourage him to experiment with envisioning the approach to literacy in the classroom that he wanted to create—one that I already saw him embodying (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Tillmann-Healy 2003). In this spirit, I posed the question again:

**Katie:** If you had all the tools and rules and system at your disposal . . . what might a lesson, or a classroom environment look like where you were saying to yourself, “We're doing it! I'm giving people the opportunity to learn to be more like themselves. They might not take me up on it, but I’m offering it. I don't feel like the system offers it, but I am offering it.” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 43)

This time, something clicked for Albert, and he was able to push the limitations of school into the background while foregrounding his own vision. He noted that listening to the question this time brought him back to his senior seminar class in college saying, “That class, I envisioned being, like, the ultimate class where you could be yourself” (Albert, Interview 2, September
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2022, p. 43). When prompted for a more detailed description, Albert explained how the class was organized, and subsequently how it made him feel.

Albert: We're all going to read this text, whatever it was, and we're all gonna come in like two days later and discuss it. Whatever you want to bring to the discussion, that's what we'll talk about. And, if you choose not to discuss, that's on you . . . So, it puts the onus on us . . . if we didn't have anything to discuss, that was it. But, no one ever did that because people read. People wanted to because it was a genuine conversation . . . That’s what made it fun. There was no, like, grade for it. There was no consequence, necessarily. It was just, like, show up and be there. You’re already here, might as well enjoy it. (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 43)

The experience Albert had in this course reinforced his conception of what literacy could look like in the classroom. Skills and grades did not have to be the end goal for school-based literacies. In fact, Albert’s learning was enhanced when grades were removed from the equation and students were encouraged to bring their ideas to class and collaborate with one another through “genuine discussion” and the sharing of ideas. I wanted Albert to feel empowered to replicate this environment in his own teaching. I had witnessed it during the small class I visited in June of 2022, and felt like we could recreate it in our co-teaching. I suggested we should bring in “That imagined classroom. Like your college seminar where you come in, and not for a grade, the expectation is just ‘let's talk about this’” and Albert responded in a way I did not expect. It turned out his other example of a classroom where students were invited to be more like themselves was my own (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 45).
In April of 2022, Albert asked to sit in on one of my classes. In this interview, as he recalled that class session where my students and I discussed *The Alchemist*—a text the class largely did not enjoy—Albert gave the following explanation:

The kids hated the text, right? Like, there was a genuine dislike for this text, and when I teach students and they dislike a text, there’s no discussion, right? It's me just picking apart different things to discuss and analyze, over-analyze, but that class genuinely did not like that text, but came to the discussion ready to rip the text apart with legitimate reasons . . . That's what an ideal classroom looks like. Students come into the class with things they want to talk about a particular text and, like, interweaving the curriculum into that discussion . . . I think you had points of discussion up on the board, and that's where the curriculum kind of comes in, and it can guide us when we reach wall in discussion…but it’s not like you cut “John” off in order to say, ‘Okay guys, well that's not part of the curriculum right now. We need to get back to the three things I put in the lesson plan for today. (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, pp. 45-46)

I was moved by this compliment from such a respected friend, but I also felt uncomfortable in the tension between my positionality as researcher and my role as a friend-colleague whose in-school literacy practices aligned with his vision of “what an ideal classroom looks like.” However, this was part of Albert’s literacy story, and rather than shy away from it, I responded as his friend, reminding him, “That's where I want to go with our shared class, and I'm willing to try anything you want to try to get us there” (Albert, Interview 2, September 2022, p. 47).

Although Albert felt frustrated and pessimistic in the face of standardized tests and deficit-based models of assessing students' capabilities, I had seen him enact classroom literacy practices that
mirrored that inspirational senior seminar course, and I wanted him to see that he could continue
to do so with our students.

**Living and Teaching in the Tension.** This tension between the way Albert wanted to
teach and the rules he felt he had to conform to was also evident in one of the teacher artifacts he
shared with me. I asked each participant to share a lesson or assignment that they felt embodied
their conception of literacy. I was surprised when Albert chose to share a prompt for a five-
paragraph essay on *Fahrenheit 451*. In my initial analysis of the document, I could see
connections to Albert’s conception of literacy in the assignment, but there were aspects of the
prompt that aligned more closely with an essayist model of writing than I had expected. I
wondered where personal experience and opportunities to move toward deeper understanding of
the self and the world fit into the assignment. I was also curious about his choice to have students
communicate their ideas through the five-paragraph essay model, a structure that is often
privileged in standardized assessments of student writing (Gee, 2015; Knobel & Lankshear,
2014; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). I brought these wonderings to Albert when we co-
analyzed the assignment, the details of which can be found in Figure 8 below.
In my initial, independent examination of the document, I began with the prompts to look for alignment between the assignment Albert offered students and the pieces of his literacy model (see Figure 7). Each of the prompts asked students to consider some aspect of the text—
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characterization, theme, author’s use of allusion—in order to express a point of view on the
text’s significance. Albert ended each prompt with a reminder to use evidence or “concrete
elements” from the text in order to support their point of view (Artifact Fahrenheit 451 Essay
Prompt). Thus, any topic a student chose required them to engage in several literacy practices
Albert valued including taking a stance, building an argument, and supporting that argument
with evidence in order to defend their point of view. However, I kept coming back to the idea of
self-actualization, which was the core of Albert’s literacy model and I struggled to see it
explicitly highlighted in the guidelines for the assignment. Students were able to choose the
prompt they wanted to write about, but based on the prompt alone, it did not seem like they could
develop their own topic. The static versus dynamic character analysis and relationship analysis,
choices one and two respectively, could be tied to a consideration of the self and how one fits
into the world, but there was no language in the prompt that guided students to think about the
ways the characters’ relationships might mirror relationships in their own lives. Addressing a
theme would push students to go into detail about one of the novel’s core messages about life,
but they were only asked to “explain how this theme is presented in the text” not in the world
beyond the text (Artifact Fahrenheit 451 Essay Prompt).

With all of this in mind, I sat down with Albert to take a closer look at the artifact and
hear Albert’s assessment of its connection to his conception of literacy. In some ways, Albert’s
conception of literacy was crossing the boundary into his classroom as he designed writing tasks
for his students, but I wanted to know if there were deeper connections than those I had
uncovered on my own. Although the vehicle for these practices would be a literary analysis
essay, Albert believed these were practices that students would need to use in order to become
thoughtful communicators in the real world. He explained that he offered topic choices so that
students could “write about something they feel they can connect to” and he hoped the topics would also “allow them [students] the freedom to make [their] argument” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 2). For Albert, writing in school would help students “sharpen skills,” but if students were writing about something meaningful to them, they could use writing as a way to “sharpen their identities too” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 4). Albert added that he was not looking for any specific right answers in response to the prompts he posed. In fact, he loved when students “pointed out things that I haven’t even thought about” and asserted that he did not want students to feel like they needed to create a product that simply restated ideas their teacher had said in class (Albert Follow Up Session 2, p. 3). As we looked at his literacy model (Figure 7) in conjunction with the Fahrenheit 451 essay options (Figure 8), he noted that the assignment aligned with literacy practices in the outer rings. Through each of these prompts, students would break down an argument and fight for a point of view, but the inner, more personal rings might not be present because these were not personal narrative essays. However, as we talked, Albert took me through how each prompt had the potential to connect to the self, and these explanations were similar to my initial analysis—our examination of characters could also be an examination of ourselves; exploring themes might be connected to the way we see ourselves and the world.

Given the wording of the prompts, this link to self-actualization still felt tenuous, and I wanted to push Albert to reflect on whether students would pick up on the invitation to explore the self through these essays. In my request for the artifact, I had asked participants to send, “a lesson or project from a class you have taught (past or current) that you feel exemplifies your conception of (or approach to) literacy” (Email to Albert, October 22, 2022), and if self-discovery was not explicitly present in this writing task, could it truly exemplify his conception
of literacy? I grabbed my chance to push for reflection after Albert mentioned, “analyzing, critiquing those characters and really saying what they like and don't like about the personalities is them [students] also defining their personality at the same time” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 7). I followed this with the comments, “Which might not be entirely obvious to them,” and in the recording, I could hear Albert join me on the words “to them” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 7). Albert knew he wanted students to work through their self-understanding as they wrote, but this did not mean that expectation was clear to students. I asked him to think of ways to make the invitation for personal connection more explicit to students. Where would that fit in a conventional literary analysis essay? This moment in our co-analysis of the essay assignment was reminiscent of our earlier interview where Albert felt constrained by systemic expectations around literacy as he tried to imagine a classroom where students could be more like themselves. He could see a clear place for student reflection and personal connection in the conclusion of a conventional essay. He pointed out that he often guides them to use the conclusion to answer the “so what” question and address why what they have written is important, but reflected:

Maybe I don't make it legit to, like, connect with it personally because this is where I'm operating within the framework where there are expectations on us as high school teachers where I know if these students go off to college they are not allowed to use first and second person. That is just like the hierarchy I think that is inhibiting us from pushing our kids to make personal connections in education (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 8).

Albert was torn. He wanted students to consistently use literacy practices—in and out of school—to find themselves and their place in the world. However, he faced the same worry
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reported by many preservice and in service teachers. He worried that breaking the established
rules of essayist literacies would negatively impact students if they did not fit the literacy mold
privileged in the academy and felt pressured to stay within those limits (Britzman, 1995; Freire,
1998; Janks, 2010; Labaree, 1997; Street, 2011). Albert both rejected hierarchical notions of
right and wrong literacies, and did not want to inflict a different kind of damage on students by
failing to prepare them to meet systemic expectations.

As we continued to unpack the five paragraph essay as an example of Albert’s conception
of literacy, I saw that Albert’s subversions of institutional conceptions of literacy were, at least at
times, covert. As previously noted, Albert was open to students creating their own prompts, but
had not explicitly stated this on paper. When I asked Albert why he assigned this writing task as
a five paragraph essay with three examples, he sighed and responded, “Because that’s the way I
was taught” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2, February 2023, p. 10). He seemed dissatisfied with
his own response, but it was important to recognize that, while Albert regularly challenged
institutional conceptions of literacy, he was also in the process of unlearning some of the habits
ingrained in him as a participant in that system (Ghiso, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley &
Crawford-Garrett, 2015). In reality, to Albert, “the five is arbitrary. I’m willing to bend . . . I’m
just giving, like, parameters cause some students need those guidelines, but I guess I'm not
forthcoming in saying, ‘Oh, if you do this in three, that's great’” (Albert, Follow Up Session 2,
February 2023, p. 10). As highlighted in his work with students throughout this portrait, Albert
overtly prioritized the literacy practices of self-actualization, particularly in classroom
discussions, but when it came to writing, he seemed more reluctant to include his subversions in
the directions. Albert did not have a fixed notion of what so-called good writing had to look like,
and through our discussion of his pedagogical practices as he and his students worked on writing,
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it was clear that they were free to adjust prompts to suit their interests and negotiate what the final product would look like as they discovered what they wanted to say. However, our discussion also pushed Albert to acknowledge that the flexibility around assignment parameters, as well as the invitation for students to bring personal connections into their writing, would not be consistently obvious to his students if he did not state it more explicitly.

During our ongoing work together, I have seen Albert look for places to invite personal connections from students in our shared class, and I checked back in with Albert just after the end of the 2022–2023 school year to ask him to reflect on ways his pedagogical choices disrupted the school-based expectations of literacy that he found confining or limiting. We had talked extensively about his desire for students to “learn to be more like themselves” in school. He had expressed both hope and doubt in his ability to create that space with students, and I wondered how he was feeling as another school year came to a close. Albert shared, “I can definitely say that I have continued to push my teaching in a direction that is more personable and allows students to be more of themselves” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 4).

He wrote about a shift in his questioning while reading *Romeo and Juliet* with ninth grade students where he aimed to “ask more opinion questions about what we had just read” and described working with students on a *Romeo and Juliet* writing assignment where he deliberately worked to “bend the assignment to them because nothing gives me more joy than a student finding love in their writing to be able to demonstrate their knowledge, but also ideas” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 4). This statement rang true with the core conception of literacy we had returned to time and again throughout this study. Literacy, in this case writing, was not simply about the students’ ability to report on the plot. It was an opportunity to explore an idea they felt passionate about and share it with others—something that Albert had done with
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his own writing from the time he was a boy. Albert also wrote that he was planning ahead—
brainstorming ideas for new ways to invite students to explore themselves through different
genres of writing. Albert was committed to change. He knew that “If people (students and
teachers) say that they do something because they have always done it that way or have always
seen it that way, then they have stopped growing” (Albert, Follow-Up Reflection, July 2023, p. 1).
Albert would have to continue to contend with systemic barriers created by limited
conceptions of literacy. However, his personal literacy practices had played a significant role in
his ability to navigate complex feelings and experiences throughout his life, and he was on a
journey to continually bring that conception of literacy into his work with students.

Portrait 2: Jane

As noted in the participant descriptions in Chapter Three, Jane is a white, cisgender,
woman in her late twenties. In the initial description of Jane, I also introduced some of the
intricacies of our relationship, details I needed to expand upon here in order to put her portrait in
context. Jane and I were well-established collaborators and friends at the time of this study. We
saw each other as teaching partners. We had been each other’s most consistent allies and
collaborators over the last several years, and I continue to deeply admire her as a person,
educator, and friend. Our friendship was intertwined in each aspect of her participation in the
study because our teaching and our friendship were also inextricably linked (Klein & Taylor,
2023; Taylor & Coia, 2020; Taylor & Klein, 2018). The pedagogical examples she drew on in
our interviews often came from the ninth and twelfth grade curriculums that we co-created.
When I visited her classroom, I sat in on lessons we had co-designed with students who knew
that Jane and I were both responsible for the planning that went into the content they explored in
her class.
Perhaps the only difficulty that arose through Jane’s participation in this study was that our conversational pattern, as well as our collaborative writing, often included finishing each other’s sentences. As I wrote this description, I received a note from Jane in a shared doc I had just edited that read, “Thank god for having a second brain to make sense of the ideas I can’t. LOL” to which I replied “Lol. Same here. Two brains are better than one :)” (Jane and Katie Google Chat, May 26, 2023, p. 1). While this was typically a useful dynamic, it complicated our interviews because I had a continual impulse to finish Jane’s thoughts or fill in the blanks if Jane was searching for a word or memory in response to one of my questions. There was a moment in our second interview when she looked at me as if to say, “Why aren’t you helping me out here?” and I had to address the tension. As Jane described an example of student work—one with which I was already familiar—she asked, “Why am I drawing a blank?” and looked to me for help. I explained:

**Katie:** I have this, like, intense desire to finish your sentences.

**Jane:** [laughing] I know!

**Katie:** Because I know that I can . . . And, I'm just sitting here going, “Well, I know what she's going to say, but don't finish her sentence!” So yes, I'm going to resist finishing your sentences. And I'm really sorry. Because you're probably, like, just say it!

**Jane:** [laughing] Come on, Katie. You know what I’m gonna say. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 13)

After a brief chuckle, we shifted back to the conversation at hand, relieved of the awkwardness that came with deviating from our typical mode of communication. This is just one example of the moments where we both felt the need to call out our working relationship as we talked about Jane’s teaching in the context of the study. In our first interview, she wanted to know if it was
okay for her to talk about the curriculum we worked on together (it was), and, at times, I had to say, “I know we've talked about this before, but . . .” in order to acknowledge that parts of our interview discussions crossed over with topics in our daily interactions. Our interviews also required continuous reflection on my part. I had to coach myself to ask questions even if I thought I knew how Jane would respond and to leave room for pauses and silences while she thought through her responses. I needed to hear Jane’s ideas in Jane’s voice. Her participation in this study and the subsequent portrait of her conception of literacy was an opportunity for me to learn from her experiences, one that required me to be quiet and wait for Jane to find what she wanted to say rather than jumping in to fill in the blanks as we both do naturally in our regular conversations.

By framing this work in an epistemology of friendship, it was clear my friendship and collaboration with Jane were not an impediment to uncovering Jane’s conception of literacy. Quite the opposite. Jane and I were used to talking shop and were comfortable sharing ideas even when we might not see entirely eye to eye. Inviting our existing relationship to cross the boundary into our work as researcher and participant added depth and vulnerability to her portrait (Klein & Taylor, 2023; Taylor & Klein 2018; Taylor & Klein, 2021). Our existing relationship was grounded in honesty, negotiation, encouragement, and compromise; all feminist ways of knowing that served as the foundation for our shared pedagogical approach—an approach through which we sought to challenge normative, deficit-based approaches to literacy (Coia & Taylor, 2013; Forest & Rosenberg, 1997; Klein & Taylor, 2023; Luke & Gore, 1992; McCusker, 2017). This foundation allowed us to quickly dig into Jane’s conception of literacy, her childhood experiences, and her ongoing journey as an educator. Despite my day-to-day knowledge of Jane’s teaching, there was much to be discovered about her literacy history and the
way her conception of literacy and teaching practice had been forged. Thus, I began Jane’s portrait in the space where Jane and I developed our relationship as collaborators and friends—her classroom.

**Jane’s Classroom: A Space for Collaboration**

Classrooms served as the spaces where Jane and I began our work together—work that found its roots in the conceptions of literacy we hoped to share with our students. Therefore, as with Albert, the process of crafting a picture of Jane’s conception of literacy began in the space where our interviews and class visits took place. This was the setting where I met Jane for the first time and where we have done much of our collaborative work. It also served as the space in which she created classroom communities with her students. In Jane’s written reflection on her classroom setting, she noted, “I honestly struggle with coming up with ideas because I’m not the most artistically creative person” (Jane, Email Reflection, May 2023, p. 1). In that respect, some of the items displayed in her classroom were more functional and less personal than those Albert described. Her literary imagery, which included figurative language posters, common grammatical errors, parts of speech/the writing process, were there “in hopes that students, maybe when they are spacing out during a lesson, are still learning something or can always have something they can refer to” (Jane Email Reflection, May 2023, p. 1). Her “Things to Re'Meme’Ber” board used memes to “set up a level of class expectations . . . in a funny way” by using humor to remind students of their shared classroom guidelines. These items were functional rather than personal to her, and she displayed them for the purpose of student reference, as well as to keep the room from looking too cold and institutional due to lack of decoration.
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However, there was one permanent fixture of her classroom setting about which Jane expressed genuine excitement. While the other decorations were functional and/or humorous, the bulletin board called “The Fridge” acted as a collaborative space that students had full control over.

*Figure 9: Jane’s Classroom Bulletin Board The Fridge*

Jane wrote:

The Fridge is my favorite of the bulletin boards because it's a place for students to show off their work that they are particularly proud of, in whatever way they want. I've had quizzes and tests hung up, artwork, essays, anything that they feel they want to display,
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which I think has helped to build a community in my class. (Jane Email Reflection, May 2023, p. 1)

The most personal parts of Jane’s classroom foreshadowed the, multimodal, collaborative nature of Jane’s conception of literacy and highlighted the student-focused nature of her classroom. In addition to the permanent fixtures, various signs of Jane’s students’ collaborations could be found around the room. Jane valued having her students think together as a key part of their analysis process and though they did this digitally on occasion, more often than not, Jane would hang large posters on the walls around her classroom for her students to write on as they talked and shared ideas. Jane shared pictures of these at several points throughout the 2022–2023 school year, and the various topics can be seen below.

*Figure 10: Jane’s Classroom Posters: Collaborative Student Brainstorming*

The poster on the left was from a lesson where students generated questions about themes in Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel *Speak* (1999). They were tasked with avoiding yes and no
questions in order to get into the more analytical and personal aspects of the text. These questions, initially written on sticky notes, were shared on larger posters where students could read and add responses to their peers' questions and ideas, allowing them to steer their own discussions rather than having Jane tell them what to talk about. The right-hand poster was from a brainstorming session. Students were reading Nicola Yoon’s 2016 novel *The sun is also a star* and working on using characterization to think through the motivations behind people’s attitudes, values, and decisions. Jane did not want to simply give students a list of words that could be used to describe characterization, so she began this exploration with an opportunity for students to work together to come up with their own descriptive words. These were left hanging in the classroom for the duration of the unit, so students could draw upon the various descriptors their peers had come up with. Although her students were not pictured here, these artifacts were a sign of the movement and liveliness visitors were likely to see when they stepped into Jane’s classroom, and ways in which her students were consistently represented in that space.

For adult Jane, literacy practices happened in community with others, but through our interviews, I would learn that her conception began as something more solitary and became collaborative over time. The remnants of student work, ideas, and interests were all over the walls. Jane’s classroom was a space where she could enact the literacy practices she valued with her students and colleagues. It was a physical representation of the spirit of collaboration, community, discourse, and creativity Jane aimed to cultivate as an English teacher—a spirit which indicated her practices were more closely ties to feminist new literacies than the autonomous model (Barton & Hamilton, 2017; Coia & Taylor, 2013; Gee, 2010; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; McCusker, 2017). Although this was not obvious to Jane at the start of our interview process, these were the pedagogical practices that grew out of her childhood
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experiences—experiences that were closely tied to the conception of literacy she named and explored throughout the study. In the following section, I discussed the personal experiences that shaped her conception of literacy. While Albert’s literacy history followed a relatively linear path from childhood to adulthood, it was not possible to organize Jane’s in the same manner. Instead, I looked at two significant pieces of Jane’s identity that emerged as we discussed her experiences: Jane the achiever and Jane the multimodal creator. I examined the literacy practices that were embedded within each by weaving in stories and examples from her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Jane’s History: Literacy as an Escape into New Worlds

In order to understand the conception of literacy that Jane defined in our interviews and enacted in her classroom, it was necessary to spend some time with young Jane—unpacking the childhood and adolescent moments that were central to the identity and literacy practices she brought to her teaching. Jane was a self-described “very emotional kid” adding “And now, looking at it, I was just an anxious kid, that's what it was. But at the time we didn’t talk about that. It was not anxiety. It was just emotional” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 23). These were the first words Jane used to describe herself, and as we unpacked her literacy history, those anxious feelings continued to be part of our discussion. Jane, however, was not shy. She also described herself as “very chatty, very social” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 23), and took solace in school, which became a space where she felt accepted by peers and confident in her academic abilities while also balancing pressure to excel.

Jane identified herself as a reader from the pre-kindergarten age of four or five, and she quickly fell in love with the worlds she discovered in books. Once Jane started reading, she realized, “I just loved stories” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 9) and that love fueled the
way she came to think about literacy as she moved through childhood into adulthood. When I asked her from where that love came, she brought us back to her mom saying:

I honestly think my mom. I started reading young . . . We were reading so much as a kid that it was just normal and that was expected. Like, I remember I had a leap pad and the first story that I remember on the leap pad we had was *The Secret Garden* and I read it—it was like a kids version of it—and I read it over and over. I loved it so much and I just have a vivid memory of that thing. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 27)

Jane’s early reading history involved becoming passionately engaged in texts. At this time, her reading was mostly an individual endeavor. She wanted to experience the story “over and over” and found reading to be “an escape. Less of, like, an escape because I wanted to escape life, but that it was lives that I would never have lived” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 27). As a child, Jane was drawn to stories like *The Secret Garden* and *The Magic Treehouse* that gave her opportunities to explore worlds and lives to which she did not have access. She told me that *The Magic Treehouse* books were especially meaningful to her because “I loved the adventure, and I loved that fantasy element of it” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 28). She continually made a point of clarifying that she did not feel a need to escape her own life, but loved that stories could allow her to travel to other worlds and live vicariously. In her teaching, Jane was inspired by Rudine Sims Bishop’s (2015) description of texts as mirrors and windows. In Jane’s words, this was the idea of “a book reflecting your own experience back to you” as a mirror, “but also a book that can be a window and an insight into an experience that's different from yours” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 14). Even before Jane heard the terms mirrors and windows, the seeds of this approach to texts were planted in the first stories she was drawn to—ones that were imaginative and magical in ways that were different from her day-to-day life.
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As she got older, Jane would “go through books so fast and just stay up so late to finish a book because I just wanted to keep going” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 28). Jane’s passion for reading was born early in her life and it became a driving force in her journey as well as her road to becoming a teacher. However, Jane’s description of her love of stories also shed light on the connection between passion and tenacity that emerged as a repeated pattern as she walked me through her literacy history. When Jane was passionate about something—reading, academics, friends, dance—she devoted herself to it fully and pushed herself to exceed expectations, which both fostered confidence and fueled the anxiety she identified as we unpacked her childhood literacies.

**Jane the Achiever.** As the youngest of three siblings and daughter of a preschool teacher, the process of learning to read was one of Jane’s earliest memories. When Jane’s mother started teaching her brothers to read, she was determined to do so as well. Jane shared that her mother “started us early. I wanted to be like my brothers, and if they were doing something, I wanted to do it. So, I think that was a push” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 9). She expanded upon this later, explaining, “my brothers were doing it and I wanted to do it too. I needed to do it. If they’re doing it, I need to do it” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 27). Jane felt an admiration for her brothers that came with a sense of competition. She would not be left behind as her older brothers took on a new phase in their development, and it was interesting that she shifted from the word “want” to “need” as she described the feeling she had when she and her siblings started to read with their mom. These comments were indicative of a core part of Jane’s personality. She was (and continues to be) a go-getter. When Jane wanted to accomplish something, she pushed herself to bring it to fruition, and she valued meeting challenges head on rather than shying away from difficulties. This detail helped to contextualize several aspects of
Jane’s literacy story. It was central to the start of her love of stories as well as her approach to reading, writing, creating, and communicating in the classroom.

Unlike Albert, Jane did not dream of being a teacher from a young age. However, she loved learning, and school was a positive place where she built a strong sense of self and had an active social life. Early on, Jane’s family “instilled in me that school work was super important” and Jane internalized this message (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 25). She shared several times that she “loved school” adding once while laughing “I’ll say it loud and proud. I love being in class. I love learning” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 8). Part of this love for school came from the confidence she felt about her capabilities in that environment, which grew out of her early experiences as a student. Since Jane already knew how to read upon entering school, she was quickly assigned the role of teacher’s assistant, “helping the other kids because I already knew how to do it” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 9). Although she would not consider teaching as a possible career path until right before starting college, Jane the literacy teacher was present within Jane the little girl who kindly collaborated with peers and whose teachers saw her as “really helpful to friends in school” right from her first year of K–12 education (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 9).

Through these early interactions, Jane cultivated an enthusiasm for school that followed her throughout her childhood into her teenage years. However, like many young women, Jane also felt a pressure to excel and to be seen as good, and she associated that pressure with the anxiety she continues to work through today. In Klein and Taylor’s Our bodies tell the story: Using feminist research and friendship to reimagine education and our lives (2023), Emily Klein shared the following reflection, “My inner ‘good girl’ wanted to do well—perform in ways that were recognized by the academy” (p. 23). While Klein’s words referred to the world of academia
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in the context of a university setting, they mirrored the same demand to conform to institutional
rules that Jane felt from early elementary school. School was a place where Jane could be social,
but also where learning needed to be prioritized and standards of behavior had to be met. Jane
emphasized, “I loved school. I loved learning, I loved my friends, and I loved being chatty. But I
was not disrespectful-chatty . . . when it came time to do the work, I did my work, and I liked
being a good student” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 23). Through comments such as this, it
became clear that Jane took pride in trying hard and pushing herself to excel, but also wanted to
be seen as someone who understood the academic and behavioral expectations that led to praise.
Even in less engaging high school classes where Jane felt teachers followed a “mold” of: read,
answer questions, write an essay, and repeat (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 5), Jane
remained focused on high grades and success, particularly since the expectation set at home was
that C’s were unacceptable (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 5; Jane, Follow-Up Audio
Reflection, July 2023). Thus, Jane looked to excel academically and behaviorally, and in a later
reflection added “that validation throughout school really motivated me” (Jane, Follow-Up
Audio Reflection, July 2023). She pushed herself to embody the patriarchal mold of the good,
respectful, and obedient student, and this pressure to conform rather than question also cultivated
Jane’s fear of failure (Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Kamler, 1997; Klein & Taylor, 2023; Knobel,
1999; Meyer & Tilland-Stafford, 2016). Her description of her in-school behavior and attention
to goodness reminded me of the elementary school girls in Kamler’s (1997) study where the
teacher positioned little girls who sat still and raised their hands as the model of good behavior
for learning. Jane had learned what Hughes-Decatur (2011) referred to as the “grammar of the
body” which set the rules for when to speak, how to speak, and how to engage in the work of
school. (Kamler, 1997; Meyer & Tilland-Stafford, 2016). For Jane, conformity to these rules led
to in-school success that made her feel accomplished as a student, but also came with an emotional toll from the pressure to maintain her status as a high achiever.

Jane’s high-pressure work ethic extended to her after school activities as well. She began dancing at the age of five, and by middle school, “my life was dance and school” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 24). Jane danced five days a week, made time for homework and assignments, balanced spending time with school friends and dance friends, and “made sure I got done with my responsibilities” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 25). Jane looked back fondly on these formative experiences, but also reflected that through both school and dance, she internalized the pressure to live up to high achievement standards. She noted that her anxiety probably came from “the fear of not . . . living up to that expectation” (Jane Interview 2, May 2023, p. 25). As she thought through the influence of high expectations during her young adulthood, Jane added:

It made me a good student. I got through life. I have discipline, and I'm somebody who does what they need to do . . . I don't do anything half-assed. I have a task that needs to be completed. I'm gonna complete that task because I'm asked to do it . . . but I don’t think I needed the anxiety that came along with it all those years. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 25)

Jane’s comments reinforced the pride she felt in her ability to take on many responsibilities and follow through with them—to “get through life” even when it was difficult and to do so in a way that was thorough and well executed. However, Jane's reflection that she did not need all of the anxiety that accompanied her response to high expectations was also telling. She was proud of her achievements, but also was also motivated by the fear of failing to live up to the expectations
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that were set for her, which might also be interpreted as the fear of being seen as something other than good.

Although comments on achievement in school and dance were not directly related to Jane’s in-school literacy practices, they added layers to who Jane was as a child and who she would continue to become as she moved into adulthood. Jane brought passion and enthusiasm to activities she felt committed to—reading, school, friendship, dance, and later, teaching. She took responsibility seriously and was motivated to tackle challenges head on rather than avoiding them. However, she also experienced tension between her deep desire to be seen as successful, and the sometimes overwhelming fear and anxiety of letting others down. These pieces of Jane the young achiever would become part of Jane the teacher, as her approach to literacy practices in school, along with her hopes for students, were tied to the childhood feelings and experiences described here. However, before delving more deeply into Jane the teacher, I needed to explore the additional shades of Jane’s identity that influenced the way she thought about literacy and education. In the section that follows, I examined the out-of-school literacies Jane shared throughout our interviews and the subsequent discovery of her literacy of dance.

**Jane the Multimodal Creator.** As Jane reflected on her love of stories, I learned that she did not see herself as a writer or creator. Although she wrote essays for academic purposes and enjoyed teaching the writing process, she did not engage in creative writing as an outlet the way Albert did with his comics and poems. Instead, Jane described herself as a “consumer” of stories on multiple occasions throughout our interviews, and noted that books were not the only genre of texts she was passionate about. Her love of stories began with the previously mentioned children’s books, but as Jane got older, she came to see texts as more than words on a page. Anything she consumed—pop culture, art, TV, movies, books, and music—were texts to be
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examined (Janks, 2010; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Kosnik et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020). Jane did not see herself as a casual consumer. She brought the same tenacity reflected in her dedication to school and dance to the texts she explored in her free time. By investigating texts from every angle, she carried her love of learning into her personal literacies. Jane explained, “I always wanted to know everything I could about whatever it was I was consuming, and I wanted to understand everything there was to understand” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 24). For Jane, literacy was about understanding, thinking, deeply, and diving into a text’s layers. Jane was not content to engage with texts for entertainment alone. She searched for analytical articles and videos to add layers to her initial reaction to a text. She would consume, think, research, analyze, and share her thoughts with others by talking about the content she had consumed. She “loved IMDB” (the Internet Movie Database) and recalled that from the time she was a teenager, “watching something and then just, like, wanting to know everything there is to know about it” from the creation of the story itself to the histories of the actors involved (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 24). This process was a central part of Jane’s literacy practices. Jane wanted to escape into the stories she was passionate about, but she also wanted to pull them apart to see what made them tick. In this respect, Jane’s literacy practices were inherently multimodal and intertextual. While multimodality referred to the different formats or modes a text might come in, intertextuality referred to the interplay between texts that guided a reader as they engage in the social practice of constructing meaning (Damico, 2005; Gee & Greene, 1998; Janks, 2010; Saint-Pierre, 2000). In the context of Jane’s literacy story, reading was an act of making meaning out of a text—whether the modality consisted of words on a page, images, sounds, or a combination of communicative elements—that could be enhanced through side-by-side readings of texts about
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the subject at hand (Damico, 2005; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Pahl & Roswell, 2012). While Jane the achiever adhered to traditional in-school literacies, outside of school, young Jane continued to engage in rich literacy practices that went beyond skills-based conceptions of reading and writing. Jane leveraged her skills as a reader, writer, thinker, and communicator to examine the texts she loved and use them to make sense out of her life experiences and the world around her. In school, Jane questioned the purpose of engaging with texts simply by reading and answering questions, but out of school, she conducted self-motivated analysis of the meanings housed within the texts she enjoyed.

However, this exploration of Jane’s multimodal, intertextual literacies added another layer to her literacy history. While Jane did not initially claim creator as part of her personal literacies, we came to see that the multimodal and intertextual literacy practices she brought to her reading of texts was also present in the texts she created as a dancer and choreographer.

When I initially asked Jane about her own creative practices, we had the following exchange:

   **Katie:** What about creating stuff when you were young? Did you do any creating that might be considered a literacy practice?

   **Jane:** I think I was more of a consumer. I've not—I never considered myself like a writer. I can write, but I don't. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 25)

In wording my question, I intentionally left out the words write and writing, opting for the word “stuff” to leave space for Jane to define what counts as a text created through literacy practices (Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). Jane’s first instinct was to interpret creating stuff as writing texts, noting that she could write competently, but she did not see herself as a writer. She saw herself as someone who loved to engage with pre-existing texts rather than as someone who created texts of her own. Although Jane’s definition of texts pushed
beyond the boundaries of traditional models of literacy, her conception of what it meant to use her literacy practices in an act of creation remained tied to the conventional written word (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). While the texts she consumed came in multimodal forms, her own creative habits did not involve conventional writing, so she did not claim creator as part of her literacy practices.

As Jane explained her role as consumer rather than writer, she returned to her history as a dancer, and this is where a new idea began to take shape. Jane explained, “My creativity is limited to dance. I think that's, like, my outlet of creativity. So I was never creating writing. Dance was my outlet of creativity” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 25). While Jane meant for this comment to confirm that she was a consumer of texts rather than a creator, it pushed my thinking in the opposite direction. I was intrigued by Jane’s statement that her “creativity is limited to dance”—particularly her use of the word “limited.” Dance felt far from limited as a form of creativity, and as I reflected on this, I saw parallels between the practices that went into crafting a dance and those that are inherent to the writing process. I wondered if Jane, who had experience as both a dancer and choreographer, might see these parallels as well, so I asked her, “Is there a literacy practice to dance? To choreography?” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022). Jane paused to think before responding:

Ahhh, I guess there could be because you have to have an understanding of a few different things, right? Like, you have to understand counts and music . . . so you're interpreting music. You have to have an understanding of movement, and how movement works with music, and how something looks on a body, on a person doing it, right? So like, I think maybe there is a level of analysis that comes with listening to a song and knowing how your body could move to that song, or how counts work with the
movement and what would look good. Um, there’s a level of thinking involved. And, it's difficult. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, pp. 25–26)

I could feel Jane working out this connection between literacy and dance in her response, looking for the areas of connection and overlap. Like her engagement with the texts she consumed, the creation of a dance was inherently multimodal and intertextual. Choreographing a dance involved interpretation of sounds, lyrics (sometimes), and movements. The creator had to first analyze one text, in this case a song, in order to marry sound and body together, creating a new text—the dance itself. This act of creation was a process, and like writing a conventional text, that process involved challenges that the creator may have to struggle through in order to arrive at a finished piece (Janks, 2010; Knobel, 1999; Muhammad, 2020).

As Jane worked through this new idea about choreography, she continued to reflect, becoming more enthusiastic as she added:

Yeah, yeah. You’re trying to get them [the audience] to feel something, I guess, to feel inspired, or to feel entertained . . . you're maybe trying to convey a message. So you're hearing a song and then there's a story that goes along with that song. I think storytelling and music go hand in hand, and I think dancing and storytelling go hand in hand. So, yes.

I think there is literacy in choreography. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 26)

This further description added to the literacy practices she had already identified within dance. Dance was storytelling, and storytelling involved crafting a text for an audience with which to interact. The text did not have to be crafted in words alone, but could be made by using the body along with the music as the language through which the creator’s message could be conveyed.

After this interview, Jane continued to think about the literacy of dance. She shared a video of a piece she choreographed to Sara Bareilles’ (2010) “Send Me to the Moon.” Jane
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paired this artifact with audio recorded reflections on how she created the piece, and later, shared written commentary interpreting the dance and connecting it to her literacy practices. Jane chose to both speak through and write her reflections, selecting the medium that felt most meaningful to her in the moment. To honor Jane’s multimodal, intertextual literacies, I included segments from her recording in the figures below so that her words could be both heard and read as she intended. I intertwined Jane’s voice with her written reflections and images of her movement that matched with the parts of the dance she analyzed in the recordings and written responses below.

Figure 11: Jane’s Choreography Reflection Part 1—Introducing the Song

Jane started the reflection (linked above) with the feelings she associated with Bareilles’s song—feelings that created the sense of tension she brought into her choreography. Jane identified love, desire, and longing as the primary emotions in the song, and described the push and pull between feeling that love is out of reach and continuing to hope that it can be attained. When I asked Jane to expand on some of the lyrics that led her to this interpretation, she singled out the lines:

    Holding my breath
    Last one I've got left 'till I see you
    Deliver my heart
    With the pieces and parts of me left. (Bareilles, 2010)

Jane wrote that these lines encapsulated:
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That idea of holding your breath, waiting for a moment or any bit of time you have with a person and not knowing when the next time will come. I think that definitely influenced my choreography and can be seen through the movement that shifts between heaviness and lightness (Jane, Written Reflection, July 2023, p. 1)

The shifts between heaviness and lightness were apparent in Jane’s movement, as shown in the moment depicted below.

*Figure 12: Jane in Motion: Heavy Lightness*

As Bareilles (2010) gently sang “bringing me one step closer to you,” with soft, plucking guitar sounds underneath her voice, Jane shifted from gliding movements to the crouched shape in the first panel, pushing her hands as if against a wall or a door before springing up, reaching outward and leaping forward on the words “one step closer.” The push and spring depicted coming out of the heavy moment of waiting and uncertainty into the act of reaching out for what the character in the dance desired.
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Jane’s verbal and written discussion of this song suggest that she engaged in what Rosenblatt (1994) referred to as an aesthetic reading. Jane began her interpretation with emotion bringing attention to “what the words [were] stirring up” within her and using that to take a stance on the meaning of the song and translating it into her own choreography (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 31). Jane prioritized the emotions that influenced her interpretation of the song and inspired her to layer this text onto her own creation—one that used the body to convey the meanings she drew from Bareilles’ (2010) work.

In the next segment of her reflection, Jane more specifically described the connection between the emotions in the song and the choices she made as a choreographer.

*Figure 13: Jane's Choreography Reflection 2—Breaking Down the Movement*

In the recording above, Jane delved more deeply into her creative process. While her aesthetic reading of the song began with emotions, the next step in the creative process required Jane to look at the more technical components of the music to which Bareilles’ words were set. Jane used music-specific language by referencing the syncopated, waltz-like rhythm of the song to describe the sounds that drove her creative decisions. This balance between Jane’s experiential knowledge and the technical knowledge of music and dance aligned with key concepts from feminist new literacies, which posited that the rules or skills associated with the creation of a text
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were not the desired end product, but a set of tools through which a creator might express themselves to someone else (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; hooks, 1994; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). Jane’s purpose in the creative process went beyond practicing the technical aspects of music and dance, just as a meaningful writing process goes beyond practicing the skill of sentence construction. However, Jane—much like a writer—leveraged her skills to help shape the emotions evoked by the song into a movement story she could convey to an audience. The “differences in fast and slow movement” and the pauses, holds, and drops Jane wrote into the piece grew out of “the music and that feelings of longing” (Jane, Choreography Reflection Part 2, February 2023). Jane’s experiential knowledge worked in tandem with her skill-based knowledge of music and dance as she planned the sequence of movements that became the piece she created.

In order to show Jane’s creative intentions in action, I pulled moments from the dance she created and shared them in Figure 14 below.

*Figure 14: Jane in Motion: Dropping, Holding, and Reaching*
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The movements depicted above were sequential in Jane’s dance and aligned with the lyrics “Every last day seemed to carry the weight of a lifetime” (Bareilles, 2010). As this line began, Jane moved from sweeping across the floor to suddenly stopping and dropping her upper body towards the ground as if pushed down by the “weight” referenced in the lyrics of the song—another example of the heaviness and lightness she aimed to play with in the dance. In the instrumental interlude that followed, Jane brought her hands to her hand as a signal of turmoil before simultaneously reaching forward with her arms and legs while leaning back as the next set of lyrics kicked in. Each of these movements conveyed the push and pull that Jane intended to bring into the piece. Thus, Jane wrote her interpretation of the song into existence using the movement of her body rather than letters and words.

Through sharing her choreography with me, Jane started to see the literacy of dance in a new light, writing:

The role of a choreographer is to take a piece of music and create moves and tell a story through those moves. The creation process can be fun and low stakes, but it can also be cathartic and a way for a person to work through emotions or experiences, which can also be very similar to the writing process for people. (Jane Choreography Reflection Part 2, February 2023)

Although Jane was a consumer of texts, for the first time, she saw herself as a creator who could express her point of view through the medium of dance. Choreographing was storytelling, and like the writing process, required her to tune into her emotions as she interpreted a text and then use her technical skills as a dancer to communicate a story to her audience. Like Albert, Jane saw the act of creation as an opportunity to work out and release her feelings about experiences in the
world. And, Jane built on her conception of literacy as she realized the creation of a text could be achieved through multiple modes, not just the written word.

Without knowing it, Jane’s choreography also pushed the boundaries of embodied literacies, which are often discussed in terms of how our bodies—and the emotions felt within them—take part in our construction of knowledge as we engage with texts and create written texts of our own (Fleckenstein, 1999; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Ghiso, 2015; hooks; 1994; Jones, 2013; King, 2019). Jane’s work leaned into feminist notions of embodiment that challenge the patriarchal positioning of the mind and body as separate entities (Fleckenstein, 1999; Klein & Taylor, 2023; McBride, 2021). McBride (2021) defined embodiment as “the conscious knowing of and living as a body, not as a thing distinct from the self or the mind” (p. 19). Thus, the feelings of longing and desire Jane expressed in her dance were not separate from her body. Instead, they were written into being through the signs and symbols created by her body, taking the internal ideas that could not be seen and allowing them to pass through her body making them corporeal (Fleckenstein, 1999; McBride, 2021). This process was reminiscent of Fleckenstein’s (1999) discussion of the somatic mind which positions the mind and body as “a permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity” (p. 286). In positioning Jane’s dance as a text, we also positioned Jane as a writer. As Jane embraced choreography as a form of writing, she broke through the precedent set by western male philosophers who argued that truth was found in the mind—a mind that needed to detach from our emotional, irrational bodies (Fleckenstein, 1999; Klein & Taylor, 2023; McBride, 2021). In dance, truth could not exist simply in the mind, but had to be brought into the world through the intertextual play between sound, words, and body. By examining choreography through the lens of feminist new literacies, Jane could be both a consumer and a writer who relied on
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...intertextuality to create pieces designed to enlighten and entertain an audience. From childhood, dance was a part of her history and identity, but now it could be embraced as part of her personal literacies. Throughout each part of her reflection, Jane enacted an intertextual reading of her own choreography. She offered an explanation of her interpretation of the song and broke down the ways her movements were used to convey that interpretation of the song’s message. Jane was not simply reading Bareilles’s song in the way one might read the written word, but interpreted multiple layers of communication—instruments, words, and vocal sounds—in order to create a new text that intertwined Bareilles work with the language of movement that Jane wrote in response to the original piece.

In learning about Jane’s literacy history, her current conception of literacy began to take form. Jane’s passion for stories grew out of her childhood experiences as a young reader, and throughout her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, Jane turned to stories to both escape into the lives of others and see her own life reflected. The literacy practices Jane employed stemmed from the sense of purpose she attributed to the task at hand—one that was often tied to exploration and expression. As a student, high expectations in school and a desire to be seen as good contributed to Jane’s fear of failure, and pushed her to conform to conventional practices in the classroom. While she adopted a far more complex, multimodal, and intertextual conception of literacy in her personal literacy practices, the power of hegemonic, skills-based models of literacy that privileged traditional forms of reading and writing obscured her view of herself as a creator. Yet, as our investigation of her choreography would suggest, Jane’s conception of literacy was not fixed. When faced with the invitation to examine the possible literacy practices in choreography, Jane found new meaning in her most significant creative outlet: dance.
Each of these pieces of Jane’s history shaped her conception of literacy and crossed the boundary into her classroom. The fear of failure born in school became the compassion Jane brought to her future students. She dedicated herself to alleviating anxiety in the young adults with whom she worked, noting that we have to “help [students] work through the anxiety and stress of [school]” because “a test is not what determines whether they’re a good student or not” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 19). As a teacher, Jane broke the conventions of her own schooling as she shared her multimodality with students and looked to foster an environment where they would see value in themselves without taking on the pressures for goodness and rightness that were ingrained in Jane during her own schooling. Like Albert, Jane ultimately saw literacy practices as a means through which the self and the world could be both explored and shared.

**Defining Jane’s Conception of Literacy: Centering Exploration**

Through working closely with Jane, I had seen her literacy practices in action and discussed ideas around literacy with her well before we would do so in the context of this study. However, as she talked with me, invited me into her classroom, and shared artifacts from her life, I quickly realized how rare it was to have the opportunity to delve so deeply into a concept with a trusted friend and colleague. As with Albert, Jane and I collaborated in the creation of her literacy model, and she had the opportunity to review and make suggestions about its creation at multiple points throughout the study (Leavy & Harris, 2019). At first, this collaborative process seemed simple, but as I spent more time with Jane’s portrait, questions arose, and we had to negotiate which elements of the original model to keep and which to adjust—a process that I expand upon in my explanation of Figure 15 below.
The initial version of the model in Figure 15 grew out of our interview discussions, my visits to Jane’s classroom, and the artifacts she shared. As evidenced in her literacy history,
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Jane’s conception of literacy was complex, multimodal, and intertextual. It reflected her broad definition of what counts as a text and acknowledged the technical aspects of literacy, such as skills and strategies, alongside the more personal practices that individuals might use to express themselves. Initially, it seemed that Jane saw texts, skills, strategies, and practices as guiding the literate person towards one greater purpose, and this interpretation was supported by the purpose-driven nature of Jane’s teaching. In a reflection on the model, she suggested minor adjustments all of which are captured in Version 2 of the model. These included de-emphasizing the focus on grammar and sentence structure by grouping them together, adding drafting and revising as significant literacy skills, and adding “making connections” to the strategies category as “it's a strategy that students can use to make meaning of the texts that they are engaging with” (Jane, Email Reflection, February 2023).

Overall, however, Jane felt her conception of literacy was captured in this initial version of the model. She liked the idea of centering purpose and wrote, “I think the word purpose is the perfect center to my concept of literacy. The ‘why’ is really important to me and I think it should be important for students to understand in their educational journey (Jane, Email Reflection, February 2023). Jane saw purpose as having a clear explanation for why a particular literacy practice or set of practices was employed. In our interviews, Jane also highlighted the importance of developing a clear why for any literacy tasks in the classroom. She grounded her curriculum development in Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) essential questions, which she argued, “take the messages or take what the author's trying to say and kind of connect me [the reader] to bigger picture stuff, or real world stuff, or individual stuff, things that relate to the student or the student's world” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 6). Jane wanted to ensure that any time students explored a text in class, they would be able to say to themselves, “I understand why I'm
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reading this because I can see how it can help me understand my world better” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 6). Thus, we agreed that purpose rang true as the center of her conception of literacy. Purpose was twofold. Jane wanted students to feel that there was an identifiable reason to engage with a text and to look for connections between texts and their own lives. However, as I continued to wade through the layers of her history, the idea of purpose remained central to Jane’s approach to teaching, but it felt as if we had not yet unearthed the core of her personal conception of literacy.

Months later, as I reread the story of Jane’s childhood love of stories and their ability to transport her to new worlds, I wrote the following reflection and shared it with Jane to revisit our discussion of her literacy model:

What if the center of Jane’s conception of literacy is exploration rather than purpose? Jane definitely wants there to be a why for her students, but in life, as well as in the classroom, that why (for Jane) might be exploration. We know the purpose for Jane is not to practice a skill or find the right answer. The purpose, time and again, seems to be to explore, to figure things out, to understand the self and the world. (Katie, Journal Reflection, July 2023)

At first, Jane’s re-examination of the model remained tied to students. She wanted to make sure that declaring exploration as the purpose of our literacy practices left room for students to make “choices for themselves” and would not come across as “just me telling them what to do or what to think” (Jane, Audio Recorded Reflection, July 2023). As I sat with Jane’s response, I wondered what she would say if she put the classroom to the side and looked at the model while asking herself, “Is this how I see literacy for me in my life?” (Katie, Audio Note to Jane, July 2023). Jane sat with this question for a few days before sharing her thoughts, this time in writing.
Looking back at the model, and taking into consideration that it covers my literacy practices overall, I think exploration does fit . . . I think I'm always putting myself into the situation I'm reading about or into the mind of the character that I'm watching on TV and want to explore worlds and ideas that maybe I would never have experienced or thought of on my own. Even with dance/choreography, I think the whole idea is to be presented with movement and then figure out how to explore the emotions or feelings that can be conveyed through that movement . . . it can also relate to the classroom because even though I want my students to always find purpose in what they do, the process of doing that can be directly connected to the idea of exploration. (Jane, Email Reflection, July 2023, p. 1)

For Jane, literacy could lead to many forms of exploration including but not limited to: different worlds and lives, alternate points of view, our perspectives/beliefs, and our emotions. These thoughts on exploration echoed much of Jane’s literacy history. She was a child who read to explore new worlds. As her conception of texts became more multimodal, she relied on skills, strategies, and practices as a means through which to engage with texts and explore herself and the world around her. In the classroom, she hoped to be clear with students about the why behind a lesson or task so they could engage in explorations of their own. For Jane, “literacy practices [were] ways in which we approach a text” and texts could be “anything that we’re taking in and consuming to make sense of” such as videos, podcasts, books, and images as possible examples (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 4). While “the basic idea of literacy [was] reading and writing” richer literacy practices involved “engaging with a text and thinking about it, and making connections to it, and using it for our own growth and for our own understanding of the world” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 4).
Jane’s conception of literacy extended beyond the autonomous model privileged in schools. Jane—like scholars in the fields of feminist literacies, new literacies, and critical literacies—challenged the notion that literacy was defined by a fixed and neutral set of skills (Collin & Street, 2014; Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Kalman, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, 2019; Rose 2005; Saint-Pierre, 2000). While skills related to reading and writing (structuring a paragraph, identifying parts of speech, recognizing literary terms, etc.) could be useful, she worried that positioning skills as literacy’s primary defining characteristics, reduced it to “a checklist. I can do this skill, and I’m good to move to the next grade or I’m able to move to the next thing” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 15). For Jane, this was an oversimplification. The real stuff of literacy involved bringing together the skills, strategies, and practices we develop through our experiences (in and out of school) and using them to make meaning within a variety of social contexts (Collin & Street, 2014; Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Rose, 2005; Saint Pierre, 2000). Jane’s enthusiasm for stories, desire to investigate texts by digging into the details, and experiences as a dancer/choreographer shaped her personal conception of literacy, and like Albert, she invited these personal literacies into her work with students.

Sharing Literacy: Jane and Her Students

Much of Jane’s literacy history shaped the teaching philosophy she brought with her into the classroom. Jane was inspired to share the love of learning and storytelling that grew throughout her childhood and adolescence with her students. However, she also carried the anxiety that was born out of pressure to maintain her status as a good, high achieving student and daughter. Most of the English classrooms Jane experienced as a student were ones where adults passed on information and students individually reported responses. Jane was not looking to
reproduce this environment with her students, nor did she want to pass the pressure to be *good* and *right* on to her own students. She wanted them to feel empowered to face challenges and try things out even when they felt difficult. She approached them with empathy and a sensitivity toward their own anxieties and insecurities that was informed by the fear of failure she felt she could have done without as a child and young adult. Jane and I spoke extensively about her philosophy of education throughout our interviews, and I visited several class sessions where students worked collaboratively and shared ideas. I began this section of her portrait examining how Jane aimed to enact her conception of literacy with her students and followed this with vignettes that showed her conception in action—one from my class visits and two from shared experiences with students that we unpacked during our interviews.

**A Developing Philosophy for Literacy in the Classroom.** As previously noted, Jane came to the decision to become a teacher right before entering college. Her plan was to attend college for dance therapy, but switched gears, “probably because of my senior year English teacher. She taught class in a way that I had never experienced before” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 2). Jane went into detail about why she loved this class, telling me about their creative writing projects, analysis of different media like paintings and films, and their class blog where they shared ideas. Jane reflected that this teacher, “incorporated a lot of different techniques, really things that I do now in my own classroom, to make it interesting, and to make it more enjoyable for us students” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 2). Jane saw the multimodality in her personal literacies reflected in this teacher’s practices, and that boundary crossing inspired the choices she would make as a teacher in the future. Jane felt her students engaged in rich literacy practices that they brought to school with them, explaining:
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I think [about] the discourse that they engage in between themselves . . . I listen to them get into heated debates about shows that they watch or about movies that they've seen, and they come up with these really great arguments and really great, like, evidence for why they think their show is the best or why they think their movie is the best, and they're doing the skills that we're asking them to do when they're reading a book. Right? Come up with a statement and come up with a claim and then support that claim with evidence. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 20)

Jane could see the similarities in her students’ day-to-day discourse and the literacy practices she asked them to employ when examining a text in school. Like her twelfth grade English teacher, Jane invited these practices into the classroom. She wanted her students to see that in-school literacies were “not just reading and writing,” a sentiment that was echoed by both Albert and Sebastian. She worried, however, that students struggled to recognize the connection between in-school and out-of-school literacies and wanted to disrupt this binary.

I think that sometimes students have that very limited view of “I'm in English class. So I'm going to read it, and I'm going to write. And, it's going to be a story. It's going to be a book. It's going to be a poem.” But, helping them to see that you're taking information in, and it's not in a traditional sense. You're taking it from a video. You're taking it from a podcast, a news article, whatever. But you're still learning something . . . you're still taking this information and making the connections. And you're analyzing what they're trying to say. And you're digging deeper into something. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 23)

While most of her examples of English teachers followed what she referred to as “traditional” practices that involved “being able to recall information” with “no connection to me,” Jane
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wanted to reframe the definition of literacy in the classroom. The focus was not reading a literary
text and writing an essay, it was about learning something and using multiple modalities to dig
into the topic at hand (Janks, 2010; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel &
Lankshear, 2014).

Jane’s approach to literacy in the classroom was also grounded in the relationships she
built with students, and this too came from her experiences with the influential teacher
mentioned above. Jane told me:

She was personable. I looked at her not just as my teacher. She was a person. She would
try to relate to us, and she would tell us things about her own life that helped us to feel
like she existed outside of the classroom. (Jane, Interview 1, September, 2022, pp. 2–3)

Jane was inspired by a teacher who brought her authentic self into the classroom, and like
Albert, Jane made it a priority to do this with her own students as well. Early in her career she
felt a pressure to prove, “I am the authority figure and you have to listen to me because I’m the
teacher,” especially due to her age and small stature, but had spent the last few years of her
teaching career working on, “tearing down that perception of a teacher” (Jane, Interview 1,
September 2022, p. 12). Jane actively disrupted hegemonic school structures by pushing herself
to drop the mask of authority figure who delivered content for students to absorb and called
herself to “show [students] that I struggle with things . . . and I’m still learning” (Jane, Interview
1, September 2022, p. 12). Rather than seeing herself as the head of the class who deposited
information into the minds of her students, she wanted to share her humanity with students so
they could collaboratively learn, make mistakes, and take risks together (Coia & Taylor, 2013;
Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Forest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; McCusker, 2017; Pallapathou,
2018). If literacy practices ultimately were a means of purpose driven exploration, the teacher-
student relationship had to be one where students felt safe to “explore difficult topics” and “dive
into stuff that they wouldn’t, maybe be open to diving into” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022,
p. 24). Each time I visited Jane’s classroom, I witnessed this spirit of collaborative learning
where students were encouraged to engage in literacy practices like discussing, analyzing,
questioning, and challenging in order to engage with texts for the purpose of co-constructing
knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that this did not always go perfectly, nor should we
expect it to. There were students who dove in enthusiastically and students who resisted the
invitation to dive in and explore. But, Jane extended that invitation consistently, and watching
those who took her up on it provided insights into the ways in which her conception of literacy
crossed the boundary into her classroom.

Engaging in Collaboration. My second visit to Jane’s classroom took place in late
November 2022—in the awkward weeks between Thanksgiving and winter break. This was a
small, ninth grade class that she co-taught with Anne, another English teacher who was also a
certified teacher of students with disabilities (TOSD). The ten students in the class—six boys and
four girls—were spread out in a variety of seating arrangements. Two large tables contained
groups of three students, a pair of boys sat together at a large table in the back, a solo boy
claimed a standing desk next to the group of two, and a solo girl sat in the back corner. The class
had been reading Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) novel Speak, and were honing in on the
author’s use of symbolism to express the inner thoughts and feelings of the main character.

Jane greeted her students as they entered the classroom, taking a moment to personally
check in with a student who Jane later confirmed was returning from an extended absence. Jane's
demeanor was simultaneously casual, friendly, and direct. Students chatted with each other and
their two teachers as they came in, but they did not delay in readying themselves for class, taking
out their books, computer, and other materials while also discussing The World Cup and the long weekend. As students settled into their seats, Jane addressed the whole class saying, “Alright. Today, we are going to wrap up”—but switched gears suddenly, mid-sentence to ask, “First of all, how was our weekend?” (Jane, Class Visit, November 2022, p. 1). As Jane shared in an earlier interview, she wanted to make sure she and her students saw each other’s humanity, and she seemed to catch herself forgetting to take time to be people together in addition to carrying on with the business of the day. While asking about the weekend may not immediately read as tied to literacy, if the class was going to be comfortable using literacy to explore themselves and the world, Jane needed to invest time in continuous community building. This came across clearly in Jane’s interactions with students each time I visited her classroom. She and her students laughed often, and my transcriptions of these visits are full of comments like “Jane laughed,” “the students laughed,” “Student X replied laughing” [Jane, Class Visits, October and November 2022). Students also looked for her input, inviting her to look at their writing and asking questions like, “Does this make sense?” and “Can I write about ______?” to which Jane often replied with an enthusiastic, “Yeah, yeah, yeah” and, when necessary, a follow-up question (Jane, Class Visit 1, October 2022, p. 3). Jane’s students trusted her with their ideas. The sense of community in their classroom encouraged students to openly share their thinking with her and with each other, a detail that came across in the ninth grade class session I returned to below.

This class’s collaborative analysis of symbolism in *Speak* was an invitation for students to look at emotions—to examine the ways in which a character’s feelings might be expressed through the symbols an author chooses to use in her writing. The session was reminiscent of Jane’s analysis of her own choreography where she broke down technical elements of Bareilles’ song and the body movements Jane chose to accompany them in order to explain how emotions
and thematic messages were conveyed through the dance. In this class session, Jane asked students to embark on a similar task—taking a technical aspect of literature, in this case symbolism, and using it to explore the deeper levels of a character’s emotional state. The purpose of the lesson was not to see if students could identify symbols. Instead, it was to leverage symbolism as a tool through which students might collaborate and co-construct meaning (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Ghiso, 2015; Kalman, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; McCusker, 2017; Street, 2016). Throughout the class, students worked together, shared textual evidence, thought through ideas with peers and teachers, and reflected on the human experiences represented in the text.

The class session began and ended as a full group, but for the bulk of the lesson, students worked in pairs or groups of three as they rotated around the room examining symbols. The previous week, the full class collaborated to examine the author’s use of different parts of a tree to represent the main character’s state of mind, and now, students explored other symbols from the text using the same method. Jane and Anne provided students with suggested pages in the book since the goal was not for students to memorize the novel’s plot, but for them to use moments in the text as a jumping off point for analysis and discussion. Just before the groups got started, Jane explained, “We’re gonna be looking at, examining, thinking about how these symbols show up in the text. Why they are important. What they represent. Bigger picture” (Jane, Class Visit 2, November 2022, p. 6). As students settled into their groups, she reminded them:

At each station, you will add quotes or evidence from the story along with your ideas.
Dig deeper . . . You'll also need to explain your understanding of what that symbol represents. You're not just putting a quote down, but also explaining your understanding of it. (Jane, Class Visit 2, November 2022, p. 7)

Through her directions to the class, Jane emphasized the purpose of the task was *not* to collect quotes. It was to explore, to “dig deeper,” and get at the “bigger picture” the symbols in the novel might be used to create. As I watched the action of the class unfold, I wrote:

> The students start the task right away. They are looking through their books and writing on posters. One boy dances to himself as he reads . . . Students look comfortable here. Many students' books are full of sticky notes. At times, they are quiet as they work and don’t talk to each other much even as they write on shared posters, but they turn to their peers to check in and discuss when they are ready. They get supplies as needed, ask questions to both teachers, take turns at their shared writing stations. (Katie, Field Notes, November 2022, p. 1)

It is difficult to bring the comfort of this classroom to life in words. There was an ease to the way students worked together and communicated with teachers, and the space felt like it belonged to all of them.

What was particularly interesting during the small group discussions were the choices Jane made as she interacted with students. When groups called Jane over for input, she consistently met their questions with further questions. Occasionally, she would make a suggestion, affirm the students’ thinking, or add on to their ideas, but she avoided telling students what to think about the symbols and often left conversations after asking a question meant to prompt further discussion amongst the group. One example of this can be seen in the following
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exchange between Jane and Liz, a student who was thinking about the symbolic use of closets in
the novel.

**Liz:** Can I talk about how Melinda, when she starts getting out more, she says she’s
gonna stay away from the closet?

**Jane:** Mm hmm. Cause she’s trying to do what?

**Liz:** She’s trying to, um, [pause] What’s it called? She’s trying’ to be more [pause]
open?

**Jane:** Mm hmm

**Liz:** And, [pause] talk to people?

**Jane:** And grow, right? And change? Trying to get out of that little space that she’s been
kind of stuck in. (Jane, Class Visit 2, November 2022, p. 14)

Throughout the course of this brief exchange, Jane listened to Liz work out her idea and waited
through several pauses to give Liz time to find the words she wanted to use to get her
interpretation of the symbol across. Liz and her group had already worked out that the closet
represented the main character’s desire for a safe space—one where she might hide from the
world, but Liz looked for affirmation when she took her analysis a step further by thinking about
what distance from the closet might mean. Jane provided that affirmation both through listening
and offering several “Mm hms” that encouraged Liz talking. Jane’s add on at the end of the
exchange came only after Liz had fully expressed her own idea. Jane did not seek to change
Liz’s thinking, but collaborated with her to make the connection that being “more open” and
“talking more” were signs of growth. After this discussion, Liz captured her analysis in writing,
pairing her thoughts with a quote from the text as shown in Figure 16 below.
Liz used a variety of literacy practices captured in Jane’s literacy model (see Figure 15) as she explored this symbol from Anderson’s novel. She relied on strategies like collecting evidence to select a quote that fit with her interpretation of the symbol. She worked her ideas out in conversation with her group members, as well as with Jane, and then transferred those ideas into writing where she deepened her analysis by pulling the word “normal” from the passage she chose, and using it to emphasize the character’s perception that to be normal she has to step away from her sanctuary and become more open.

Conversations like the one above were sprinkled throughout Jane’s class. By the end of the lesson, the posters on the wall were full of writing from the groups’ exploration of the novel’s “bigger picture” as represented through symbols. They contained quotes from the book each of which was paired with student writing. For example, one poster acted as a record of the many times the main character, Melinda, took down or covered mirrors, and the quotes students
chose were accompanied by comments about Melinda’s reluctance to look at herself, the feeling that she is “almost disgusted with herself,” and her “negative self-appearance”

*Figure 17: Student Gallery Walk Responses*

While students’ exploration of emotion in this particular lesson focused solely on using symbols to look at the feelings and experiences of the character in the novel, Jane also built in reflection questions throughout the unit that offered students the opportunity to express opinions and make connections to their own lives. In a writing reflection just before the students engaged in symbol analysis, Jane asked them to “brainstorm suggestions we could give Melinda to help her open up
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to others” and to “Imagine the events in the novel were taking place in 2022. How would this change how the characters interact? Also, how would some events remain the same? Are there any elements of high school in the novel to which you can relate?” (Jane, Artifact: End of Marking Period 3 Reflection). Jane explained that she believed literacy—reading and experiencing other people’s stories—was a means through which people could build empathy, sharing:

I think that maybe that's why I’m the person I am today. Because I spent so much of my time as a kid reading. It builds so much empathy because you're reading about all these experiences that you would never have. Or maybe you would have, but not until later on in your life. Learning about different people and different experiences…made me see the world differently and with more of an open mind. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2022, p. 30)

In her own life, Jane learned about the world, other people, and herself through interacting with and creating stories, and she brought those practices into their teaching. Her students knew how to identify symbols and were practicing explaining the deeper meaning behind those symbols in their own words. However, they could also notice the ways a character struggled with her identity, self-esteem, and trauma, and could imagine themselves as part of that character’s life and offer her advice as if talking to a friend. Jane’s role in this process was to help foster a community that allowed for collaboration, and guided students as they explored what they wanted to say. I saw this process in action in the class sessions I attended, and in our interviews, Jane also reflected on the ways she invited students out-of-school literacies into their schoolwork by negotiating projects and writing guidelines with them.
Embracing Students’ Personal Literacies. A significant piece of Jane’s conception of literacy that crossed the boundary into her classroom was her multimodality and broad definition of what counted as a text. This was evident in the value she placed on students’ personal literacies, from their rich discourses about TV shows and movies to their use of social media, YouTube, and podcasts. While it is true that Jane did not see her own choreography as a literacy practice until she was able to reflect on that experience throughout the course of this study, she was consistently open to what counted as literacy when she spoke about her students. Jane often tapped into student’s personal literacies as she guided them through the writing/creating process in class. One example of this arose when I asked her about Colin, a student she worked with who was remarkably insightful, but hesitant to put his ideas into writing. While in Jane’s twelfth grade English class, he created two podcasts in lieu of essays, and I wanted to know more about what it was like for Jane to negotiate that process with him. When I mentioned Colin to Jane, she said:

He really flourished when things were done verbally or in groups. Listening to him talk about his ideas, I was just like, ‘Ah! You, you have it!’ And I want him to tell everyone because it was so insightful . . . But then, any time it came to writing things down on paper, he would just shut down. He struggled with getting the ideas out or starting the ideas and not feeling like it was good enough. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 14–15)

Jane had a deep admiration for Colin, and she wanted him to share his thinking with as many people as possible. She knew that he was “more than capable” but also “struggled, not with his abilities, but with other factors” like the lack of self-confidence that she noted in the comment above (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 14). When Jane mentioned other factors here, she pushed back against the autonomous model by acknowledging that our literacies are not just informed by
our skill-based ability to read and construct words or sentences. Jane did not dismiss skills, but she challenged the idea that there is a set of skills everyone can conform to if they just have the right strategies (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Bostock et al., 2016; Collin & Street, 2014; Damico, 2005; Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Kalman, 2008; Rose, 2005; Street, 2011). For many of us, Colin included, there were other factors—anxiety and self-esteem, for example—that influenced the ways we communicate and express ourselves. Rather than looking to pathologize Colin, Jane looked for opportunities to encourage him to share his ideas, and late in the 2021–2022 school year, Jane was able to support Colin as he did just that.

Jane and I had started experimenting with modality in the writing assignments, and often offered “a writing option and some sort of visual option, and an audio option.” Jane felt that “As long as [students] are getting to the heart of what we want the outcome to be, right, there's variations that can be offered” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 13). Thus, when students came to the end of a unit that asked them to use a variety of texts to consider the roles destiny, love, and individuality play in our lives, Jane was thrilled that Colin came to her with a proposition. Instead of an essay, he wanted to enlist the help of a friend and create a podcast episode. Colin was a media production major in our technical high school, and he was asking Jane to express his thoughts using a form of communication he found accessible and interesting. He took the initiative to get a friend to co-host the podcast with him, and all he needed was a green light from Jane. Jane said yes, and she recalled the final product with enthusiasm:

They [Colin and co-podcaster] just talked to each other . . . but it was so insightful and I could tell that he understood and thought about and analyzed this text without having to have written anything down . . . I think they just had like bullet points, probably on a piece of paper and said, “Okay, let's talk about this,” and they would dig into it. And it
showed me, just as much as anyone's written essay, that he not only understood the text, because that's just step one right? But was able to grapple with it, and was able to think—Challenge his own thinking. I think that was a big part of it. He was not only showing me that he understood the story, but he was challenging some of the characters, he was challenging some of the decisions that the author made . . . It was so interesting to listen. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 16)

Although Colin and his podcasting partner did not write an essay, they engaged in many of the literacy practices that Jane aimed to share with her classes. They communicated with each other, collaborated to create a text to share with others, analyzed textual evidence, grappled with a text, and challenged the author’s ideas rather than taking them at face value.

Jane was not only supportive of this process; she was excited by it. And, it is important to address that when Colin brought the idea to her, she could have said no. She could have told him that there was already an audio option in the assignment prompt instead of embracing his idea to take it further by recording in the style of a podcast using a co-host. When I asked her why she agreed, Jane responded from a place of both empathy and practicality, saying:

I knew what he was capable of. I'll be very honest. I was happy that he wanted to submit anything to me. That was one thing. The fact that he wanted to turn anything in was promising, so I wanted to accept whatever he was going to give me . . . I knew that because of his anxiety, he wasn't going to submit something that was just a mish mosh of nonsense because I think he would rather not have turned in something than turn in something of poor quality. I knew that it was going to be of sustenance, because I knew that he had good stuff to say, so I trusted him. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 20)
Jane had watched Colin struggle as both his eleventh and twelfth grade English teacher. She cared about him and admired his thinking. She wanted him to have the experience of submitting something he felt good about instead of defaulting to avoidance as he had done in the past, and because he had made this request, she trusted him to follow through. Ultimately, she “hoped that he was able to feel a burden lifted because of the stress that came along with writing for him” and that he would feel acknowledged” by her willingness to go along with his idea (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 21).

Colin did a second podcast episode as his final project at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. Students were tasked with creating a philosophical manifesto, and as we talked, Jane went back into her files and found Colin’s final piece. She played a bit of the beginning of the episode, and as we listened, she recalled how it felt when she first heard Colin’s episodes, using phrases like “I was hooked,” “It felt genuine,” and “I was transfixed” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 17). When she hit stop on the recording, Jane started speaking before I could ask a question.

So, I think that what he submitted is just as valid as an example of literacy as any kid who writes an essay or does those traditional formats that we've talked about . . . because he's showing me, maybe more thoughtful ideas or more critical thinking than somebody who just throws a paper or an essay together because they have to . . . I don't need it to be in this box . . . If we're assessing a skill, like, if you can write a paragraph, I need to see that you can write a paragraph. That's one thing. But if I need you to show me that you've taken something away from a theme of a book, or if you're willing to challenge messages that an author is trying to communicate through a text, there's many ways that can be done. (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 18)
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Jane saw the classroom as a place where students could bring their interests and their out-of-school literacies in order to explore ideas and communicate them to an audience. There were many legitimate ways for students to communicate and many different types of texts they could develop. Like Janks (2010), she understood that “Different ways of reading and writing in the world in a range of modalities are a central resource for changing consciousness” (p. 24), and challenged dominant structures that perpetuate the myth that there is one right kind of literacy that should be privileged in schools (Bostock, et al., 2016; Gee, 2015a; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Kalman, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Saint-Pierre, 2000; Street, 2011). Jane’s comments also subtly disrupted the hierarchies often found in school literacies by asserting that Colin’s podcast was “just as valid,” perhaps even more valid than a traditional essay a student might throw together. Instead of prioritizing one style of communication over another, Jane looked to the depth of thought that came across in the text the student created.

However, Jane wanted to make it clear that saying “yes” to every student proposal was also not a one-size-fits all solution. As we talked about Colin, she added:

You can't just assume . . . Yeah, a Podcast will be so cool for students to do. But who's doing it? And where— If I don't give you any structure, will I trust that you can make it happen in a way that's going to be beneficial?” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 20)

To Jane, this kind of experience “comes with connection and relationship and knowing the students” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2023, p. 21). These were the factors that had to be cultivated in order to negotiate a feasible project that would move the student through a purposeful exploration of the topic at hand. Sometimes the negotiations were not as simple as they had been with Colin, but Jane was committed to engaging with students in learning that was purposeful; where, as Cook (1992) wrote, “what we are to learn and why we are to learn” are clear and
students were “curious or puzzled by the things we are learning” (p. 17). Sometimes, as with Colin, Jane could easily green light a student’s plan and watch them run with it. On other occasions, more guidance would be needed. Students might know what they want to explore, but need support figuring out how to get there. They might want to try out a new modality, but need access to the appropriate materials. Ultimately, Jane felt a responsibility to work with students to create positive experiences where they explored something meaningful to them and felt supported throughout the process, and she emphasized that this was only possible when student and teacher could communicate with one another and uncover those needs.

Like Albert, Jane’s teaching was inspired by her experiences from childhood into adulthood. The girl who loved stories brought that spirit of exploration into the classroom. The student who felt pressure to adhere to a fixed idea of goodness became a teacher who aimed to collaborate and negotiate with students. The young woman who admired her twelfth grade English teacher’s willingness to be a person with her students, worked to build community in the classroom and appreciate the interests and multimodal literacies her students valued in their lives. The power-sharing that Jane engaged in with her students disrupted normative expectations of the teacher’s role in the classroom, and Jane was critical of institutional leaders that had the power to impose hierarchical, skills based conceptions of literacy in school.

**School-Based Conceptions: Who Decides What Counts as Literacy?**

In capturing Jane’s literacy portrait, it was important to acknowledge that she was in the process of consciously reconstructing it. Before agreeing to be a part of the study, Jane had already started revising her teaching practices to more meaningfully align with the way she saw literacy in the world. Earlier in her adulthood, Jane’s conceptions of literacy would have been represented by separate images—one of her multimodal and expressive personal literacies and
another of what literacy typically looked like in school. Jane confirmed that in her early years as a teacher, she reproduced the conventional literacy practices she experienced as a student despite her more nuanced conception of literacy in her day-to-day life. The majority of her in-school English class experiences as a student involved, “knowing what’s going on in a story and being able to recall that information” and in her early teaching, her mindset was, “I’m going to give you [the students] information, and then you’ll absorb that information” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 12). Her primary exposure to literacy in the classroom was grounded in the banking system of education which privileged memorization and storing information that was deposited by the teacher into the minds of the students (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). However, as Jane became a more experienced teacher and developed the teaching philosophy described in the previous section, she began to change her approach—to leave behind the notion of teacher as authority figure and become more vulnerable by sharing her imperfections with students. She wanted to “show that I struggle with things. I struggle with understanding ideas, and I’m still learning, and I’m still wrapping my head around stuff” in order to invite them to do the same without the fear of being wrong (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 12).

This shift in Jane’s classroom practices also sparked her criticism of institutional, hierarchical conceptions of literacy. As previously noted, Jane worried that school literacies were too focused on skills-based literacy goals that “check[ed] off some boxes” without grounding the skills on that checklist in some kind of greater purpose. Jane offered a list: “I’m able to write an S. I’m able to write five paragraphs. I’m able to cite information. I’m able to identify literary terms,” and added “I don’t think there is any sort of connection between what and why we’re doing those skills (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 16). Jane also asserted that using
standardized testing to assess the level to which students could be considered literate was inauthentic.

I think that standardized testing is really the benchmark of how the education system decides whether a student is literate or not . . . and I think it's just so far removed from what teachers are doing in the classroom . . . Here's this test you have to take where you have to sit and read two pages, or read this paragraph, and then answer a bunch of questions about it, or know how to find the root of a word and identify what that means. There's such a disconnect that the students suffer because they're expected to perform well on this test. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 16)

Throughout this discussion, Jane echoed Albert’s challenge of power structures that perpetuate deficit views of students when she asked “who decides?” in regards to “benchmarks that have been decided, that say this is where a student should be” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 18). In the classes she shared with her students, young people had the opportunity to work out ideas in a variety of modalities, but when outside forces judged their level of success with literacy skills, those classroom experiences were replaced by a test that could not capture the student as a whole person. Jane called these benchmarks “just ridiculous,” explaining:

If a student is in ninth grade, and they're reading at a Lexile level that's not up to predetermined Lexile level where they should be in ninth grade, does that—why does that make them not on par? . . . Because what if they've made progress from sixth grade to eighth grade substantially from where they were? But, just because they're not at the point that someone decided, or some system decided that a ninth grader should be reading at, that makes them not successful? (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 18)
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Jane’s questions highlighted the ways in which students’ growth can be overshadowed by assessments aimed at categorizing them into hierarchical levels of achievement (Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Labaree, 1997; Rose, 2005). In her own classroom, Jane was much more interested in “accepting students where they are, and seeing the growth that they make from their starting point” and saw the stratification of students into levels as damaging to their self-esteem and willingness to participate in school.

Jane’s critique of school-based conceptions of literacy were not limited to standardized tests. She had recently completed a Master of Arts in literacy at the same university through which she acquired her teaching certification, and had concerns about the methods used to assess students’ proficiency in literacy. When I asked Jane about the program’s focus, she told me it was centered on “the things we're going to do to get students to read and appreciate reading, and be proficient in reading,” but that “in my own work and practice it's expanded beyond that” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2022, p. 6). She then read me the mission of the master’s program, which was to, “Develop expertise and provide literacy instruction to all students, especially those who struggle with reading” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2022, p. 6). According to Jane, the response to struggling readers to which she was exposed in this program was diagnostic testing that would “figure out where students fall” in relation to the expected reading level for their age group; a process that did not align with Jane’s conception of literacy or approach to students (Jane, Interview 2, May 2022, p. 7). Although she had earned a master’s from a reputable program, Jane “learned more from my job than I have from my education” (Jane, Interview 2, May 2022, p. 8). Because Jane valued meeting students where they are and collaborating to figure out what they needed to grow, the process of testing students to “find out where they fall” was another form of stratification that did not serve her as a teacher.
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Jane’s investment in student growth and expression over systemic interests in leveling and benchmarks grew out of her work with students. Many of the students we taught had learning disabilities and had been encouraged to pursue a vocational education rather than attend a traditional high school with a broader, liberal arts curriculum (Labaree, 1997; Rose, 2005). Throughout her seven years in the classroom, Jane encountered student after student who was already turned off to school before they ever walked into her classroom.

Our students, in our population, they've gone through years of struggling with reading or being told that they're not good readers, or being told that it’s not for them, whatever the case may be, or them just sitting and struggling with it, and not having the tools in which to work through those struggles. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 10)

To Jane, this was the damage that students endured when benchmarks were used to classify them. In her experience, students who are closed off to engaging in literacy in the classroom had often been told that they were not good enough or not capable enough as students. She recalled a ninth grade student who “really took a while to open up and try,” and explained that through the process of helping him to open up:

We discovered that a lot of that came from previous experiences with teachers who told him that he wasn't good at English, and he wasn't good at reading, and he was a bad student, which really affected him, and made him believe that he was not capable of succeeding in English class. (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 9)

Jane saw a throughline that moved from testing, to leveling, and, ultimately, to messages students received about their value as learners. When students entered her classroom, Jane felt a responsibility to help them unlearn these damaging messages. In reference to the student mentioned above, Jane said:
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It took a lot of work on my part and his part to be like, “I’m not that teacher. Like, you can't project that experience” even though it's ingrained in him. “You can't project that experience onto your situation now because it's just going to hold you back.” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 19)

Jane’s words implied that exploration in the classroom was not possible without taking time to build trust and support students as they unlearn systemic damage. One way Jane did this was by meeting students with empathy and encouragement. While she expected students to participate in English class, she did not place blame on students who were avoidant, noting, “If you don’t have positive experiences with something, you avoid it. You don’t want to do it” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 19). Jane understood negative interactions could leave students feeling like it was too risky to try when tasks got challenging in school. With students like the ninth grader mentioned above and the twelfth-grade podcaster, Colin, Jane had to continuously create opportunities for students to engage and work to convince them that she would not judge them the way they had been judged in the past.

Thus, systemic conceptions of literacy created barriers to exploration for Jane and her students—barriers that had to be chipped away at so students could access what Jane saw as the more meaningful, exploratory, collaborative work of literacy. Her assessment of school-based literacies was reminiscent of Rose (2005) who called out the stratified and individualistic nature of American society as “serious nonsense” and argued:

To journey up through the top levels of the American educational system will call for support and guidance at many, many points along the way. You’ll need people to guide you into conversations that seem foreign and threatening. You’ll need models, lots of
them, to show you how to get at what you don’t know. You’ll need people to help you center yourself in your own developing ideas. (p. 48)

Jane was a guide who was ready to help students navigate the difficult terrain of the educational system. She too saw the “serious nonsense,” or what she referred to as the “just ridiculous” investment in benchmarks that created a competitive and deficit-based environment in school. Throughout her own schooling, Jane was overcome with anxiety and fear of failure due to the pressure to achieve. While her early teaching practices fit more closely with the methods that she experienced throughout her own schooling, Jane’s interactions with students pushed her to reflect on the system of school. Through that reflection, she became committed to actively disrupting conventional approaches to literacy that looked to label and categorize students, and did so by valuing the practices students brought into the classroom with them and focusing on their individual growth.

Navigating the Tensions: It’s About More Than Grades

When Jane thought about the limitations posed by school-based conceptions of literacy, she chose to place emphasis on areas where she had some power to make change. While Albert could feel daunted and discouraged by the institutional expectations, Jane had become comfortable making her classroom a place where the status quo could be disrupted. As previously noted, young Jane knew how to play the game in school, but she was not invested in the kind of exploration she wanted her students to experience through literacy practices in their shared classroom. She was taught to work hard, even to the detriment of her emotional health, in order to earn the reward of being perceived as good; a goodness that was not awarded because of the risks she took to stretch her thinking beyond the boundaries of knowability, but through the grade point average she maintained (Britzman, 1995; Ellsworth, 1989; Labaree, 1997; Meyer &
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Tilland-Stafford, 2016). While Jane could have grown into a teacher who also placed significant value on grades and achievement, her experience as a student had the opposite effect. Jane added through laughter:

It took me through college to realize that it doesn’t matter . . . It was the realization that I didn’t need to stress myself out. I didn’t need to worry so much about what grades I was getting as if that was going to have some huge impact on my life. And, instead, there’s a possibility of just enjoying the process. (Jane, Audio Recorded Reflection, July 2023)

Through reflection on her own education and her interactions with students, Jane learned to challenge the system she had been indoctrinated into, realizing that the numbers associated with her achievements did not hold real meaning. She wanted something different for her students, “because, when you’re actually engaged in learning, and you’re trying new things, and you’re pushing yourself to think differently and outside the box…the benefits come from that instead of just being focused on the grades” (Jane, Audio Recorded Reflection, July 2023). Her stance was reminiscent of hooks (1994), who asserted:

The obsession with good grades has so much to do with fear of failure. Progressive teaching tries to eradicate that fear, both in students and in professors. There are moments when I worry that I am not being a “good” teacher, and then I find myself struggling to break with a good/bad binary. It’s more useful for me to think of myself as a progressive teacher who’s willing to own both my successes and failures in the classroom. (pp. 157–158)

Jane had first-hand experience with the ways in which dominant norms in the educational system could inflict damage on students. She had also witnessed the damage her students endured, and noted several instances where fear of failure created a barrier to growth. Jane did not have the
power to make broad institutional changes, but she leveraged her power in the classroom to create a space where people were safe to explore, to try, to make mistakes without the fear of being wrong.

In my visits to Jane’s classroom, as well as through artifacts she shared, I saw that collaboration was one way Jane privileged exploration and communication over the good/bad, right/wrong binaries that drove the dominant approaches to literacy in school. Another significant way Jane brought her conception of literacy into her teaching was through her approach to curriculum development and assessment. Although Jane would “love to not give grades . . . and for the students to embrace that idea of the grade doesn’t matter, so I’m gonna try,” she did not have the power to eliminate grading from her teaching practices (Jane, Audio Recorded Reflection, July 2023). However, she did have the autonomy to design curriculum and assessments that centered students’ interests, experiences, and development. As previously mentioned, Jane aimed to ground anything she and her students studied in essential questions. The idea was not to read and memorize a story, but to explore ourselves and the world through discussing, analyzing, interpreting, and challenging the idea texts might invite us to think about. This, in itself, may not read as a radical act. In fact, the curriculum planning software our district used included a space for essential questions. But Jane was not just filling in boxes. Jane was enacting feminist new literacies. She believed these broad, open-ended questions invited students to see texts (in various modalities) as both mirrors and windows, and allowed for many different kinds of right answers. Jane may have been required to give grades to her students, but that did not mean she had to do so through assessments with plot-based questions of rigid right or wrong responses.
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Assessment came up in several of our conversations about Jane’s conception of literacy. She explained, “I do not give traditional tests anymore. Multiple choice. Here, tell me what happened in this story and regurgitate that information . . . We really tried to move away from that and create assessments that ask students to dive more into bigger ideas” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 13). When I asked Jane to share an artifact from her teaching that connected to her conception of literacy, she chose two of these revised assessments. They each follow the same format—four open-ended questions that ask students to use evidence from the texts they have been studying to explore a broader idea. Sometimes the questions also ask students to consider a particular rhetorical or literary device in their responses, which is consistent with Jane’s blending of technical skills with personal feelings and points of view. All of the prompts on the assessments link to the essential questions students have explored, and they all offer students choices regarding which texts they would like to include in their responses.
Figure 18: Assessment Example: Examining Identity Through Short Stories

**Exploring Identity Through Short Stories**

**Final Assessment**

"House on Mango Street" – "About Russell" – "Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy"

**Directions:** Answer each of the questions below in full sentences. Each response should include quotes and/or very specific examples from the stories to support your points.

Well developed responses will:
- Start with a topic sentence that rephrases the question as a statement about the stories.
- Provide a specific example from both stories that support your point.
- Explain how each quote helps to prove the point you introduced in your topic sentence.
- Show clear comprehension of the stories by representing the plots and characters accurately.
- Be proofread -- check spelling, capitalization, and punctuation before turning in your work.

See the rubric at the end of the assignment for specific assessment details.

**QUESTION 1:** Choose two of the short stories we read to answer the question below.

How do family relationships like the ones shown in these short stories shape and affect the main character's life?
What are the authors trying to say about the ways our family lives affect us?

**QUESTION 2:** Choose two of the short stories we read to answer the question below.

How do mental health difficulties affect both the main character who is experiencing them and those around them?
What are the authors trying to help us see about mental health related struggles?

**QUESTION 3:** Choose two of the short stories we read to answer the question below.

What effect do hopes and dreams about the future have on the main character? Think about moments when these dreams seem possible or impossible to achieve.
What are the authors trying to tell us about the affects our hopes and dreams can have?

**QUESTION 4:** Choose one of the short stories we read to answer the question below.

Which short story gave you the most meaningful window into someone else's lived experience? Why is this the one that feels the most meaningful? What do you think you learned from this window?

**Note:** You might consider windows that helped you understand something related to assumptions about social class, race, and gender. But, you can feel free to take the response in any direction that works for you.
Figure 18 demonstrated in more detail the ways in which Jane’s assessments aligned with her conception of literacy and pushed back against traditional practices. Jane has provided hyperlinks to the short stories students read throughout this unit at the top of the document. On all assessments, students are not only permitted, but encouraged to use their texts as a resource rather than committing plot points to memory. With the example above, Jane chose the modality through which each student would respond, but she also provided guidance to help students shape their written responses. Additionally, each question offers students a choice. Jane never dictated which text they should use in response to a particular question, but wanted them to be able to explore ideas through the texts that they connected with most. As Jane explained, when she asked questions like the examples shown in Figure 18, she hoped students would not only think about what happened in each story, but would ask themselves, “Who am I as a person? And, how do these types of experiences that I'm reading about relate to, or not relate to, my own experience?” (Jane, Interview 1, September 2022, p. 15). While Jane had to assign a grade to these assessments, the intention behind her design was to deemphasize grades by providing opportunities for students to take their responses in a number of directions.

Throughout the course of the 2022–2023 school year, Jane continued to experiment with bringing personal literacies—her own and her students into the classroom. She looked for new ways to partner with students to focus on process and collaboration over grades and benchmarks. During a new twelfth grade unit exploring identity and power through Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Jane and I developed a process through which we could work with students to hone essential questions together rather than solely using teacher-provided questions. Inspired by creative students like Colin, Jane and I also experimented with co-constructing assessments with students, holding brainstorming sessions with our individual classes and then coming together as teaching
partners to figure out the logistics. The process was messy at times. We immersed ourselves in a process of experimentation, trying things out, shaking up the system, and we did not always get it right the first time. But, the friendship and partnership that Jane and I shared were what made our disruptions possible. Disruptive work (even when it did not strike us as particularly radical) was not easy. And, we became a part of each other’s “feminist killjoy survival kit”4 (Ahmed, 2017). As we risked being seen as ungrateful or positioned as squeaky wheels within the educational machine, we found ways to support each other, paying attention to each other’s’ emotions and balancing each other out (Ahmed, 2017; Klein & Taylor, 2023). Jane was not afraid to break from conventional, limited approaches to literacy in order to fit into a mold of normalcy. Instead, she aimed to foster a spirit of exploration with her students, and was willing to navigate push back without apology. I remain grateful to have her as a partner in that work.

**Portrait 3: Sebastian**

I introduced Sebastian in Chapter 3 noting that he is a Hispanic, queer, cisgender man in his mid-thirties. Like Albert and Jane, Sebastian is also a friend and colleague with whom I have worked closely for several years. We had been teaching together for five years, and became close early in our relationship as colleagues as we both adapted to our new teaching environment. Throughout our friendship, Sebastian and I have been confidants who share personal stories, express our feelings, and work out frustrations together. The implications of this closeness were touched upon in Chapter 3, but I delved more deeply into them here to bring Sebastian’s portrait into focus.

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4 *Living a feminist life* (Ahmed, 2017) uses the term “feminist killjoy” to refer to feminist disruptors who aim to challenge hegemonic, patriarchal structures. Ahmed asserts that the labor associated with this work requires a “feminist killjoy survival kit” to protect killjoys from burnout, and a key tool in this survival kit is allies with which to share the labor.
Upon meeting Sebastian, it did not take long to recognize that he is a deeply thoughtful person who approaches any task with care and meticulous attention to detail. Thus, when it came to this study, Sebastian was initially concerned about fulfilling what I wanted or needed. I could feel his concern as we planned class visits. He wondered if I would see something that was useful to me, and I worried, in turn, that he would go out of his way to plan something special when what I was excited to experience was simply Sebastian and his students just doing their thing in the classroom. Bringing friendship as method into the study meant I was fortunate to work with participants like Sebastian who felt genuine investment in our work, and this required commitment to negotiating expectations in order to ensure Sebastian honored his own personal and professional needs while taking part (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). We did this by making space for our friendship in each research-related meeting. We chatted and debriefed informally after class visits. We allowed for tangents that arose during interview sessions, and if those tangents involved “secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report or narrative” we left them out, respecting the line between private details among friends and those meant for public consumption (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Sebastian was a relatively private person who generously shared pieces of his life experiences throughout interviews, and I felt a double responsibility to him as a friend and researcher. Our friendship crossed the boundary into the study, adding depth and layers to the portrait of Sebastian that would emerge. At times, we delved into difficult and uncomfortable spaces as we discussed his history and the literacy practices he valued, and I continually reflected on the trust Sebastian placed in me. As with Albert and Jane, I brought my work back to him as a collaborator, inviting in “examination, critique, and further dialogue” with special attention to maintaining (rather than crossing) the boundary between private and public (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 744).
In truth, Sebastian did not love the classroom space he had been assigned. It was a boxy, windowless room that he did his best to transform into an inviting place in which students would feel welcomed and inspired to learn. Sebastian and I had also spent many hours together in that windowless room, often with me perched on the small, waiting room style sofa that was pushed up against his desk. This was where our friendship began to bloom—first through working on a writing curriculum project together that naturally transitioned into sharing more personal details of our lives.

As we began to unpack Sebastian’s conception of literacy and his hopes for students in-school, the feeling he wanted to convey in his classroom came up without a specific question from me. Sebastian had one core vision for his classroom. He wanted to foster an environment that showed students they “will be loved and accepted no matter what when they walk into this school” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 17). He stressed that this message should exist beyond his classroom—that students should feel this love in all parts of their school. And, while Sebastian could work to cultivate that feeling via his interactions with students and staff throughout the building, his classroom was the one physical space he was able to curate in order to further communicate that message of love and acceptance. Sebastian’s classroom was full of art, poetry, positive messages, and references to his personal interests as well as those of his students. Some of these items, like his sports pennants and collection of Funko Pop figurines were not pictured, but the displays in Figure 19 below provided a sampling of Sebastian’s use of his physical space to communicate care to his students.
The mini-marquee reading “Happy Juneteenth” was frequently changed to shout out special holidays, as well as students’ birthdays and accomplishments. When I asked Sebastian about this, he came back to the idea of care and acceptance we spoke about in a previous interview, saying:

I want the students to know they will be cared for while they're in my classroom . . . and that they are valued and celebrated, which is why I do like to do that mini marquee with their birthdays . . . That's a quick way that they can just see, like, “oh, I am celebrated. I do matter. I am important to Mr. ____.” (Sebastian, Follow Up Session, August 2023, p. 18)
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We would discover throughout the construction of this portrait that embracing one another’s identities and cultures was a significant piece of Sebastian’s conception of literacy—one that was born out of his personal history and continued to cross the boundary into his classroom in the curriculum, as well as in the physical environment he fostered and his interactions with students.

In looking around the room, it was clear the message of acceptance went beyond happy birthday signs. As shown in Figure 19, among the poetry and literary device quick guides, Sebastian displayed a “Feminism is Equality” sign, a “Love is Love” poster, and several flags including the Progress Pride Flag and the Disability Pride Flag. Through these items, Sebastian not only shared pieces of his interests and identity, but made his values clear to all who entered the room. When I asked him about this, he asserted that while messages like “Feminism is Equality” and “Love is Love” “have been politicized” by others, “the mere saying that other people matter is not a political statement to me.” He added:

I think those [messages] are really important because . . . look at how women's rights and LGBTQ rights are being questioned and taken away left and right these days. And, I think [students] do need to know that I support them. I mean, if we're gonna go back to education and Maslow's hierarchy, like, people need to feel safe in order to learn.

(Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 20)

Sebastian felt it was essential that students, specifically those who may have experienced marginalization, have a safe space to learn. As a queer, Hispanic man, Sebastian had been made to feel othered, and he aimed to declare that this classroom was a space where people did not have to silence pieces of themself to fit into normative expectations. I understood Sebastian’s desire to reject the idea that the aforementioned statements were political. He felt that saying people’s cultures and identities mattered should be a given. However, as the system of school
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continued to privilege whiteness, patriarchy and heteronormativity, the choice to display these messages was a disruption of the status quo; one that could potentially come with pushback (hooks, 1994; Kitchen, 2014; Love, 2020; Martin & Kitchen, 2020). Rather than erasing references to race, gender, and sexuality in favor of a so-called neutral space, Sebastian prioritized his students’ need for a classroom in which they felt safe and supported.

The Progress Pride flag and Disability Pride flag shown in Figure 19, were also features that Sebastian pointed out as significant to the safe environment he cultivated. The flags were not only about showing acceptance, but also intended to encourage students to feel proud of themselves, their background, and their identities. In addition, Sebastian displayed the New Jersey state flag and the International Flag of Planet Earth. All of these accompanied the American flag that hung in each room in our building. Sebastian brought up these flags as we discussed his belief that students should be “loved and accepted” throughout their school. As he pointed out the flags in his classroom, Sebastian shared:

I want kids to feel proud of who they are. And I've realized that, like I, I kind of have to be a little bit more bold and outspoken and unapologetic about who I am . . . I'm just trying to show them, like, no matter who you are, I will accept you and embrace you and, like, you're safe here. That's all. (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 20)

Safety, acceptance, love for oneself and love for each other made up the core values that Sebastian brought to his teaching. These were values he derived, in large part, through the literacy practices he engaged in throughout this life. At the time of this study, he was in the process of living more boldly and unapologetically by bringing his identity as a queer man into his life as a teacher. He told me that if our study had taken place five years ago:
I might not even have said that I was queer or gay. I might have tried to convince myself that my sexuality doesn’t matter in this study, but I think it does . . . It’s important to be seen. To speak up for who we are. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 34)

Sebastian’s identity as a queer man did matter. It mattered in the ways it informed the educational setting he wanted to create for and with his students. It mattered to how he saw himself as an individual, a partner, a friend, a teacher, and as a person in the world. Each part of Sebastian’s identity was essential to the way he conceptualized literacy in both his out-of-school and in-school life, and the intersections between his identity, his personal experiences, his connection to literature, and his approach to teaching began to unfold as he shared his literacy history with me.

**Sebastian’s Literacy History: Who Am I and Who Do I Want to Be?**

The unexpected discoveries about love, acceptance, and living unapologetically that came out of our discussion of Sebastian’s classroom became the backdrop for his portrait. The version of Sebastian who sat with me in our interviews grew out of the boy and young man who found company and comfort in books when the world did not feel like an inviting place. Although Albert and Jane’s literacy histories took shape through the childhood anecdotes they shared and their endeavors as creators, Sebastian expressed his history more through the feelings he navigated, the people he admired, and the texts that inspired him, all of which informed the conception of literacy detailed later in this portrait. As with Albert and Jane, I aimed to bring young Sebastian into focus to set the context for the conception of literacy he held at the time of this study.

Although he did not share his sexuality during his teenage years, as a queer teenager in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Sebastian’s identity deviated from hegemonic expectations of
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masculinity, complicating his opportunities to build relationships with his peers. Throughout this time, books became a source of comfort and self-discovery. Sebastian described himself as a “book nerd” on multiple occasions in our interviews, and shared that throughout his childhood, he “didn’t have as many friends as most people have, so I read a lot” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 3). He “grew up hearing, ‘That’s so gay’ every two seconds,’” which pressured him to suppress his identity in order to conform to normative, hierarchically acceptable notions of masculinity (Heinrich, 2013; Love, 2019; Martino, 2017; Meyer & Tilland-Stafford, 2016; Miller & Gilligan, 2017). He had learned, as Heinrich (2013) put it:

the importance of carefully negotiating and silently coping with the personal trials that invariably accompany their journey through adolescence,” a process that “boys may find . . . solitary and fraught with uncertainty, clouded by feelings of insecurity, confusion, and self-doubt they have been taught to disguise. (p. 104)

Sebastian experienced the isolation and push to disguise pieces of himself that Heinrich described in order to get through his high school years. It was during this time that he turned to books, which invited him to think more deeply about identity, injustice, and systems of power. As he moved from adolescence into adulthood, critical analysis and questioning became the foundational practices he turned to in order to make meaning out of the world.

Learning to Question the Status Quo. Whether he was reading a classic or watching his favorite genre of film, “campy horror movies,” Sebastian was “constantly analyzing” texts because “the more you analyze it [a text], the more enjoyable it is” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 4). For example, as an avid horror fan, one of Sebastian’s favorite pastimes was watching movies and considering questions like:

How are the female characters being treated?
He was interested in thinking about the author/creator’s intentions and the influence their choices could have on an audience. This interest in analysis was not limited to horror movies. Most of Sebastian’s analytical explorations were focused on the novels, nonfiction, and poetry he enjoyed. However, Sebastian explained early in our interviews that all of his hobbies—listening to music, playing video games, watching movies, creating and altering recipes—involved “constantly analyzing” and “constantly dissecting.” Although this was a process he engaged in independently as a young man who felt isolated from his peers, in his adulthood, Sebastian enjoyed dissecting texts with his partner and his friends, a detail that came up often throughout our interviews. By high school, Sebastian “realized that people that read are cool, are smart, are knowledgeable” and he found points of connection with individuals who shared his appreciation for intelligence and learning (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 6). He saw the pursuit of knowledge through books and analysis as admirable acts, which was his first step towards rejecting the hegemonic pressures he had been contending with throughout his adolescence.

Sebastian’s realization he was drawn to and wanted to be like people who appreciated reading, learning, and self-development was also connected to the adults he admired throughout his young life. Sebastian was raised in a matriarchal environment and explained that his “first role models were my mom and my grandmother” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 7). Sebastian shared:

My mom and grandmother definitely had a big influence on me; definitely stressed
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education. And, my mom always stressed that, you know, my education, my intelligence, is something that nobody can ever take away from me. And so it was definitely something that I wanted to nurture, and guard and strengthen . . . I took it to heart that no matter, you know, how hard you worked for a car or clothing, like, all of those things are fleeting and ephemeral. Your intellect is what stays with you. (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 8)

Sebastian’s mother and grandmother instilled the appreciation for education that he carried with him from childhood to adulthood. His matriarchal role models equated education with intelligence, and communicated that while material objects might come and go, his intellect would live within him throughout his life as long as he took the time to “nurture, guard, and strengthen” it. Sebastian and his family valued education and believed that intelligence came from the work that one put into becoming educated. While Sebastian might not have been able to control many of the circumstances in his life, his intellect was something he could take ownership over. He could choose to nurture it, and no one would be able to take that away from him.

The encouragement and inspiration Sebastian got from his mother and grandmother inspired the type of reader he would become. He modeled himself after them, explaining:

I always wanted to be as smart and as knowledgeable about so many topics as I saw them to be. I guess I wanted to be like that. I wanted to be able to know so many different things, and books were a great avenue for that. (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 7)

Sebastian was committed to nurturing, guarding, and strengthening his intellect, especially through the books he read. He loved reading challenging texts and was “interested in reading classics that I didn’t get to read in school” on his own time just for the experience of it
When Sebastian looked to books in pursuit of knowledge, he did not simply seek out facts to memorize. He sought to understand who he wanted to be for himself, in his relationships, and in society as a whole. The comment above sparked me to ask, “Can you think of a text or some texts that have really helped you to think about that ‘Who am I’ question you were navigating?” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 9). Because Sebastian was so passionate about the books, movies, and TV shows that he loved, I expected him to rattle off a few formative texts right away. Instead, he sighed and said, “That’s a big question. I [pause] would have to get back to you on that” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 9). We decided he would take some time to think about it and respond at a later date, and I am grateful we took this approach because the result was the list of texts and associated reflections that Sebastian sent me in August of 2023. I included his curated list in Table 5 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Book Title by Author</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Romeo and Juliet</em> by William Shakespeare</td>
<td><em>Romeo &amp; Juliet</em> taught me that masterful language could be fun to interpret and also bawdy and funny.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>To Kill a Mockingbird</em> by Harper Lee</td>
<td><em>To Kill a Mockingbird</em> taught me to stand up for what is right, especially when it is difficult and others try to stop me. It also stoked my outrage at the racial injustice and hypocrisy of this country, having experienced and witnessed discrimination myself as a teenager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>Emily Dickinson’s Poetry</td>
<td>Emily Dickinson’s poems showed me how people suffer in silence and could contain so much beauty and pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Civil Disobedience</em> by Henry David Thoreau</td>
<td><em>Civil Disobedience</em> taught me that you could stand up against foes no matter how big and that you could simply refuse to be part of the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-15</td>
<td><em>The Harry Potter Series</em> by J.K. Rowling</td>
<td>The Harry Potter series also strengthened my morals and stressed the importance of supporting the underdog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>His Dark Materials</em> by Phillip Pullman</td>
<td><em>His Dark Materials</em> helped me realize that heroes don’t always know exactly what they’re doing and sometimes make mistakes. It also showed me that good people could make the right choice with the best intentions but still end up hurting others or sacrificing something or someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em> by Margaret Atwood</td>
<td><em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em> showed me how unfair the world can be to disenfranchised people and how those who are different from me can suffer because of the inherent power a society lacking equality gives me over others. I never wanted to contribute to that, so I dedicated myself to learning about systems of power, history, and the experiences of people from other backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+</td>
<td><em>V for Vendetta</em> by Alan Moore</td>
<td><em>V for Vendetta</em> further showed me how those systems of power operate through the government. It inspired me to question authority, especially when I am being told or persuaded what is the right thing to do. It made me search for who stands to benefit from those decisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sebastian took the time to reflect on his formative texts—sitting with the question of which texts had guided him as he started to explore the question: “Who am I and who do I want to be in
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society?” His detail-oriented response lent depth to the emerging image of his conception of literacy. The list he provided was a mix of poetry, novels, plays, and nonfiction with one multimodal text, the graphic novel *V for vendetta*. This was consistent with our discussions of literacy, as Sebastian nearly always came back to print-based works like novels and poems as the most influential texts in his life. While he enjoyed movies, video games, and movies, these were not the main sources through which he nurtured and strengthened his intellect. He read the formative texts in the table above throughout years of his life where building a strong sense of himself and his place in the world were of utmost importance, and these texts guided him throughout that process.

Although Sebastian initially shared this list via an emailed reflection, we met over Zoom a few days later, as there were thoughts Sebastian wanted to share through conversation with me. He explained that:

The list of texts that were formative while I was a teenager all really do have to do with, like, a person's morals and like learning to do—I don't wanna say the right thing, because it's so much more complex than that—But I guess learning to make informed decisions through knowing yourself better. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 16)

I wanted to include Sebastian’s comment that texts did not teach him to do “the right thing” because he was in the process of breaking down the right/wrong binary in his own thinking. Therefore, as he looked back on texts that were significant in his development, he did not use them to declare a set of right ways for everyone to think, feel, and act (Britzman, 1995; Damico, 2005; Lather, 1998; Saint-Pierre, 2000). Instead, he reflected on the ways these texts helped him to figure out who he wanted to be. After writing his reflections, Sebastian saw a thread developing through his interactions with these texts, telling me:
I feel like a lot of the earlier ones . . . have to do with, like, personal injustice and struggles. But I, if you get to the later ones like, you know *The Handmaid’s Tale, V for Vendetta*, even “Civil Disobedience,” they start to become more about looking at the systems of power, and how they negatively influence disenfranchised people . . . And I feel like that has been a formative revelation for me to see how people struggle and then to see how it's interconnected with systems of power. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 32)

Looking back at Table 5, we could see that *Romeo and Juliet* fostered his love of language, Emily Dickinson’s poetry invited him to think about the confluence of human emotion, and *To kill a mockingbird* and *His dark materials* pushed him to question authority and trouble the notion of the hero as an infallible figure.

Sebastian spoke in detail about both *To kill a mockingbird* and *His dark materials* as texts that reshaped his way of thinking about the world, but his relationship to *To kill a mockingbird* was particularly complex. Through *To kill a mockingbird*, Sebastian got his first glimpse into injustices in America, sharing that “originally, I really didn’t like the book” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 24). The text disrupted his sense of justice in America and his initial response was to reject it. Sebastian explained:

I think I became disenchanted with the United States in that book because I realized how racial injustice could even happen, you know, in a courtroom . . . And so, I think that was like, probably the first time I read anything that challenged any kind of notions that I had about the U.S. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 25)

Now, as someone who has taught the novel for several years, Sebastian has “actually grown to really love it because the storytelling is so well done” also noting that “the characters are
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important and . . . so well-drawn out” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 25).

However, this appreciation for the author’s craft does not come without critiques. Sebastian worried that American readers do hold Atticus up as a perfect character, which made “the story itself a white savior narrative” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 25). While he enjoyed and valued the text, he saw it as an example that “change has to be made palatable for privileged, cisgender white, heterosexual people . . . For people to be like, ‘Oh, yeah, racism is pretty bad.’ We have to see Tom Robinson’s story through the eyes of this cute little white girl” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 30). Sebastian’s comments called out the power of dominant structures that position whiteness as the norm, and expressed dissatisfaction with the notion that critiques of racism had to be presented in forms that were comfortable to the normative group (Janks, 2010; Love, 2020; Muhammad, 2020; Picower, 2021). He was critical of the packaging of Lee’s message lessened the tragedy of Tom Robinson’s experience by centering Scout and her family. While To kill a mockingbird was the initial text that opened his eyes to the connection between literature and societal critique, he would seek out texts that more directly disrupted the status quo.

As Sebastian developed his critical consciousness through literary works, he wanted to be less like Lee and more like Henry David Thoreau, whose “Civil Disobedience” exposed him to the idea that an individual could disrupt the system and “stand up against the government . . . by refusing to be part of the problem” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 22). He continued to be inspired by texts with similar messages including The handmaid’s tale and V for vendetta, which depicted individuals and collectives pushing back against oppressive government forces. The inspiration Sebastian found in the texts he chose to include in Table 5 shined a light on his conception of literacy, and as I continued to construct his portrait, I would
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see this echoed in his approach to curriculum and teaching. The messages about emotion, empathy, injustice, power, and disruption that he embraced through these books drew the outline of the man he grew into—the man who was committed to living more unapologetically in order to create safe spaces for his students. However, as I looked back at these texts that inspired Sebastian to question and disrupt systems of power, another truth about Sebastian’s literacy history also unfolded. Because of the time and place in which he grew up, the models of disruption Sebastian had access to were white, mostly male authors who operated through a white-centric lens. When Sebastian and I first spoke about the way reading literature inspired him as he grew up, he acknowledged this, saying, “We live in a society that is white-centric. Your texts are Eurocentric. Our media is hetero-centric or heteronormative . . . I’ve grown up my entire life, like, learning about those things, but like I find diversity more interesting” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 13). Thus, while Sebastian could see his values and aspirations reflected in the formative literature from his adolescence, he would have to wait until adulthood to uncover the more diverse texts through which he could see his own life and identity reflected. This, too, would cross the boundary into the conception of literacy he developed as an adult and teacher. His passion for reading and joy he found in books and poems, were born not only out of his need for companionship as a young man, but also out of his mother and grandmother’s reverence for education and intellect. As an adult, Sebastian continued his pursuit of knowledge, still constantly reading, analyzing, and dissecting texts—particularly those by queer authors and authors of color. He told me he was invested in, “reading queer authors, reading about the queer experience, people of color, female authors, like, real difficult things that people are going through and trying to find some solace in that” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 16). For Sebastian, literacy was still a way to explore the questions “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to
be in society?” and engaging with texts that mirrored his own identities and lived experiences made that exploration all the more meaningful.

**Defining Sebastian’s Conception of Literacy: Fostering Intellect and Empathy**

Sebastian’s literacy history indicated that his conception of literacy was deeply personal and highly intellectual all at once. Texts, particularly print-based texts, had been a means through which he could become an intellectual and knowledgeable adult, qualities he valued because, in an often chaotic world, his intellect and knowledge were things he could control, things that could not be taken away from him. However, as seen throughout his literacy history, the knowledge Sebastian built through textual exploration was not simply cold or factual. Analyzing texts ignited self-knowledge and acted as an invitation to question and challenge the status quo.

Sebastian and I collaborated on a model of his conception of literacy using the same methods I had employed with Albert and Jane (Leavy & Harris, 2019). As Sebastian and I worked through his personal conception of literacy and developed the model depicted in Figure 20, we realized the intellectual *and* the personal had to both be captured as the core characteristics.
Because of the dual focus of Sebastian’s conception of literacy, it made sense to both of us to construct it as a Venn Diagram with one side devoted to fostering intellect and the other to building empathy. The middle of the diagram was the heart of Sebastian’s conception of literacy—the place where intellect and empathy merged and invited individuals to become knowledgeable in the ways that Sebastian had come to value throughout his childhood. When we settled on this model, Sebastian said, “Honestly, I love it. I wish I could print it out and hang it in my classroom” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 17). However, the model did not come easily. We spoke about Sebastian’s conception of literacy across three interviews and after I visited his classroom three times before I had a model to show him as a starting point. When I first asked Sebastian to describe the way he would define literacy, his responses focused mostly on technical processes of reading and writing, but speaking to him about his life and his teaching, along with watching him interact with his students, suggested that Sebastian saw literacy as more
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than a technical process. As we continued to talk through what it meant to be a literate person and what counted as literacy practices, the meeting place of intellect and empathy came to light.

Initially, Sebastian defined literacy as “being able to decode any kind of text and numbers” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 8). When I asked him to elaborate on what counted as a text, he started with the idea that a text is “anything that has words. Anything from, like, a poem to an infographic, for example” and later expanded his definition of texts by describing the types of texts he tried to bring into his classroom. These included novels, poems, nonfiction, song lyrics, historical speeches, and documentaries (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 9). However, even in that interview he asserted that literacy is “more than just reading and writing” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 23). That comment signaled decoding was just a starting point for Sebastian. Throughout our continued meetings, Sebastian walked me through many of the literacy practices we ultimately placed on the “Fostering Intellect” side of his model. For example, Sebastian felt dissecting patterns, tropes, and allusions were practices that unveiled the way an author put their text together. When listening to music, he would “hear the influence of other things,” and when playing video games, he could recognize “how games lift or pay homage to other video games that came before it,” which could help him intuit how to navigate the open world of the game (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 13). These were the first practices we included in Sebastian’s literacy model as they represented the everyday literacies he carried with him in his daily activities both in and out of the classroom (Gee 2015a; Knobel, 1999; Street, 2016).

Several months later, Sebastian and I returned to our collaborative effort to define his conception of literacy, and it was after this discussion that I constructed the first draft of the
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model depicted in Figure 20. The key to seeing beyond the technical skills of literacy was a closer look at the motivations behind Sebastian’s curricular choices. Sebastian explained that:

> We read literature and texts that have to do with universal themes . . . There's so many, like, crossovers, so many Venn Diagrams of themes in books overlapping with things that the kids are going through; things that we've gone through as adults, as teachers. And it’s important to, like, recognize those patterns and hopefully learn from that. (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 5)

Although Sebastian emphasized recognizing patterns, which he had also done a year earlier in our first interview, this time the patterns were personal. Seeing the overlapping themes in a text was a means through which individuals could make connections to their own lived experiences and hopefully gain new insights. As I asked Sebastian to go into more detail about this, he had a moment of realization. Reading texts—seeing the patterns in them and unpacking their messages—was really about “not only becoming more analytical, but also being more empathetic” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 28). We left this interview with a plan. We had established that “Fostering Intellect” was essential to his conception of literacy, and we found the more personal missing piece, building empathy.

I sent the model in Figure 20 to Sebastian in August of 2023, so he could reflect on my interpretation of our previous discussion of his conception of literacy. Although he shared some thoughts with me via email, Sebastian asked if we could hop on Zoom to talk through his reflections face to face. In his email, he asked me to add a couple of missing pieces and this was our opportunity to discuss why. My version of the model was missing “Identifying Values and Feelings,” and Sebastian brought this back to the texts that were formative to his own development. Those texts in Table 5, and the practices he engaged in to understand them, had
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helped Sebastian navigate complex feelings and pushed him to figure out who he wanted to be in the world. He also asked me to add “Learning About Other Groups’ History” but through our negotiations, we settled on “Exploring Other People’s Lived Experiences.” Ultimately, Sebastian wanted to make sure that learning about the lives of others was included as an empathy building piece of the definition of literacy. For Sebastian, the phrase lived experiences, “encapsulated culture” while also making room to think about the different circumstances and situations that people are in throughout their lives (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 11). The final decision in our collaboration had to do with Sebastian’s focus on vocabulary and word choice. Word meaning and the power of words frequently came up in personal conversations with Sebastian, in our interviews, and in each of the class sessions I visited. I was looking for a way to capture that Sebastian’s interest in words was not simply a technical process. It was rooted in something personal. We came up with the phrase “Choosing Words with Purpose” as part of the literacy practices associated with “Building Empathy” because, as Sebastian put it, “When we use specific words, they can convey different attitudes we have . . . and I think that’s very important for people to understand as they grasp the nuances of language” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 2). After commenting on the power of language to convey our thoughts and feelings, Sebastian added:

And I feel like that also goes into a person's identity and building empathy. Like, when you can explain yourself, you feel heard, you feel seen and that's I mean, ultimately, that's what we all want as human beings is to be heard and to be seen accurately. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 4)

Therefore, when Sebastian investigated the meaning of words and pushed his students to do the same, he was not looking to memorize definitions or increase test scores. He was gathering the
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intellectual knowledge needed to use language as a tool to compassionately communicate with other people in a way that would allow him to be seen and heard.

This model of Sebastian’s conception of literacy came together through continued dialogue and reflection. While Albert and Jane found one central quality at the center of their conceptions of literacy, Sebastian’s conception of literacy could not be defined without overlapping the technical and the personal and was heavily influenced by his work as a teacher. Sebastian was devoted to the young people with whom he worked, and through that dedication, much of our discussion of literacy came back to hopes for students, curriculum planning, and classroom practices. Sebastian felt that literacy was a pathway to both fostering intellect and building empathy. For example, if students looked at a character’s motivations in a novel, Sebastian, “hope[d] they [students] start to realize people do things because they want or need or desire something. I want them to be able to . . . not only become more analytical, but also be more empathetic” adding that “these are the important things for kids to learn…everybody should learn how to be empathetic and analytical” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 28). Through literacy practices, people could build the knowledge that would, ideally, unlock their ability to be more understanding towards one another. Sebastian wanted to live in a more empathetic and understanding world. These were the values he learned from the influential people in his life, and they became the principles he brought with him into the classroom.

Sharing Literacy: Sebastian and His Students

Unlike Albert and Jane, Sebastian did not pursue a career in teaching during his time as an undergraduate. He earned a bachelor’s degree in English and psychology, but graduated from college in 2010 “when there was a dearth of jobs,” and took a job as a paralegal while trying to figure out his next steps (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 6). As depicted in his literacy
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history, Sebastian learned to value education through his first role models, his mother and grandmother, who led him to see the acquisition of knowledge as a source of power. Despite his appreciation for these early role models, Sebastian came to teaching unconventionally. His desire to teach was not solidified until he became an educational role model for someone else by assisting his cousin with essays she needed to write as she applied to graduate school. While working with her, Sebastian realized that he was able to “show her writing is just putting your thoughts down” and that “it can be very simple and fun” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 5). Sebastian would “always remember [that] she said, ‘You’re really good at this. You could definitely do this’” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June, 2022, p. 5). Even in this informal role as teacher, Sebastian was driven by a desire to model that writing could be a fulfilling endeavor, and the encouragement he received from his cousin set him on his path to teaching. With guidance from his partner, who was already a high school English teacher, Sebastian obtained his substitute certification and began subbing while going through an alternate route teacher preparation program, which led him into the career he has today. In the following part of Sebastian’s portrait, I offered a closer look at the teacher role models who influenced Sebastian throughout his life. I followed this discussion of Sebastian’s role models with examples of classroom interactions with his students, focusing specifically on the ways Sebastian fostered the development of students’ intellect and empathy through their shared literacy practices.

**Becoming a Knowledgeable Role Model.** Throughout our interviews, Sebastian often spoke passionately about the experiences he wanted his students to have in the classroom. Sebastian had learned to value intellect from the prominent educators in his life, and he brought his belief that literature could open doors to intellectual and emotional growth into his work with students—a quality I saw first-hand during each of my visits to Sebastian’s classes in the spring
and fall of 2022 (Dharamshi, 2019). Sebastian was drawn to educators who shared his mother and grandmother’s passion for intellectual knowledge, particularly his high school English teachers. He explained, “every one of my high school English teachers inspired me to want to read more, to read different books” and went into detail about his tenth grade English teacher who was the first person to read “challenging texts” that were “also fun and interesting” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 4). He loved reading *Beowulf* in this teacher’s class because of the way he “approached it with such passion,” and it was clear that Sebastian admired this teacher’s “cool, very laid back, but also intelligent, [and] philosophical way of looking at literature” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 4). He explained that classes like these “pushed me to see that [with] literature, what you put into it is what is what you get out of it” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 4). The discoveries Sebastian made in this tenth grade class and the admiration he had for his teacher led to his initial college pursuits where Sebastian not only majored in English, but also attended the same university for his undergraduate degree that this teacher had graduated from. This was a teacher who used literacy to foster intellect in students through the ways they studied challenging literary texts, and the qualities Sebastian identified in this teacher were ones he later worked to emulate with his own students.

This, however, was not the only influential teacher in Sebastian’s life. Sebastian also spoke about one of the teacher-educators with whom he worked in his alternate route teaching program. As he explained his path to teaching, he shared:

My professor was just, like, such an inspiration. I wish I could be like her.

She was just so amazing, too. She had nothing but love and compassion, but when she walked into the room, everybody paid attention to her because she knows her
Here, there was little ambiguity concerning this educator’s influence on Sebastian. He said it quite plainly. He wished to be like her. He too wanted to be a teacher who met his students with love and compassion, earned their attention through his demonstration of knowledge, and imparted wisdom on them. In one of his final reflections for this study, Sebastian described the way he talked to students and I was reminded of his description of his teacher educator.

I definitely speak to my students the way I want to be spoken to, and I try to never speak disrespectfully to them, or yell at them or belittle them in any way. . . I don't believe in just like blind allegiance to authority figures. I feel like respect must be earned.

(Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 20)

Sebastian learned to be a teacher from a professor who made him feel loved, and he met his own students with the same spirit of kindness and mutual respect. He had come to respect and admire her because of both her compassionate demeanor and the depth of knowledge she shared, not simply because she held the title of professor. As demonstrated in the discussion of Sebastian's classroom, Sebastian considered himself a feminist and he brought an ethic of care to his work with students. He did not demand respect from students simply because he was the teacher, but deviated from normative power structures as he modeled kind and respectful discourse as a way to share respect with his students (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; McCusker, 2017; Saint Pierre, 2000). However, the comments above also suggested Sebastian admired his tenth grade teacher and teacher educator as disseminators of knowledge. While Sebastian saw a hierarchy between teachers and students, where teachers took on the role of authority figure, their authority came from their expertise. For Sebastian, teachers were not
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authority figures who should wield power over their students. They were people who held gifts that they could pass on to their students.

Sebastian had meaningful role models who influenced his personal development as well as his teaching philosophy. Because he saw teachers as role models, this was what he wanted to become for his students as well. Upon initial review, phrases like “impart wisdom on to students” might feel reminiscent of the banking model of education where the teacher is the keeper of knowledge that deposits information to students for students to memorize and repeat (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Gee, 2015; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Love, 2019). However, visits to Sebastian’s classroom suggested that he did not simply aim to feed students information that they would take in without thought. Instead, he saw himself as a resource for his students. Like his tenth grade English teacher and professor in his teacher-educator program, Sebastian had spent time developing his knowledge base. Engaging students in observations, analysis, and questioning were central to the conception of literacy that crossed the boundary into his classroom, and he felt that sharing his knowledge was a way to guide his students' growth and development.

Role Modeling by Guiding Discussion. As depicted in his literacy model (Figure 20) and literacy history, Sebastian’s personal conception of literacy was academic in nature. When he thought about literacy, he continually came back to the books and poetry that had shaped his view of the world and human experience. Literacy and literature were intrinsically linked, and Sebastian hoped to bring his love of challenging texts from a wide-range of authors and genres to his students. Sebastian believed that the study of literature was a way of “building heuristics . . . so that we’re better equipped to deal with this crazy, chaotic world” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 18). He had been inspired by teachers who helped him to build the
capacity to learn for himself, and Sebastian saw teaching as a way to pay that forward. In the classroom, he could be a heuristic guide—a person who would help students develop the skills needed to learn for themselves. This role modeling was evident in each of my visits to his class—through the topics he raised in class discussions, the questions he posed, and materials he used with students as they engaged with texts.

My initial visit to Sebastian’s classroom was late in the 2021–2022 school year. Like Albert’s class, Sebastian and his students were exploring issues of identity, sexuality, family, and friendship through *Aristotle and dante discover the secrets of the universe*. (Sáenz, 2014). The fourteen students that made up this class—ten boys and four girls—filed in, chatting and greeting Sebastian and their co-teacher, Carrie, with whom he taught the class. Students arranged themselves at tables that faced the SMARTboard, some choosing to sit on their own while others sat in pairs. As they settled into class, students took out their books and computers, reminding Sebastian that they had finished a chapter in the novel the day before, and diving into discussion when he posed the open-ended question, “So what did we find out” (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 1). Several students in the class quickly responded to Sebastian’s question, and Sebastian’s position as role model or guide was established early in the lesson.

**James**: His [Aristotle’s] Aunt Ophelia died.

**Sebastian**: Yes. His Aunt Ophelia died, unfortunately. Somebody who cared for Aristotle when he was young. Um, what else did we know about Aunt Ophelia?

**Jen**: That she also handed the house to him.

**Sebastian**: She handed the house—She, um. In her will, she put the house in his name.

**James**: His [Aristotle’s] Aunt Ophelia died.

**Sebastian**: Yes. His Aunt Ophelia died, unfortunately. Somebody who cared for Aristotle when he was young. Um, what else did we know about Aunt Ophelia?

**Jen**: That she also handed the house to him.

**Sebastian**: She handed the house—She, um. In her will, she put the house in his name.

Yes. [To a student with her hand raised] Kiara?

**Kiara**: She married a woman.
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

Sebastian: She was, um, not married, but she was with a woman, right? Franny. We could say like her life partner, her girlfriend . . . We just couldn’t say married because, at that time, it wasn’t legal for gay people to get married. (Sebastian, Class Visit, June 2022, p. 1)

Throughout this short exchange, students shared information about the text that Sebastian reinforced, clarified and corrected. When Jen said that Aunt Ophelia “handed the house down,” Sebastian offered the more conventional vocabulary for this situation using phrases like “in her will” and “put the house in his name.” Sebastian’s response to Kiara’s comment that Ophelia “married a woman” was similar as he pointed out the women would not have been able to marry one another during the time in which the novel is set. Sebastian’s conception of literacy was closely tied to word choice and the power that words hold and he modeled this in his responses to students clarifying and correcting word choices that did not match with the exact point students aimed to make. He felt that defining words was a way to build intellect and that choosing one’s words carefully was an empathetic act—a way to show care for others.

When I asked about the frequency with which vocabulary and word choice came up in his classes, he explained it was “because it ties into not only our work life, but also our personal lives. When we use specific words, they can convey different attitudes that we have,” later adding it was important to “understand the history of words and the repercussions of words. The ramifications of words . . . It’s important for every aspect of our lives to make sure that we choose words with purpose so that we can express ourselves clearly. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Session, August 2023, p. 2, p. 4). To Sebastian, words mattered. He emphasized that words mattered in small ways—like clarifying that when someone dies and leaves a belonging to someone else, they do so in a will. But, his modeling reflected that words also mattered in more
significant ways; that they were not neutral, but held power in their meaning (Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Love, 2019). Sebastian was in a long-term partnership with another man, and he remembered a time when it would not have been legal for them to choose to marry if they wanted to. As Janks (2010) wrote, “language, together with other signs, works to construct reality” (p. 61). Therefore, using the term *married* to describe a partnership between characters who were denied legal right to marry overlooked the reality of couples who could not be defined within a heteronormative context. Sebastian’s tone was kind and gentle as he offered his clarification in response to Kiara. His comment was not a critique, but it pushed back against the “dominant patriarchal representation of reality [that] is so often taken-for-granted that it is . . . made to seem inevitable and true” (Janks, 2010, p. 63). Marriage was not a neutral term. It was a term rooted in patriarchy and heteronormativity, and if Sebastian and his class were going to examine characters’ lives and sexuality with both intellect and empathy, they would have to think about the implications behind the words they used.

Sebastian’s focus on word usage as a way of guiding his students was consistent throughout all of my visits to his class. Sometimes these instances popped up throughout the course of class discussions like previously described exchange, but there were also several points in Sebastian’s classes where exploration of a specific word was planned in with a distinct purpose. For example, the discussion of Aunt Ophelia’s partnerships led Sebastian to a planned moment in his lesson. The students continued to discuss Aunt Ophelia’s character, and two students in particular, Mateo and James, talked through the reasons she was ostracized by her Hispanic Catholic family.

**Mateo:** She wasn’t, um, accepted by her family. She didn’t have great communication in those relationships.
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

James: [interjecting] Because she was living with a woman.

Sebastian: ‘Cause she was living with a woman. So, why would the family have trouble with that?

Mateo: They’re probably, uh, pretty conservative. Things like that. Probably believe in straight relationships.

Sebastian: Yeah, probably believe in straight relationships. Probably because of what?

James: Cultural or religious reasons?

Sebastian: Yes. So, that’s what I wanted to talk about . . . I want you to go to the dictionary and look up the word homosexual. I want you to find out when it was first used. (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, pp. 2–3)

While Sebastian’s clarification of the word marriage happened in the moment, Sebastian had planned for students to look up the word homosexual, and he had a specific purpose in mind. The progression of the conversation revealed that he aimed to model how we might break down a word's meaning and use that information to challenge a stereotype or oppressive belief. When cultural or religious beliefs came up in the discussion, he took the opportunity to weave in the examination of word meaning he had planned. The first piece of information students found came from Jen who noted that, “until 1973 homosexuality was listed in The Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders” (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 3). While Sebastian took a moment to clarify what the DSM is, he quickly reminded the class that they were looking for “when it was first used, first recorded” (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 4). It was clear throughout this part of the exchange that Sebastian was looking for something different and his repetition of the earlier question prompted the student Jordan to confirm that the first usage of the word homosexual was in 1890. Sebastian revealed the purpose of this exercise when he responded,
“So here’s my question. If the first time the word was ever used was 1890, how could it appear in ancient religious texts?” When Jordan replied, “it changed when they were translated,” Sebastian echoed him and then said, “Yeah. That’s exactly it” (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 4). Sebastian’s comment “That’s exactly it” suggested he wanted students to challenge religious rules against homosexuality. The novel was a vehicle through which he and his students could have this discussion as characters in the text rejected LGBTQ+ romances for religious reasons. Sebastian reiterated this connection to the text as the class’s discussion came to a close, saying:

So, like I said, I really encourage you guys to do your own research and find out more. Okay? . . . Obviously, Aunt Ophelia suffered because she didn’t have her family with her when she died, and it was because, you know, she lived with a woman that she loved. This is definitely something that we’ll see with, maybe, what Dante’s going through. Right? (Sebastian, Class Visit 1, June 2022, p. 6)

Again, Sebastian led students through an exploration of a word that went beyond a simple vocabulary exercise. In looking into the origin of the word homosexual, Sebastian reinforced his belief that the way we use words may have repercussions. Sebastian modeled his conception of literacy throughout this portion of the lesson. By looking up not only the meaning of a word, but also its origin, we could develop a more informed analysis of beliefs that are associated with the word in question. Examining our words and beliefs in this way might also push us to choose our words more carefully, explore other people’s lived experiences, and ultimately build our capacity to see others with empathy.

When I visited Sebastian’s classroom for two consecutive days in December of 2022, the start of the lesson was similar to the previous June, reinforcing the ways in which Sebastian’s
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conception of literacy crossed the boundary into his classroom. The group was much smaller than the class I attended the previous June. The seven students—four boys and three girls—sat together at tables around the room with only one student choosing to sit on his own. Students were studying *To kill a mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960), and as with the previous spring, topics around identity, oppression, and family were all part of the class’s discussions.

Sebastian began with an open-ended question engaging students in the discussion of an event in the most recent chapter of the novel. Sebastian reminded the students, “So, we saw that Bob spit in Atticus’s face. What did we come up with as to his motivation? The book doesn’t tell us, so we have to infer why” (Sebastian, Class Visit 2, December 2022, p. 1). A brief conversation around the character’s motivation ensued. As students imagined the reason why one man might spit in the face of another, they were asked to put themselves in his shoes. While the first student to speak, Kelly, interjected “Oh! That’s rude! He spit in his face?,” the next to contribute, Elizabeth, suggested that “He [Bob] wanted to keep his reputation because it got badly destroyed to the whole town basically” (Sebastian, Class Visit 2, December 2022). Elizabeth did not express whether she approved of Bob’s behavior, but she could see a possible explanation behind the character’s actions—he had been humiliated and felt he had something to prove. In a later interview, I asked Sebastian about this focus on character development, and he explained, “Looking at characters in a book and, like, understanding them helps us understand the real people in our lives and, like, the situations that we have with the relationships that we're in” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 22). Sebastian’s words echoed Muhammad (2020) who asserted, “Our goal is not just to help students become better test takers or academic achievers, but also for them to gain the confidence to use learning as a sociopolitical tool to thrive in this world and help them know themselves” (p. 68). When Sebastian asked these open-ended
questions of students at the start of class, I could see part of his conception of literacy at work. Students like Elizabeth who examined Bob Ewell’s behavior, as well as Mateo and James who unpacked the rejection of Aunt Ophelia in *Aristotle and Dante* were able to consider the reason behind a person’s choices and behaviors. Their pursuit was intellectual in that they engaged in interpretation and analysis of these texts, but it was also empathetic. Students used their intellectual tools for the purpose of exploring and making sense out of the lives of others.

**Role Modeling by Providing Structure.** Guiding students to consider word choice, underlying messages, and character motivations throughout in class discussions was not the only way Sebastian modeled his conception of literacy in his teaching. The materials Sebastian designed for his classes were highly structured documents that he hoped would support students as they analyzed the deeper meanings of the texts they studied. Sebastian provided students with note-taking documents that guided them through key concepts related to their reading and lessons. These documents focused on building skills to foster intellect, but also included space for reflection. For example, Sebastian shared a notes document (see Figure 21) that corresponded with the chapters in *To kill a mockingbird* students discussed during one of my visits. The focus of their note taking was analysis of character motivation. The guide for each chapter included the following parts: a “Do Now” question related to the chapters they were about to read, a summary of the chapter’s key points, links to the audio book and graphic novel, a graphic organizer with prompts about characterization, and a “Journal Write” question. The “Journal Write” questions differed in focus, sometimes prompting a more in depth response about a key idea from the text and sometimes prompting students to make a connection to themselves or the world around them. The *To kill a mockingbird* Chapter 23 notes shown in Figure 21 were part of the lesson I described in the previous section.
**Chapter 23: Appeal**

**Do Now:** Research the words “appeal” and “trial.” What is it? What could happen in the book, if Atticus is successful with an appeal?

---

**Chapter 23 (pg. 249-260) Summary – Audio & Graphic Novel**

- The children are worried about Atticus because of Bob Ewell’s threats, but Atticus is not worried.
- Tom is now in a prison seventy miles away waiting for an appeal. Atticus feels he has a good chance of being pardoned. We learn that if Tom is not pardoned he will be put in the electric chair as rape is a capital offense in Alabama.
- Jem discusses and questions the judicial system/class system with Atticus. He doesn’t understand how twelve men get to decide the fate of one man. Atticus explains that in Alabama court law, a white man’s word holds more weight than a black man’s. The reader also learns that one of the jury members amazingly voted for acquittal (one of the Cunninghams).
- As a result, Scout says that she wants to invite Walter Cunningham to dinner, but Aunt Alexandra forbids it and calls him trash.
- Jem seeing how people go out of their way to hate each other suggests that perhaps Boo doesn’t come out of his house simply because he wants to stay inside away from it all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character’s Actions</th>
<th>Character’s Wants</th>
<th>Character’s Values/Motivations</th>
<th>Textual Evidence (w/ page #)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atticus explains how racism works in the town to Jem.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt Alexandra forbids Scout to invite him to dinner.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose your own:</td>
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**Journal Write:** How do Atticus’ & Alexandra’s motivations differ?
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

The lesson supplement above related to Sebastian’s conception of literacy and his approach to instruction in several ways. He valued literary practices that pushed readers to break down a text’s meaning, and felt it was his role as a teacher to guide students through the development of these practices. He paired writing prompts and graphic organizers with resources like hyperlinked audio files and graphic novel pages, as well as bullet points providing a brief overview of the key points in the chapter ahead. Sebastian wanted to add accessibility to the text’s ideas, and told me he hoped the materials he provided to students would, “an easily accessible tool for [students] to use” adding “I hope it helps them, you know, aids them in remembering and being able to analyze” (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 35).

In my class visits, I saw that Sebastian actively used the notes described above as a bridge to class discussion. In my aforementioned December 2022 visit, Sebastian used the question about the meaning of the word *appeal* at the top of the notes in Figure 21 to unpack the significance of appealing a jury’s decision (Sebastian, Class Visit 2, December 2022, p. 2). Kevin defined an *appeal* as “a second chance” sparking the discussion below.

**Sebastian:** That’s good. A second chance for what?

**Kevin:** To prove their innocence.

**Sebastian:** Yes. So, it’s a second chance for a guilty party to maybe, uh, prove their innocence. What other—There’s actually another reason.

**Kevin:** Also death sentence

**Sebastian:** Yes, maybe to lessen a sentence. [pause] Anything else for an appeal?

**Sara:** Um, but isn’t it—doesn’t it also maybe look at if there are any mistakes?

**Sebastian:** Yes! So, if there’s any mistakes, you could file an appeal and say maybe there was jury tampering. Or maybe you found some proof that one of the jurors was paid off
or something like that. Or maybe you feel the trial was not fair or just. Maybe there wasn’t enough time spent on, like, one piece of evidence. Yeah. So, there’s many reasons why someone might file an appeal. [pause] So, what could happen in the book if Atticus is successful with an appeal?

Elizabeth: Well, if he wins, it would change, like, history altogether, right? This whole entire time period

Sebastian: Okay. Yeah, it would be a big step forward to help, hopefully, combat at least, like legal racism? (Sebastian, Class Visit 2, December 2022, p. 3)

As with the *Aristotle and Dante* lesson, Sebastian guided students from the exploration of word meaning to issues of justice and equity. When Elizabeth mentioned that a successful appeal to the Tom Robinson verdict would change history, Sebastian tied a successful appeal to combating racism in the judicial system. While Sebastian knew Atticus would never have the opportunity to appeal the jury’s decision, and he had his own critiques of Atticus’s role as a savior in the novel, he made space for students to think through the social impact of these possible results.

Ben: I think even more people from the Black community, like, from that area would stand with him.

Sebastian: Mmm hmm

Ben: Like, even more than everybody else who was supporting him from the trial. I feel like more people from the Black community would respect him because it would prove that he was not guilty. That he got Tom out of jail.

Sebastian: Would respect Atticus more?

Ben: Yeah, would respect Atticus more for, like, sticking with it. For like going above and beyond.
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Sebastian: Anything else that could happen in the town?

Sara: Protesting?

Sebastian: Protesting? Like, from who?

Sara: The White people.

Sebastian: Okay, yeah. I think it probably might make some people upset. And it is, like Elizabeth says, a step towards . . . believing Black people. Like, trusting Black people’s words. (Sebastian, Class Visit 2, December 2022, p. 3)

As students brought up the possible implications of reversing the guilty verdict, Sebastian’s comments highlighted the multiple truths that emerged; backlash and progress might occur simultaneously (Britzman, 1995; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; McCusker, 2017; Saint Pierre, 2000). Sebastian used the structure of this notes document as an analytical tool for students. Before reading Chapter 23, they wrote a reflection response about the topic of racism depicted below in Figure 22 and defined legal appeals (see Figure 21).

Figure 22: Lesson Supplement: TKAM Chapter 22 Character Motivations Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal Write: Is racism extrinsically or intrinsically motivated? How does racism negatively affect everyone?</th>
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While some students might just jump into a conversation about legal appeals and racism, these prompts gave those who benefitted from thinking through an idea before discussing it a chance to work out their thoughts in writing before coming to class. Thus, Sebastian’s modeling of the
literacy practices he aimed to bring into the classroom took several forms. He guided students to practice skills like defining words, making inferences and predictions, and examining themes. But he did not stop at skill building. He leveraged those technical practices to engage in the more personal practices from his literacy model (see Figure 20). These included analysis of themes, reflection, exploring other people’s lived experiences, and making personal connections.

Although Sebastian had not read the works of Muhammad’s (2020, 2023) *Cultivating genius* and *Unearthing joy*, his approach was reminiscent of her Historically Responsive Literacies Framework, which began “with identity and skills because if these two pursuits are developed, the possibility is created for intellect, and when students develop intellectualism, they can express their ideas, work through justice centered solutions to the world’s problems, and expand their mental capacities” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 104). Sebastian created structures to support students’ academic and personal development. Intellect was not “conflated with skills in the classroom” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 104). Instead, skills served as tools through which students could build their capacity to empathetically sit with and talk through intellectual concepts, and as they developed their intellectualism, Sebastian guided students towards criticality by using fictional texts as a springboard to examine inequities and systems of power in the real world (Muhammad, 2020, 2023).

**School-Based Conceptions: White, Eurocentric Heteronormativity**

As with Albert and Jane, Sebastian’s literacy portrait was entwined with his lived experiences and identity. He had been inspired by teachers from his youth well into his adulthood, but saw literacy in schools as limited both in the definition of what it means to be literate and the types of texts students are exposed to in language arts courses. Even the high school English teachers who inspired Sebastian to read challenging texts and delve into analysis
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

of authors’ messages and stylistic choices, did so through a curriculum that was white, male, Eurocentric, and heteronormative. As Sebastian addressed the conception of literacy in schools, he explained:

Let's face it. We live in a society that is white-centric. Your texts are Eurocentric. Our media is hetero-centric or heteronormative. And, like, that's fine [drawn out]. I've grown up my entire life learning about those things, but, like, I find diversity more interesting.

(Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 13)

While Sebastian’s words said that learning about those things for his whole life was fine, I could not ignore the drawn out emphasis on fine and the sigh that accompanied this statement; a tone that emphasized Sebastian’s fatigue as a queer Hispanic man operating in this system. School was a microcosm of American society, and if society was white-centric and heteronormative, so too were the experiences that Sebastian saw reproduced in school (Gee, 2015a; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020, 2023). As a student, Sebastian had few opportunities to see himself reflected in the texts chosen for him in school (see Table 5: Sebastian’s Formative Texts), and he saw this lack of diversity continued in the schools in which he taught.

Within his current school context, Sebastian worked to use his power as a teacher to influence curricular changes. A recurrent theme throughout our interviews was his support of and enthusiasm for queer artists and artists of color, and this crossed the boundary into his classroom whenever he had the opportunity to propose new texts for his classes. Sebastian spoke about Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, at least briefly, in every one of our interviews, and at one point, directly addressed its significance to him.

With Aristotle and Dante, I know we keep going back to it, but it is also the only book I
have ever taught in my career where the main character is Hispanic. It is a positive depiction of most of the Hispanic characters. Um, and also with main characters that are queer. We don't know that the main character, the protagonist, is queer until, like you know, the end of the book. But there are hints here and there. (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 13)

While he and Albert both taught the novel, it was Sebastian who wrote the curricular plan and first incorporated it into the eleventh grade American Literature course. For Sebastian, the inclusion of this text was a meaningful step in developing a more diversified literary canon with which students could engage, and it held special significance because he was responsible for its selection. This was not Sebastian’s only addition to our department’s courses of study. Sebastian paired *Aristotle and Dante* with excerpts from José Olivarez’s (2018) book of poetry *Citizen illegal*, along with several songs that were referenced in the novel (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 12). During one of my class visits, I also saw him pair Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem” with a section of *To kill a mockingbird*, and our work together as colleagues involved expanding the voices of women, particularly Black women and women of color, throughout our department's curriculum. When Sebastian had the opportunity to select new texts, he did so with representation in mind. He wanted students who did not see themselves in widely used white, heteronormative texts to find mirrors of their life experiences, and he felt students “need to have more windows” into life experiences “that are not just straight, white people” (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 15). In a later interview he added:

I think it's important for, not only for Hispanic students [or] for queer people, queer students to see those portrayed in, like, the books that they read in school. But it’s also important for the white kids, the cisgender, heterosexual kids to recognize that like, okay,
they also struggle through a lot of the similar things I struggle with. (Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 14)

Sebastian had high hopes for the power of curricular change, and that hope was connected to his belief that our literacy practices could help us to build empathy by examining other people’s lived experiences. He made moves to bring those more diverse perspectives to his students, but he also faced backlash that left him feeling frustrated and discouraged.

Sebastian and I could not talk about his efforts to change the school-based definition of a valuable literary work without also discussing the barriers that blocked change. When diversification takes the form of inclusion in the curriculum:

The hope is that the truth of the minority might persuade the normative folks to welcome the diversity of others . . . and maybe to transform . . . their racist, sexist, and heterocentric attitudes. But, how exactly, is identification with the other to occur if one is only required to tolerate” the excluded party by allowing them into the curriculum.

(Britzman, 1995, p. 157)

Sebastian knew that new texts by writers from marginalized groups was not enough to challenge the dominant conception of “normalcy,” which Britzman (1995) explained as the “conceptual order that refuses to imagine the very possibility of the Other” (p. 156). As discussed in the previous section, Sebastian’s approach to curriculum involved discussing identity, normalcy, discrimination, justice, and equity with students. And, while in the classes I visited students engaged in open discussions of these topics without resistance, Sebastian explained that this was not always the case—that students sometimes constructed barriers to an expanded view of literacy through resistance to the Other.
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A lot of students are not open to things that are different . . . And I feel like that's a problem. That does create, like, an insular mentality where you don't want to learn about different people. You don't want to have your set ideas challenged in any way by new things. (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 13)

I asked him, “How does the system of school play into that barrier?” and he responded by saying:

With the change in, like, the political climate, it feels like we’re pushing, or at least, politicians are pushing for us to not have any kind of discussions or—not even controversial discussions—but conversations that are not about straight, white people in schools. And I feel like that’s a danger. (Sebastian, Interview 2, April 2023, p. 15)

For Sebastian, one of the most significant barriers to literacy was the suppression of stories that did not center whiteness and straightness, and he could see that his approach to literacy was in conflict with school-based literacy practices that were rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (hooks, 1994; Love, 2020; Muhammad, 2020). Although Sebastian saw literature as a humanizing force—one that could highlight the similarities in the struggles and joys human beings experience—he also knew that honest discussion of the human experience was politicized and deemed controversial by school leaders, parents, and subsequently, even by students. Queer stories, BIPOC stories, and female stories were positioned as controversial. Therefore, Sebastian risked pushback as he continued to focus on identity, intellect, and criticality in his text choices and his teaching.

Navigating the Tensions: Caught Between Conformity and Subversion

Sebastian's literacy story was complex and multi-layered. He described school literacy as “just probably being defined as reading and writing” and challenged this limited view in many of
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

the actions he took as an educator (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 23). But he was also in
the process of undoing the conditioning that came with growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s.
He grappled with what counted as appropriate language. He looked for opportunities to help
students combat deficit-based systems like standardized tests. And, he moved between rejecting
white supremacist, patriarchal structures and preparing his students to work the systems they
would be forced to face. These are the tensions that made up the final shades of Sebastian’s
literacy portrait.

Appropriate Language and Out-of-School Literacies. It was interesting to witness
shifts in Sebastian’s thinking around literacy and language over the course of this study. Over the
five years we worked together, we have had many conversations about language, and this came
up in our first interview as we broached the topic of students’ literacies. At first, his responses
centered around activities he led in the classroom, specifically how he brought their interests into
class activities by analyzing songs they like as a form of poetry or using pop culture references to
contextualize vocabulary. (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, pp. 17–19). When I asked him,
“What literacy practices might we see [students] using in the classroom that are really just from
their day-to-day lives,” he responded with uncertainty, but it led us into a conversation about the
ways students communicate.

Sebastian: Um . . . [pause] I guess like, occasionally [pause] Nah, that’s not really a
literacy practice.

My curiosity was piqued.

Katie: What were you thinking was or wasn't really a literacy practice? That's interesting!

Sebastian: Um [pause] Their text speech in a response. Like, you know, instead of
saying “Thank you,” they would put, like, “ty.”
EXPLORING TEACHERS’ LIVED LITERACIES

**Katie:** Mm hmm. Why wouldn't that be a literacy practice?

**Sebastian:** [pause] I don't know. (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 19)

Each time I listened back to this moment from our interviews, I could hear the hesitation in Sebastian’s voice. Our friendship was creeping into the study as we broached a topic we had discussed before. He knew I saw rules around language as flexible and socially constructed (Knobel & Lankshear, 2019), and we had previous conversations about what made certain ways of talking or writing *good* or *appropriate*. Because of this, my response to Sebastian’s hesitation took on an enthusiastic tone as I tried to encourage him to share his thoughts.

**Katie:** I don’t know either! It's so interesting that you thought about it as an example and then said no, that wouldn't be a literacy practice.

**Sebastian:** [pause] I don't know. I guess it's just because I see it as a, like, a shortening, a slang and, and I'm sure you don't like this, but like you know, an unprofessional . . . [sighs]. (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 20)

Sebastian dropped off for a moment after the word unprofessional. I heard him acknowledge that we might not see eye to eye on this topic, but I needed to see if I could get a clearer picture of his thinking. I steered away from whether language was professional or unprofessional and asked what students were doing when they used text speech or slang. After thinking for a moment, Sebastian explained, “I mean, it is their understanding, it is understandable for them. So it is something that they bring in . . . It’s still decoding. It's still decoding language. It's still a symbol” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 21). Sebastian’s response suggested he acknowledged slang as a mode of communication where the symbols held meaning. He even went on to add, “Honestly, I love slang and all of the different slang that like each new generation of kids uses because it's interesting. I love how words get meaning, different connotations based on how
they’re used” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 22). For Sebastian, the languages that students created for themselves were interesting, but he seemed unsure about whether or not they fit in the classroom.

In our final meeting, as we negotiated Sebastian’s literacy model, slang came up again in the context of making choices about writing. Sebastian explained writers make specific choices about their words depending on their audience. “I tell my students this all the time, you're not gonna use the slang that you speak with your friends . . . in an academic essay, or you're not gonna write that in an email to your boss” (Sebastian, Follow-Up Reflection, June 2023, p. 5). On the surface, this was similar to the comment he had made the year before. However, when I asked him why we would not use slang in those contexts, his reasoning had changed. Rather than discussing professionalism, Sebastian said:

You should be cognizant of how your words are gonna be received. Like there's two parts to it. You wanna make sure you’re getting your thoughts across. But you also wanna be sure that the people that are reading it will be able to understand it. (Sebastian, Follow-Up Reflection, June 2023, pp. 5–6)

Like Jane, Sebastian appeared to be in the process of revising his conception of literacy. While he maintained there might be a time and place for slang, the focus was on the writer’s voice and the audience’s ability to understand the message rather than the quality of the words (Ghiso, 2015; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019). Notably, both of Sebastian's examples involved audiences that were in positions of power—teachers and bosses. While Sebastian acknowledged slang subverted what counted as standard language in ways that might enhance the writer’s voice, he also wanted to ensure his students knew how to conform to expectations for appropriate word choice in school and at work so they would be seen as literate within the confines of the
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system at large (Gee, 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020).

Working the System. The tension between conformity and subversion was also apparent in the way Sebastian discussed standardized tests. Like Albert and Jane, Sebastian was highly critical of standardized texts describing them as, “inherently classist” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 24). Sebastian taught an SAT preparation class earlier in his career and argued it measured life experience and access to information rather than capability, adding:

It’s not really a test of what you know, or what you can do. It is trying to trick you and you won’t know how to do well on the test unless you know how they're trying to trick you. Or you just have an amazing, stellar, complete, very strong grasp on grammar. (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 25)

Sebastian’s words did not just echo the comments of Albert and Jane, but those of scholars who have long critiqued the equity of such assessments (Gee, 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; Greene, 1991; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Janks, 2010; Love, 2020, Muhammad, 2020).

Sebastian’s response to the tricks embedded in these inequitable assessments was to equip students with tools that helped them anticipate and move around those tricks. In his SAT prep class, for example:

We would get a grasp on that concept, and then I show them a bunch of examples from the test showing them, “Look! This is how they’re trying to mess you up, but all you have to do is notice where the prepositional phrases are, cross them out, and then you got your answer. (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 25)

Sebastian’s tactics made sense, but they also lived in the tension between conformity and subversion. He saw the tests as classist not only because of the content of the readings and
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questions, but because of “tutors. People who have studied the test. Khan Academy. Things that you pay for, which once again, is classist because you don't have access to that unless you have disposable income or disposable money to get those things” (Sebastian, Interview 1, June 2022, p. 25). He did not have the power to end testing that led to deficit-based views of young people’s abilities, but he understood the mechanics of the test, had an undeniable grasp of English grammar, and could provide students with free access to strategies that would help them work the system. While, as Audra Lorde (2007) asserted, it is not be possible to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, Sebastian knew students would be judged and measured according to their performance on standardized tests, and the only tool he had at his disposable was his ability to see through the tests’ tricks and show others how to do the same.

At the heart of Sebastian’s work with students was the belief that education was a source of power. His mother impressed upon him that no one could take away his intellect, and Sebastian wanted his students to build their intellect so they too could possess something that no one could take away from them. For Sebastian, literature provided a wealth of knowledge that helped people understand themselves and the world around them in ways that could foster empathy. His classroom was a place where students would examine issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. At times, students would engage in that discourse not only willingly, but meaningfully. Other times, Sebastian would feel pressure from outside forces that opposed the discussion of so-called controversial topics in the classroom. Growing up, Sebastian turned to mentors and role models to guide the development of his intellect and empathy, and as he continued in this development, he also sought to act as a role model for his students.

Albert, Jane, and Sebastian each delved into an exploration of their conceptions of literacy with openness and vulnerability. Our discussions, their work with students, the artifacts
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they shared and their personal reflections revealed nuanced conceptions of literacy. While the
skills associated with reading, writing, and communicating were part of their literacy practices,
their conceptions of literacy could not be represented by skills-based models alone (Alvermann
& Moje, 2013; Gee 2015a; Muhammad, 2020, 2023; Street, 2016). All three participants saw
skills as tools that could be used to move towards a greater purpose. For Albert, that purpose was
self-actualization. For Jane, literacy practices were an invitation to explore our own lives and
worlds beyond our own. For Sebastian, whose conception was the most traditionally academic,
fostering intellect through building knowledge was a way to navigate the chaotic world in which
we live, and he hoped that this intellect would also lead people to engage with one another more
empathetically. These personal conceptions of literacy grew out of their lived experiences and
often crossed the boundaries into their classrooms through the choices they made as they
interacted with students, as well as the lessons and curriculum they designed. It is essential to
note, however, that the study of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s conceptions of literacy was neither
simple nor fixed (Britzman, 1995; Saint-Pierre, 2000). At times, there were contradictions
between their beliefs and their practices, and they each felt pressured to navigate the more
limited view of literacy that is dominant in schools. If I had sought a definitive right way to see
literacy, these contradictions may have been discouraging, but the feminist lens I brought to new
literacies directed me to live in and learn from the spaces of uncertainty (Britzman, 1995; Saint-
Pierre, 2000). Rather than reproduce a new hierarchy for right or appropriate literacies, I looked
to Albert, Jane, and Sebastian to see what new possibilities might open up when teachers
examined the ways they had come to understand literacy and reflected on the literacy practices
they brought with them into their teaching.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

Over the course of a year, Albert, Jane, and Sebastian shared their time, their classrooms, and their personal stories with me. Our explorations of the literacy practices in which they engaged in their day-to-day lives, also sparked examination of deficit-based models of literacy in schools. This work was grounded in the research questions:

1. What are teachers’ conceptions of literacy both in school and in their day-to-day lives?
   a. What conceptions of literacy do teachers hold from their personal literacy history?

2. In what ways [if any] do teachers’ day-to-day conceptions of literacy cross the boundary into their classrooms?

As suggested in the questions above, as well as through my use of portraiture, this study was designed to learn from the participants’ literacy practices. While my initial impulse was to examine the ways in which teachers' conceptions of literacy crossed the boundary into their classrooms, boundary crossing became embedded in multiple aspects of the study. Portraiture as a methodology relies on blurring the boundaries between what counts as art and what counts as science, and insists that the portraitist’s self must be recognized as entwined with the work (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Additionally, the close friendships Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I shared were central to the work we did together through this research. We were able to build off of our pre-existing relationship as they generously shared their stories with me. Our relationships, however, did not preclude us from addressing complications that arose as we explored their conceptions of literacy. Portraiture begins with the question, “what is good and healthy” pushing the researcher to resist the impulse to pathologize or simply document failures (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). As
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Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained, “relentless scrutiny of failure” amplifies “a view of our social world that magnifies what is wrong and neglects evidence of promise and potential” (p. 9). The purpose of my research was to examine literacy beyond the limits set by deficit-based conceptions of literacy that are pervasive in educational institutions. My aim was not to define right and wrong conceptions of literacy, but to problematize fixed definitions of literacy in schools by learning from Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s varied conceptions and practices (Britzman, 1995; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Leavy & Harris, 2019; St. Pierre, 2000). By beginning with “what is good and healthy,” the participants and I did not ignore the tensions, barriers, and contradictions that arose, but rather reflected on and talked through those imperfections while leaving space for “evidence of promise and potential.”

In this chapter, I share what we learned from our work together throughout this study and the broader implications for practice and further research. I begin with a summary of the findings that looked across Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s portraits for points of connection, as well as variations in their literacy histories and practices. Then, I organize the broader conclusions from our work into the following sections: personal histories as a tool for meaning making; disrupting what counts as literacy; facing systemic barriers; and emotional boundary crossing. Finally, I address implications for practitioners, policy makers, administration, and teacher educators, with a final focus on what I learned from the process of portraiture as a purposeful method of study.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

In the sections below, I detail the conclusions I drew from the development of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s portraits. While I contend there is much to learn from these conclusions, I do not claim to offer definitive solutions and answers. Instead, I offer insights into what became
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possible through the process of unpacking teachers’ conceptions of literacy through the stories that emerged in their portraits. As Coia and Taylor (2012) reflected:

Insight comes in telling our stories to one another. We do not tell the stories because we have insight: they are not complete in that way, with their lesson neatly attached. Rather it is in the telling and the retelling to each other that meaning is made and insight is gained. (p. 10)

Thus, the conclusions below are a starting place not an end point. Through them I hope to leave space for unknowability and uncertainty; to encourage further questions to be asked and continued investigation of boundary crossing between teachers’ everyday literacies and the practices we enact in school (Britzman, 1995; Coia & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Coia, 2019).

Portraits in Conversation: Reflections on Albert, Jane, and Sebastian

Many parallels arose between Albert, Jane, and Sebastian throughout the process of constructing their portraits. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian each grew up with a love of reading and storytelling. Their connections to stories, reading, and learning stemmed from their families. Albert came from a long line of teachers. Jane’s mother was a preschool teacher who taught her to read alongside her brothers at home. Sebastian’s grandmother had been an educator. She and his mother inspired him to build his intellect and instilled a value of learning. Additionally, all three participants looked to stories to learn about themselves and the world around them. Albert was drawn to texts—particularly novels and poems—that focused on characters who were seeking a place to belong. This was evident in his discussion of his love of Salinger’s (1951) The Catcher in the Rye, as well as through the content of the comics and poems he wrote. From the time she was very young, Jane gravitated towards stories that gave her windows into the lives of others. Texts, in various modalities, were a means through which she could explore places,
people, and experiences she might never have access to in her own life. Later, as Jane reflected on her choreography as a literacy practice, she also came to see the creation of texts as a way to explore and communicate emotions. Sebastian was a child who, at times, felt isolated from his peers and looked to texts as a source of companionship and comfort. He also saw the time he spent with stories as a means through which he could become a more knowledgeable person; a quality he learned to value from his mother. Although their investment in texts manifested in different ways, the time that Albert, Jane, and Sebastian spent engaging with stories as children played a significant role in the literacy practices they carried into their adulthoods.

There were also significant variations in the conceptions of literacy and literacy histories that Albert, Jane, and Sebastian shared. For instance, while Albert wrote comics and poetry as a way to work out his feelings about himself and his place in the world, he rarely spoke about his academic experiences in reference to his childhood literacies. As we constructed Albert’s portrait, any talk of school was focused on his interactions with classmates and sharing his comics; feelings about academic achievement did not arise as a significant part of his story. Although Albert aspired to be a teacher from a very young age, he did not focus on grades and school assignments as a central to the experiences that shaped his conception of literacy.

Jane, however, revealed she was very focused on grades and achievement throughout her schooling, and felt a desire to gain the approval of teachers and parents in order to be seen as good even when the content of her classes was not particularly interesting. While she was social in school, describing herself as “chatty,” she felt the need to keep her social-self separate from her student-self to keep from being seen as disruptive. As a teacher, Jane valued literacy practices that were collaborative, and in her classroom, chattiness could be part of the learning
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process. This, however, was counter to what she reported of her time as a student where her in-school literacies involved quieting herself and working diligently to achieve high marks.

Like Jane, schooling was also significant to Sebastian’s literacy history, as he valued being challenged in school and was inspired by teachers who pushed him to read difficult texts. Sebastian and Jane both reported that they worked hard in school and put a great deal of time and effort into their academics. However, Sebastian’s comments did not focus on the grades he received for that work. Instead, he identified knowledge and deeper understanding of challenging texts as the result of his hard work and argued that what students get out of learning opportunities was determined by the amount of effort they were willing to put in.

Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s individual school experiences were part of their literacy histories and crossed the boundary into their classrooms. As a child and adolescent, Albert sought a place to belong among his peers in school, and sharing his writing with others was a way to work out his feelings and forge connections with others. As a teacher, Albert continued those practices, particularly through the poetry he wrote and shared with students as moderator of a poetry club. The lessons and writing assignments he planned also invited students to think about characters’ emotions and their place in the world while considering their own lived experiences. Jane's schooling also informed her teaching, but in a different way. Most of Jane’s instructors in high school, as well as in her teacher education programs, approached literacy as a set of skills to acquire; a definition that Jane found inadequate and limiting. In her own teaching, Jane aimed to push back against limited conceptions of literacy by positioning skills as tools that students could use in their exploration of ideas. She looked to her twelfth grade English teacher as an example of a more nuanced approach to literacy in the classroom, and Jane’s own approach to literacy left room for multiple right answers, different forms of expression, and collaboration.
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While in school, she felt pressured to conform to fixed notions of rightness and looked for ways to free the students she worked with from that same pressure. She wanted students to be able to develop and justify their own interpretations of the texts they examined and was open to different ways of knowing. Sebastian, on the other hand, was inspired by many of his teachers, and looked to them as role models for his own teaching. He incorporated texts he identified as challenging into the curriculum because reading challenging texts as a student had bolstered his acquisition of knowledge. He looked for ways to share his knowledge with students and modeled methods of analysis through structured documents designed to guide their thinking. While there was space for students to express individual ideas, the format for how those ideas should be expressed came from Sebastian. Sebastian also looked to diversify the curriculum with careful attention to whose stories were and were not being told. He did not have the opportunity to see himself in the texts he studied in school, and wanted to ensure that students, particularly students of color and LGBTQ+ students had the chance to see both mirrors and windows in their curriculum. Like Jane, Sebastian’s curricular moves were a rejection of the more limited experiences he had in his own schooling. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian each brought their experiences as students into their teaching, from their approaches to literacy to the lessons they designed and their priorities as they thought about their students’ opportunities for learning.

Finally, Albert, Jane, and Sebastian all struggled against the limitations presented by the autonomous model of literacy that continued to be privileged in schools. When asked about school-based literacy, each of them discussed frustrations with standardized tests and expressed concerns that these measurements of students’ capabilities had the potential to do harm. Both Albert and Jane asked “Who decides?” what counts as a successful measurement of literacy proficiency. Their questions targeted the power structures that determine which literacy practices
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were seen as valuable and which were not, and revealed that Albert and Jane were skeptical about the reliability of standardized test results. Sebastian also shared this skepticism around standardized testing, expressing that assessments like the SAT were inherently classist. He echoed Albert and Jane’s concern that the tests were not authentic measurements of a person’s nuanced literacy practices, and like Albert, argued that the questions were designed to trip up the test takers. Sebastian had experience teaching an SAT preparation course, and had first-hand experience breaking down the tricks of the text with students. He noted that the classist nature of tests like the SATs stemmed not only from the content of the questions, but also from the access to tutors and special programs that students with more financial resources might be able to obtain. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian all saw tests as a primary example of the hierarchical, limited model of literacy in schools, and Sebastian specifically called out the ways these standards are designed to push students to conform to White, Euro-centric ways of knowing. Each of these educators were concerned about the damage inflicted on students’ sense of self and willingness to engage in school as test scores are used to label and track their capabilities.

The conceptions of literacy these teachers brought to their work grew out of their personal contexts—their identities, childhood experiences, early schooling, teacher preparation, and beyond. The literacy models we co-constructed throughout the course of the study suggested that there was not one fixed definition of literacy for us to agree upon as right. Instead, their varied and nuanced conceptions of literacy pushed back against the notion that literacy is simply the skills associated with reading print-based texts and writing essays (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Muhammad, 2020; Street, 2016). The process of sharing and reflecting we undertook throughout the construction of their portraits pushed each of them to ask questions about where their understanding of literacy came from,
what practices they leaned on to express themselves in the world, and what conceptions of literacy and literacy practices crossed the boundary into their work with students. Living in the questions, tensions, and understanding Albert, Jane, and Sebastian brought to the study also pushed me to reflect on my own literacy history and the choices I made in the classroom. The conclusions that follow grew out of the major themes from the portraits of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian, each of which offered insights that hopefully will lead to further inquiry in the broader field of literacy studies; insights that I elaborate on in the implications addressed later in this chapter.

**Personal Histories as a Tool for Meaning Making**

Stories—specifically the personal stories Albert, Jane, and Sebastian shared—were at the heart of this study. Portraiture provided a lens through which I could discover the narrative threads in the stories they told, and ultimately, add depth to the conversations we could have as we made sense of literacy in their lives both within and outside of educational contexts (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Inspired by the work of Klein and Taylor (2023), I hoped centering participants’ stories as a valuable way of knowing would invite other educators to:

- reflect on their own stories and potentially enter the dialogue from their own lived experiences, both within the walls of schools and universities and beyond in the larger context of their lives . . . that the opportunity to retell and reexamine their testimonies would then provide them the impetus to think differently about what is possible in terms of disrupting the patriarchy and the status quo. (p. 7)

I did not know when we started how fully Albert, Jane, and Sebastian would invite me into the intimate details of their lives or how much ongoing dialogue this would prompt as we returned to their stories for further discussion. They did not just communicate their stories through the words
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we exchanged in their interviews. Their stories also emerged through the artifacts—poems, performances, childhood writing, lists of favorite books, lesson plans and assignments—pieces of their histories that added to my interpretation of the role literacy played in their lives.

Additionally, as Albert, Jane, and Sebastian looked back on their own literacy histories and recalled the texts, practices, and school experiences that were significant to the literacy practices they valued at the time of the study, they also thought about their own students. Jane, in particular, saw her students as individuals engaged in active literacy practices outside of school. Their day-to-day actions from social media, to texting, to chatting with friends and breaking down the TV shows they watched were all practices that Jane felt her students could (and often did) use in school. The field of new literacies has consistently argued that students are already engaged in complex every day literacies that may go unrecognized in the context of school (Gee, 2015a; Knobel, 1999; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Moll, 1992). Teachers were once students. Teachers, like students, employ their preferred literacy practices outside of school, and these preferred literacy practices are not identical from one person to the next but shift based on factors like social context and identity. Approaching conceptions of literacy through the lens of their personal experiences from childhood through adulthood, allowed teachers like Albert, Jane, and Sebastian to think about students' literacies beyond the skills that are tested and hierarchically organized in school. They also needed to continue to think of their students’ literacy beyond the limits of their own experiences. Thus, personal histories became a tool for meaning making that had the potential to disrupt what counts as literacy—disruptions that I examined in more detail in the following section.
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Disrupting What Counts as Literacy

Literacy is often at the forefront of discussions of educational reform. Student performance on standardized tests is used to rank the level of success schools are achieving and perpetuate the narrative that there is a literacy crisis among American youth (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee, 2015a; Ghiso, 2015; Janks, 2010; Muhammad, 2020, 2023). School reform initiatives seek out fixes to address so-called deficits in children’s reading and writing development, often without challenging the definition of literacy against which students are measured. When literacy is limited to a fixed set of skills through which students must demonstrate proficiency, the possibility to be seen as a proficient reader, writer, and communicator also becomes limited. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s portraits, however, disrupted the fixed definition of literacy that is employed in policy making and reform.

Examining Teachers’ Day-to-Day Literacies as an Act of Disruption. Discussions of what counts as literacy commonly revolves around the ways in which literacy is used in school. This was the case in my initial discussions of literacy with all three participants. As I asked, “What comes to mind when you think of literacy?” they turned to their work with students—what students read in the class, how and what students write, the types of assignments that they, as teachers, planned for students. This instinct to discuss literacy as it exists in classroom settings made sense. First, Albert, Jane, and Sebastian had all been students at many points in their lives, and like most of us, had learned to define literacy in terms of what we read and write in schools (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Gee, 2015a; Janks, 2010; Muhammad, 2020). This impulse was furthered by their role as English teachers. They were used to discussing literacy in the context of school with attention to K–12 Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (2021) and college and career readiness. However, once Albert, Jane, and Sebastian started talking about the
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literacy practices they valued in their day-to-day lives, we were able to explore literacy as something that exists well beyond the world of college and career readiness outlined in the K–12 English Language Arts Common Core Standards (2021). This allowed us to dig into what people do with literacy, reminding us that, “People do not just read and write texts; they do things with them, things that often involve more than just reading and writing” and things that are often done in collaboration with other people (Gee, 2015b, p. 36).

As described in the previous chapter, Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s conceptions of literacy did not just involve cognitive skills to be learned in schools and used in careers but were made up of a complex collection of practices that they drew on as they navigated the world and communicated with others (Gee, 2015a, 2015b; Janks, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014, 2019; Street, 2016). Skills like decoding the printed word and constructing clearly written sentences were a piece of the definitions of literacy we discussed, but what stood out more significantly were practices like analyzing, interpreting, making connections to ourselves and the world, evaluating arguments, asking questions, and collaborating. These practices were not limited to texts one might encounter in school. They included films, songs, podcasts, YouTube videos, performances, social media, images, art, and even the bodies of people with whom we interact.

The purpose of Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s literacy practices also took on greater meaning than college and career readiness. Albert thought that literacy was a means through which we could investigate ourselves, and continually come to know our inner selves more deeply. Jane saw literacy as a vehicle for exploration, not only of ideas, but also of modalities. Sebastian saw literacy practices as a way to open doors to greater knowledge, and felt that what people learned from their interactions with texts could also help to build a more empathetic outlook on the lives of others. Examining all of the ways in which literacy practices were used in
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their lives challenged the reduction of literacy to a set of easily testable skills and disrupted hierarchical notions of what it means to be appropriately literate. Throughout the process, they wrestled with multiple truths about literacy in our lives—simultaneously acknowledging that there are skills involved in reading, writing, and communicating that are useful to our everyday lives and questioning how the skills identified as valuable in policy initiatives like state mandated testing and Common Core Standards were selected (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; hooks, 1994; Gee, 2015b; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Muhammad, 2020, 2023). When English teachers like Albert, Jane, and Sebastian have this opportunity to reflect on the literacy practices they enact in their personal lives and classrooms, they may begin to see cracks in the normative positioning of literacy in schools, and may find themselves asking questions like those posed by Muhammad (2020):

Who gets to set pacing guides, curriculum, state assessments, and learning standards? . . .
Who develops them? Are they people of color? Are they teachers who embody sociopolitical consciousness? Do they deeply know the history of race and equity in this country? (p. 84)

Questions such as these may lead to more personal questions, as they did for Albert, Jane, and Sebastian. And, as they are questions of power, may also spark change. In dialogue with me, as well as in individual reflections, they looked at choices they made in their own teaching and asked why. They looked for ways they might be contributing to deficit-based approaches to student literacy. In thinking about their own day-to-day literacies, they also considered the literacy practices students already engaged in outside their academics, and examined whether or not they actively invited those practices into the classroom.
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Unpacking, Questioning, Reflecting, and Revising What Counts as Literacy. It would be tempting to use Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s literacy models to construct a new definition of literacy to use in schools. That, however, would run the risk of perpetuating the oversimplification of literacy that is tied to deficit-based views of students’ capabilities.

Throughout this study, we learned that there were no quick fixes when it came to the positioning of literacy in schools. Rather than pull us closer to one way of seeing literacy, our collaborations, which were grounded in feminist new literacies, emphasized the multiplicitous ways in which literacy was enacted in our lives. We came to recognize that we live in a world of evolving modes of communication and technologies that ask us to embrace a more flexible, multiplicitous, and unfixed conception of literacy that may change based on context and evolve over time (Britzman, 1995; St. Pierre, 2000; Street, 2016; Taylor & Coia, 2020). As Street (2016) explained, “The job of studying culture is not of finding and then accepting its definitions but of discovering how and what definitions are made, under what circumstances and for what reasons. These definitions are used, change and sometimes fall into disuse” (p. 581). Although Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s conceptions of literacy appear frozen in time through the literacy models we constructed, these were a representation of how they saw literacy at the time of the study. In fact, as detailed in chapter four, the models did not remain fixed from the beginning of the study to the end, but underwent ongoing co-construction and reconstruction as our dialogue went on. Living in that unfixedness felt (and will likely continue to feel) uncomfortable at times, but was also an act of disruption that kept calling Albert, Jane, and Sebastian to challenge the status quo. Although this work was not easy, it seemed to have value for the three participants.

As noted in chapter four, Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I have continued to bring these challenges into our collaborations as teachers. In our co-teaching/co-planning, Albert, Jane, and I
look for ways to encourage students to draw on their day-to-day literacy practices and have
worked on bringing multimodality to our courses more consistently not just in the texts we study,
but also in the texts students are invited to create. While I do not share any courses with
Sebastian, he directly addressed what the process of participating in this study has meant to him
in our third interview. His comment was in response to the final interview question I consistently
asked participants: “Is there anything else you’re left thinking about or anything you wanted to
share?” In response, Sebastian said:

I really appreciate our discussions because I mean, I just enjoy talking like I
said, being nerds. But also, like, on a personal level, it’s made me be really introspective,
[about] some of my practices, some of the things that I do. It makes me feel like I'm
gonna do them with more intent and more, like, understanding, and more confidence,
because I feel like I understand more of the intention behind what I do and why I do it.
(Sebastian, Interview 3, June 2023, p. 41)

Sebastian felt that the having the opportunity to think through his conception of literacy in
dialogue with me pushed him to take a closer look at the intentions behind the practices he brings
into the classroom, and he wanted to use this clarified intent in his work with students. While this
study has come to a close, I hope Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I will continue to engage in this
reflective process and make space for our conceptions of literacy to evolve alongside our
students.

It is also important to acknowledge that this cyclical process of unpacking, questioning,
reflecting, and revising was neither neat nor linear despite the linear fashion in which I have
listed those actions here. There were significant instances where Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s
beliefs about literacy did not necessarily align with aspects of their practices. These tensions and
contradictions do not take away from the value of their portraits but add additional layers for us to unpack. As the portraitist, I looked for the overarching story that emerged for each participant with whom I worked. There were experiences, beliefs, and actions that shaped what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) referred to as the *aesthetic whole*—the narrative that emerges as the portraitist brings together the individual elements that were studied—but this narrative needed to be constructed without eliminating inconsistencies that emerged. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) offered this guidance, “Even when there are references to people’s experiences, backgrounds, or perspectives that do *not* seem to fit the dominant conception, we recognize that the contrasting image does not detract from that conception, but actually underscores its certainty and power” (p. 248). In our case, the contrasting images that emerged in Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s portraits shed light on the complexities inherent in the study of literacy practices; again, disrupting the call for simple solutions to the so-called literacy crisis in schools.

For instance, Albert, who turned to modes of communication like comics and poetry in his own writing, provided me with a five-paragraph essay prompt as an example of an assignment that embodied his conception of literacy. When we examined the prompts together, we could see alignment between their content and his belief that literacy can invite self-examination and discovery. However, our co-analysis also revealed that the modality he chose—the five-paragraph essay—held little meaning for him. Five paragraph essays were a common writing style in school, so he assigned a five-paragraph essay. I did not approach this contradiction as a failing, but as an opportunity for further discussion, one that gave Albert the chance to question why he had chosen this modality and reflect on the ways he might approach this differently in the future in order to more closely honor the conception of literacy he hoped to enact as the foundation for his teaching.
Facing the Contradictions. Contradictions between belief and practice also came to light in Sebastian’s portrait. Sebastian was passionate about using literacy as a tool to disrupt White, Eurocentric, heteronormative systems of power. He took advantage of opportunities to claim power and enact this by making curricular revisions that honored diverse voices. He wanted students, particularly students of color and queer students, to see themselves in the texts they examined in schools because that was an experience he had been denied. At the same time, Sebastian found it difficult to envision students doing literacy without the guidance of structured activities. When he thought about students reading, watching movies and TV, listening to music, or enjoying memes, for example, he looked for ways to operationalize those practices into formalized lessons. He was excited about the prospect of bringing students’ day-to-day literacies into the classroom, but approached that opportunity from the position of a literacy role model who needed to restructure students’ expression of their out-of-school literacies for an in-school purpose.

With Jane, the most significant contradiction emerged in the way she saw her own role as a creator. Jane had an expansive conception of literacy, and she enthusiastically invited in her students’ literacy practices even when they broke with conventional modes of expression privileged in school. As a child and adolescent, Jane prioritized meeting teachers’ expectations and achieving good grades over her own individual meaning making and expression, and this pressure to conform carried over into the way she made sense of herself as a writer and creator. When discussing literacy in our interviews, Jane listed dance and performance as types of texts. In her teaching, Jane encouraged students to express themselves through a variety of modalities. However, when I asked her if she saw herself as a creator of texts, her impulse was to classify herself only as a consumer despite her extensive experience as a dancer and choreographer. As a
teacher, Jane made choices that pushed back against the confining standards she felt pressured to adhere to when she was in school. She worked to free students from the anxiety she felt by prioritizing multimodality, multiplicity, and collaboration, but when she looked at her own literacy practices, she still held herself to a limited conception of what counted as a writer until we had the time to unpack that impulse and examine her choreography together.

My aim in highlighting these contradictions and tensions is not to take away from the overarching elements that came together to write Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s literacy stories into being. Instead, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggested, these examples underscore the complex, multiplicitous, and unfixed nature of our conceptions of literacy and literacy practices. Language has been constructed through cultural practices over time, so “we can also deconstruct and reconstruct it” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483). More specifically, the meaning(s) we accept for literacy exist not because they are absolute truths, but because they are “created and maintained every day by people . . . the foundations are contingent, not absolute, and therefore open to change” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483). Unpacking and questioning every day assumptions about literacy invited us to deconstruct and reconstruct what literacy meant to Albert, Jane, and Sebastian, a process that needs to remain ongoing in order to leave space for these conceptions of literacy to evolve over time. Providing English teachers with the time and space to work through their conceptions of literacy and the history through which those conceptions developed was powerful. A year into the study, Albert experimented with more flexibility in his writing prompts and Jane and I worked together to co-construct assessments with our students. We have brought what we learned through their portraits into our work as teaching partners. Now, however, there is no set time and place for it; no structure to our continued deconstruction and reconstruction of our conceptions of literacy and literacy practices.
Thus, our work together leaves me both encouraged and uncertain. We have seen that disruption of hegemonic beliefs around literacy is possible, and that disrupting the beliefs can lead to action by inspiring participants to break old patterns in favor of practices that more closely align with their multiplicitous conceptions of literacy. However, now that the organized structures for unpacking, questions, reflecting, and revising have come to an end, there is no way to know if that process will continue for Albert, Jane, and Sebastian.

**Facing Systemic Barriers**

An additional point of uncertainty was tied to the systemic barriers Albert, Jane, and Sebastian identified throughout the course of the study. Standardized testing, hierarchical labeling of students’ literacy skills, and limited representation in language arts curriculum were points of frustration for all three participants. They worried about the damage inflicted on students when their literacy skills were judged, labeled, and categorized as proficient or underdeveloped (Labaree 1997; Love, 2019; Martino, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). While their conceptions of literacy extended beyond the autonomous model they questioned what power for significant change they had in the face of these widespread, deficit-based models of literacy.

While their discussions of barriers were similar, the way they navigated those barriers was not. Albert wanted to break the mold, but could feel discouraged in the face of pressures from administrative forces that set expectations to maintain the status quo. Jane reported that she began teaching with a conception of literacy that was more closely aligned with skills-based models. As a new teacher, she defaulted to practices that were common when she was a student, and that she saw reproduced in her preservice and masters programs. However, Jane found greater satisfaction in her work and more fulfilling engagement from (and with) students when she started to play outside the boundaries of the autonomous model. She felt confident pushing
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back against hegemonic beliefs around literacy and took on positions of power within the
English Department—like revising the ninth and twelfth grade curriculum—to align more
closely with literacy practices she believed would combat deficit models and create space for
students to practice interpreting different kinds of texts and expressing themselves through
different genres and modes of communication. Sebastian channeled his frustration into
opportunities to incorporate more diverse texts into the curriculum. Like Jane, he was committed
to offering students both mirrors and windows through curricular content, and looked to bring in
stories that reflected the lives of underrepresented groups. However, Sebastian often felt limited
by pushback when he brought in texts that included the stories of people of color, women, and
LGBTQIA+ characters. While Albert, Jane, and Sebastian were each concerned with the damage
the autonomous model could inflict on students, they also sustained damage. There was
emotional labor involved in their resistance, and I question how sustainable it can be for teachers
to continually resist within a system they feel they have little power to change.

Emotional Boundary Crossing

In addition to disrupting normative conceptions of literacy, our work also challenged the
notion of objective truth commonly privileged in academia. This manifested in the ways Albert,
Jane, and, to some extent, Sebastian invited emotion into their classrooms in their approach to
literacy with students. It also emerged in the vulnerability they brought to the research process
through our pre-existing friendships. With students and with each other, we recognized emotion
as a valuable way of knowing rather than something that existed in binary opposition to
rationality (Ahmed, 2017; Fleckenstein, 1999; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Klein & Taylor, 2023;
Leavy & Harris, 2019). Resisting the call to shut out our embodied and emotional knowledge
was far from perfect. Students did not always take the invitation to bring their emotions and
personal experiences into their learning, and the participants themselves sometimes wrestled with how much they wanted to share. However, in the moments when our emotional epistemologies made their way into classroom practices, interviews, and reflections, they lent nuance to our examination of literacy practices. This was particularly clear during Albert’s class discussion on *Aristotle and dante discover the secrets of the universe*. Here, students did not simply report details from the plot of the novel, but talked through their feelings about sexuality, love, and relationships. Albert’s goal was not to check whether or not the boys had completed the task of reading and decoding the assigned homework pages. Instead, he aimed to engage the four boys in that small class in a conversation about topics that were inspired by the text. The results were similar to Forgasz and Clemens (2014) who found that, “Asking students how they felt about some academic content appeared not only to succeed in encouraging them to respond to the question, but it also tended to elicit a noteworthy depth of response” (p. 68). Acknowledging emotion may not be a measurable literacy skill within the patriarchal, normative structure of school as we know it now, but when Albert, Jane, and Sebastian allowed for this kind of boundary crossing, they found greater opportunities for discovery, exploration, knowledge building, and empathy emerged.

Our interactions as researcher and participants also relied on emotional boundary crossing. The discoveries we made throughout the study would not have been possible without Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s willingness to vulnerably share their stories with me. They spoke about family relationships, recounted painful moments and insecurities they faced throughout their childhood and adolescence, and shared moments of joy and pride, as well as instances of frustration. They recounted the texts and experiences that first made them fall in love with storytelling, and walked me through their journey from literary enthusiasts to secondary English
teachers. It was emotional. Albert felt choked up talking about a poem he wrote and shared with students. Jane listened to a reflection I wrote about her choreography and sent me an audio recording reading my words aloud as she talked through her response to them. She felt seen. I teared up as I listened. Sebastian opened up about his commitment to embracing his queer identity when he had felt pressured to hide for much of his life, and we talked about how this was born out of his hope that students would feel free to express themselves fully. Each of these moments allowed us to enter into dialogue with one another as we tried to make sense out of their conceptions of literacy. Feminist epistemologies challenge the patriarchal notion of rationality as superior to emotion (Ahmed, 2017; Fleckenstein, 1999; Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Taylor & Klein, 2023). If we had remained confined to the so-called rational, and restricted our dialogue to the classroom alone in an attempt to construct objective definitions of literacy, the nuances that were revealed in their portraits would likely have been missed.

We learned from these experiences that emotional boundary crossing was grounded in trust that grew out of taking the time to foster our relationships. With students, the teachers’ willingness to be open was not the only factor. Students would not necessarily jump into more emotional literacy practices like making personal connections and exploring other people’s lived experiences if they did not feel comfortable to do so (Forgasz & Clemens, 2014; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; Taylor & Coia, 2019). Albert, Jane, and Sebastian had to dialogue with students, share their own vulnerabilities, and navigate frustration when students rejected invitations to share themselves through literacy practices.

Trust was also an essential component in the emotional boundary crossing between my personal relationship with each participant and our work throughout this study. Our friendships and the portraits that I developed could not exist separately from one another. Through the act of
constructing a portrait, the portraitist had to enter the lives of the participants and build
relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Albert, Jane,
Sebastian, and I had already entered each other’s lives. Vulnerability and trust were already part
of the ways we communicated. By inviting our friendship into the work, we continued to deepen
our relationships and were able to vulnerably discuss personal aspects of their lives that shaped
their conception of literacy and their teaching. This could not, however, be done casually. I could
not assume that because we were friends the details of their lives were fair game. They read my
analysis and offered reflections. We negotiated and collaborated. I double-checked that it was
acceptable to share details of their lives even though they had been mentioned in interviews. I
have no doubt that the study was richer because of our friendships, but I do not propose that
friendship automatically strengthens a researcher’s results. The friendship, like any relationship
between researcher and participants, had to be tended to (Taylor & Klein, 2018). It could not
exist in the background of the study, but needed to be firmly a part of the work in order to ensure
that the openness with which the participants engaged in the study could be maintained and cared
for while still giving attention to the questions, contradictions, and tensions that arose their
portraits took shape. This was simultaneously a deeply moving experience and a difficult one.
There were times throughout the course of this year-long study where we had disagreements in
our work as colleagues that created frustration between us. There were periods when I was so
immersed in my efforts to balance work, research, and family that I neglected my commitment to
tending to our friendships, and had to consciously recommit to checking in with Albert, Jane, and
Sebastian as friends (Taylor & Klein, 2018). We had to remember to socialize with each other
without much talk of work and our study. We needed to allow our shared projects to cross into
our friendships without allowing those projects to take over entirely. Ultimately, our friendship
brought richness to the study and the study brought a depth to our friendships, but this was not achieved without significant effort and honest communication between us.

**Implications for Practice and Further Research**

Examining conceptions of literacy that extend beyond the *skills* associated with reading and writing was a meaningful pursuit for the participants in this study. They were able to reflect through questions like:

- How would you define literacy?
- What literacy practices do you engage in in your day-to-day life?
- What were you like as a reader, creator/writer, and communicator growing up?
- How do you see literacy defined in the context of schools?
- What literacy practices do you see students bringing into the classroom?

And, these questions pushed them to name, unpack, and in some cases revise their conception of literacy. Through questions such as these, Albert, Jane, and Sebastian also looked more closely at the literacy practices they prioritized in the classroom and questioned the *why* behind these choices, which affirmed some of their pedagogical moves and pushed them to rethink others.

This, however, was not a panacea for the prevalence of deficit-based measures of literacy proficiency in schools. Albert could invite student’s emotions into the learning process. Jane could collaborate with students to come up with multimodal options for self-expression. Sebastian could fight for curricular developments that represented the vast identities, cultures, and lived experiences of our students. Thus, the conclusions from this study reveal that recommendations for reflection can be made for practitioners and teacher educators, but change that extends beyond individual classrooms is also reliant upon shifts in conceptions of literacy on administrative and policy levels.
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Implications for English Teachers

In schools, literacy remains framed as a set of neutral skills students can be taught in order to become appropriately literate adults (Alvermann & Moje, 2013; Gee 2015a; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). These expectations often perpetuate the status quo and contribute to white-centric, masculinist ways of knowing that eschew the “relational and dynamic” nature of the literacy practices individuals move between depending on the sociocultural contexts in which they are communicating (Alvermann & Moje, 2013). While the list of measurable skills that count as valuable may be revised as policy initiatives change or evolve, the limitations imposed by positioning literacy as a testable set of skills anyone can (and must) adapt to still remain. Thus, teachers, particularly English language arts teachers, are immersed in a system that continually pushes them to teach young people skills for appropriate communication in order to ensure upward mobility (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Labaree, 1997; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). Common Core Standard Initiative’s English Language Arts Standards for Speaking and Listening Grade 11–12 (2021) referenced students “demonstrating a command of formal English” (para. 11) while the English Language Arts Standards for Language Grade 11–12 (2021) used the phrase “standard English” in reference to students’ writing proficiencies (para. 1, 4). In both cases, no definitions for “formal” or “standard” were given. The insidious message found in this wording is that what is standard need not be defined. This is the norm as dictated by the dominant power structures in place, and acts as means of stratification, or what Janks (2010) referred to as “unification and fragmentation” (p. 38). She continued, “The variety of language which is codified as the standard is invariably the variety approved of or spoken by the dominant members of society” (Janks, 2010, p. 38). By creating a system where teachers enforce adherence to this standard, the
dominant group becomes further unified by their right ways of speaking and knowing, while those who deviate from the accepted uses of language become fragmented or excluded from the dominant group; a process of othering that reinforces the power of the dominant group (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; Gee 2015a; Janks, 2010; Love, 2019; Knobel & Lankshear, 2019).

English teachers are expected to reproduce this hegemonic view of literacy in their work with students. Teachers in this position can become so immersed in the expectations and values of the institutions in which they work that they may not question the status quo. In some cases, those that do question these normative rules are positioned as less effective in preparing students to meet the demands of college and career readiness. As Freire (1970/2000) wrote, academics that “argue for clarity of language” often “accept the dominant standard discourse [and] aggressively object to any discourse that both fractures the dominant language and bares the veiled reality in order to name it” (p. 22). Discourses that name the oppressive nature of the dominant language are labeled as “imprecise and unclear, and wholesale euphemisms such as ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘disenfranchised,’ . . . remain unchallenged since they are part of the dominant social construction of images that are treated as unproblematic and clear” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 22). Under this system, literacy becomes a process of measurement, tracking, and remediation.

In order to challenge the dominant standards that can lead to deficit-based views of students whose literacy practices deviate from the norm, teachers need time to engage in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction (St. Pierre, 2000). The findings and conclusions of this study suggest that collaborating with teachers to examine their conceptions of literacy through their own lived experiences in and out of school can create a useful access point for reassessing the purpose behind our approaches to literacy in school. However, the lens that shapes this process of reflection matters, as unpacking their own conceptions of literacy will not
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disrupt the status quo if approached through the autonomous model. My work with the
participants in this study was grounded in feminist new literacies, and therefore designed to
extend beyond discussion of literacy as a set of skills. Thus, lived experience, sociocultural
contexts, multiplicity, and multimodality were driving forces in the way we looked at literacy in
the participants' lives and classrooms, as was questioning the purpose behind their various
literacy practices and the pedagogical choices they made while working with students. And, all
of this was done through a collaborative process. Unpacking, naming, and revising conceptions
of literacy did not happen in isolation but through sharing ideas, co-analyzing artifacts, creating
visual models, and writing/recording reflections. So much of what we learned came out of the
work we did in partnership with one another. I would recommend that practitioners who want to
engage in a similar process do so in community with others and can imagine that this could be an
undertaking for a professional learning community (PLC) or affinity group (Gee, 2018;
Hutchinson, 2012; Lormand, 2021). These groups, however, may be most effective in
challenging the autonomous model if they involve knowledgeable insiders, particularly like Jane,
who are already well-practiced in disrupting normative conceptions of literacy.

Although I do not aim to prescribe a fixed set of steps for English teachers to follow as
they question and possibly challenge their conceptions of literacy, I can make some
recommendations based on what we discovered throughout the study. First, the creation of
literacy models was a powerful mode of reflection for the participants. They were able to see
their conception of literacy and literacy practices interpreted through someone else’s eyes and
then continue to dialogue with a fellow practitioner to question, revise, and co-construct their
models. I would caution that we did not aim to create a finished product through these models.
The models shared in chapter four were merely the most recent versions at the time of my
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writing. In truth, the participants' models changed throughout the study and were meant to shift and evolve alongside the participants’ conceptions of literacy. We chose diagrams as the modality for these models but did not settle on a uniform format through which to depict the participants' conceptions. In future work, reflective models might also take different forms than a diagram—a drawing, poem, or other artistic medium could also be a meaningful form of reflection and expression. More important than the format was the role the literacy models played in uncovering teachers’ literacy practices, as they gave us a foundation to return to when we looked at their literacy histories, day-day-day literacy practices, and the conceptions of literacy that did (and did not) cross the boundary into their classrooms. Another meaningful part of this process was dialoguing through questions. Questions like those listed in the opening of this chapter could be a useful starting place for reflection. Others that were useful to us included:

- What does it mean to be literate?
- What counts as a text?
- What are some of the practices you engage in when you read/examine a text?
- How do you decide what kinds of texts to bring into your curriculum?
- What counts as writing?
- How do you like to express yourself?
- What modes of expression do you see your students engaging in?

These questions are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting place for teachers to think about literacy beyond the autonomous model. I have to acknowledge that the actions I have recommended here take time—a luxury that teachers are often not afforded. Therefore, teachers who are interested in undertaking this work will need administrative support in order to do so in a manner that is meaningful and sustainable.
Realistically, teachers may engage in the type of reflective process described above out of their own desire to resist/disrupt systemic forces that get in the way of young people’s opportunities to learn and express themselves in an environment that values their ways of knowing. However, for sustainable teacher learning to be accessible, teachers need to be provided with time and support in order to examine and develop their practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2012; Zeichner, 2020). I could not have developed the findings of this study through a quick process of interviews and class visits. It took more discussions, more reflections, more artifacts, and more class visits than I initially anticipated. With this in mind, undertaking the process I described in the previous section could not be done in one or two professional development sessions. Administrators who are open to challenging deficit-based models of literacy would need to collaborate with teachers to build in time for them to reflect, dialogue, collaborate, visit each other’s classrooms, experiment with practices that grew out of their collaborations, reevaluate, and so on. I would encourage them to look to teachers as sources of knowledge for this type of process. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian are evidence of the varying and complex conceptions of literacy and literacy practices that teachers right in our buildings already possess (Hutchinson, 2012; Muhammad, 2023; Zeichner, 2020). Identifying teachers who are passionate about this work and providing them with the resources to conduct continuous examination of their literacy practices in community with others could potentially expand the in-school literacy practices that welcomed for student use.

Taking this further, administrators who are committed to a more expansive view of literacy can also engage in deconstruction and reconstruction of their literacy practices in their own PLC or affinity group. Muhammad (2020) recommended a series of reflective questions
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around literacy aimed at school leaders, including, “How is literacy defined at the school and district levels? Does it focus on skills only or wider goals?” (p. 37), as well more direct questions concerning approaches to literacy in school, like:

- Do you (or your teachers) use factory created worksheets?
- Do you (or your teachers) use packaged curriculum that was not designed for your students’ identities? Did experts who share and know the cultural identities of your students and their families design it?
- Who wrote the curriculum your school has adopted? (Muhammad, 2020, p. 109)

In dialoguing through questions like the ones Muhammad (2020) posed, administrators could also unpack the assumptions about literacy they bring to their decision making and evaluation of both teachers and students. Teachers’ conceptions of literacy and the pedagogical choices that may grow out of them impact the in-school literacy practices available to students. Therefore, individual teachers or small groups of teachers actively reflecting on their conceptions of literacy to disrupt systems of stratification can shift what is possible for students. However, school leaders and administrators hold power over the literacy practices teachers can bring into their classroom, so for wider change to be possible, those in power will need to share in the work of challenging hegemonic conceptions of literacy that limit what counts as a valuable practice.

Even with administrative support, the autonomous model is likely to remain dominant without shifts in policy around literacy in schools. Unfortunately, the conversation around literacy has become even more fraught throughout the year and a half it has taken me to conduct this study. Policies limiting or banning content related to LGBTQIA+ people have become more prevalent, and states including Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Montana, and South Carolina have directly enacted policies that prohibit LGBTQIA+ topics from being taught in schools (Peele,
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2023). As I write this chapter, the children’s book Read Me a Story, Stella by Marie-Louise Gay was mistakenly flagged as inappropriate in an Alabama library simply because of the author’s last name (Cooper, 2023). The movement to censor racial content in school curriculum is also gaining power. According to recent reporting from the American Civil Liberties Union, “45 states have introduced bills to limit instruction about racism and sexism” and these bills have passed in 17 states (Watson, 2023). The autonomous model serves these initiatives. Positioning literacy as a neutral set of skills feeds into systems of dominance and control. The materials that are read become less important under the autonomous model because they are tools for practicing the mechanics of reading and writing. Students’ proficiency in demonstrating standard or formal literacy using these technical processes can be tested and categorized, and content that challenges the status quo can be labeled as inappropriate and removed from the classroom. Within this skills-based conception of literacy, the cultures, identities, and experiential knowledge students and teachers bring into the classroom is not a priority.

This reality suggests that it is more important than ever to seek out and partner with those who are already engaged in challenging oppressive policies and elevating liberatory models of literacy. With this in mind, rather than direct my comments on policy to policy makers, I extend them to all of us who are engaged in the field of education. Although educators are currently surrounded by movements to restrict diversification and liberation, there are also disruptive actions emerging in response to such movements. Resources like Muhammad’s (2023) Unearthing joy, for instance, offered practical tools to introduce board policies that support Culturally and Historically Responsive Education (CHRE), the foundation of which was her Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacies (CHRL) framework. Anti-racist and abolitionist movements in education intersect with those enacting feminist and queer pedagogies
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in order to push back against systems of power that use policy as a tool to further marginalize young people in our schools. The work of resistance is arduous and change can feel small and slow, but we can find fellow disruptors and feminist killjoys in our own communities to support us in our efforts (Ahmed, 2017; Janks, 2010; Klein & Taylor, 2023; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020, 2023; Picower, 2021). Challenging normative conceptions of literacy by examining personal histories and lived experience was a first step towards imagining the doors that open when we are able to conceive of literacy in more nuanced ways. Walking through those doors would perhaps feel more possible through partnerships between stakeholders committed to combating forces of oppression within education.

Implications for Teacher Education

While literacy is a sociocultural practice (or set of practices) that we engage in as we make sense of the world around us, it is also a buzzword around which significant educational decisions are made. Common Core Standard Initiatives (2021) called for content-specific literacy and cross-curricular reading and writing positioning “every teacher as a teacher of English” (Alvermann & Moje, 2013). However, the conceptions of literacy embedded in teacher education programs varies. Jane and Sebastian’s stories provided a snapshot of the varying approaches in teacher education. Jane’s undergraduate program had touched upon the skills of reading and writing, and her Masters in Literacy program largely aligned with the autonomous model by focusing on strategies that could be used to identify and remediate struggling readers. Sebastian’s alternate route program, on the other hand, included no specific focus on literacy at all, despite his pursuit of a K–12 English teaching certificate. The variety in these programs has left me with questions about the experiences teacher candidates will have based on the course of study they choose.
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- Will preservice teachers participate in coursework specifically designed to address in-school literacies?
- Will they be exposed to strategies to teach reading and writing?
- What frameworks for literacy will they encounter? Will the approach primarily be skills-based or will they be exposed to sociocultural conceptions of literacy?
- Will they have opportunities to reflect on their own literacy practices and experiences in school?
- What measures will be taken to prepare teacher candidates to face the tensions and barriers between sociocultural conceptions of literacy and the deficit producing, essayist models they may be up against as in-service teachers?

Questions such as these may serve as a resource for teacher educators, particularly those in programs committed to social justice oriented education, to examine the ways literacy is (and perhaps is not) present in the programs in which they work and courses they teach. While the body of research in this field suggests literacy teacher educators in social justice oriented programs embrace combinations of new literacies, critical literacies, abolitionist literacies, and feminist pedagogies in their work with inservice teachers, significant disparities across teacher education programs remain (Cho, 2015; Dharamshi, 2019; Dover, 2016; Ghiso, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rosaen & Terpstra, 2012).

Disparities also exist in the conceptions of literacy teacher candidates and novice teachers may bring into their undergraduate and graduate programs; a phenomenon about which there is already a significant body of research. As Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2015) found, preservice teachers coming of age in the era of No Child Left Behind and Common Core Standards initiatives had difficulty reconciling their own school experiences and the sociocultural
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constructions of literacy they were introduced to in their teacher education programs. These teacher candidates also come into teacher education programs likely holding varying conceptions of literacy based on their cultures, identities, and experiences lived and out of school (Dharamshi, 2019; Ghiso, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; St. Pierre, 2000). What this study may contribute to the field is a process through which teacher candidates might begin to reflect on the role(s) literacy has played (and continues to play) in their lives, and the historical foundations for the conceptions of literacy they are bringing into their teacher education programs. Like the suggestion made for in-service teachers earlier in this chapter, deconstructing and reconstructing the hegemonic views of literacy that may have become second nature to us, gives aspiring English teachers the opportunity to challenge the status quo as they prepare to enter the field.

While I acknowledge programs may already have students write literacy histories or autobiographies (Dharamshi, 2019; Ghiso, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2017; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015; Rosaen & Terpstra, 2012), I am called back to my dialogue with Albert, Jane, and Sebastian as a significant piece of the reflective process. Adding a layer of sharing and co-analysis of each other’s literacy histories could offer preservice teachers, or even teachers pursuing graduate degrees in literacy education, a meaningful opportunity to frame the type of literacy educator they want to be.

**Implication for Research Beyond the English Classroom**

When I began this research, I wanted to hone in on teachers’ conceptions of lives and in their classroom through the lens of feminist new literacies. There was a significant body of research in the field of literacy studies that applied the principles of new literacies to study young people. These studies often looked at the literacy practices students enacted in their lives and the
ways they did (or did not) leverage those practices in school. Studies examining preservice teachers’ conceptions of literacy were also prevalent, which frequently involved action research as preservice teachers’ whose coursework involved new literacies and/or critical literacies to apply those principles to lessons they led in during field experience. Much of this research also problematized the autonomous model and shed light on the multiplicitous ways in which people think about and enact literacy practices. However, few studies of conceptions of literacy focused on in-service teachers. The studies of boundary crossing with students’ literacy practices piqued my curiosity. They led me to wonder about the conceptions of literacy classroom teachers held and the lived experiences that may have influenced those beliefs. There seemed to be an opportunity to delve into teachers’ lived experiences and histories in order to consider how their day-to-day literacy practices did (or did not) cross into their teaching.

My initial call for participants was open to secondary education teachers across the subject areas: English, social studies, science, and math. However, the initial survey data I collected from potential participants (as discussed in Chapter 3) revealed significant variations between teachers in the humanities and those in math and science. For the purpose of this study, I was looking for participants whose responses showed some alignment with the feminist new literacies framework that became the foundation for the study, as I sought to learn from teachers whose ideas about literacy stretched beyond the skills of reading and writing. Studying English teachers provided a valuable starting place for this work and portraiture provided a meaningful model through which to tell participants stories. The next step in this research is to learn from teachers in other subject areas—perhaps starting with those in other humanities subjects and extending to the sciences, mathematics, and career and technical educators. The process I undertook with Albert, Jane, and Sebastian could be replicated with teachers in these subject
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areas, allowing their stories to offer new layers to our understanding of the conceptions of literacy educators bring with them into the classroom, the tensions that arise as they unpack these conceptions, and systemic barriers they face. I also see the potential to further this work by developing a model for coaching and instruction that is informed by the work of literacy teacher educators who draw on new literacies and feminist pedagogies. Reproducing the process of unpacking, questioning, reflecting, and revising individual conceptions of literacy with teachers in and beyond the English classroom could serve as a way to refine this model.

Implications for Researchers: Inquiry Through Portraiture

As previously noted, committing to portraiture as the methodology for this study took time. In truth, I did not imagine at the start of this research that the process would be so time consuming for me or for the participants. To honor my feminist epistemologies, the portraits that I composed had to be co-constructed with the participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) discussed stitching together the “aesthetic whole” of a portrait as if it were a colorful quilt or tapestry the artist weaves together with all of its “varying configurations, color, texture, and design” (p. 247). I could not, however, weave these tapestries alone. Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s feedback was the thread they lent me to stitch their stories together. In order for this to work, I had to remain open to the possibility that I would share interpretations with me, and they would respond “no” or “that’s not me” or “you didn’t get this quite right” even when I felt pressured by time constraints or the push to bring this project to a close. They took the risk of sharing their stories. I had to continually take the risk of handing their stories back to them and engaging in additional discussion or reflection if necessary, and I was lucky that these participants were willing participants in that process. Had they not been able to sustain their
commitment over the course of the last year, discussions that came up once they began to read their portraits may never have happened.

Portraiture is a rich, emotional, immersive, time consuming endeavor. The researcher may not be able to quickly produce a final product, but investing time and emotion into this process has the potential to yield rich and complex results. For other researchers who intend to take up this methodology, I want to emphasize the importance of trust and relationship building with participants. Without the foundation of trust and safety, it may not be realistic to expect participants to boldly share their stories. Getting to know participants, openly discussing what they are and are not comfortable being asked about, showing sections of our writing and dialoging about their thoughts, and respecting their time constraints and emotions are essential to the process. When openness is cultivated and tended to maintained, portraiture offers the opportunity for us to learn from one another through storytelling, and reaffirms the value of sharing our stories with others.

A Final Thought

As this dissertation comes to a close, I find myself where I began: with family and storytelling. I lost my father in 2009, and after his passing, I ended up with pages and pages of unsent letters he wrote to loved ones in his life. At the time, I found reading them incredibly difficult. I put them carefully away—precious items that would remain mostly unexamined for several years. About a year ago, I was compelled to revisit them and found the following message directed at me:

Honey, you have to write. Pen to paper, Kate. That’s what it’s all about. Make an explosion, honey, when you write. That is what you have to do. (December 26, 1999)
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I was seventeen years old when he wrote those words, twenty-seven when I saw them for the first time, and over forty when I really allowed myself to take them in. When he wrote that statement, I did not in any way see myself as a writer. In my mind, I was a person who could write, but not a writer. Although he and I had spent years creating the fictional little adventures I mentioned in chapter one, I saw that as a game shared between father and daughter, not texts created by a writer. I had never spoken to him about a desire to write. I am not even sure the desire was present at that age, as I embraced my passion for writing much later in my early adulthood. I will never know what made my father think about his seventeen year old daughter and proclaim that she (I) had to write; had to “make an explosion.” Yet, I can acknowledge now, that the compulsion to write—to tell stories—has always been there.

I would like to frame my dad’s use of the word “explosion” not as a violent image, but as a source of light. Whether or not the writing I have done here makes an explosion is not for me to say. What I can hope, however, is that telling Albert, Jane, and Sebastian’s stories sheds some light on the multiple roles literacy plays in our own lives; that it invites us to see “What is good and healthy here” as we witness and examine literacy practices in our lives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). And, to continue to question the unhealthy, oppressive handling of literacy in our schools. It feels, in many ways, like the collective story Albert, Jane, Sebastian, and I share is just beginning. This study is the prologue, maybe also a few opening chapters, but it leaves us thinking about what is next—what we do with all we have learned and how to carry on questioning, deconstructing, reconstructing and learning through our shared practice.
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