

Reductive literacies: Ethnographic vignettes of content area classes for middle school Latino/a students

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EMIGRA Working Papers núm. 96
ISSN 2013-3804



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Resumen/ Abstract

The statistics on the educational outcomes of Latino/s students at the secondary level tell a dreary tale of underachievement and attrition. Even if “accurate,” the tale conjured lacks specificity and provides no counter-narratives. Several studies have already pointed out the misgivings in the educational experiences of Latino/a students’ across schools in the United States, but few draw on long-term, ethnographic data that include systematic observations of middle school classrooms. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines a Freirian perspective, adolescent literacy and new literacy studies, this article reports on ethnographic findings across 7th and 8th grade classroom during an entire academic year, shadowing two immigrant students from the Dominican Republic. Ethnographic vignettes across content classes provide illustrative glimpses into the missed opportunities for content literacy and second language development across such classes. The findings convey a chilling picture of the growing failure of our educational system to meet the complex educational needs of Latino/a students—the fastest-growing segment of our population. The author provides alternative possibilities based on what has been suggested in the practice-oriented research literature. Implications for educational policy, teacher-preparation programs, and future research are addressed.

Palabras clave / Keywords: immigration, secondary education, literacy

Cómo citar este artículo: **RUBINSTEIN-AVILA, E.** (2007) “Reductive literacies: Ethnographic vignettes of content area classes for middle school Latino/a students”. *EMIGRA Working Papers*, 96. Accesible en línea: www.emigra.org.es. Descarga realizada el (dd-mm-aaaa).

How to quote this paper: **RUBINSTEIN-AVILA, E.** (2007) “Reductive literacies: Ethnographic vignettes of content area classes for middle school Latino/a students”. *EMIGRA Working Papers*, 96. Available on line: www.emigra.org.es. Last retrieved on (dd-mm-yyyy).

Este texto se presentó como comunicación al II Congreso Internacional de Etnografía y Educación: Migraciones y Ciudadanías. Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, 5-8 Septiembre 2008.



Introduction

In recent years, several literacy scholars have begun to explore *what* “counts” as literacy (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) and *whose* literacy count (Alvermann et al., 2006). This shift, from traditional cognitive notions to a social approach has also led to discussions on the future of literacy research, and the often-conflicting directions of literacy pedagogies (Rogers et al. 2000). The language ideology within a particular nation, and school system, plays an essential role in how literacy is viewed, defined, and developed. Our notions about what counts as literacy, and whose literacy count, drive literacy pedagogy.

These issues are especially relevant in our era of globalization, which according to Suarez-Orozco (2001) is marked by the unprecedented rapid emergence of new information and communication technologies; global markets and post-national knowledge-intensive economies; and global immigration and displacement. One consequence of these complex formations is the high percentage of immigrant students, who are developing English as an additional language, enrolled in secondary schools across the United States and Canada.

But, while these students hope to achieve the “American Dream,” many—especially low-income Latino/a students—are “almost assured [to fail]” given “the vast differences that exist between their needs and abilities and the teaching and learning going on in schools” (Gunderson, 2004 p.1). Given that Latino/a youth are currently the fastest growing segment of the United States’ population (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), the miseducation of Latino/a students is a ticking social and economic bomb (Author, 2006).

Although a growing number of scholars (Street, 2003) argue that multiple and multilingual literacies ought to be viewed as social, political and historical *practices*, in the aftermath of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), school districts seem steadfast on defining literacy as a fixed set of narrowly conceived cognitive skills, which are only valued in English. Upon enrolling into a U.S public school, students for whom English is not a primary home language are routinely assessed for their (oral) English proficiencies, but few districts conduct assessments of students’ first language (L1). Consequently, we know little about secondary students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al. 1992) or the role their ‘linguistic repertoires of practice’ (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) play in meeting the literacy demands they face in and out of schools. Thus, in spite of the fact that reading comprehension in the second language, especially in the later grades, correlate with reading comprehension in students’ first language (Sonw, 2006), we know little about their first language competencies, and even less about their literacy socialization, and how they come to understand the demands with which they are faced in their adoptive country.

This paper reports on ethnographic findings of two students’ experiences with content area literacy across a 7th and 8th grades in a school with high percentage of Latino/a students. The main research question this article addresses is: What are the literacy practices to which Latino/a students, for whom English is an additional language, are exposed across middle school content area classes? In addition to answering this question, this paper highlights several institutional constraints that contribute to teachers’ and school administrators’ lack of preparation to work



effectively with immigrant students. The paper also provides a theoretical frame and practical strategies that in contrast to reductive literacies are likely to be conducive to produce robust literacy practices that result in meaningful content area learning and language development.

Rational and contribution to the research literature on immigration and education

This case study helps fill several gaps across the literacy research and the immigration and education literatures, and is an attempt to create a bridge across the two. The Report of the National Reading Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanhan, 2006) asserted that relatively little is known about the schooling experiences of secondary ELL student population across the country. Immigration students (first and second generations) for whom English is an additional language are no longer concentrated in the few states in which immigrant groups have settled for over a century; they are increasingly enrolled in states such as South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama—with no prior experience in teaching ELLs (Author, 2006). However, the consequences of unprepared school districts are not inconsequential—Mexican and Latin American students are approximately twice as likely as Asians and other students to be labeled ELLs, and although Latino/as represent only 56% of the total immigrant student population, they account for 75% of total ELL students (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).

Research focusing on immigrant students' in secondary schools is still in its infancy. Although foreign-born youth currently represent a substantially larger share of the total high school student population than in the past, programs to assist ELLs are more numerous at the elementary level (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Consequently, fewer studies focus on secondary ELLs. When the adaptation of immigrant secondary students to "schooling in America" (Olsen, 1997) is discussed, language barriers and students' lack of familiarity with the content are often underscored. However, discrimination, unfamiliar patterns of participation, students' literacy practices in L1 and students' prior conceptions of what counts as literacy are most often not taken into account (Anderson & Gunderson, 2001).

Limited access to content area learning and language development

The few existing empirical studies that have focused on secondary ELLs' learning experiences seem to highlight a common denominator: the lack of opportunities for students to develop their second language and literacy skills. Valdés' (2001) well-crafted case studies revealed a bleak picture for secondary Latino newcomers, and Miller's (2001) study among Chinese ELLs in Canada not only confirmed Valdés' findings, but found in addition that the move from ESL classes to mainstream (content area) classes resulted in even less opportunity for language development. No other published studies to date have empirically addressed the plight of more advanced ELLs coping with the demands of content area literacy in U.S. schools. On the other hand, even fewer studies have explored the demands of this phenomenon on secondary teachers who, through no fault of their own, have been ill prepared by teacher preparation programs that continue to ignore the demographic realities of K-12 schools (Gutierrez, et al., 2002; Rubinstein-Ávila, 2003b). Especially absent are empirical documentation of strategies used by successful content area teachers to engage ELLs in meaningful learning, and the role of student-teacher interaction. Therefore, contributes to the scant and fragmented research literature on the

schooling experiences of secondary ELLs across programs. It not only provides a glimpse of *how* students and teachers experience the challenges they face, but will also yield valuable insights on the strategies and resources teachers and ELLs use to cope with the demands they face.

The literacy experiences of “the growing population of adolescents and young adult ESL students” remain largely unexplored (Harklau, 2000, p. 36). Jiménez’s (2001), Valdes (2001) and Rubinstein-Ávila’s (2003) case studies of ELLs in the classrooms reveal from an emic perspective the literacy needs and creative coping strategies employed by Latino/a middle school ELLs.

Dominican students in U.S. schools

Although Dominicans are currently the largest immigrant group in New York City (Lopez, 1998), and in cities such as Linenville, where this case study was conducted, little is known about the experience of Dominican students in U.S. schools. Lopez’s (1998) examination of two large high schools in New York City with large Dominican student bodies (90%) and a graduation rate of only 25%, revealed that the schools’ structural bureaucratic imperatives paralleled the structural inequalities in the larger society. Analysis of the 35 life histories of high school graduates and of youth who had dropped out, Lopez (1998) found that students complained about being tracked into non-college track classes in which the curriculum was disorganized, “watered-down and inconsistent” (p. 90). In addition, participants claimed that the schools alienated not only them, but also teachers who cared to make a difference; i.e., those who advocated on their behalf (Lopez, 1998). Both graduates and non-graduates alike believed “that the school as an institution was not interested in their success” (p. 90). In fact, the graduates claimed to have graduated “*in spite of* the bureaucratic imperative that push[ed] them out” (Lopez, 1998, p. 90; italics added). Several studies conducted in schools in which Latino students make up the majority confirm these bleak findings (Author, 2001, under review; Valdes, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Data Collection and Analysis

This ethnographic case study drew on data sources across a middle school in an industrial city in New England (the second largest concentration of Dominican immigrants in the United States). Ethnographic observations across several middle school and high school classes, cafeteria, breaks and transitions from class to class took place for a period of one academic year and one additional semester. For approximately 50 school days—one day a week—I conducted participant-observational and formal interviews, ranging from 45 to 90 minutes each, with Dominican students (newcomers and those who were brought up in the U.S.), teachers and school administrators (Seidman, 2006).

The data I draw from for this paper was part of a larger study (Author, 2001), which focused on the literacy practices of Latino immigrant youth in and out of school (Author, 2004, in press). Toni and Yanira were two out of four focal students, from a total of 239 participating students, with whom I worked more closely. This paper draws mostly from field notes from ethnographic participant observation during one academic



year (1998/ 1999). The field notes presented here include informal conversations with the assistant principal, teachers, an administrator and a school counselor.

Using a qualitative approach to the analysis to the field notes, I coded the field notes from each of the participant's separately, exploring emerging themes, and then I explored the salient themes that were prevalent across both participants' classrooms. The analysis yielded three main themes: 1) the scarcity of print across middle and high schools classrooms; 2) the existence of an implicit student-teacher pact of going through the motions of teaching and learning "getting it done" and; 3) the lack of effective content area literacy strategies resulting in missed opportunities for the development of academic (English) language and literacy development.

Focal Participant

Tony (short for Antonio) was a 7th grader from the D.R. Although this was Tony's first year at this particular school, he had been in the U.S. with his family for approximately two years. His family moved to New York City first, where they had many relatives. While in NY, the family moved several times. Consequently, Toni was enrolled in several schools, where in Toni's own words, "*no aprendi ni un chin*" [I did not learn a thing]. The family had since moved to New England in search of more secure employment. Tony's parents and older brother worked at a sneaker factory. One of his sisters was enrolled in a local community college and the other was a single-mother living at home with her newborn.

Context: Holmes School

Built in 1917 Holmes K-8th was in 1998 an outdated building in Linenville, a mid-size industrial city of about 72,000--known as "the immigrant city" for the many immigrant groups, which have populated its mills since the 1800s. The city was a one-hour ride on the commuter train from one of New England's major metropolis. During the academic year of 1998/1999 there were approximately 580 students enrolled at across grades 1-8th. Student population was almost 90% Hispanic/Latino (mostly Dominicans and Puerto Ricans), and approximately 85% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Spanish and English were heard interchangeably across the school and in the school's teachers' lounge. Although I did not collect data on the teachers, it was my impression that most of the teachers, with some exceptions, were around or over 50, and were of European descent.

In the office adjacent to the main office, two full-time Spanish-speaking parent-liaisons were kept busy on the phones serving as cultural and language brokers among students, teachers, school administrators, school psychologist, social workers, the courts and the parents. In the main office several bilingual notices welcomed parents to attend evening workshops (in Spanish) to help prevent school truancy, teen-pregnancy, and suggestions for how to combat kids' involvement with gangs and drugs. A visitor to the school would not take long to notice the stark difference between the Dominican newcomers and their U.S. born and bread Dominican and Puerto Rican classmates. Despite of the school uniforms: blue slacks or skirts (no jeans) and white shirts or blouses; many older students in grades 7th and 8th wore creative adaptations.



The newly arrived boys wore fitted, button down shirts, tucked into their fitted pants; some even wore dress shoes. Boys born or brought up in the U.S. wore oversized baggy pants, precariously balanced around their hips, and sported the latest styles Nike sneakers—unlaced. Most also wore one earring, and meticulously stylized haircuts. Some sported heavy medals, which appeared to be gold, hanging from oversized links. Girls who had been in Linenville for less than a year, wore no make-up and non-descript uniform and hair styles, while those born or brought up in the U.S. exhibited long, colorful, press-on nails, blue mini skirts and skin-tight white knit tops, with almost identical hairstyles—gelled tight-curved perms usually pulled snugly back, culminating in a high ponytail.

But the differences between the newcomers and more seasoned students, according to their teachers were not only visual. Teachers openly spoke of their behavioral differences, and especially of their attitude toward school and learning. Even though several teachers shared their lack of preparation to teach content to students who were developing English language competencies, they admitted they preferred having Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students—as ELLs were classified at the time—in their classrooms. Their narrative was almost identical, even if I spoke to them separately. They shared that within one academic year, sometimes less, newcomer students who were extremely respectful and motivated to learn would acquire the “bad habits from the others.”

The bilingual assistant principal shared that without a doubt the starkest change in students’ behavior and attitude was noticeable when students moved out of the bilingual program and into the monolingual environment:

I’m not sure if they feel the need to fit in with the students who’ve been here [the US] longer... to distance themselves from the [other] new arrivals. Perhaps they are not used to the mainstream [program] teachers—finding them too permissive. Whatever it is, something seems to happen to these kids as soon as they are mainstreamed out of bilingual—that’s when the *real* discipline problems seem to start.

Findings

Although my findings were not as stark as Blommaert, Creve and Willaert’s (2006) findings across Dutch classrooms with foreign-born students, my inquiry pointed out that Holmes did not provide its students, many of whom were from Puerto Rico and the D.R. (newcomers and first generation) access to the discourse practices they will need to do well in high school and beyond. Moreover, teachers seem to know little about the challenges students faced in or outside of school, and were not prepared to apply the Sheltered Instruction methodologies to render the content more meaningful for immigrant students who were English language learners.

The observational data pointed to three themes: 1) the scarcity of print and of meaningful texts, 2) the tragic emphasis on procedural learning and keeping students occupied—not necessarily engaged; and 3) the missed opportunities to support the



development of students' academic language development. Although the study focuses on immigrant students to the United States, the implications are relevant to many "receiving" nations.

Scarcity of print

Walls convey a great deal about inhabitants' lives--their values, dreams, aesthetic sensibilities, their discontents and often the official and unofficial agendas of institutions. Walls divulge a myriad of information about what goes on in a particular setting. Hallway displays are likely to reflect the media tools and symbol systems of what is valued within a particular school culture (Labbo, Montero & Eakle, 2001). In fact, after conducting a visual inventory of elementary schools hallway displays and identifying eight different categories, these authors found that much can be learned from what is not displayed (Labbo et al. 2001).

What was most pervasive across my observations of the walls across my field notes was the lack of print material on the hallways and classroom walls across the 6th to 8th grades—whether computer or pen and paper generated. Students' work tapered down considerably as one moved from the lower floors (and lower elementary grades) to the higher ones. Display of students' work dwindled considerably from 4th to 6th grades and was all but absent across 7th and 8th grades. Most of the walls in the upper floor were blank, which as Labbo et al. (2001) point out result in a sterile and unstimulating learning environment. But there were exceptions to the occasional commercial poster and the behavioral slogans.

One visual display that stood out were two walls of the 8th grade social studies classroom were covered with student-made collages of magazine cutouts. The glossy cutouts exhibited fancy sports cars, motorcycles, CD walkman players, sound systems, jazzy cell phones, sneakers, Tommy Hilfinger and Gucci sunglasses, Rolex watches, hip-hop jewelry, and a few desktop and laptop computers. Some had pictures of their music heroes foregrounded with images of pristine beaches with swaying palm trees. Name brands such as Nike, Rolex, Adidas, and BMW were also cutout and layered over these items. Other cutout words included "PODER" [Power], "LOVE," "SUCCE\$\$," and "MIAMI." Except for the few that displayed the title "My Culture," most of the posters were untitled. I concur with Labbo et al. (2001) that finish products, such as the collages I just described, with no contextualization or explanation of their rationale or process, may be confusing, counter-productive and less likely to enhance students' learning experiences.

A lack of meaningful print was observable across all 7th and 8th grade content areas. I did not observe students reading books, producing extensive writing or conducting research using the Internet or other sources. As the vignettes throughout this paper illustrate, most of the text students produced was reductive, low level, fill-in the blanks, copying, organizing—literacy practices that only required the most basic technical skills.

Procedural teaching & learning: “Getting it done” and keeping students “busy”

My field notes came to reveal that there was little teaching or learning across most of the classrooms I observed. As the vignettes will illustrate, students were certainly not the only ones who were going through the motions of “doing school.” It seemed as if teachers and students may have implicitly agreed on a non-verbal pact: “If you let me act as if I am teaching, I ‘ll act as if you are learning.” This would have allowed students to keep their status as students and teachers could keep theirs as teachers—requiring minimum effort. The phrase “getting it done” or “getting [the work] done” was the most common phrase voiced by teachers and students alike across all subject areas. The following vignettes are illustrative of such an implicit pact.

Spanish Language Arts:

I entered Tony’s 7th grade Spanish Language Arts class, about 10 minutes after class had begun. Since I did not spot the teacher right away, I thought the students were by themselves. A group of five or six girls were trying to yank something from each other’s hands (perhaps a note); Tony was playing Gameboy while two boys stood behind him, looking over his shoulder, all transfixed by the screen. One boy was running in circles around the edge of the classroom, like small children do trying to get dizzy. Two other boys were sitting on (not at) a desk talking to Mrs. Rima, a short, middle-aged Latina woman.

Mrs. Rima told me that Tony was not doing much, but her rationale was that most of the students “were done with their work.” “You know how they are at this age, they just do *it* [the work] fast to get it over with, so they can play.” When I asked what the “work” she was referring to was, and asked to see what Tony had done, Mrs. Rima did not hesitate to show me a sheet with a short poem (in English) and the four accompanying multiple-choice comprehension questions.

See? He got 2 out of 4 answers wrong. But it’s not like he doesn’t know it. He probably just circled anything, without even reading, just so he could play.

Since this was a Spanish language arts class, it struck me as odd that the poem and questions were in English. Mrs. Rima explained that the principal had asked her to “do” that poem earlier that day, and proceeded to show me what students usually accomplished in her class. I took the opportunity to inquire about the workbooks, the 7th grade students in this class often worked on independently, since they seemed more appropriate for second or third grade level students. Mrs. Rima explained that since the students could “do and finish it on their own,” it brought them a sense of empowerment and they enjoyed it. Mrs. Rima candidly explained that her greatest challenge, was to “*mantenerlos ocupados*” [keep them busy] and seated at their desks with work they could do independently. She claimed the students were calmer, less restless, when they had something they knew *how* to do and could be successful. She admitted she could

not capture their attention long enough to teach them much. When she tried to teach something that required students' attention—by that, she meant lecture to them—they tended to get out of hand and wander off into the hallways. That type of behavior, she explained, was absolutely unacceptable. Mrs. Rima feared gaining the reputation as someone who couldn't control her students. The successful completion, or “getting their work done” plowing through this lower grade workbook, helped keep the seeming interaction of teaching and learning intact. If the principle or assistant principle were to peek in through the little glass window of the wooden door, while students were hunched over their workbooks, what they would be likely to see was students' at work.

But Mrs. Rima's Spanish language arts classroom was not the exception. The following example comes from Tony's science class at the Holmes: the teacher, a thirty-something man of European heritage, walked among students' desks with his record book in hand, checking whether students had brought their homework. Although Mario, a student with whom I was sharing a desk for that period, had brought an unintelligible graph, Mario received a check mark for “bringing his work.” Shrugging his shoulders and with a victorious look on his face, Mario confessed to me that he had not understood what he was supposed to do for homework. Nevertheless, he was relieved that it had “worked out.”

Science:

Several times during this particular period, the science teacher reminded—or warned—the students that the deadline for “science binder check” was near (following Tuesday). The science teacher, a young man of European descent, strongly suggested that students go over their binders over the weekend to make sure that “all the work was done” and arranged in the order in which he had previously indicated. He had provided a checklist of the order in which their work was to be organized. When I spoke to Tony about his science binder and check-list, Tony indicated that since he had not understood many of the assignments, he was not going to be able to turn in the complete binder. Tony did not provide an explanation as to why he did not approach his teacher, or his classmates, about the assignments. He seemed resigned that he would turn in what he had, and assigned the grade he deserved.

Social Studies Snapshot:

Mrs. McNeelsen, Tony's social studies teacher, had already mentioned to me that Tony was not putting much effort into her class. She admitted she did not know how he was doing in his other classes. Showing me her record book, she pointed out that Tony had not “turned in his work” for quite some time. She conceded that Tony may have been having some trouble with the language. She was worried: “He seems to have checked out; he doesn't bring any of his assignments in, but he doesn't ask for help,” she told me regretfully. She assured me that he was basically a good kid, “like most of the other students.” She added that Tony was very respectful and good-natured, and that earlier in the year he in fact “did get his work done.” Mrs. McNeelsen explained that at first, the newcomers tried as hard as they could to “get their work done,” but as time went by, they seemed to adopt the attitudes of the “more seasoned” students.



In fact, the following scene from one of Mrs. McNeelsen's social studies classes is illustrative of the non-verbal pact between teachers and students. It was clear that Mrs. McNeelsen, a plump, friendly, middle-aged woman of European descent, had developed a warm rapport with her mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican students. Although most did not participate actively in her lessons, most of which were delivered through lectures, students were generally well behaved while many, if not most, engaged quietly in other activities. In other words, if one was to peer into the classroom, one would not see inattentive students getting up, moving around or throwing things across the room. In fact, if one peered into Mrs. McNeelsen's classroom, one could reasonably assume that learning *was* taking place. But the analysis of my field notes reveal that during most of Mrs. McNeelsen's classes I observed, one young woman would work on her homework for another class, another was starting a new phone/address book—passing it around for students to enter their most current information, and several girls passed notes to each other; one almost always doodled hearts on her notebook. Once, while two boys behind Tony engaged in a quiet discussion about their favorite CDs while sharing their rock bands' glossy photos, glued to the inside cover of their binders. Two other boys regularly communicated to each other in Spanish from across the room, supplementing their dialogue with hand signs. Mrs. McNeelsen who seemed to have become accustomed to it, seemed to ignore most of the students' alternative activities and continued lecturing, stopping occasionally to remind the students in a friendly manner that that they were the only ones to lose from not paying attention.

Missed Opportunities for Language and Literacy Development

Another characteristic shared across content area classes was the lack of support of language and literacy development. For example, after warning me that she was only reviewing the material for an upcoming test, Mrs. McNeelsen invited me to come in. Throughout the review period, she stood in front of the class and lectured about the Articles of Confederation in the overheated classroom; only three of the 27 students present that day seemed to be looking toward her, listening attentively and answering her occasional questions, which did not require extensive elaboration. Not even the three participating students took notes. On the board, next to the phrase "articles of confederation," Mrs. McNeelsen wrote "bicameral" and "check and balance." Mrs. McNeelsen two attempts to engage greater student participation, failed. The verbal interaction below while not recorded (with audio or video), was my best attempt to jot down student/teacher verbatim interaction:

Mrs. M: (underlining the "bi" in bicameral): What does "bi" mean?

Students snickered, and from where I was seated I heard some say "bisexual," but no official answer was offered.

Mrs. M: Who has a bicycle? (She asks an audience of 98% bilingual students).

Many students shouted: "me, me, me!" and "I got one!"



Student A: I got a mean, lean BMW!

Mrs. M: OK! OK! So, there were two cameras; in other words, a bicameral congress.

Student B: (with a sly grin) Yeah! A Kodak and a Fuji.

Ignoring the remark, Mrs. McNeelsen points to the board.

Mrs. M: Do you remember what check and balances means?

Student C: Yeah, like when you bounce a check 'cause you got no balance!
(Students laugh loudly)

Mrs. M: Where were you guys all of September?

English Grammar:

Another stark example of missed opportunity for developing academic language was the following English Grammar class—Tony's last period: The teacher, Mr. Courtland, a tall, gray-haired man, of European descent, in his mid to late 50's, asked his students to define an autobiography. One student, a Puerto Rican young man, the same one who participated eagerly across most classes, raised his hand and provided a satisfactory answer (inaudible to me). Assuming the rest of the students heard and understood the answer, Mr. Courtland informed the students that the sheet they had in front of them was "an excerpt" from an autobiography titled "Momma" by Dick Gregory. Without any further explanation as to who the author was, what an excerpt meant, or why he had chosen that particular excerpt, Mr. Courtland continued: "How many paragraphs are there on this sheet?" Since the response was less than enthusiastic, Mr. Courtland reminded the students that the fastest and easiest way to recognize paragraphs was to look for indentations. Without stating the goal or objectives for the following activity, Mr. Courtland demanded the students' full attention. "Listen carefully! I will call out certain words and I want you to circle them." He then began to call out words and directed the students as to their location on the sheet:

'Away', paragraph 3 line 4; 'up'; same line; 'don't', on the next line;
'never', next paragraph, first line; and an adverb that shows up two times
on that line; circle it in both places.

Many students, including Tony, were failing to keep up; as they tried to confirm with other classmates, sitting next to them, they inevitably would miss the next word. Suddenly, a male student, seated in the back, blurted loudly without raising his hand: "Mr. Courtland, why are we making circles around these words?" Looking intently at the student, Mr. Courtland answered slowly and deliberately: "Because, I don't like squares."

Following a long and uncomfortable pause, Mr. Courtland offered a muddled explanation about intensifiers. While writing the word "always" on the board, he told the students that intensifiers ask the question "to what extent." From the confused looks on most of the students' faces, I had the distinct feeling that Tony and many other students may not have understood the phrase "to what extent." Next, Mr. Courtland wrote on the board the phrase "don't have," then asked the class: "What verb is the intensifier modifying here?" This time there were no volunteers. Mr. Courtland then

wrote the word “home” on the board, and asked Tony what question the word answered. Tony answered “where?” The teacher praised Tony. While writing the word “always” on the board, Mr. Courtland called, “Guerrero! What question does ‘always’ answer?” After the student responded “when,” Mr. Courtland wrote the student’s response on the board. “What verb is it modifying?” There were no responses from the students.

The classroom was so overheated that day, that I dozed off at some point after this, but the next field note entry recorded that students were reminded to bring their sheets back the next day. Their homework assignment was to list on the back of the sheet one word that each of the adverbs modified. “I’ll do the first one on the board as an example.” At this point Tony began looking around and check with their classmates that they had the correct words circled. Most students were listening; even those with glazed eyes were not carrying on or disturbing in any way the flow of the class. The bell rang, announcing not only the end of what seemed to have been an interminable period, but the end of another school day.

Discussion and Implications: What do robust and meaningful content area literacies for students like Tony look like and what are the challenges for implementing such pedagogy?

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