

The English Record is a refereed journal and an official NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) publication. NCTE is the premiere professional organization in the field of composition and English education.

**Reading and Writing Class:
A Case Study on Literacy and Social
Opportunity
By Benette Whitmore, PhD**

When we met for the first time in the summer of 2009, Tracey was a spirited 13-year-old girl just starting 8th grade in a middle-class school district on the outskirts of a mid-sized city in the Northeast. With her auburn hair pulled back into a gushing ponytail, she wore a black *Twilight* t-shirt and carried a large, lumpy backpack stuffed with her favorite books. Her father, Dave, a janitor at the college where I teach writing, brought her to my home so I could interview them both for my study on social class and literacy. Since Tracey was my only participant from a working-class family, I was especially interested in her perspective. I looked forward to hearing her ideas on reading and writing in the context of her middle school life. I knew from her father that she was a voracious reader.

Fast forward two years when I met with Tracey to get an update on her life and, more specifically, to learn about her current relationship to reading and writing. It was ten days into her summer vacation, and I was looking

forward to getting together again. She is a 15-year-old sophomore in the same school district where she has been enrolled since kindergarten. Dave mentioned that Tracey was volunteering once a week as a babysitter at the local YMCA. As I pulled up to her modest yellow home across the street from the public swimming pool, I was excited at the prospect of seeing her again and talking with her about her reading and writing life. She bounded out the door, looking several inches taller and wearing a t-shirt that said, "Vampires are Bloody Great."

I will begin with definitions of two key terms: literacy and class. Deborah Brandt (2001) informs my understanding of literacy for this project:

Literacy is a resource in the way that electricity is a resource: its circulation keeps lights on. Literacy is also a productive resource, a means of production and reproduction, including a means by which legacies of human experience move from past to future and by which, for many, identities are made and sustained (p. 6).

Leonard Reissman's (1968) classic definition of social class suggests that "class" requires a balanced assessment of all relevant characteristics that situate an individual's position in the prestige hierarchy, which is reflective of occupation, education, organizational memberships, community participation, family background and lifestyle, adding up to a kind of "social arithmetic." From this perspective, Tracey's family is working-class. Before I

met Tracey for the first time, I knew that her father, Dave, had a part-time rug cleaning business to supplement income from his janitor's job. Dave's brother had purchased their home for them. Tracey's mother and Dave's wife, Doreen, added to the family income by cleaning her cousin's home. The family's financial situation has deteriorated over the past two years ago. Dave's rug cleaning business is defunct. Doreen is no longer cleaning because she is in constant pain after her recent back surgery. Dave has medical problems associated with unsuccessful abdominal surgery last year, but he continues to work as a janitor.

Tracey sees that many of her peers are more economically advantaged than she. She referred to her family as "poor" several times during our conversations and emphasized her family's not having the disposable income of some privileged peers who go on vacations, buy expensive clothing, and own more than one cell phone:

Tracey: All I can say is that rich kids are popular kids. Money makes you popular. I know kids are rich if they have DROIDS or iPhones. Carly has both. Two phones. It's ridiculous. It's their clothes and things that shows how rich they are. Carly goes to Las Vegas like it's nothing. Then her friend, Cheryl, does this video-sharing thing in school where Carly is in Las Vegas and we're at school. Then we have to see Carly in Las Vegas when she's supposed to be in school taking a test on Romeo &

Juliet. [June, 2011]

The notion of connecting popularity with wealth reflects Tracey's self-awareness about her own social class standing in relation to others who have more advantages than she. While she dismisses what she views as overindulgence as "ridiculous," there is a sense that she sees herself as outside the "popular" crowd. Her denigrating Carly's trip to Las Vegas because she is missing an English test indicates Tracey's value on school work. Tracey has a greater chance of succeeding in school than she does in becoming rich, so English class is a social context where she can feel valued.

Tracey's acceptance of her family's class position as "the way it is" was evident during our interview two years ago. Her father conveyed several times during our interview his enthusiasm for a "better life" for Tracey based on her strong reading and writing skills. He often spoke directly to Tracey in our interviews. Dave suggested that his lack of a college degree limited his opportunities and he "wanted more" for his daughter. Even though Dave saw his job as a "dead end," he still had dreams for his family that involved unrealistic expenditures. Tracey doubted those dreams would come through in relation to her friend Kristy's more privileged reality. This dialogue illustrates the relationship between father and daughter:

Interviewer: *What happens when you go to the bookstore?*

Whitmore

Tracey: *I head for, like, sometimes I go to, like, to children's books to see if they have an adult-ish book that I might like.*

Interviewer: *Where does your dad go?*

Dave (answers for Tracey): *I go to see the books on landscaping and stuff. I'm trying to figure out what to do with our yard.*

Tracey: *Make a porch. Like the one Kristy has. Before I go to college.*

Dave: *When we have enough money.*

Tracey: *By the time we get enough money, we're going to be dead. [September, 2009]*

Tracey's remark about being "dead" by the time Dave has enough money to build the porch she wants reflects more realism than sarcasm. She is well aware of the financial constraints of her working class family. Tracey had earlier indicated to me her plan to "go to college," which showed then that she saw herself following a different path from her parents. As a 10th grader, she describes her future goal as "ballet dancer," but expresses doubt about the viability of that career. When I asked her if she has a back-up plan, she said, "I'll probably just keep working at the YMCA." I mentioned that she had talked

about college, and perhaps becoming an English teacher, two years ago. She said, "I don't like public speaking, so that's out. I don't know what I would study." It appeared that, in some respects, her confidence level had dropped along with her family's financial status over the past two years.

Two years ago, Tracey's perspective had linked literacy with class mobility and middle-class privilege. That is, she saw possibilities for attaining middle-class opportunity through literacy skills, noting the hard work it would require if her reading skills were weak. Here she reveals her definition of "success" at that time:

Interviewer: How do you feel about reading skills? Do you have thoughts about reading skills and what they might mean for someone's future?

Tracey: I think there could be a connection between reading and success. People who are successful, they're either extremely hard workers or extremely lucky if they don't read.

Interviewer: What do you think is success?

Tracey: Like, if you want to be a teacher as a child, and then it's your dream, and if you reach your dream to become a teacher, then I would say that's successful. To me, that's success. Doing what you want

Whitmore

and reaching your dreams. But if you aren't good at reading, then you'd have to work extra hard to get your dream. That's what I mean.

Dave (to Tracey): *You can do it if you work hard because you're a really good reader.* (to Interviewer): *She is very smart. It's amazing how she loves to read. I haven't read a book, maybe one, but this one is always reading.* (to Tracey): *You can have more than your mother and I have. Do more things. I know you will.* (to Interviewer): *She will. More than her mother and me.* [September, 2009]

Dave is teaching Tracey about the value of literacy in our society. Tracey is learning from her father that individuals who lack literacy skills must work harder than those who are good readers in order to achieve their goals in life. However, a hard work ethic had not borne out in the context of her immediate family. Her father is hard working, yet he said he was not living his dream and indicated he wants "more" for his daughter. He barely makes ends meet and admits disappointment with his limited choices for work opportunities and earning potential, which he attributes to his lack of literacy skills. Despite the immediate experiences of her working class family, when I first began to interview her, Tracey believed in the American Dream that promises upward

class mobility and unlimited potential to those who work hard. Tracey contended at age 13 that literacy skills could help anyone's dream become a reality. That same perspective is true today in her most recent interviews:

Interviewer: Two years ago, you mentioned that reading and writing skills were connected to success. How do you feel about that now?

Tracey: The same exact way. If you don't know how to read or write, you won't go anywhere in life most likely. You can get into a good college and have a career you like if you aren't good at that . . . you won't have as many choices in life. [June, 2011]

Tracey's understanding of literacy skills being the key to greater life chances has not changed even though she no longer sees college as a given in her future. Regardless, she still values reading and writing, yet she distinguishes her literacy experiences at school from those outside of school. She was eager to talk with me about reading and writing as "hobbies" in our first interview:

Interviewer: Can you tell me, what do you think about reading?

Tracey: On my own, it's kind of like a

hobby.

Interviewer: *A hobby?*

Tracey: *When it's not at school, it's a hobby. I can pick my own books and it's different from when I'm at school.*

Tracey: *At school, you have to read what they give you, not what you want to read for yourself.* [September, 2009]

Tracey's use of the word "hobby" stands for self-selected reading and writing experiences that she enjoys for enjoyment and relaxation, as opposed to requisite structured or institutionalized experiences, such as those that take place at school. At 15, Tracey suggested she still distinguishes between reading and writing at school as opposed to reading and writing on her own:

Tracey: *At school, the stuff we read is to get us ready for the Regents and those state tests.*

Interviewer: *How do you feel about that?*

Tracey: *In a way I don't mind it because it gets me to read books I wouldn't choose on my own. But it isn't as good as what I read outside of school, what I read for a*

hobby. I enjoy that a lot more. [June, 2011]

Reading as enjoyment is connected to Tracey's freedom of choice. She sees a distinction between the required texts at school and those she chooses to read on her own. This suggests that when reading becomes institutionalized in an educational setting, typically it loses its value for Tracey. Consequently, her interest level is apt to diminish. At the same time, Tracey indicates an appreciation of opportunities for exposure to books she might not have known otherwise.

Tracey named a number of books she currently reads for pleasure, including Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* series and P.C. Cast and Kristin Cast's *Marked* books. She still loves Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (She said: "I've read each of them four times") and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (She said: "I've read all of them more than that"). I asked her why and how she chose those books:

Tracey: If it has a good title, or a nice cover, I'll pick it up and read the paragraph on the back. Sometimes friends or teachers tell me about a good book, so I might try it. Emily was talking about a book that she liked so I checked it out, but it was too romancy for me. Sometimes I do a random search on google for "magical" or "mythical." I've done that before. If I go

to the library, I visit the teen section or sometimes the adult section. [June, 2011]

Tracey shows how she engages in a thoughtful process when it comes to selecting books. She listens to her teachers' and friends' recommendations, then engages in her own selection process, which includes using on-line search engines with key words that bring up books of a particular genre. I found that her reliance on on-line sources had increased over the past two years, which in part was a result of her used laptop, given to her by someone in her church. The use of on-line sources for finding books is supplemented with trips to the public library, which she says she relies on because she "doesn't have the money" to purchase books on her own. A computer also gives Tracey access to reading and writing opportunities:

Tracey: I love reading fan fiction.

Interviewer: What's that?

Tracey: It's online. Autumn told me about it. People post stories they write about popular tv show or movies. They write stories with those characters. I've written some myself. They're pretty sweet because I love reading on a computer. [June, 2011]

For a teenager from a home that does not have disposable

income to spend on books, on-line reading resources are significant because they are accessible and immediate. These on-line reading experiences spark writing moments for Tracey, as well. She says she gets inspired through reading what other people write and that the fan fiction site gives her a “chance to be an author.” Sometimes she writes stories herself and posts them on the site. Technology also plays a role when she uses her cell phone, along with her laptop, to write collaboratively with her friend, Audrey:

Tracey: On my own I like writing stories. Audrey and I texted each other back and forth while we made up a story and pretended we were characters, then we took the texts and typed them on her laptop. [June, 2011]

Tracey values these informal reading and writing experiences outside of school, which inform the experiences she has in school by giving her more practice and greater confidence in her reading and writing abilities. At the same time, she continually negotiates a sense of her abilities. On one hand, she indicates high regard for her literacy skills when talking about books that have made an impression on her:

Tracey: I'd have to say Harry Potter made a very strong impression. I never used to read and then I picked up the first Harry Potter at the library in third grade. I was

reading at a 6th grade level in 3rd grade, so I could handle it. I also liked Island of the Blue Dolphins. I read that on my own in third grade and then had to read it for school in 4th grade.

Interviewer: *Where did you find out about it?*

Tracey: *My aunts buy me books. One of them gave it to me. They mostly give me books I don't like, but I liked that one and the New Moon Movie Guide. [June, 2011]*

Tracey was matter-of-fact when expressing her accelerated reading level, yet she still conveyed some doubt about her abilities, as though she had not internalized the positive messages she received at school about her literacy competencies. I noticed a pattern to this insecurity. While Tracey indicated several times in our conversation two years ago that literacy is a key to success, and while she characterized herself as an avid reader and writer, she lacked confidence about the school system's assessment of her high reading skills and indicated a similar low confidence level in our recent discussion. Tracey told me in 8th grade that she surmised from her observation of reading group assignments that she was placed in the advanced group. Her teacher did not tell her this directly, but she said she "figured out" she was in advanced reading when she saw the other students in the group. Tracey immediately thought her teacher had

made a mistake:

Tracey: *I knew I didn't belong in that reading group. It was all the best readers.*

Interviewer: *But you said you like to read and that you read all the time.*

Tracy: *It's not the same as being in the high reading group. I got put in there by mistake.* [September, 2009]

A disconnect existed then, and still exists today, between Tracey's fervent engagement with literacy experiences and her perception that she would not qualify as a strong reader from her school's perspective. She said she was unworthy to be in the highest reading group, even though she said she "never goes anywhere without a book." To her, this placement was a "mistake." How is it possible she would feel this way? I ascribed Tracey's confusion to the mixed messages schools convey about literacy and the lack of confidence she has as the child of a janitor. When schools define literacy achievement according to specific reading lists, it may shake the confidence of students who enjoy other kinds of books, as though those books are not valued and, therefore, do not count. Tracey's position as a working-class student in a middle-class school district has also called her confidence into question, since she does not have access to the material possessions and experiences (clothes, cell phones, trips) she says the "popular" students have. The opportunity to feel valued

in the context of a middle-class high school comes from her English class, where she has potential to be appreciated by her teacher and peers who also value reading and writing practices. The problem is, she does not always see this very clearly herself.

In our recent interview, Tracey said she is advancing to the Honors section of English 10 in the coming fall:

Tracey: Audrey and I were in the regular English class this year and our teacher, Wills, said we could be in Honors 10 if we showed more determination.

Tracey: We moved up to the Smart Corner with Vienna and Darlene. The others were in the Dumb Corner.

Tracey: That's where kids who don't do the work sit. They just sit there and talk and don't pay attention. They just don't care. Audrey and me didn't want to sit there, so we asked if we could move up to the front with Vienna. That girl is smart!

Interviewer: What do you mean by smart?

Tracey: If we get an assignment for an essay that's due next week, she will have the draft due the very next day. She has

Whitmore

five books going at once. She is really smart. I'm not as good as her and never will be. I don't know how she does it.
[June, 2011]

I sensed a struggle for Tracey in finding her place in the English classroom. She points out a binary that exists in the English classroom between “dumb” and “smart” that is apparent through the seating arrangement. She aligns herself physically and intellectually with those who share an appreciation for books, even though she sees herself as “less than” Vienna. While she had the confidence to request a move to the “Smart Corner,” she wonders if she actually belongs among the high achieving students:

Interviewer: *How do you feel about being in the Honors class?*

Tracey: *Scared and happy and terrified. We worked really hard and then Wills told us that we made it into the Honors class. At the end of the year, we asked him if we made it and he said yes. He said that if we didn't do the work in Honors, the other kids would eat us alive. Well, not literally eat us alive, but they would eat us alive.*

Interviewer: *Meaning?*

Tracey: *Meaning we have to do the work because the kids won't put up with it if we don't. We have to read three books and write three essays this summer, and watch one movie. If we don't do it, we shouldn't bother going to the class the first day. We'll be kicked out.*

Interviewer: *How does that make you feel?*

Tracey: *Kind of nervous. Honors kids are the real thing. It's kinda scary. I hope I do okay in Honors. Audrey, too.*

Tracey: *I want to be a nerd. I'm going to get a t-shirt that says, I'm a Nerd and I'm Proud. [June, 2011]*

Tracey suggested at age 13, and again at 15, the social value she places on excelling in English class, despite her fear of failure. She wants to be seen as “smart” and to be labeled as a “nerd,” which reflects a search and struggle for identity. She is proud of her literacy skills, as reflected in the fact she took on the challenge to “show her determination” as part of her admission into the Honors English class. She expressed excitement over the three challenging books that are summer reading requirements for the Honors English class. This on-going toggling between self-assurance and insecurity was

consistent during our conversation:

Tracey: *We have three books about war. All Quiet on the Western Front, then we watch the movie, the 1930s version and compare them. My mom got a copy of the movie. I already started All Quiet.* [Her last day of school was 10 days ago.]

Interviewer: *How do you like it?*

Tracey: *Better than I thought. I wouldn't pick it on my own, but it's pretty good. Then I have to read a book by Aristotle, and another one is a book of poetry by Wilfred Owen and edited by John Stallworthy. His footnotes are priceless. At least that's what Wills told us.* [June, 2011]

Despite Tracey's articulate description of her reading requirements, after two years she continues to express self-doubt about her potential to succeed in the Honors 10 English class. At the same time, she rattled off the names of books, authors, and editors from the summer reading list she had received only 10 days before. More than simply telling me the titles of the summer books, Tracey wanted to *discuss* them with me, and in so doing, she presented herself as someone who knew what she was talking about, even down to the footnotes. This made her

proud. Instead of resisting the prospect of reading three difficult books and writing three papers over her summer vacation, she made it clear she is excited about the challenge. She displayed a similar level of excitement two years ago. When she was in 8th grade, the literacy experience that Tracey said she enjoyed most was the “fun” of finding vocabulary words she learned in school while reading books on her own time:

Tracey: It's kinda fun because there are new words in there that you don't even know. Like one of our vocab words was lackadaisical. I did not even know that word existed.

Interviewer: But you might read it in a book someday, right?

Tracey: Yeah, when I'm reading a book, I might see a word and think, Oh, that's one of our vocab words, or Oh, that was one of my vocab words. That's pretty sweet when that happens. [September, 2009]

Learning new vocabulary words at school facilitated Tracey's reading “hobby” outside of 8th grade, which she said was important to her. After revealing her enthusiasm for vocabulary words, she expressed some frustration about the reading culture at school:

Interviewer: *Tracey, how often do you read?*

Tracey: *Every day. I try to read whenever I can. If we have a test and I finish it early, I will take out my book and read it. The other day, my friend Kelsey finished her test early, and she took out a book, and the teacher came over and said, People who are caught reading during the test will get a zero. Kelsey had a look on her face like, I want to kill you for not letting me read.*

Tracey: *Seriously! The teacher didn't want her to read! In school! Like it's bad thing.*
[September, 2009]

Tracey came to understand literacy as a skill that was highly regarded, yet also tightly regulated, in schools. While she understood that schools valued reading, she saw a contradiction in the control teachers exerted over students' academic literacy experiences. From Tracey's perspective, her school's expectations around reading achievements conflicted with its control over reading opportunities. It made no sense to her that reading a book in school would lead to a punishment (i.e., a zero on a test). When Tracey saw literacy through this lens, reading became something to be hidden or avoided altogether while at school, unless under the prescriptive direction of teachers. Based on school experiences she did not give up on reading.

For students, like Tracey, who love reading and cherish books, literacy experiences in school require on-going negotiations because of their perception of the educational system's sometimes contradictory messages, which they read loud and clear. For a student who seeks an identity aligned with reading and writing, this disconnect can create confusion around her identity. Tracey was indignant about the ways in which her access to desirable books was sometimes restricted in 8th grade:

Tracey: There's this book, Kira-Kira, I found it at the library and a librarian at school had told me it was too adult for me and I still got it anyway.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Tracey: It was really dumb that I couldn't get an award-winning book out of my own school library. How do they know it's too old for me? I think I can figure that out for myself. A book, it teaches you life lessons, like, in Kira-Kira, her sister died, and you gotta deal with death in your life. In regular school we don't really learn about death, maybe in social studies, with wars and stuff, but not on a personal level. Books can do that, teach us things that kids want to know about. Kids know what we need. [September, 2009]

For Tracey, who does not have the disposable income to purchase books, the library takes on greater importance in providing access to books she views as valuable for their intrinsic qualities. However, when librarians act as gatekeepers, their control over books is discouraging for Tracey and, I imagine, for other children who share a similar passion for books. Tracey's experience with the librarian reflected the negotiation tactics children need with respect to the literacy practices they often encounter in school. Tracey's choice, *Kira-Kira*, won the 2005 Newbery Medal, the highest honor awarded to children's literature and, ironically, bestowed by the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC), yet she had to get the school librarian's permission to gain access to the book. Book selection for Tracey is serious business. She indicates that she makes wise and discriminating decisions about books, based on the criteria she established, sometimes with an eye toward the opinions of "experts" (e.g., librarians and award committees). She has learned to negotiate her book choices by taking into account various influences: her emotional reaction to a book, the knowledge she had about perspectives of those in authority (e.g., librarians and award committees), and the advice from friends she trusts. Yet, despite her discriminating system for evaluating and choosing books, school sometimes stands in her way of accessing the titles that meet her stringent criteria.

In what appeared to be an act of resistance against the kind of reading prescribed by school, in 8th grade Tracey co-founded a Book Club with her friend Ashley. Tracey relied on the Book Club for her access to books, as

the girls shared resources and traded books. In the Book Club, Tracey valued the opportunity to express her expertise around books-- discovering them, reading them, and being able to speak confidently about them-- with the other members:

Tracey: I have a bunch of friends, some are big readers and we talk about reading a lot and we share ideas about books and stuff. Our talking is about that. Ashley and I are in the Book Club and sometimes we argue about books. Like she'll say, Twilight is icky, and I'll say Twilight is cool. Things like that.

Interviewer: How does that feel?

Tracey: Okay. It's okay if we have different ideas. As long as nobody gets too bossy about it. We have strong opinions about books. We just like them, that's all.
[September, 2009]

Tracey's connection to Ashley and others in the Book Club extended beyond a common taste in books to shared experiences and discourse about books. She had positive feelings about her relationship with other girls in the Book Club and the voice she had within the club, as reflected by her willingness to express an oppositional position to Ashley. It appeared that the relationship between Tracey

and Ashley was emotionally charged when it came to book discussions, but they seemed to view those encounters as intellectual exchanges rather than personal attacks, and as a result, they remain best friends in 10th grade. I found through my conversations with Tracey that the two stuck together and supported each other, in private and in public, and the same was true for other book club members, although to a lesser degree. For instance, any shortcoming Tracey might have experienced due to a lack of money for books when she was in 8th grade was minimized through the Book Club's collaborative approach to book purchases, as shown when they worked together to buy books they wanted individually:

Interviewer: *How do you usually pay for things you buy at the bookstore?*

Tracey: *Sometimes me and my friends, we share money so we can buy things. Last time we went there, me and my friends, we all pooled our money and gift cards, then we got all the stuff that we wanted.*

Interviewer: *Well, who would own the stuff that you bought? Would you share it?*

Tracey: *Like, Ashley got Ink Heart so that was her book. Bridget got a book I can't*

remember. I bought a different book. We all got something we wanted, so that was really good. [September, 2009]

Though they purchased these books from a collective pool of money, Tracey indicated they had ownership over their individual selections. The relationship between Book Club members appeared to gain strength because of the camaraderie they expressed around literacy experiences. She indicated that this created a stronger group identity, since individual group members came together for a common cause—to support each other in purchasing books they wanted to own by pooling money and gifts cards. Though they may have disagreed on which books were “good,” they did agree that books were important to own, enjoy, and talk about.

Tracey told me in our recent conversation that while the Book Club no longer exists, she, Ashley, and Bridget still pool money for books. She says she misses the Book Club.

Tracey: Vienna and I may start a book club. Vienna is smart. She can figure it out.

Interviewer: What about you?

Tracey: Well, maybe. Maybe I can figure it out, too.

Interviewer: How do you think the other

kids at school would think about it?

Tracey: *Some of them would think it's dumb, because it isn't about clothes or cell phones like the popular kids live for. They don't care about books like we do. [June, 2011]*

Once again, Tracey indicates a lack of confidence, this time with respect to resurrecting the Book Club. She appears to be nostalgic about the experiences she had in the Club back in 8th grade, yet believes that Vienna is best qualified to start it up again, because she is "smart." Even within the context of the Honors English class, there is a social hierarchy that Tracey understands as saying, "You aren't good enough."

Tracey says that 9th grade English was "her favorite by a mile," with French and Global tied for a distant second, and Gym and Math in last place. She spoke endearingly about her 9th grade English teacher, Mr. Wills, who will teach the Honors section of 10th grade English:

Tracey: *I love Wills. He's a comedian. He swears and makes it fun.*

Tracey: *Wait. I have some Wills-isms on my phone.*

[She takes out her cell phone and starts searching.]

Tracey: *Here's a funny one. When we were taking notes about punctuation he was saying the ways to make a sentence with a verb, and a noun and his example was John runs. We were saying that we could use an exclamation or a question mark at the end of the sentence, and he said, "John runs? I thought he had a broken leg."*

Interviewer: *He sounds like a jokester.*

Tracey: *He's not afraid to say hell or damn either. He's a cool teacher. He doesn't treat us like little kids. He's inspiring to me and by far the best English teacher ever.*

Interviewer: *What makes you say that?*

Tracey: *Most teachers give you a book and say, Read the chapters. Then we have a quiz the next class. Wills did this, too, but he gave us a chance to talk about the chapters right before the quiz. He let us ask questions and got us thinking about the book. It made it better for taking the quiz.*

[June, 2011]

Tracey connects to Mr. Wills because she says she enjoys his humor and respects his sometimes playful, other times serious, teaching style. This connection is reflected by Tracey's keeping track of her favorite "Will-isms" on her

cell phone. She said that he respects all of the students and treats them as “more than just kids.” While she came into the class with a deep appreciation for reading and writing, the fact that Tracey sees Mr. Wills as a “cool teacher” who respects his students further connects her to literacy experiences that take place in his classroom:

Tracey: I felt bad because Mr. Wills told us in the beginning of the year that he was married. Then the last day of the year he told the class he was going through a divorce that whole year.

Interviewer: That's big. How did you feel about him telling you that?

Tracey: I felt so sorry for him. That was hard. It still makes me feel bad for him, thinking about it. [June, 2011]

Tracey connects to her English teacher because he acknowledges students' experiences and respects their ability to understand and handle them. The fact that he shared his own difficulties (his divorce) showed this was not simply a top-down relationship. Instead, he conveyed that he, too, was dealing with difficult issues in his own life, and it was apparent that he trusted his students enough to tell them about it. The level of intimacy derived from Wills' sometimes humorous and, at other times, serious rapport created a trusting, positive learning environment that often connected to themes from course

readings. I asked Tracey to describe the ideal English class, if it could be anything she wanted it to be:

Tracey: For one, kids should have a chance to read books that they want to read. When our teacher brought in comic books, that was really cool. It was a reward after suffering through our computer class.

Tracey: I think teachers should take a survey in class to see what kids are interested in and find books that are about that, books that relate to the life of students. That's the kind of books teachers should choose.

Tracey: When I was in 8th grade, I read a book, How I Survived Middle School. That was a good book for me at the time because it was what I was going through myself.

Interviewer: Oh! Was that a book you read in school?

Tracey: No, I read that outside, on my own. I wish we had read it at school. The other kids would have related, too, I think.
[June, 2011]

Tracey is seeking a balance between the teacher's position as educator and her position as a student. While she indicates that she respects and welcomes her English teachers' input and guidance on book selections, she would like the students to have some decision-making power, as well. The book might have created rich opportunities for conversations at school about students' common struggles. She sees reading as providing not only literacy skills, but also life skills:

Tracey: Books can teach kids things. Like, some kids are really rich, some kids are poor, and some kids are in the middle. Rich kids end up shoving it in poor kids' faces, like, I get to go here, and I have this new thing or that new expensive thing. They don't even think about it. If everybody read a book about poor kids, maybe the rich kids could understand what life would be like if they weren't so rich.

Interviewer: That's a pretty amazing thing to say.

Tracey: I like it when what we read relates to real life. Like when we read Romeo & Juliet, Wills said to us, How many people here are in relationships? Celeste pointed to me because I was with Donny at the

time. It was an interesting class because of the way he related it to us. [June, 2011]

When English teachers find a way to make readings relevant to their students' lives, the learning experience has a more significant meaning. Her use of the example that a book about "poor kids" could help "rich kids" understand their life circumstances shows that she feels misunderstood by some of her peers, as she elucidates here:

Tracey: Books help people understand each other. We have more of a sense of the world than teachers think we do sometimes. It's our life. This year, two or three kids lost someone in their family. Books could help kids. If you find some form of story that's something like losing someone close to you...

[Tracey stops talking, then breaks down.]

Tracey: I lost my grampa last year and then his wife died two weeks later. She wasn't my real grandma, but still it was hard. I was just thinking about that and I knew I was going to cry from thinking about it. That was hard and it's hard to think about it still. [June, 2011]

I understood from Tracey the incredible value of literacy experiences associated with young adult literature. Adolescents are already thinking about, and very possibly even facing, challenging life experiences. I thought about all that Tracey is coping with. A biological father she never knew. Two parents with serious health issues who struggle to pay the bills. The death of her grandparents. The existence of two half sisters, a revelation she discovered only recently. Her first boyfriend and her first breakup. Witnessing the struggles of two friends who “came out.” Her dog, Pugsly, losing an eye to an infection. Not to mention the dramatic physical and emotional changes that accompany the surging hormones of adolescence.

Young adult books in the classroom could help her navigate these experiences by conveying the message that she is not alone. But young adult novels in the English curriculum provide opportunities to do more than that, especially when in the hands of a teacher who is in touch with students and, ideally, not constrained by larger institutional pressures. With a teacher’s insightful guidance, young adults books with themes related to social class can also help students from less privileged backgrounds feel that their more affluent peers might understand and appreciate their circumstances. Beyond helping adolescents understand themselves, these books help adolescents feel understood. While the young adult novel may not have the power to disrupt the structure of social class in America on a grand scale, reading and talking about class distinctions in school through themes presented in the young adult genre could improve the confidence levels of Tracey and other adolescents like

her. And that could make all the difference.

References

- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*.
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2008). *What video games have to teach us
about learning and literacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan.
- Reissman, L. (1968). *Class in American society*.
Glencoe, IL: Free Press.