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Elementary School Students' Identity Negotiations in their Literacy Classrooms

Kimberly Ilosvay & Jeff Kerssen-Griep

Existing research reveals too little about how elementary-level students make sense of their teachers' and others' interpersonal communication with them, particularly regarding how it impacts students' identity development and engagement in teaching-learning relationships and instruction. Addressing this timely exigency, this study applied a cross-disciplinary conceptual framework to examine identity aspects of elementary school students' interpersonal and relational communication experiences in and around their literacy learning classrooms. Guided by Hecht et al.'s (2005) communication theory of identity (CTI) and examining themes that emerged among 103 face-to-face interviews with second- through fifth-graders, this paper reports key findings related to four interpenetrating identity layers, as well as identity gaps these young students reported experiencing among those layers. Interpersonal findings are explained and instructional principles discerned in light of CTI and research in second-language learning and multi-cultural pedagogy.

Classroom communication conveys participants' ideas, experiences, feelings, and knowledge, but it also encodes participants' personal, enacted, relational, and communal identity negotiations. Such negotiations matter in students' development, awareness, and engagement in learning activities over time; even young students are aware of such social dynamics in their interactions. For example, Corsaro (1985) found that young children use their perceptions of and reactions to the adult world to create their own peer culture in the classroom. While building shared knowledge through common activities and routines, children develop socially as well as academically, thus shaping their identity (LeFlot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2010). Additionally, Lash (2008) found that children as young as kindergarten build a peer culture that sometimes complements and sometimes conflicts with teacher interactions to form individual as well as classroom cultures. These classroom interactions shape children's view of self not only in the classroom context, but also in the larger community context. Further, studies exploring the multidimensionality of children's self-concept prove that young children are able to meaningfully discriminate various aspects of their identity (Verschueren, Doumen, & Buyse, 2012).

Yet existing education research reveals too little about how elementary school-aged students themselves make sense of their
teachers' communication with them, particularly regarding how those experiences braid with students' own identity development and engagement in teaching-learning activities and relationships (Pinxten, Wouters, Preckel, Niepel, 2014; Verschueren et al, 2012). Existing literature suggests many reasons for the lack of evidence, such as the diminished importance for young children to compare themselves externally (Pinxten et al, 2014), the complex nature of self-awareness in early childhood identity development (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014), the multitude of confounding variables that impact a child's self-concept (Verschueren et al, 2012), the separation of influences on child development (i.e., parents, teachers, and peers are often studied independently), and the methodology of research (i.e., observation of behavior lacks the ability to provide the child's perception (Sroufe, 2005).

Classrooms as Social Learning Environments

It long has been believed that the teacher exerts the most influence on the social environment, student self-concept, and learning in the classroom by framing and driving the communication interactions and norms of the classroom (Halliday, 1975; Smith, 1988). Similarly, research suggests that peers also are powerful agents of socialization impacting school engagement and academic self-efficacy (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009).

However, Hughes and Chen (2011) posited that the teacher is still said to sway these peer relationships, especially in grades two through four, by illuminating normed expectations. Studies put forth a range of explanations, such as the use of language as a dominant form of explicit framing of classroom practice and more subtle offerings such as student observations of interactions in the classroom to infer student abilities (Hughes & Chen, 2011). While it is unclear how or to what extent teachers promote what "good student" characteristics are, it is clear that when a student is perceived by peers as a "good student" classroom interactions are enhanced and learning engagement increased. Bierman (2011) suggests that students use these "peer reputations as a source of social comparison information that informs self-evaluations and academic motivation" (p. 298). She further suggested that students' direct evaluation and treatment from peers, normed social structures, and indirect framing of expectations by teachers affect that students' perception of themselves.

Pinxton et al. (2014) note that academic self-concepts (ASCs) reflect an individual's impression of his/her ability on academic tasks. Although studies of ASC show beneficial effects on various learning outcomes, very few studies have investigated
elementary students’ self-concept formation. They posit that external comparisons are less important for younger students.

Connection to Literacy

Becoming literate is a complex venture requiring the acquisition of knowledge from various resources. Typically, oral language and historical conventions are acquired in specific contexts through interactions with adults and peers (Moll, Saez, Dworin, 2001). Literacy learning “creates new options for thinking by mediating access to the valued resources of culture ...” and develops metacognitive awareness—learning concepts for talking and thinking about language (Olsen, 1987). Studies by Wells (1989) and Wolf (1990) explain how children gain control over their thinking and this in turn shapes who they identify as and their place in the world with respect to others.

Instructional Communication Negotiates Knowledge, Relationships, and Identities

Aside from being the means by which instructional intentions become visible and teaching-learning transactions actually get accomplished, communication also is a ubiquitous, central organizing feature of social life (Tracy, 1990). This position is no less true in classrooms, where participants’ interpersonal, group, and public communication competencies are consequential in negotiating participants’ motivations to learn and to their experiences, relationships, and identities (Kerssen-Griep, 2001; Nicholls, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the midst of instruction, everyone is responding to their own and other learners’ variable emergent understandings with varying levels of competence, especially during encounters that involve heightened emotion or risk, such as feedback or in-class performance situations (Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Kerssen-Griep & Terry, 2016; Nolen, 1995). Several forces intertwine to affect the success of such encounters, including course goal structures, teachers’ instructional strategies and interpersonal tactics, students’ motivations and self-determinations to learn, and classrooms’ learning environments (Ames, 1992; Pintrich, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). People in classrooms very often care about whom they are perceived to be and how they are dealt with, framings which have consequences for students’ engagement and learning (Nicholls, 1989).
Theoretical Framework

This study is concerned with the identity implications of classroom-related communication as heard, processed, and understood by elementary-aged students. Though the study’s design centers around Hecht et al.'s (2005) communication theory of identity (CTI), several theories help frame what may be happening in and around those encounters.

Co-cultural theory (Orbe & Spellers, 2005) highlights that people with less power in a social situation (such as these students) often will calibrate their engagement in it according to their communicative orientation toward it (non-assertive, assertive, aggressive) and their desired outcome from it (separation, accommodation, assimilation). Those engagement decisions themselves are patterned, and are affected by ongoing interactions in that social surround, including the relationships emergent there.

Identity management theory (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) further details how relationships among people who differ societally often progress through a series of relational puzzles, moving from more categorical thinking to more personal-plus-cultural understandings about each other’s similarities and differences relative to oneself.

Ting-Toomey’s identity negotiation theory (2005) helps anchor these negotiations in more concrete interactional dynamics, explaining how each person carries and negotiates multiple conceptions of their sense of self, formed via symbolic communication with others and composed of social and personal identities. Identity negotiations are variably informed by a person’s ethnic, cultural, personal and situational norms; feeling understood, respected, and successfully balanced in negotiating personal and social identities (i.e., identity security) rests on participants’ knowledge, mindfulness and interaction abilities.

Finally, Hecht et al.’s (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005) communication theory of identity (CTI) forms the heuristic heart of the current study’s analytic frame. CTI posits that communication legitimately “externalizes” a person’s identity, communication being the process by which identity is continually exchanged, formed, understood, and negotiated with others, and which establishes expectations for competent interactions. Identities vary in their scope (how widely held), salience (how important to a person at that moment), centrality (how important to a person’s sense of self), changeability, and intensity (how much ownership one expresses about an identity). Identities are argued to have emergent individual, performative, social, and communal properties, which the theory conceives as four distinct, interpenetrating “layers” working together to constitute a person’s identity.
The personal identity layer refers to an individual's locus: self-image, self-cognitions, self-feelings, and a sense of well-being, for example. The enactment identity layer identity is the self one performs via communication in a given moment. Regardless of whether that performance reflects personal layer understandings of oneself, others respond to it consequentially; it affects subsequent interaction. The relational identity layer refers to identities that are invested in connections with others, ascribed in and through relationships. This identity layer is seen as a jointly negotiated and mutually defined product in relationship with others (e.g., as a teacher's student, as a peer's classmate, as a parent's child, e.g.). Finally, the communal identity layer is also a place where identity exists, sharing common group histories and characteristics that form a collective group identity on the basis of history. For example, one's self-concept as a transgendered person (personal identity) is juxtaposed with how one’s particular others interact with one's enactments as a transgendered person (relational identity), as well as with how one’s communities (communal identity) define these social positions. Unlike the other three layers, communal identities are held in common by groups rather than “owned” by individuals. These identity frames are said to interpenetrate or constantly intertwine with each other.

People thus routinely experience identity gaps, discrepancies between or among the four layers of identity. People are challenged to calibrate their enactments to their personal layers as well as to a partner's relational layer and communal identity expectations for that individual. Even people’s relational identities (e.g., how a pair of friends defines itself) are negotiated in light of how a community views that relationship type, and how the parties in it define themselves. Common identity gaps include a personal-relational identity gap, showing discrepancy between how one views oneself and one’s perception of how others view one; and a personal-enacted identity gap, where one feels discrepancy between the self-view one holds and one’s actual enactment of self in communication with others. Seen through CTI, identity itself clearly is an enduring and changing entity that continually integrates and challenges one’s own subjective and others' ascribed meanings about oneself.

Rationale

Elementary-level students are aware of and involved in negotiating their identities with other communicators in their social surround, yet existing research has paid too little attention to students' voices themselves about this phenomenon even though such identity negotiation are consequential for students' learning and socialization. This study integrates compatible streams of research and theorizing
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across disciplines to help address that exigency, framed by Hecht et al.’s communication theory of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). The theory conceives of four interpenetrating “identity layers” continually negotiated via interaction, as well as emergent “identity gaps” that must be managed among those layers. Understanding those identity negotiations in light of elementary-aged students’ identity development led us to propose the following two research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: What is the nature of elementary-aged children’s accounts of their own personal, enacted, relational, and communal identity layers relative to their school literacy learning settings?
RQ2: What is the nature of elementary-aged children’s identity gaps experienced relative to their school literacy learning settings?

Method

Participants

This study’s face-to-face interview participants were 103 students in second, third, fourth, or fifth grade literacy classes (see Table 1) at one of three public elementary schools within a Western U.S. city. The study centered around elementary school literacy learning classrooms, where identity concerns often are more prominently discussed than in other classes (e.g., math, science) whose subject matters do not as directly reference, discuss, or evaluate key cultural currencies such as language mastery, reading, and writing. There is evidence that thoughtful classroom talk leads to increased literacy comprehension, thus shaping identity (Johnston, Woodside-Jiron, & Day, 2001).

Table 1

Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<td>5th</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
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As mandated by human subjects approvals from the researchers’ institution and these schools’ district, each student’s participation in this study was voluntary and required permissions
obtained from the school, from each student's parent or guardian, and from the students themselves (pseudonyms for people and locations have been used throughout the project). Demographic information obtained about each participant affirmed that the student interview pool reflected some diversity in age, sex, literacy ability (i.e., struggling, benchmark, challenge), learning preferences (i.e., auditory, kinesthetic, visual), and first-language usage (i.e., the majority were native English speakers, but the pool included three native Swedish speakers, two native German speakers, six native Spanish speakers, one native Chinese speaker, and one native French speaker).

**Procedures**

Evidence examined included students' narratives in response to their interviewer's focused interview prompts about their classroom experiences, as well as students' descriptions of pictures some of them drew in response to particular prompts. The prompts asked about some of the communication these students had experienced in and around their literacy learning classrooms, as well as some of their feelings and observations about those acts. Creswell (2005) explained that because telling stories is a natural part of life, using narrative data helps analysts shift focus from broader to more specific accounts of experience. In education, detailed narrative accounts can give students and teachers voice in classroom experiences, which can improve instruction and socialization.

The interviewer was an educational researcher who also is a certified, licensed, and experienced elementary educator, adroit in managing elementary student interview dynamics. Each solo interview took approximately fifteen minutes. Interviews were recorded as digital audio files with an unobtrusive “LiveScribe” pen and later transcribed for analysis using qualitative data software.

Data were coded to capture two primary identity phenomena suggested *a priori* by the study’s theoretical frame. First, students’ references to any of Hecht et al.’s (2005) four identity layers were noted: *personal layer* coding included students’ references to their self-concept or self-perception regardless of what they showed others; *enacted layer* coding captured students’ reports of self-expressions they had shown; *relational layer* coding denoted students’ references to the person they see themselves being within a particular relationship (e.g., as their mother’s daughter, as their teacher’s student); and *communal layer* coding noted larger societal norms that students referenced (e.g., that being a fast reader is better than being a slow one).

Second, data also were coded to capture students’ references to what Hecht et al. (2005) identified as “identity gaps,” times when
they reported feeling any sort of dissonance that could be recognized as tension among various identity layers. These might include situational reports of acting differently than one’s self-perception, or of seeing themselves differently from how they noted their teacher’s, parents’, peers’, or culture’s communication framing them, for example.

Analysis involved first noting response frequencies in the four identity layers and the identity gap categories from Hecht et al.’s (2005) communication theory of identity. Those particular categories of response each then were qualitatively analyzed using open and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), utilizing NVIVO data analysis software to track response frequencies and highlight emergent themes within and across those categories’ data.

Results

Analysis of identity layer references and identity gap experiences reveals ways these students made sense of their emerging selves via their communication with key others in and around their literacy class experiences. Findings are described in terms of Hecht et al.’s (2005) four identity layers, and then in terms of the identity gaps reportedly experienced by these students.

Identity Layers Findings

Research question one sought to explore the nature of these students’ identity layer experiences relative to their literacy learning settings. Three sorts of findings emerged in response.

First, these 103 interviews produced \( N=1,020 \) codable statements relevant to identity. Although some interviews produced more identity-related communication than others did, that is a substantial overall number of identity-relevant thought evident in these interviews.

Second, the majority of students’ identity-relevant experiences ended up being multi-coded as referencing more than just one identity layer (and those sometimes in tension – see RQ2 findings below). Of the personal identity layer statements, 298 of 324 were multi-coded; of enacted identity layer, 144 of 268 statements were multi-coded; of the relational identity layer, 91 of 217 statements comments were multi-coded; and 89 of 211 communal identity layer comments were multi-coded. Such a high proportion of overlap reflects CTI’s presumption that identity layers interpenetrate in lived experience.

Finally, particular patterns emerged within and among some of the identity layers. Next, each identity layer is considered and illustrated in turn, and then in combination.
**Personal identity layer.** Students' self-concept was disclosed in all \((n = 103)\) students' accounts, directly revealing personal identity information:

[Do you think you’re a good reader?] Yes. I started reading chapter books when I was 5. So I’m 8 now. So you’re proficient now? Yeah. (Grade 2)

I haven’t heard like anything from her, but I just know that I’m a good reader. Okay. [How do you know?] Well just because I read so many chapter books like in three years or 4 I don’t really remember but I lost count. (Grade 2)

Sometimes she’ll ask us to do partner reading but I’ve never read with a partner. How come? Because I like reading to myself because I’m sort of shy. But once I talk to a person like someone that I’ve met, I’m not shy anymore with them. When she tells us to partner read I just don’t. (Grade 2)

I feel like I am good reader. I do not think that I am a good writer, because I usually write really big and do not write very much. (Grade 2)

I think I am a good reader because I can read big words. (Grade 2)

I think I’m a good reader, I don’t know how to test if I’m a good reader or not, so I’m think I’m a good reader, but I’m not quite sure. (Grade 4)

[What makes you feel like you’re a good reader?] Well like I just I, I read thick books and sometimes I finish the book in like two or three days and I have a big imaginations so it helps with reading a lot. (Grade 5)

I feel comfortable because I have like my own little bubble for reading I have my own little brain. (Grade 5)

One pattern gleaned from students’ personal identity layer statements shows that these students’ most intimate senses of self often were grounded in narratives of comparison with others (e.g., “I am in a high reading group”). These differ from the less socially referenced, more essentialized self-perceptions more common to hear from adults, such as “I am smart” or “I’m a thoughtful person.” While this difference is developmentally expected, such a finding reinforces the importance of elementary teachers’ vigilance regarding
peer-social comparisons that may be evident to students in their classroom communication and other practices, especially if trying to shape students as intrinsically motivated and task-mastery-oriented learners in environments where their peers clearly demonstrate diverse backgrounds and abilities. Personal-layer accounts here reiterated findings from other studies (Jung & Hecht, 2004) about the certainty students felt about their identities at least in the context of their literacy ability in the classroom and home.

**Enacted identity layer.** Students' expressed identity was coded ($n = 97$) times. Consistent with developmental understandings, some students’ comments revealed that they, even at a young age, value having their identity enactments seen in favorable ways by others. Enacted identities did not always align with beliefs reported about personal identity:

- Sometimes I hide my paper so my friends don’t see my bad grade. (Grade 2)

- I'm always a good reader in the classroom. Last week, I was the first one to finish reading and doing our assignment and everyone else had barely started. The assignment was we had to read something and we have to do a job for it, I was just summarizing it. I didn’t even read all the words so I could say I was done first. (Grade 4)

- Well I stumble more when I am reading out loud so they can’t actually read my brain and see what I am reading so probably between what I said and no because I think I am better at reading in my brain than out loud. (Grade 4)

- I usually have one hour when it says how much I have been reading and you have to at least have 20 to get a star, and I get at least 60 for fun. (Grade 4)

The notion of performing is useful when conceptualizing how identity was enacted here in contexts. At times, identity enactments appeared contradictory to what students reported believing they could do; sometimes purposefully different. Enacted identities often plainly were context dependent. Enacting identities is not a neutral proposition, but instead has many intertwined components that establish times of belonging and times of differentiating, even at these elementary ages.

**Relational identity layer.** Most recently, Jung & Hecht (2004) described four levels to relational identity. First, how the individual internalizes how others view them. Second, self-identification regarding relationships with others. Third, existence of
multiple identities (e.g., student and son). Fourth, individual as group or communal identities. Examples of all four levels were present in this study:

My friends have told me that I am a good reader. *(how others view individual; Grade 2)*

I felt really good about myself as a reader when I got to go in the highest level reading group in my class. I felt proud of myself. *(communal identity; Grade 2)*

I think I’m a good writer because I’m one of the only people in my class who actually likes to write. A lot of people in my class don’t like to write, I’m pretty sure. Well, some of the girls do, but not the boys. I do, so I am good. *(identity regarding relationships with others; Grade 4)*

Yes, I think I’m a good reader. I get complimented about it. *(identity regarding relationships with others; Grade 3)*

I am a good reader compared to my class, I would say I am the best reader. *(identity regarding relationships with others; Grade 2)*

My mom says I am a good writer. My teacher would say I am not because she gives me lots of feedback. It means I have a lot of things to change. It’s bad. *(multiple identities; Grade 4)*

As expected, students’ relationships with peers were significant to them. According to Mead (1934), students naturally incorporate others’ views of their abilities into their identities. Students’ self-appraisal in this study verified that they used their parents’ and peers’ views of them to evaluated their own literacy abilities and describe their own literate identities. Other less direct forms of teacher influence are present in the data. Some students referred to placement in a reading group or assignment of a thick book as evidence of their reading identities. Comments such as “I am a good reader because I am in the highest reading group” and “I think I am a good reader because my teacher gave me the biggest book to read.” Other students believe written feedback on grammar is the key to good writing skills (see, e.g., Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988) citing “my teacher would say I am a good writer because she says I have good grammar.”

Students’ relational identity layer analysis provided one other intriguing theme: the preponderance of parents’ and peers’
(relative to teachers’) communication students reported in describing themselves. These students offered far more narratives involving their parents and their peers than involving their teachers, even though our interview prompts cued them to classroom communication. For example, one student stated, “I know my teacher thinks I am a good reader and writer because my mom told me that my teacher said that I was a good reader and writer during their conference” and “If I compare myself to Matilda I don’t think I am a good reader, but compared to other kids I am a good reader.” The way a teacher/parent frames “a good reader” seems to determine a student’s self-evaluation of being a good reader more than comparisons to actual benchmark criteria do. Students in this study referred to their enacted identities with certain social constraints (e.g., the classroom, home, society), often illustrating how home, school, and community are intertwined influences.

**Communal identity layer.** Some students \( n=38 \) revealed communal identity awareness when revealing their identity in relation to external expectations. Students explained classroom expectations and how they learned these expectations:

We know we are supposed to listen. We are in 2nd grade. [What happens when your class is not listening?] We don't do that. My teacher tells us what she expects from us, but it hasn’t happened in a long time. She doesn’t need to tell us. (Grade 2)

My teacher expects more from us because it is later in the year. She usually talks about what we are doing and what we are supposed to be doing, to let us know what she expects from us. (Grade 2)

My teacher just goes through the steps of what to do to help us know what she expects. (Grade 4)

However, often, students were unaware, even with prompting, where they learned school/community expectations, but they displayed certainty with what the constraints were:

We know that we are supposed to come in and do quiet reading. [How do you know this?] We just know. (Grade 2)

I felt good and I kind of got embarrassed, was I supposed to say that word? Is it a bad word or something? We shouldn’t say bad words outside. Sometimes when I say words I don’t know, I’ll just say, ‘mom, is that a bad word?’ and she’ll just say, ‘no it isn’t.’ But I basically know, but what I do is
first, when other people are reading, sometimes I read when the teacher’s talking. I’ll read ahead and so then if there’s, I don’t know, if I have to read a word, or if I’m with my mom, if I have to read a word that’s kind of weird that I don’t know, then I read ahead, then it’s like ‘is it good or bad’ and when she’s talking, I can interrupt her and say, ‘is this a bad word?’ That’s kind of weird. (Grade 4)

Students also often expressed understanding about which communal values were important:

The most important thing is our report cards. I’ve improved speaking up in class. (Grade 4)

[Do you think you’re a good reader?] Yeah because I can read most difficult words and some are kind of like too hard for me. My uncle told me [that] if I can read hard words and thick books I will be successful at a job. (Grade 5)

Students often were aware of the communal expectations that influenced them, even if unable to explain why or how they knew. Understandings of communal expectations provided insight into areas from specific classroom and literacy expectations to broader societal expectations. Examples revealed that even young children are able to position themselves within a group. For example, “yes, I am a good reader compared to my class, I would say I am the best reader.” Students were also able to describe broader cultural values such as not saying bad words aloud, reading more in a shorter amount of time, and the necessity to be literate. For example, “I am a good reader because I read fast. Everyone has to be a good reader and read fast when they grow up.”

Communal layer findings also revealed the value placed on a report cards as societal currency. Thirty-nine of the 103 stated that they thought they were good readers, but they knew they were good because their report cards stated they were good readers: social confirmation of communal identity claims. Though students reported that they did not actually read their report cards, teachers and parents cited the report cards when discussing their children’s achievements, and students integrated these reflected appraisals among their identity negotiations.

**Combined identity layers.** Some coding legitimately invoked more than one identity layer. For instance, these elementary school students’ narratives often referenced the relational layer of identity while also noting some aspect of their identity’s communal layer, indicating how interpersonally located such “who I am supposed to be” learnings apparently are at the elementary level.
Brooks and Pitt (2016) suggest U.S. students have a strong sense of their personal identities, often distancing themselves from communal identities; for example, the statement, "I am a good reader. I finish books before other kids. I am better than everyone else in class" (Grade 4). Brooks and Pitt (2016) attributed such phenomena to growing up in an individualistic society.

Whereas developed adults might more easily reference a relational identity that is somewhat distinct from communal norms guiding a societal role, for these students their relational identities (with parents, with peers, sometimes with teachers) often appeared less differentiated from the cultural identities they are learning within those relationships. This could indicate that students are mining their relationships and interactions (perhaps less critically than adults would) for cultural information about their identities. Knowing their communication is "read" by students in relationship as a communal-level news source may help teachers be mindful about the consequential, identity-level meanings their students likely create from interpreting even their most mundane classroom and peer interactions.

"Identity Gap" Findings

Research question two queried the nature of these students' identity gap experiences relative to their literacy learning. First, it is worth noting that there were proportionally fewer identity gap references (n = 46) than identity layer references (n = 1,020) to code within these 103 interviews' transcripts. Most were from more advanced elementary grades' interviews, perhaps reflecting that older elementary students may be developmentally more able to articulate the social puzzles they experience. The statements themselves offer insights into some of the ways and places students wrestle with their identities, especially as "readers" in these literacy contexts.

Qualifying statements in the data were coded into a typology of six identity gap types (Hecht et al., 2005): personal–enacted (n = 13), personal–relational (n = 15), personal–communal (n = 7), enacted–relational (n = 7), enacted–communal (n = 4), and relational–communal (n = 0).

These elementary-level students' personal identity layer understandably was invoked in the majority (n = 35) of these 46 identity gap statements, with most gaps experienced between it and students' relational and enacted identity layers:

[Do you think you are a good writer?] Yeah. But my first writing in school. It was my personal narrative. It had like 60 errors in it. (personal–enacted gap; Grade 3)
I think I am a good writer. I don't tell others when my teacher gives me bad feedback. (personal-enacted gap; Grade 5)

If I compare myself to Maria I don't think I am a good reader, but compared to other kids I am a good reader. Maria would say I am a medium reader... My teacher thinks I need more work on getting focused on a book. But I think she thinks my reading skills are good. (personal-relational gap; Grade 2)

I like writing and I'm good at it, I'm just really bad at punctuation and spelling. Good thing reading is more important. (personal-enacted gap; Grade 4)

I think I'm kind of a good writer... [If you were to ask your parents if you were a good writer what would they say?] They would say maybe. (personal-relational gap; Grade 3)

I felt like a good reader after I finished the Harry Potter series in a month. My friend Alma said she already finished them. She said wow “that's really cool.” Then I feel like I was behind because others finished too. (personal-relational gap; Grade 4)

I felt pretty good about my reading. Like I wasn’t bad and I knew I was good. Like I knew I wasn’t the worst. Sometimes when I hear other people read, I'm like, I'm not the only one. My mom says I need to work on it though. (personal-relational gap; Grade 4)

I don’t think I’m a good reader .... My parents would say I’m a good reader .... my teacher would say I’m an average reader. (personal-relational gap; Grade 3)

I like writing, or used to. I don’t really like writing narratives 'cause I have a bunch of stuff to fix and I definitely had to spend a long time to do it. So yeah. Like I said, I don’t remember what she says about fixing my writing, but I feel anxious. (personal-relational gap; Grade 2)

Sometimes I think the things that people think about me are important, but they are not as important as the things I think about myself. (personal-communal gap; Grade 2)
Some enactment-relational identity gaps were reported, tensions between something the student had done and some aspect of a relational identity the student also owned:

That's another thing about me—I’m thinking ‘oh my God, I’m on track,’ then she [the teacher] is like ‘read to page 99’ and I’m only on page 3 and it’s like dang. (enacted-relational gap; Grade 4)

My teacher might not think I am a good writer. But I don’t really mind because that is her opinion and not mine. I could probably use some work, but I like the things that I do in my writing. (enacted-relational gap; Grade 2)

Finally, a few enacted-communal layer identity gaps were reported; tensions between something the student had done and some aspect of a communal identity the student also claimed:

[Do you think you are a good writer?] Yeah. But ... I was supposed to get a sticker. Good writers get stickers at the tops of their papers. (enacted-communal gap; Grade 3)

When the teacher says ‘don’t come up to me’, I feel like, I wouldn’t say she’s rude, but I would blame myself anyways because I wasn’t listening and I should’ve been listening and I shouldn’t have said things like ‘what did you just say?’ Sometimes, I could hit myself and go ‘stupid me I should’ve been listening when she told me to,’ or I would just ask another person. Normally if I’m not listening, I’m thinking about something in my head. And normally everything around me completely goes blank and I can’t hear anything, I’m just thinking, then I go back and she’s like ‘okay guys, get started, don’t come up to me because you should’ve been listening,’ and I’m like ‘what?’ then I’ll ask my friend and they don’t explain it as well as the teacher. (enacted-communal gap; Grade 4)

[Tell me about your picture.] Mine is me writing, and I’m a little confused. [Why are you confused?] I’m confused because sometimes I don’t know what to write about, or sometimes I forget, like I think of something like ‘oh, this would be a really good sentence, then I start writing and go ‘oh dang it, I forgot what it was,’ and then it’s not as good as I thought it would be. (enacted-communal gap; Grade 4)
Also, sometimes, I stutter when I get nervous. Good readers on TV don’t stutter. (enacted-communal gap; Grade 4)

It is important to note here that students’ reported connections among or even tensions between identity layers also reportedly spurred learning and other productive outcomes. They were not experienced as uniformly negative, but on the whole were rather “both-and” experiences of that dialectic, as in these examples:

I like it when she says ‘good job’ because if she said something negative, I’d probably feel bad and start crying or something. Or I would tell my parents. I’d say ‘our teacher said something negative about me. Our parents would get really mad. I probably would be disappointed if she said something negative, but I’d try to work on it to make it better. (personal-relational gap; Grade 4)

A time I did a really good job reading in the classroom was last year in third grade. We would have Reading Street book and we would read stories and sometimes I felt like I was a better reader than other kids in the class. I could pronounce words better, or read more fluently and other kids stuttered or had a hard time reading words or got nervous when they were reading in front of other people. (enacted-relational congruence; Grade 4)

One of the specific things she said I had to do in my writing was that I had to go past tense, and then I went back into present tense. [What did she say?] She said ‘you’re kind of going back and forth, so you should go back to past tense and change a few of your words like was, and had.’ (personal-communal gap; Grade 4)

[How did that make you feel?] I was thankful that she was supportive of me. (personal-relational congruence; Grade 4)

Sometimes when I am done reading a book and get up to get another one, my teacher will tell me to please sit down. I think maybe she thinks I am not as absorbed in the book as I should be. It makes me feel kind of sad about my reading but it also encourages me to do better. (personal-relational gap; Grade 2)

These elementary-aged students’ descriptions of their identity discomforts most often invoked personal (how I see me) or enacted (how I am being) versus relational (who I am in relation to
layer gaps, or sometimes even an intra-relational layer gap, where they seem to process and think about being different sorts of “selves” within different relational identities. For example, one participant stated, “I am a good reader at home because my mom says it, but at school, my teacher says keep trying, you will be a better reader.” Some students experienced tensions between their personal identities as “not a good writer” or “moving toward benchmarks” (e.g.) despite also reporting contradictory feedback from their teachers or others. These younger students’ thoughts about their “self” understandably center around the personal and performative layers they understand best, while also beginning to explore and wrestle with some of their interpenetrations with the more other-aware (relational and communal) identity layers as their brains are developing social perspective-taking ability. Perhaps students with differing first-language or cultural home and school identities especially note identity gaps as they attend to managing the expectations and characteristics of becoming “literate” in writing and reading the English language.

Discussion

This study set out to learn about the identity messages and meanings reported by elementary-aged students. Such communication has consequences for academic performance, motivation, and engagement in teaching-learning relationships and activities (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987), yet can be easily overlooked despite its omnipresence within instruction ostensibly about subject matter. Interviews with 103 elementary school students in literacy learning environments revealed identity messaging they heard relative to their personal, enacted, relational, and communal identity claims, and discovered examples of the identity gaps (amongst identity layers) they experienced in these settings.

Implications for Scholarship

For scholars, this study’s findings and theoretical perspective offer innovative, cross-disciplinary, heuristic means to examine the relational and identity negotiations key to students’ development, awareness, and engagement in learning activities through communication. The benefits of a positive experience with a teacher has been well studied from the perspectives of cooperative engagement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007), academic achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and peer acceptance (Hughes & Kwok, 2007) to name a few. Seaton, Marsh, & Craven (2010), for example, found that students often use the achievements of classmates (and sometimes teachers) to evaluate their own achievement level. These
ASCs are usually domain-specific, but transfer to general academic abilities across subjects vary.

Rather than diminishing the teacher's role in students' identity development, this trend perhaps indicates something more noteworthy and subtle, that teachers' influence on identity is simply more camouflaged—though no less influential—to these elementary-level students. These students apparently saw their teachers' communication as mainly about teaching them subjects and grading their reading and writing, unlike their parents' and peers' interactions, which lack that agenda and have covered transparently wider ground about "them" more generally for as long as they have been alive. While elementary-level students may be used to recognizing peer and parent commentary about the people they are and should be, the classroom's added "just teaching you here" veneer may cloak elementary-level students' awareness of the social messaging also being brought to bear in those interactions. This interpretation increases the importance of teachers being able to communicate instructional messages with elementary students' identity development in mind; being able to give students directive feedback in face-saving ways that increase students' likelihood to internalize and apply the substance of that guidance, for instance (Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008).

This study also underscores the literacy context as fruitful for exposing identity negotiations to study, even among elementary-aged children, whose identity insights here reflected the sorts of awareness existing research forecasted. According to McCarthey and Moje (2002), identity and literacy share important linkages in classrooms. Identities and literacies are constructed and practiced in ways that are unique to individuals. Additionally, literacy interactions influence how readers and writers come to understand themselves in specific ways (McCarthey, 2001). Findings here give researchers cogent means to conceive and study how larger societal/contextual forces such as language and national identity can intertwine with practical, day-to-day, moment-by-moment negotiations of students' (and teachers') identities, relationships, and learning via classroom communication.

**Implications for Instruction**

Learners' identities are constructed amidst interaction with other members of the learning community (Norton Peirce, 1995). For teachers, learning directly from students—especially at the elementary school level, as here—how these tacit communication processes operate in the literacy context can offer more intentional means to calibrate their instructional choices with identities in mind, especially in culturally diverse learning situations (i.e., in most
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situations). Applying existing scholarship to these findings can help teachers highlight and excise unhelpful (even when unintended) cultural, relational, and identity "noise" in their communication and pedagogy, enabling clearer instruction, more constructive identity negotiation and development, and better teaching-learning relationships, all of which benefit student engagement and performance.

Students in this study also differentiated among specific communication strategies they recognized, recalling more of their written than their oral feedback received. Educators have long known that the way in which a paper is marked for editing or grading purposes can have a profound effect on students; the infamous "red pen" can devastate a student's confidence and motivation. The presumed solution was to balance the marking of errors with the confirmation of work well done, but according to researchers such as Hyland and Hyland (2006), written feedback from teachers and peers often is of poor quality and overly concerned with marking errors, thus less effective. Still, it was clear that students in this study noted and internalized both oral and written feedback. Traditionally, there is an emphasis on oral communication ability in the classroom. However, due to language mismatches and prompted by inattention to oral feedback training, decades of feedback research privilege the efficacy of written feedback over the multi-channel capabilities of orally provided feedback (Shute, 2008). This study suggests that all types of feedback provision are consequential for students and thus are communication modes that should be mastered by feedback providers (Kerssen-Griep & Terry, 2016).

Finally, one interesting outcome of the interviews was to see the relationship between the teacher and families of the students through the students' eyes. In reportedly shaping a student's identity with regard to literacy, parents and families play a pivotal role. Teachers often privilege school culture as primary and sometimes regard parental, home, and community learning from a deficit perspective, valuing less the types of learning that occur outside of school environments (Barton, 1995; Heath, 1993; Purcell-Gates, 1993; Tomlinson, 1993). This study's student narratives often revealed that conversations with their parents were the means by which students came to know how their teacher perceived their literacy abilities. Findings affirm current practice in education that the teacher and school environment's strong relationship with the family and home environment is important in shaping student identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

It is important to note that, however identity is formed, when asked how they feel in the classroom during literacy learning, a vast majority of students ($n=91$) in this study stated that they felt "comfortable," "relaxed," "content," and "happy." Though not all
students were able to explain why they felt positively, findings in this study suggest that multi-layered identity negotiations—even when aligned imperfectly—are not necessarily lethal to students’ affective experience of literacy learning situations.

Conclusion

This study’s innovative conceptual rationale and student-centered findings are meant to benefit teacher training and instructional practice, as well as deepen research regarding how social contexts manifest in instructional communication and have identity, relational, and performative consequences for students. Future research might examine the actual tactics by which elementary-aged students negotiate their layered identities and manage the identity gaps they experience in doing so, for example, including how such negotiations might intertwine with students’ genders and racial identities in particular learning contexts and perhaps play a role in their later-grade achievements. Applied research could look to design professional development and training for teachers, peers, and parents around healthy identity negotiations for children’s school lives. Learning from students how those tacit processes operate in this context offers researchers conceptual insight to apply, and gives teachers, peers, and even parents additional means to calibrate their communication to address elementary students’ key identity concerns, especially relative to learning cultural-literacy subject matter in culturally diverse learning environments.

References


