

# Understanding Marginalized Students' Identities Work and Their Learning Experiences in English Language Arts Classrooms

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March 08, 2019

## Abstract

Students are affected by their social background, ethnic, geographic and cultural origin, languages spoken, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. Also affecting students are the more general social-political transformations (globalization, migration, changing labor markets, etc.) Whereas a lot of the social science literature in education has viewed these aspects of student *identity* and diversity as separate from each other, I aim to understand how these factors impact on student *identities*-work intersectionally, especially in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. In the referenced pilot study, I use Positioning Theory to analyze the discursive incidents around literacy learning in Texas. By analyzing students' interactions, I begin to gain an understanding of student agentic movements and the marginalizing forces that strengthen or diminish a student's response to learning.

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**Keywords** identities ··· English classrooms ··· Positioning Theory ··· marginalization

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Alan Riser is a research student pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Oxford. This research was self-funded and conducted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for candidacy as a doctoral research student.

“In a world whose absurdity appears to be so impenetrable, we simply must reach a greater degree of understanding among [wo]men, a greater sincerity.” – Albert Camus [redacted]

## 1. Introduction

In the hands of young people, each day, are electronic devices that can scour the internet for information and/or entertaining content. Immersed in educational environments daily, the likelihood of students thinking critically and questioning socratically should be inevitable. Unfortunately, capability and environment do not render these students any more prone to or capable of fact checking than the populace at large (Ufarte-Ruiz, Peralta-Garcia, & Murcia-Verdú, 2018). Moreover, the convoluted compilations students are returned as “search results” create a quagmire through which it is not easy to sieve. More frequently, our citizenry is falling prey to post-truth narratives: fake news, if you will. Antitheses like, “the world is flat”, “vaccinations cause Autism”, “the Illuminati controls everything”, “climate change isn’t real”, or “everyone is assigned an FBI agent to watch her/him through the most convenient camera lens” reign supreme in the minds of many impressionable youths (Gordon, 2018).

The digital information age was once heralded as the emancipatory moment that would deliver its populace from the manacles of ignorance—connecting communities both communicatively and culturally. However, “research suggests that using cell phones in the classroom impairs academic performance” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 360). Furthermore, Tatum, Olson, & Frey (2018) explain “that when instructors discourage cell phone use for non-instructional reasons, students feel their autonomy has been threatened” (p. 226) and are, therefore, likely to disengage from the lesson. More disheartening is the notion that most state-mandated curricula does little to teach students to navigate the social media fora from which they are gaining these easily digestible conspiracy theories (Ribble, 2015; Thomas, 2018). Thus, rather than uniting us, technology seems to be physically and philosophically dividing us.

Renee Hobbs (2017) recommends that teachers capitalize on this moment of diaphanous truth in our history and face it head on. Failing to teach students how to identify credible sources only emboldens the conspiracies (Hobbs, 2017). Columbia University’s Teachers College seemingly agrees, publishing Wayne Journell’s *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator’s Guide to Navigating the Media with Students* (March 2019). The problem, though, is multifaceted. Not only are students unpracticed in cracking the code of credibility (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008), but also they are increasingly incapable of focusing because of the influx of sensory stimulation (George, Russell, Piontak, & Odgers, 2018). Couple this with the fact that most teenagers are cognitive misers (Sia, 2011) and are highly susceptible to emotions-based arguments (Widerman, 2017) that align with their identities, and it is no wonder we find ourselves at the precipice of a maelstrom.

So what are we to do? Shakespeare reminds us via Iago in *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* that we must stay the course. Lamenting the wounds of the world, Iago asks “What wound did ever heal but by degrees?” (Shakespeare & Gill, 2007, 2.3.370) and explains later that “wit depends on dilatory time” (Shakespeare & Gill, 2007, 2.3.373). That is, as we face this deep wound of distrust in what was once known to be factual, we, as the protectors of knowledge—the academicians—must face the *untruths* and allow for the passage of time so that the real, cognitive work of distinguishing between truth and lie may take place within civil discourse. Lest we forget W.H. Auden’s “searing stanza” (Popova, 2017, p. 2) from his “September 1, 1939” (1940) poem, I include lines 78-88 herein as a paired reminder of the task we have ahead of us as researchers and educators:

All I have is a voice  
 To undo the folded lie,  
 The romantic lie in the brain  
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
 And the lie of Authority  
 Whose buildings grope the sky:  
 There is no such thing as the State  
 And no one exists alone;  
 Hunger allows no choice  
 To the citizen or the police;  
 We must love one another or die.

In order to reach this point of professing truth, we must understand our students, our own humanity (epistemologically and ontologically), and the motivations of our neighbors.

## 2. Terminology

In order to understand how my research captured such an understanding, I must define the terms I will use throughout the paper, first. Employing the plural form of *identities* as opposed to the singular form *identity* allows my research to diverge strategically from that, which sees ‘conceptual identity’ as a fixed, singular, or as an unchanging facet of the human condition. I initially defined identities as the intersectionality of background, culture, religion, gender, dominant language, socio-economic status, sexuality, and race, but eventually found it to be constraining. For this reason, my definition of identities also took on other aspects of personality like being empathic, supportive, resilient, brave, and so on. As Gee (2000) puts it, identity is formed through a person’s interaction with the natural world, with institutions, through discourse with others and can be re-negotiated often. Identity, in this construction, is achieved through interactional achievements/instances (Duranti, 1997) with others and results in being seen as a “kind of person” (Gee, 2000, p. 104) who is dynamic and changing based on the sociocultural forces at work. Drawing on Taylor’s (1994) work, Gee (2000) points out that no identity can exist without an interpretive system recognizing the expression of such an identity. That is, people can “actively construe the same identity [traits] in different ways, and they can negotiate and contest how their traits are to be seen (by themselves and others) in terms of” different perspectives (Gee, 2000, p. 108). Because of this ability to change and negotiate how the self perceives identities and others, I refer to identity in the plural (identities) to perpetuate further this multiplicitous engagement. ELA classrooms, in particular, offer an opportunity through culturally responsive pedagogy (texts and classroom discussion) to contribute to students’ identities formulation. Asking students to engage with thoughts on human nature engages thinking around the kinds of people they wish to become or wish to reject (Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, & Rijlaarsdam, 2019). Culture is embedded within the discursive practices that take place in ELA classrooms; therefore, they are more suited for identities work than mathematics or science classrooms. How different students are affected by such interaction is one of the findings with which I am concerned. Involving the students in the identification of their identity labels is of paramount importance because as Holland (1998) explains, “the imaginings of [the] self in worlds of action, as social products” establishes “agency in the figured world of academia” (p.7). To deny marginalized groups agentic movement would be to do harm; therefore, it is from this salient, non-unified “composite of many, often contradictory, self-understandings” (Holland, 1998, p.8) that I will observe discursive interactions between students and their teachers. Intersectionality is treated not as a universal framework related to identity, but instead allows me

to “shed light on the ways that some people within social groups receive benefit while others are disproportionately targeted and constrained by certain social-structural situations” (Wijeyeshinghe and Jones, p. 16, 2014). I adopt one of the core tenets of intersectionality which says that in an effort to promote social justice, one’s social location and one’s complicated, multiple identities must expose and unveil the positions of power around us all (Kendall & Wijeyeshinghe, 2017). Positioning Theory, as explained below, is an appropriate theoretic framework to work from because it also deals in fluid discursive interactions. In much of the Positioning Theory literature, researchers fail to account for students’ own thinking about their identities and their formation. As student voice is often uncaptured in research, it has become an important facet of my own work to include such a facet. To do so, I have had to examine the discourse, both verbal and non-verbal, that students engage in while in the classroom setting. Encapsulating the turn taking of spoken words, the nonverbal gestures, pauses, and the rest of the dialogic process has led me to claim the term *discursive events* as integral to the employment of my examining students’ interactions around identities formulation. Because consistent choices are being made based on these situational interactions, I use the term *agentive movement/exchanges* to refer to moments in which students actively exerted choice (however constrained by the consequences available their choice may have been).

### **3. Positioning Theory: a theoretical framework**

To understand those around us, I employ the use of Positioning Theory in my own research. Composed of a blending of sociological principles and psychological dictum, this theory has been used in education and applied linguistics research for the past two decades; it was the basis of a new social psychology at its inception. In describing people from a social reality perspective, “people are viewed as the location for social acts, and the social realm is viewed [through] three processes: conversation, institutional practices, and the uses of societal rhetorics” (Howie & Peters, 1996, p. 2). From a larger perspective, this idea attempts to bring rational ordering and understanding to human engagement through discourse, which links nicely to the positions that are taken in such discourse. That is, positioning takes place everywhere and every time people interact with others (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). It is precisely the engagement and interaction of the individuals through speech acts, defined as actions that are determined by the speakers in their turn taking of conversation, and who are involved in such discourse that positioning seeks to parse and categorize. It may be helpful, for the moment, to think of positioning as unspoken labelling that takes place usually subconsciously, but sometimes consciously, during discursive interaction with either oneself or someone else. Individuals can and do position both themselves and others; positioning is in the moment, is variable, and can either challenge or confirm positioning done by others. To understand best the facets of this theory that follow, I seek first to provide a listing of terms, which will be used interchangeably throughout this review of research. “Power” and “hegemony” will be used in a transactional manner to explain the actively sought-after or active power position in discourse. Opposing these terms will be the “passive position” or the position that is “acted upon”. This dynamic of discourse can be seen in relationships like doctor (power)/patient (passive), teacher (power)/student (passive), manager (hegemonic)/employee (acted upon), and so on.

### **4. Rationale for the Use of Positioning Theory**

Though it is helpful to elucidate the power dynamics in discourse, there is much more to be gained in using Positioning Theory as an analytical tool. For example, “if we understand how we construct social reality, we can construct [our language and thoughts] more consciously to sustain [or change] norms that promote the ends we profess to desire” (Slocum-Bradley, 2010, p.

81). These norms work within some form of cultural context, which can be influenced by each participant's identities. Harré points to Bakhtin when discussing that "culture is immanent within [an] utterance" (Howie & Peters, 1996, p. 3). Agreeing that communication and other discursive practices shape our identities as individuals, Positioning Theory explains that not everyone has the same access and opportunity to shift their positions of authority when they engage in a discursive practice (Harré, 2012). Thus, the gathering or clustering "of short-term disputable rights, obligations and duties" in a communicative strand "is called a 'position'" (Harré, 2012, p. 193). How people manage their status from within their position is of interest to me because it will shed light on the agentic moves students and teachers feel able to make in a classroom and because it is missing from the research. For this reason, part of my study (explained further in the Methods section) analyzed the student-teacher interactions that take place during a lesson. While there are many pathways that allow researchers and teachers to utilize the theory of "positioning [through] the conversation analytic approach" (Day & Kjaerbeck, 2013, p. 16) while entrenched in their day-to-day "workplace agency" (Chandler & Redman, 2013, p. 59), it is Harré and van Langenhove's postulation that "positioning does not solely involve the discursive production of 'selves' as individuals, but also 'selves' as members, representatives and mediators of groups" (1999, p. 178) that I find helpful as I applied the theory to my thinking on classroom interactions. Conceiving Positioning Theory as a social process allows me to combine a linguistic and anthropologic approach (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Rather than focusing on the macro-levels of engagement, analysing the micro-levels of discursive interaction has the power to shape classroom outcomes in the years to come (Bieler, 2018). Because the theory draws from other schools of thought that treat identity as fixed and less fluid than I treated them in my study, I subsequently deviated from that stance to see one's positioning as fluid and unfixed, avoiding a pitfall that other researchers fall prey to in their analysis of discursive interactions. The methodological implication, then, is that in data analysis, I attempted to reflect that positioning is ever changing and did not make a final judgment based on a singular moment of positioning. Because positioning can be intentional (conscious) or unintentional (subconscious), it seems reasonable and necessary to cite that posturing and positioning are different schemes. Posturing, in regard to linguistics, is to intentionally or "actively adopt a stance through language which maintains a position of power" (Billings, 2009, p. 588) while positioning is "the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations [(oftentimes unintentionally)] as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 37). The fluidity of positions allows people to navigate whatever setting they find themselves in so long as their moral attitudes and personality characteristics fit neatly into the storylines that are being accessed (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Using Positioning Theory will enable me to do two important things: first, it will assist me in identifying what factors influence student identities work in classroom learning experiences; second, it will allow me to circumvent the perpetuation of the White supremacy ideology that a lot of cultural diversity research falls prey to (Fylkesnes, 2018). Additionally, I will be able to pick apart what components exist as marginalizing constraints/barriers in the classroom. By using ELA classrooms, I had access to critical classroom conversations and reflective writings over learned skills that served as the perfect environment for me to broach the workings of identities, positioning, and culture of marginalized students. Now that I have explained the relevant facets of Positioning Theory for use in researching discursive events, I will now exemplify how it has been used in Social Science research before narrowing the scope of application to educational research.

### **5. Former Applications of Positioning Theory in Educational Research**

Positioning Theory has been used as a framework for analysing various discursive practices in a broad range of disciplines. The medical field, for example, has seen its use when understanding how women make decisions based on their positions with their doctors and other medical advisors (Genuis, 2013) and how doctors' positioning of their patients' advocacy ability changes depending on race/ethnicity (Richards, 2003). In politics, Positioning Theory has been used to understand candidates' platforms (Wise & James, 2013) and their likelihood of success at the polls among their populace. Social work has seen Positioning Theory change the manners of engagement to be more sensitive of agency with clients (Cedersund, 2013). Even therapeutic counseling techniques have grown to better address when clients can shift their thinking on a given topic because of Positioning Theory (Gremillion, Cheshire, & Lewis, 2012). Positioning Theory's applicability as a structured way of understanding relationships between people through discourse has also recently permeated the field of educational research. Whether successfully arguing that girls' play is just as, if not more complex, than boys' play through schoolyard hopscotch games (Goodwin, 1995) or staking the claim that parents and educational institutions have immense power in creating moral orders for children (van Langenhove, 2017), educational researchers have applied Positioning Theory to illuminate previously unknown discourse structures which influence and shape people's thoughts, identities, and interactions.

### **6. Marginalization in the Literature**

Just as the social circumstances in the U.S. at this point in history position people who are other than White, middle class, male, heterosexual, Christian, native English-speaking, able-bodied/minded as marginalized, so too does educational research support that these *other* students struggle in the educational system. Children of color have the highest dropout rate, and tend to be overrepresented in special education but underrepresented in advanced placement and gifted programs (Cummins, 2001; Pizarro, 2005; El-Amin et al., 2017). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds make up the majority of remedial enrollment throughout secondary schools (Oakes, 1995; Farkas, 2003; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Language-minority students perform poorly in traditional academic settings because of the switch between their home language and the English in schools (Lipman, 1998; Cummins, 2001; McNeil, 2005). Though technically not a part of the educational environment because of the separation of Church and State, students' religion and spirituality—when not Christian—continues to be a source of peer-group struggles and feelings of isolation, leading to lower attainment (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, et al. (LGBTQIA+) students who experience bias against their sexuality have lower attendance rates, lower grade point averages, and a lower sense of school connectedness (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Mayo, 2014). Depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts are also high for this group of students (Williams et al., 2005). Gender and learning research wavers back and forth between arguing that girls perform better than boys in school (Hindal et al., 2013; Moller et al., 2013; Verniers & Martinot, 2015; Aziz et al., 2018) but most support that one group is more marginalized than the other. From the policy and legislative mandates known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, it is evident in both lasting government policy effects and empirical research that students who require special education services because of cognitive and physical differences continue to be underserved (Artiles et al., 2010; Derby, 2013). For these marginalized students, exclusion from school (expulsion or alternative learning environment placement) rates are much higher than their non-marginalized peers (Skiba, et al., 2002). The research above analyzes different aspects

of identity in isolation. For example, the work will represent a gender analysis, but not an analysis that accounts for participants' gender-sexuality-ethnic origin and so on. Failing to do so misses the nuances and intersectional working of identities formulation. Therefore, instances of resiliency may be overlooked, or the identification of individuals as victims rather than agents of change can skew findings.

## **7. Methods**

Rejecting these entrapments in my own pilot study, I conducted research in upper-secondary (senior classrooms) at a high school in Texas; I aimed to understand the impact that students' identities have on their learning. Additionally, I aimed to understand the impact that students' learning has on their identities formation. Specifically, I first designed a weeklong classroom unit of lessons to frame students' thinking around character (i.e. character identities) development, ensuring I would have multiple modes of interaction. After the normal classroom teachers' delivery of the lesson, I conducted in-person observations of two separate teachers' classrooms over three class periods. Then, I collected surveys and evaluated students' written tasks on scaled rubrics to code qualitative patterns that emerged. In total, 48 students participated in or informed overall the pilot research project. Using Positioning Theory, I returned to students' discursive events that I had recorded during my observations in an attempt to understand positionings of agentic movement exerted by students in their peer interactions and in teachers' positioning of students' attempts at agentic exchanges in teacher-to-student discursive events. Furthermore, I purposefully focused on ways in which students each described themselves (i.e. their identities) in either writing or in their spoken discourse. Toward the end of the study, I distributed a self-assessment psychological tool (survey) known as an empathy quotient to gauge how empathic these 17-18 year old students were. Intermittently throughout the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with selected students and both teachers.

## **8. Limitations**

While students in the study were of a wide variety (multiple ethnicities, multiple dominant languages, multiple cognitive levels, multiple supportive services being received), they were all students autonomously enrolled in an Advanced Placement classroom. Both teachers were female and had taught for 15 years: one identifying herself as of mixed-race and one identifying herself as of Hispanic origin. Because of the complexity and nuance of each of the components that make up a person's identities, a major limitation of this research is in avoiding pigeonholed classifications that remain static and recognizing that the sinuous nature of this work means that students are ever changing. As I have made a strong case for the use of both Positioning Theory and discourse analysis in my own study, it is necessary at this point to acknowledge the disadvantages to using this analytical lens and theory. "First, as researchers, we are never completely certain of the purpose and intention behind the speaker's words" (Gee, 2001, p. 108). Second, and for this reason, it is important to look closely at the words that are transcribed in a discourse encounter and to limit the number of "leaps" one might take. "Because we bring assumptions to the analysis, there is also increasing possibility for misrepresentations" (Vetter et al., 2013, p. 241), so we must also identify our own positionality as researchers. Failing to do so could severely harm one's validity. Third, much of the discourse analysis takes place in small-scale conversant interaction; therefore, data cannot always be considered generalizable, but may instead construct "a case study to provide snapshots for discussion about" a plethora of topics relating to the field (Vetter et al., 2013, p. 241). Tannen (1990) wrote that "while some actions may be immediately determinate," locating people in conversational positions, there are "other acts which are questionable ([leaving us to wonder] what did the person mean by that?) and may

even be radically indeterminate” (p. 64). We are bound by the inability to know the actual thoughts that take place at any given point in time for any person other than ourselves. For my study, this meant that I had to treat positions that are taken up or projected to be fluid and reciprocal; additionally, it meant that I also expected my participants to explain their thinking in a reflexive manner.

### **9. Findings**

I gleaned an awareness that despite coming from similar religions and genders or socio-economic statuses and sexualities or other combinations altogether that, in fact, most students’ identities made their learning styles and emotional quotients dissimilar. Antithetically, in isolating individual aspects of different identities, I was able to see moments in which certain *kinds* of students were underperforming; for example, five of the six students who identified themselves as not heterosexual failed to complete the assigned literacy task at a proficient level. Yet, in interviewing these individuals, there were factors relating to identity markers other than sexuality that emerged in our conversations that they saw as having been a barrier to the literacy task. Further to this finding, and more importantly, I was able to deduce that this multi-modal approach to capturing student voice led me toward more authentic forms of analysis when I focused on an individual experience rather than generalizable data attained by broad groupings. Essentially, I am able to support the claim that teachers must know their students’ identities and build appropriate relationships with them if they are going to engage them in the literacy learning process successfully (Cornelius-White, 2010).

One overarching component that emerged repeatedly for all students was the necessity to have autonomy in decision-making. My research corroborated similar research that explains that the more overt agentic movements that a student is capable of making, the more likely they are to engage in class. In addition, when asked about conspiracy theories, all but one of my participants named a YouTube influencer by the name of Shane Dawson as someone whom they had all seen. Fascinatingly, when prompted to explain their thinking on conspiracies they had seen, with the exception of two, all of them described the videos as “easy” to view and “fun” to think through. Moreover, it was the autonomy they felt in being able to choose whether to believe that the earth is flat in the face of the authoritative science around them that was most illuminating for me. What’s more, my research also found that teachers are often unaware of the positioning they are doing through natural, discursive interactions in the classroom—especially when they are re-positioning themselves as the authority figure in the classroom. Calling their attention to such positioning, either in stimulated recall of events or in-the-moment explanations are necessary if we are to understand the nuanced complexities of dialogue in the classroom and in the socio-political-civil sphere.

Lastly, though not comprehensively, I found that many students (21) who possessed more discursive instances that remained unchallenged by their teacher self-identified as “good at English” even if their scored assignments reflected the opposite. It is worth mentioning that the inverse (students who were challenged by their teacher did not self-identify as “bad at English”) was unsupported by my data. Relationally, students (9) whose positions of ‘correct’ knowledge were unchallenged by their peers scored as less empathic than those whose positions of ‘correct’ knowledge were challenged at least five times or more within the weeklong unit of study.

### **10. Positionality**

My positionality as an educator who is oriented toward social justice will make my research challenging to bear if it highlights that my colleagues are not as equally concerned with providing fair and equitable access to education for all students. My political viewpoint and

perspective on life—my identities—will play a major role in my interactions with the students, teachers, and other stakeholders whom I encounter as I conduct this research. My experience in school as a gay, low-socioeconomic, bilingual student was very different from the experience of other low-socioeconomic students, just as it was different from other bilingual students and other gay students. There were many times where I felt that my teachers failed to meet my needs as a student because of these identity factors, but there were just as many moments, if not more, wherein my teachers far exceeded my needs as a student because they recognized or valued my identities. As a teacher, I often wondered whether there were students I was failing to meet because of their differences from me in identities; certainly, I hope there were those I reached too because I valued who they were. For these reasons, this work is both salient and deeply personal. I hope that by being aware of my biases I have avoided them wherever possible. Finally, power relations (interviewer/interviewee) underpin many interviews, unless steps are taken to try to disrupt these power relations: for example, taking a more conversational approach (Chen, 2011). My identity (as a known teacher who could be seen as an authority figure) could have affected the interview dynamic. Thus, I took a more conversational approach in my interviews to allow the most open conversations to take place.

### **11. Conclusion**

The United States of America, at the moment, is filled with contention. From the #MeToo movement to the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, across the country, people are speaking out and they are saying we are tired of the marginalization and the oppression. Martín Espada, the poet, said, “I am a poet of advocacy, a poet who speaks for those who haven’t had an opportunity to speak for themselves.” Through my work, I hope to echo this sentiment by shedding light on how the intersectional identities of students are constituted and how they impact on students’ learning both positively and negatively. Leaving identity politics where they lie in the public sphere allowed me to capture the multifaceted experience of learners in their environment.

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