Writing Identities: The Identity Construction of a First Grade Girl Writer

Cadence (pseudonym), a tangle-hair brunette girl with deep green eyes, developed an identity as a writer during first grade. As she became more conscious of this identity, she began to articulate it through writing. In early second grade she wrote the following two pieces about writing and what kind of writer she is:

**Figure 1** I like to write a lot. Do you? You probably don’t like it but I do.

--- Cadence, Fall second grade

**Figure 2** I’m the kind of writer who writes non-fiction and fiction. I like to write that non-fiction. I can write almost six pages. It is fun to write a lot. I write on the slide, on the swings. I write on the porch and on the porch I write with my grandmother and grandpa and me and my sisters. But most of all I like to write with my mom and my dad. But I mostly write with my mom. I like writing with my mom. She is nice when she writes with me. I like it when she writes with me.

--- Cadence, Fall second grade

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Cadence assumes that most people "probably don't" like to write, but she makes it clear that she does. In the second piece Cadence gives the reader a sense of not only how often she writes, particularly out of school, but with whom she writes and how she feels about writing with family members. Lucy Calkins (1994) describes this level of literacy link between home and school as much lower critical than the typical linkages for homeschooling contexts (such as teacher-directed communication or homework). She writes, "When I read and write with the people I love, I experience for myself the power of bringing literacy home. I am becoming involved with the sign influence when they are set into the relationships of my life" (p. 504). Cadence, too, has experienced the power of bringing literacy home. This power is rooted in her writer identity. She doesn't only write at school, but she lives like a writer in all aspects of her life.

Thus far you may have an idea of what Cadence looks like, acts like, and even talks like in the classroom. Are you visualizing a young girl living in poverty, who could be considered the most resistant student in the classroom, and has an "attitude" according to authority figures in her school? Cadence has taken on this identity of a girl with an attitude; she even connected herself to the kindergarten character Junie B. Jones (Fink, 1992) during Reading Workshop when she announced, "I like the way she has an attitude because I have an attitude like that too."

Each autumn, teachers gaze out into their classrooms and recognize at least one Cadence. Eyebrows furrow, hands steeple, tongue-clicking, and outbursts like "I ain't done that!" come together to form perceptions of a resistant student who is a challenge to motivate and draw into the excitement of learning to write. This paper is about Cadence, that resistant child in the classroom who seems, at first, to be unable to be convinced to enjoy and engage with literacy.

Questions of Identity: The Possibilities for Writing Workshop

How does a young girl of seven years come to identify herself as a writer? What classroom practices scaffold this identity development? How does academic identity development occur for children living in poverty? I will explore these questions as I analyze Cadence's engagement with—and resistance to—a writing identity during the first several months of first grade.

Cadence attends a high poverty, urban school situated in a predominantly poor, white neighborhood. Within its walls are many students who may feel their lives in the real world are not recognized and valued by those who work for the school. In this article, I develop the argument that Writing Workshop can be used to invite the real lives of working-class and poor students into the classroom in a way that constructs productive writing identities. Productive identities can scaffold a student's literacy development and achievement, unlike an identity of a girl with an attitude. Through Writing Workshop is largely heralded as a philosophy and practice that merges home experiences with academic development (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994), it has been critiqued for silencing classroom voices that do not represent experiences similar to teachers and/or peers (Lemov, 1994; Schneider, 2001; White, 2001).

As a teacher/researcher in Cadence's fifth-grade classroom, I set out to learn about how to support the creation of hybrid identities, to allow young girls to hold onto the identities created within their particular class, race, and gender (female, white, and poor) while taking up identities more aligned with academic achievement (such as a writer). I have attempted to create spaces that could be considered the "Third Space" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) where these hybrid formations are possible by inviting students to write about their lives outside of school while running with academic practices inside of school.

Cadence, because of her unique identity as an attitude girl, is the main subject of this article. Cadence's narrative offers us a glimpse into her life outside of school and help us to understand her as a whole person. Inviting, even soliciting, personal narrative can bring lives of working-class and poor students into the classroom, a place where many students don't feel their lives are welcome or valued (Bernstein, 1971; Fish, 1999; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jones, in press). Teachers' sensitive readings and understandings of students' lives can help shape a classroom pedagogy that will promote academic success, while encouraging children to hold tight to their community and family identity. This is the formation of hybrid identities for which I strive.

The Study

This ongoing ethnographic study examined how particular classroom practices may encourage young girls in high-poverty, urban settings to construct themselves as writers. Ms. Lockhart (pseudonym), a gracious fifth-grade teacher, opened her classroom to me as a researcher and a teacher-scholar two days each week, beginning on the first day of school. Ms. Lockhart was interested in implementing a Writer's Workshop with young children, and I wanted to work closely...
with a group of students over a long period of time. Our mutual desire led to a collaborative effort over the school year.

In collecting data, I wrote observational and reflective field notes, audio-taped and transcribed interviews with the students and Ms. Lockhart, collected and copied all of the students' writing during Writer's Workshop, recorded lesson plans and literature used, and audio-taped children's discussions during Writer's Workshop. These dense data sets were analyzed for emerging themes and coded for specific themes, particularly those that direct or indirectly related to the formation of identities (to include engagement with writing practices, resistance to writing practices in school, statement of identifying oneself as "I am a writer" or "I am not a writer," and enthusiasm or lack thereof during particular writing sessions). This article focuses specifically on the first, perhaps most critical months of a young writer's identity in the first grade.

**One Young Girl Writer**

**The First Day of Writing for Cadence**

On the second day of first grade, room 10 was warm even with a fan blowing. A small stream of air traveled across our faces as we sat on a blue, carpeted rug in the front of the room. Ms. Lockhart was calm, comfortable, and candid with the children, already building rapport. Cadence arrived late, escorted by two older sisters, following breakfast in the cafeteria. Cadence refused to enter the classroom. Her sisters pushed and pulled trying to get her in, but Cadence anchored her feet to the ground and stiffened her legs. We all watched. Ms. Lockhart said calmly, "Just leave her, she'll be okay." But when her sisters left for their own classrooms, Cadence took off down the hallway. Ms. Lockhart closed after her.

Eventually Cadence came into the classroom, but did not join us on the carpet.

Instead, she hurried to her seat and put her head down on the table. After Ms. Lockhart told her she would have to miss recess unless she joined us, Cadence reluctantly slumped her way to the meeting area. Throughout the day she exhibited various resistant behaviors, such as not joining the other students when they came to the carpet, talking while others were talking, etc. Eventually this landed her name on the board as being "warned"; a next step would mean time spent inside for recess.

Later that same morning, Ms. Lockhart read aloud Lucky Guy To School (Herman, 2003) and encouraged the students to go to their seats and draw a picture about the story. I thought I would take this drawing opportunity to push students to do some writing of their own. When Cadence told me about her drawing, three dogs in a swimming pool with different colors, I asked, "Where are you going to write that?"

She looked at me incredulously, "I can't write. You write it."

This type of response is typical of first graders. I'm used to it and am prepared to encourage them by saying, "Of course you can, and I'll sit right here and watch while you get started."

I stared at the paper with Cadence's picture on it, and she finally began to write some letters. I left to talk with another student, and when I returned Cadence read her piece to me: "My dogs. My three dogs." She was smiling, excited, and couldn't believe she had written on her own.

"Did you know you could write?" I asked.

"No!" she replied with glowing confidence (see Figure 3).

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**Figure 3** My dogs. My three dogs.

--Cadence, 8/28

Following lunch I was scheduled to officially begin creating a writing workshop environment that would be enriched each day throughout the year. Focusing on lived experiences as st
of entry into the academic world of writing. I read aloud When I Was Young In The Mountains by Cynthia Bjork (1993). Following the reading we gathered in a circle and recounted memories of our past. As the students shared very different memories, each chose a type of paper (lined or unlined) on which to write a memoir. When Cadence was ready, she narrated her memory, "My baby brother died when he came out of my mom." She wrote about the birth of her brother and her family's reaction, capturing the emotions and experiences of that time. She then added additional details to her writing after she read it to me (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 My baby brother died when he came out of my mom. Sad. (drawing of mother, three sisters, and a small baby between them)

-Cadence, 8/28

Little did I know that this first day of writing for Cadence was the beginning of significant patterns of behavior. Over time, her over resistance to whole group activities contrasted with intense engagement with writing, particularly around themes of family and pets. These patterns reveal some important particulars about Cadence's development of a writer identity and the beginnings of the hybrid nature of her engagement with academic practices in school.

Cadence Engaged as a Writer: The Seeds of an Identity

Each day Cadence continued to resist whole group activities (meeting on the carpet, morning calendar work, attending to read alouds, assigned seatwork) as she slouched around the room, spontaneously stood up to sit in a chair, grabbed on her thumb, and crawled around on the floor. She also attempted, sometimes with great success, to lure other students into positions of resistance by poking them in the ribs, pulling their hair, or getting them to say some trickly phrases she had learned outside of school (e.g., "Hold your tongue and say, 'I was born on a pirate ship'"). Cadence was quickly becoming a "bad girl." As Ms. Lockhart said one day, "We've never lumpy-headed," and they did on a regular basis. This "badness," acted out in ways that resisted school practices, often led to punishment in the classroom. Cadence found her name on the board almost every day and even began to expect and revel in the attention. Most of the students in the classroom were simply wary of having their names placed on the board, but Cadence wasn't phased by this and nearly always spent recess inside as a result. During writing workshop, however, Cadence exhibited very different behaviors.

On September 20th, a full month into the rituals of Writer's Workshop, Cadence wrote a story about her dad going to jail and she and her family going to visit him. She reported, "His hair was all stickin' up like he was fightin' run" and added this on to her story after I pointed out how writers often use details like this to help a reader visualize the story.

Cadence was making impressive progress within writing conventions, such as sustaining a topic, spelling development, writing complete ideas, and symbolically representing each verbalized word. Much of this progress can be linked to Cadence's motivation to write frequently and with increasing vigor. This motivation and vigor were rooted in the fact that Cadence was writing about things that were important to her. She loved to read her writing to her peers, Ms. Lockhart, and me. She was completely focused when she was writing and did not exhibit the ADHD (Attention Deficit Disorder) characteristics that Ms. Lockhart was concerned about. Cadence was
Jordan was an outgoing, confident, assertive young girl (very much like Cadence) who used sarcasm to build relationships. For several weeks Jordan verbally resisted Writer's Workshop. Following my read aloud, discussion, and question, Jordan would purr, "I don't wanna write!" while looking at me with sparkling eyes that radiated communication of her insincerity. I interpreted Jordan's sarcasm, easy, saucy, protest as attempts to connect with me personally and began to respond in a similar way to her. As she objected to writing, she would often stand up, put her hand on her hip, and sway her head back and forth. In response, I put my hand on my hip, swayed my head back and forth, and said, "Jordan, you know that's not true. You always say that and then you go write, write, write like crazy. You're a writer!" Jordan looked at me and pushed her bottom lip out before a huge grin broke out across her face. Then she would be off writing.

Cadence had a different reading of Jordan's resistance, however, and for awhile I was convinced that Cadence's attempts to build a relationship with Jordan would be detrimental for her identity as a writer. Cadence took Jordan's protests seriously and began to join her. "Yeah, I don't wanna write either," or "I don't like writing" became common comments from Cadence every day. Whereas Jordan would write after voicing her disapproval, Cadence would disengage, walk around the room, chat with her peers, or just sit in a chair sucking her thumb. Each day I attempted to highlight Jordan's productive activity during Writer's Workshop, hoping to demonstrate to Cadence that Jordan's comments during whole group were meant as jokes. Finally, Cadence decided for herself what was important. On October 4th, a day when our Writer's Workshop time was postponed to recognize our classroom library, Jordan's sarcastic cheer visibly upset Cadence.

Cadence turned quickly and yelled, "No! I want writing workshop!"

Confronting Jordan was a turning point for Cadence and her identity development. Somewhere within three weeks of submitting to Jordan's resistance to writing, Cadence determined that she didn't have to choose either Jordan's friendship or writing (a specific academic practice), but that she could have both. This way well have been the beginning of Cadence's ability to form hybrid relations in the future. The ability to negotiate identities in this way would be crucial for Cadence as she engaged with academic practices that may not be typical among her friends, family, and community members.
A Relationship Built Around Engagement: Asserting an Identity

Cadence's declaration of her developing identity as a writer, "No! I want writing workshop!" began to filter into other academic areas as well, as if writing was her site of entry into successful school practices. In my reflective fieldnotes on October 9th I wrote:

Cadence continues to amaze me with her progress, not only academically, but her engagement in the practices of the classroom. She seems to be taking on a more positive identity as a whole, almost always fully engaged in the independent academic activities...however, she is often still on the fringe of whole group meetings (though not resistant). As I arrived to school Tuesday morning Cadence saw me in the cafeteria and rushed over to me. She told me about writing two full pages about "my house" and she wanted to read it to me. As soon as we walked into the classroom Cadence grabbed her writing folder and showed me her piece... A piece about her home. She claimed to have used "beautiful language"—which had been a focus in our minilessons—as she had used color words along with "sparkles" as a verb (see Figure 6). She smiled and was clearly impressed with herself as a writer. Cadence began the year as a reluctant writer, with little or no confidence in herself, and I see her growing tremendously. Her successes in writing have built up her confidence as a student overall, and this confidence spills into her reading and other academic areas as well.

Figure 6 My wall is purple like a sparkle in the sky and my house is blue like a star in the sky.

-Cadence, 10/8

This scenario is particularly interesting because Cadence was excited to share her writing with me specifically. Cadence had come to understand my value around writing, and she knew that I privileged the position of readers. I had often talked of how I admire writers and the ways they lead their lives, paid attention to the details, and shared those details with others. Cadence and I had begun to build a relationship around writing practices. Mike Rose, quoted by Hicks (2002), discusses his experiences teaching poor and working-class children:

Teaching, I was coming to understand, was a kind of romance. You didn't just work with words or chronicle of dates or facts about the suspension of parents in milk.
You wove kids with these things, instead a relationship of sorts, the terms of connection being the narrative... My first enthusiasm about writing came because I wanted a teacher to like me (p. 143).

Cadence enjoyed my enthusiastic responses to her writing, my ooohs and ohhs and genuine questions about her choices of words and sequencing of her pieces. In Mike Rose's words, I was trying to "woo" Cadence with the power of language, inviting her to join me in a relationship around writing. The terms of our connection, too, were the narrative. Cadence knew that one note to the teacher "kidding" her (to use Mike Rose's word) was through writing.

Later in October Cadence was completely focused during Writer's Workshop and anxious to share her pieces with me. Even when troubles left her missing recess as a punishment, she viewed it as an opportunity to write. She walked straight into the classroom, asked for a piece of paper, and wrote throughout recess, carefully placing the writing in her folder when she finished. I was beginning to recognize that writing offered Cadence a sense of reprieve, comfort even, and a consistency within her life at school on which she could always depend.

When Cadence wrote she was still, calm, focused. At other times, particularly whole group times, she was active, uncomfortable, a bit on the fringe of the circle or whole group, and not entirely included. A blank piece of paper may have offered Cadence a space to create and compose herself, her life, her desires. She almost always wrote about her family, though had recently begun writing about her "home" (likely prompted by the excerpts I had been reading during minilessons) (see Figures 7 and 8).
Figure 7 My roof is blue like sparkles in the sky. And I have a dog and a kitten. My mom is glad we got a kitten and a dog.

- Cadence, 10/9

Figure 8 My windows are purple like it sparkles on me. I locked out my windows. I saw stars.

- Cadence, 10/9

Cadence’s Identity as a Writer

Over time, Cadence continued to take on a stronger identity as a writer. Writing offered her a position of power, deep thought, and control. She peacefully pursued her personal work even when chaos was all around her in the classroom. In late November I observed Cadence demonstrating complete confidence in her generative power within writing spaces—a confidence that wasn’t so clear during her reading of other people’s words (and books). She almost never appeared for help in writing, and she did so only when it seemed extremely important to her story.

Cadence depended on the time spent in Writer’s Workshop every day. One day, as we began reading workshop she expressed the concern that we wouldn’t have Writer’s Workshop. “We didn’t have it yesterday,” I sympathized with her (and others in the classroom who expressed the same feelings) and assured them that we would have plenty of time for Writer’s Workshop.

The substitute (in Ms. Lockhart’s position the previous day and also present during the conversation) seemed confused and explained that they did write on the previous day, but I looked at the class and asked, “It’s just not the same as Writer’s Workshop, is it?”

“Nooooo…” They answered in unison.

I help my mom

I put the kids up

We had mad my mom happy.

I made bed, picked up

They wrote the day before, but they didn’t write their own words. The dictation and prompts to which the students wrote the day before were far removed from their daily experiences and expectations of writing and developing an identity as a writer. Calkins (1994) warns that such writing “instruction”
loads students to perceive their own life experiences as not valuable or worthwhile enough to commit to paper. Instead of writing from discussion or a teacher’s prompt, Cadence was clearly in need of writing her own words, putting her world on paper and using her experiences to scaffold her development as a blossoming writer (see Figure 9).

Valuing Lives and Constructing Identities: New Understandings of Writing Workshop

Cadence’s comments about writing in the beginning of her second-grade year, read as opening remarks for this paper, are evidence that she has continued the journey of constructing hybrid identities. Through her work, she realizes that many people in her life may not write (“You probably don’t”). She has taken steps toward an identity of a writer (“But I do”) while maintaining close relational and emotional ties with her family and friends. The first three months of first grade were critical for Cadence’s identity development. She had taken on a positive identity as a writer who noticed details in her life and explored her experiences, details, and fears through the act of writing (see Figures 10 and 11).

![Figure 10](image)

**Figure 10**: I am thankful for my whole family. They take care of me when I am sick. They leave me at home. I was scared. Finally they arrived through the door. I was glad they were home. Mom, I was scared when you were gone and I was scared.

 Cadence, 11/20

We shouldn’t expect this newly formed identity to remain static over time, however. Cadence may again resist the practices of a writer for various reasons, or she may find herself in a classroom setting that does not continue to promote hybrid identities that build on lived realities in ways that advance her academic achievement. Cadence had just begun to integrate her home and community identity with academic practices in school. She used this identity to create narrative that resonated meaning and significance to her life as she began to take on a new, unfamiliar identity as a writer. Cadence, in fact, is a writer. She writes from her lived experiences, from her soul; she reveals herself in her writing as she laps her life on the line.

![Figure 11](image)

**Figure 11**: I like flowers. I pick one for you mom. I give it to my mom. She waters them. When she comes outside to water the flowers they were old. They were brown and drooping.

 Cadence, 11/27

A number of Cadence’s pieces (and many not included in this text) echo the “disfunction” that could have been read in bell hooks’s memoir, *Becoming Black* (1996). But these stories are rewrites of Cadence’s life, the life that comes together around her and sustains her. As bell hooks (1996) eloquently puts it: “The binary lens is the way in which all comes together opposing and revealing the inner life of a girl inventing herself” (p. 46). The life of Cadence—replete with pain, loss, love, desire, dreams, and fears—is one that I (and her teachers) need to read, understand, and value as, arguably, the single most important aspect of Cadence and her identity formation.

Our sense of readings and understandings of Cadence’s life can help us shape a classroom pedagogy that will promote success in academic, while encouraging her to hold on to her community and family identities. If we don’t do this, we risk placing Cadence in a position where she feels she must choose between two disparate identities: one of a working-class/student girl and one of an academic success.
Living in a community where the dropout rate hovers around 65%, it is obvious that most students are choosing home and community identities over those prescribed in school. It doesn't have to be an either/or choice, however.Cadence's life can enrich her academic experiences, and vice versa, as demonstrated through her writing development in this paper. At this point in Cadence's school career, writing (within a responsive Writer's Workshop) has opened up a space where she can explore her lived experiences and construct a more hybrid academic identity of a writer while gaining the invaluable skills of a powerful literacy.

Children living in poverty often face different material, social, and psychological lives than their teachers, who are predominately middle class. Placing "identity" in the forefront of educational goals for classroom instruction promotes two conscious actions:

1. Locating and understanding each child's home and community identities—the identities to be used as building blocks for academic success.

2. Purposefully and sensitively encouraging hybrid identities that do not force a child to choose between home and school but instead use each to understand the other in deeper ways.

Even the most resistant first graders can begin constructing a writing identity through active exploration of their own lives. A responsive Writer's Workshop that values all children's lives can be the space where this transformation occurs. This process may be the seed-like beginnings of creating productive, hybrid identities that can break down the longstanding home-school barriers so notorious in urban, high-poverty neighborhoods. Cadence the writer has certainly confronted these traditional splits between home and school literacy. As she put it: "It is fun to write a lot. I write on the slide, on the swings. I write on the porch..." and such should be our educational goal: constructing identities that are carried far beyond the classroom and school.

References


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