CHAPTER THREE

# Identity

*At the same time that the children were using the stories to proclaim their identity as boys and "tough kids," those stories were also, in a sense, claiming them. That is, the boys were adopting dominant cultural storylines about how tough kids talk.*

DYSON AND GENISHI 1994, P. 4

Discussing different authors in his class, Steven observes, "For the funny part, Jessie is really funny. He writes a lot about fantasy stuff. . . . Ron's a pretty good writer . . . and he's a little better at drawing than writing. . . . Emily [in her mystery] gave details. She described the characters. It was a really good mystery because it had a point and it had something that the reader had to figure out" (Johnston, Bennett, and Cronin 2002b, p. 195). In the course of his comments, Steven identifies himself and his peers as authors in the same breath and terms as he talks about the authors of the commercial books they read. His teacher has arranged classroom conversations in which he will develop his understanding of what authors do and further consolidate and elaborate his identity as an author. At the same time, because he sees his peers as a diverse group of authors, and treats them as such, he further consolidates their identities as competent and varied authors. Children in our classrooms are *becoming* literate. They are not simply learning the skills of literacy. They are developing personal and social identities—uniquenesses and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming.

When authors write novels, they create characters—people who say this sort of thing, do that sort of thing, and relate to people and things in these sorts of ways. As we come to understand the richness and complexity of a character in a novel, we come to expect how he or she will likely behave when facing a new situation (though new situations can bring surprises). This is not just what authors do, it is what people do with themselves (Bruner 1994a, 1994b; Harre and Gillet 1994; Mishler 1999; Randall 1995). They narrate their lives, identifying themselves and the circumstances, acting and explaining events in ways they see as consistent with the person they take themselves to be.

Building an identity means coming to see in ourselves the characteristics of particular categories (and roles) of people and developing a sense of what it feels like to be that sort of person and belong in certain social spaces. As children are involved in classroom interactions, they build and try on different identities—different protagonist positions. We hear something of this when they use the pronoun "I" in the storylines in which they emplot themselves. As we shall see, they decide not only who they are in a given context, but also between agentive characters who are active and assume responsibility, and more passive characters who do not. They have to take up positions with respect to what they are studying, with respect to others in their social environment, and with respect to domains of practice. Teachers' comments can offer them, and nudge them toward, productive identities.

### ✿ *"What a talented young poet you are."*

This family of responses addresses children's developing identities and includes invitations such as, "As scientists, how should we handle this?" To answer the question the child, at least temporarily, has to imagine herself in that identity and might choose to maintain the possibility of wearing that mantle. Notice, again, how the assertion that the students are scientists ("as scientists") is provided as given (already agreed upon) rather than new information, making it much less open to contestation. This kind of conversation requires developing an understanding of what poets (or scientists or mathematicians or authors) do, and the students construct these understandings and ways of talking and acting in the classroom.

Just the identity label will not accomplish all that is needed, of course. In one classroom, the teachers referred to themselves as "senior researchers," and children sometimes as, for instance, "researcher

Tom," and began lessons reiterating that "We are researchers, let us do research" (Elbers and Streefland 2000, p. 39). When children argued that the teacher's role was to tell children the answers, the response was that "It is a characteristic of researchers that they attempt to answer the questions themselves" (p. 41). The response encourages the collective identity of a community of practice, that "people like us" do things this way. It also denies the activity frame presented by the children that "we are traditional students and you are a traditional teacher and we are doing school." It replies, in effect, "I'm sorry but you must be in the wrong theater. I don't know those actors or that plot. Here is how this script goes." It asserts, "When I say 'we' from now on in these conversations, this is the sort of people I am referring to."

Identities such as researcher-in-a-research-community are an important accomplishment of schooling, but also a tool for shaping children's participation in the classroom. These identities provide students with a sense of their responsibilities, and reasonable ways to act, particularly toward one another and toward the object of study. Implicit in these identities are notions of community since identity is tied to both uniqueness and affiliation (Gee 1996). In such classrooms, then, teachers are not merely trying to teach subject matter. Rather, they are, as Elbers and Streefland (2000, p. 37) put it, "mathematizing: turning everyday issues into mathematical problems and using mathematics evolving from these activities for solving realistic problems." Learning science, writing, mathematics, and so forth in this manner breaks the division between school and "the real world," a division that limits the power of children's learning.

### ✿ *"That's not like you."*

Rather than reprimanding her student, the teacher suggests that the problematic behavior just observed is atypical and that the overall pattern suggests a more admirable person. It invites the child to consider who he wishes to be—and whether he wishes to alter an assumed positive identity. The stronger the relationship between teacher and student, the more powerful and productive this prompt is. Here the function of identity as both a tool and a constantly developing achievement is particularly clear. The teacher is rather like the editor for a writer saying, "The way you have developed the character of your protagonist, he couldn't behave that way in this situation. He's acting out of character."

✿ ***"I wonder if, as a writer, you're ready for this."***
This at once asks the child to think about learning in terms of development or maturity, and invites a desire to be viewed as having an expanded maturity. It leans quite heavily on the student to both view herself as an author, and to pick up the gauntlet of challenge. Interestingly, if she does pick up the gauntlet and overcome the challenge, in the context of the teacher's words it will be hard for her to avoid composing a narrative about self-as-author-overcoming-challenge. Overcoming obstacles in this way provides a seductive invitation to adopt the identity. If the teacher asks her how she did it, she will rearticulate the story—with herself as the successful protagonist.

✿ ***"I bet you're proud of yourself."***
This is most productive after a "how" question that has established agency. Inviting a child to attend to internal feelings of pride builds upon the sense of agency and at the same time attaches an internal motivation to the activity. While building independence it does not detract from the feeling that the teacher is also proud of the child. The more common "I'm proud of you," like other forms of praise, turns a child's attention to pleasing the teacher, rather than developing agency. As with any praise, it positions the child in a subordinate position with respect to the teacher, the source of praise. It also subtly removes some of the responsibility for the accomplishment and gives it to the teacher.

More generally, "How does that make you feel?" turns attention to internal feelings and their relation to behavior and events. For example, asking, "How does it feel to have written a piece like this?" (or "to receive that letter?") has two effects. First is the matter of attaching an internal motivation to the act of writing. The more children notice and rehearse this connection, the better. Rehearsing the connection is almost as good as when it happens and continues to strengthen the connection. The second aspect is that it is part of a central classroom conversation about how *x* makes *y* feel. It is part of the responsible side of agency.

✿ ***"What are you doing as a writer today?"***
This query has several features. First, it frames what the student will be doing in terms of what writers do, and invites a conversation on those terms rather than in terms of, say, a student doing a task for the teacher. Second, presenting as "given" the assertions that a) the student is a

writer, who b) will be doing something that writers do makes it hard for the student to reject either the identity or the action. They are not up for discussion. The student has to say something like, "[As a writer] I am trying to find a 'hook' for the story I'm writing." The conversation opener insists on a commitment to a particular character (I, a writer) engaged in a particular kind of narrative (doing writerly things). The student is gently nudged—well, all right, pushed—to rehearse a narrative with herself as the writer/protagonist, opening the possibility of the teacher elaborating the story with details and plot suggestions.

✿ ***"What have you learned most recently as a reader?"*** As with the previous conversation starter, the teacher begins with "given" information that is not up for discussion: a) the student is a reader, and b) readers learn things. The only question is, what has this particular reader learned? For a student to respond to this question, he or she has to review recent learnings. The opening question requires an answer that begins, "I learned. . . ." It insists on an agentive identity statement about reading and learning. At the same time, it creates a learning history, which is an antidote for students who think they are not good and have always been not good. "What would you like to learn next as a writer?" is a similar question, but it takes the learning history to the next level of agency, creating a trajectory: I learned things in the past and I will learn things in the future, and I have control over those things that I learn. Asking, "How are you going to go about learning them?" extends the agentive conversation even further by insisting that the control of learning belongs to the student, and by turning attention to the strategies that make learning possible.

The overall conversation insists that being a writer entails taking control of learning how to be a better writer. In other words, many of these identity-leaning conversational prompts essentially insist that children respond in ways that position them as active agents in their learning, a topic explored more fully in the next chapter.

## Extension

There are two ways to explore your own teaching in terms of children's developing literate identities. The first is to tape-record some class conversations around books and around writing, such as writing conferences, and to listen to them in terms of the issues I have raised in this

chapter. A second, perhaps more direct, way is to have conversations with a couple of students in your class around questions such as these:

- Are there different kinds of readers (writers) in this class do you think?
- How do you see yourself as a reader (writer)? (Or) What kind of reader (writer) are you?

To get you started on this project, and in case you do not have your own classroom, I offer the following abstract of a conversation with Mandy. As you read it, ask yourself these questions:

- What noticing and naming are taking place?
- What identity is this student developing?
- What classroom conversations made this identity possible?

As you make your decisions, point to the evidence you are drawing on. Then plan some ways of engaging this student that would alter her understanding of literacy and of herself as a literate person.

## *Mandy*

Mandy says that a good writer "writes fast . . . [For example] when the teacher tells us to write a story then it doesn't even take her . . . not even ten minutes." Mandy does not talk with other students about their writing. She "wouldn't want to hurt their feelings or nothing because sometimes when someone comes up to them and says, 'Oh, you're a bad writer,' and everything. Then, they'll tell the teacher." Mandy says that they should not give other students ideas, "because then that would be giving them things that you thought of in your head. . . . Then they'll have, probably, the same stories."

Good readers, she says, are "all the kids that are quiet and they just listen . . . they challenge themselves . . . they get chapter books." Asked to describe herself as a reader or a writer, she says she doesn't understand the question. She does not know how she could learn about another child as a reader or writer.

Asked whether they do research in her class, she says she is unsure what it is. When it is explained, she says they don't do it. Mandy expects on her report card an "excellent" for writing and a comment like,

"Mandy has behaved and she is nice to other classmates." To help a classmate become a better reader, she would tell him or her to "stop fooling around because the more you fool around, the more you get your name on the board and checks . . . [and] if he doesn't know that word, if he doesn't know how to sound it out or if he doesn't know what it means, look it up in the dictionary."

In talking about books, Mandy makes no connections across books or with personal experience.