Making Meaning Out of Canonical Texts in Freshman English

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines ninth graders' negotiation of meaning with one canonical work, *Romeo and Juliet*. The study's sample was 88% Latino at a Title I high school. The study adopts a sociocultural view of literacy and learning. I employed ethnographic methods (participant observation, data collection, interviews, and focus groups) to investigate the teacher's instructional approaches and the literacy practices used while teaching the canonical work. With a focus on students' interpretations, I examined what they said and wrote about *Romeo and Juliet*. One finding was that the teacher employed instructional approaches that facilitated literacy practices that allowed students to draw on their cultural backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and values as they engaged with *Romeo and Juliet*. As instructional approaches and literacy practices became routine, students formed a community of learners. Because the teacher allowed students to discuss their ideas before, during, and after reading, students were provided with multiple perspectives to think about as they read and negotiated meaning. A second finding was that students drew on their personal lived experiences, backgrounds, and values as they made sense and negotiated the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot and characters. Although the text's meaning was not always obvious to students, in their work they showed their growing awareness that multiple interpretations were welcomed and important in the teacher's classroom. Through the unit, students came to recognize that their own and their peers' understandings, negotiations, and interpretations of the canonical work were informed by a variety of complex factors. Students came to find relevance in the text's themes and characters to their experiences as adolescents. The study's findings point to the importance of allowing students to draw from their cultural backgrounds and

experiences as they negotiate meaning with texts, specifically canonical ones, and to

welcome and encourage multiple meanings in the English classroom.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother,

Mary Helen Baez

who has always supported my educational pursuits.

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were both great mentors who offered me much support and guidance throughout my undergraduate studies. I was truly blessed to have met you so early in my academic journey.

I would like to acknowledge the community of learners I belong to—who were not only in the Language and Literacy program but from other disciplines as well. We were always supportive of one another, and I cannot imagine the excitement we hold as we leave more informed and critical of education. I wish you all the very best!

I wish to thank my parents, Mary Helen Baez and Felipe D. Baez Sr., who worked hard so that I could get a college education. I would not have made it this far without their strong support and sacrifice during my freshman and sophomore years in college. I wish to thank my brother Freddie Villalon who has helped me attain my career goals in education. I want to acknowledge my brother Stevie Gonzalez who has always inquired about my progress in school. Finally, I would like to recognize my niece, Bridget Villalon, who helped me the summer of '15 transcribe several hours of audio recorded class sessions. I could not have done all of that work myself. Special thanks to my dear friend Christopher Garcia, who is very much like a brother, for reading the dissertation one full and final time before I sent it off.

Finally, I wish to thank all the students who I have taught and met in the last eleven years. Truly, they are the ones who have inspired me to become a better, more informed teacher. They have always been supportive and inquisitive of my college experiences, and have often genuinely asked on my progress with my studies. I am a better teacher because of them, and they inspire me and remind me every day why I chose to become an educator.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The canonical works that Applebee (1989) found to be prominent in the English

curriculum over two decades ago continue to hold their eminence in the secondary

English language arts (ELA) classroom—works such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,*

Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter,* Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and Fitzgerald's *The*

Great Gatsby. Recent state standards, like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS),

require that certain texts be taught, as well as American and world literature and "a play

by Shakespeare" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 6). Therefore, educators still require the

canon more than they challenge it, despite the apparent lack of relevance that such texts

have to the current time and to students' experiences.

Although canonical works have endured through school policy changes, the

meanings and connections students made twenty years ago with those texts have changed

significantly (Chadwick & Grassie, 2016; Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013; Dakin,

2009). Therefore, it is important to understand processes of meaning-making among

individual students and within groups (e.g., class communities). In particular, it is

important for researchers to understand how students' diverse ethnicities, experiences,

and interests contribute to multiple interpretations of the meaning of one piece of

literature. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that reading is an event that occurs when readers—

along with their resources, experiences, and histories—and text transact come together.

Her transactional theory of reading emphasizes the ways in which meaning are both

multiple and shaped by a variety of factors. Research (e.g., Galda & Beach, 2001;

Langer, 2011; Probst, 2004) shows that English teachers can develop students as readers

while also promoting insights based on their lived experiences as they explore literature. Langer (2011), building on such insights and contributions, also conceives of reading as more than decoding sounds and words:

> . . . if we treat literature as a way of thinking, rather than a type of text . . . we can use it to highlight an important aspect of intelligent and literate thought—one that can foster and develop the searching, reconnoitering, and creative mind that explores horizons of possibilities, along with topic-oriented critical thought that maintains a fixed point of reference. (Langer, 2011, p. 156)

Langer points to the potential that literature has in the classroom for all students. Its potential lies in shaping students' thinking, which will stimulate their ability to be inquisitive on everyday matters. For this to happen, students need to be given the opportunity to discuss the text (e.g., its plot, its characters and their actions, and its themes) and not solely focus on the type of text (e.g., its genre, its structure, and its functions). Students' interest in reading literature, in particular canonical works, is important for English teachers working with adolescents Therefore, teachers require approaches that allow them to meet the diverse needs of their students and that are flexible enough for students to have agency in connecting with and making meaning out of a text.

In the last decade, high-stakes tests have impacted teaching and learning for teachers and students (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002; Guthrie & Springer, 2004; Slavin, 2002). In schools, there is an emphasis that is largely placed on students' ability to pass tests. These tests typically capture a narrow set of literacy and math skills. Although these state- and nationwide assessments consistently show that our students are not where they

need to be in terms of literacy and math, scholars of adolescent literacy have shown that students who do not typically test well have other strengths in literacy (e.g., Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Beers, Probst, Rief, 2007; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009; Hull & Schultz, 2002). Secondary teachers' understandings of literacy—and academic literacy in particular—have long been informed by autonomous models of literacy (Alvermann, 2009; Street 1984), which include narrow and deficit views of students' ability. Street (1984) has argued that autonomous models of literacy do not account for ideological and cultural factors that influence and shape social processes in how individuals make meaning of texts. Autonomous models consider literacy as neutral, not taking into account layers that shape an individual, which include cultural backgrounds, experiences, and personal histories. Unfortunately, these views of literacy contribute to and are influenced by high-stakes tests and methods of teaching literacy that state standards encourage (Beers, 2013; Coleman & Pimentel, 2012; T. Shannahan, 2012). In contrast, teachers who hold sociocultural understandings of literacy know that they can and should tap into their students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). While teaching literature, teachers have an opportunity to foster students' literacy and critical thinking skills (Chadwick & Grassie, 2016). One way to do this is to identify and use at-home literacies (i.e., practices that students participate in outside of school, such as in church or through social media) while trying to develop academic literacies (Beers, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Research shows that teachers can and should draw from students' at-home literacy skills while also encouraging students to draw from their personal lived

experiences, histories, and values as they read and study literature in their English classes (Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013; Dakin, 2009; Kirkland, 2013; Short, 2014). In secondary education classrooms, students continue to be exposed to required and canonical texts (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009) that do not align to their diverse backgrounds, which include their ethnicities, social classes, interests, and linguistic resources. Teachers who teach students from diverse backgrounds can work toward building texts' relevance to students' interest. At the present time, in order to prepare students for careers, colleges, and assessments, valued teaching methods devalue students' contexts and cultural backgrounds that influence how they come to understand texts (Beers, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2001).

Informed by the impact that canonical works, state standards, and students' diverse backgrounds have in the teaching of literature, this study investigates how one high school freshman English teacher teaches a canonical work, *Romeo and Juliet,* a text whose meanings are not immediately visible to students—in part because the text is not written in contemporary American standard English and also in part because multiple interpretations of meaning have always been possible with Shakespeare's texts. Because the majority of the students in the class were minoritized or marginalized in one way or the other (e.g., ethnic minorities, linguistic minorities), I became interested in how the teacher approached teaching the canonical text, how the teaching and learning approaches she utilized allowed for students to negotiate meaning, and what literacy practices she expected students to use. Because the students represented backgrounds that did not align with *Romeo and Juliet*, I was particularly interested in the interpretations they came to before, during, and after reading in discussions, assignments, and projects. My focal

interest was in how their personal lived experiences, backgrounds, histories, and values informed their meaning-making processes and their different interpretations. I was interested in how they came to these interpretations while they experienced the teacher's instructional approaches. Because students were reading a major and longer text, I was also interested in examining how the literacy practices that the teacher incorporated allowed for students to draw on their resources throughout the unit. I was also interested in their opinions of how and why the canonical work was relevant to their lives.

Stance

My interest in adolescent literacy; ethnic, minority, and marginalized students; literature instruction; and the canon first started in the fall of 2008 when I was in my first year of graduate school and also starting my fourth year as a teacher. I was teaching high school junior (eleventh grade) English, and the focus was on American Literature. That semester, I enrolled in a course titled Literacy and Biliteracy Development, taught by Professor Carmen Martinez-Roldan. Throughout that semester, I grappled with several concepts that the professor introduced, like Moll's (1992) funds of knowledge, and tried to apply them in my own classroom. After Dr. Martinez-Roldan's class sessions, I would leave somewhat disenchanted by what I was learning—in large part because I knew that the next morning I would return to my classroom and struggle with finding ways to engage my students with canonical texts that we were required to teach. However, as that first semester progressed, my ideas of literacy and learning started to shift, and I began to see possibilities for addressing the challenges of the teaching context I was in.

In that first semester of graduate school, I was particularly concerned over one section of junior English I was teaching at the time, where I was struggling to find ways

to get the majority of these students to read and value the staple American Literature we were required to study by the district. The students in that section were predominantly former English Language Development (ELD) students (i.e., English was not their first language, and so they had received curriculum designed to help them develop their English speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills); they spoke Spanish in the classroom (though they could speak English); and were mostly indifferent to the reading and writing tasks I assigned.

I had a B.A. in English, I spoke Spanish fluently, and I had an esteem for the canon. So I was disappointed and puzzled by the fact that my students seemed so uninterested in the literature. I entered the classroom as a young teacher ready to expose students to that literature, and I had hoped to instill that same passion for literature—reading and writing—that I had in them. How I had envisioned my teaching in my classroom did not necessarily materialize, and I wanted to systematically investigate the challenges and tensions I encountered in the high school classroom context.

Throughout the semester, I often asked Dr. Martinez-Roldan the following questions: How do I get my students to willingly read literature I have to teach them and that they must learn? How do I continue to develop their literacy (which I was starting to understand in a broader sense) with that required literature? How do I develop their literacy if they are uninterested in the literature? She never answered my questions directly (in practice). Instead, she told me (theoretically) that it was my responsibility to use the students' funds of knowledge in my classroom; to build on and refine students' existing repertoire of literacy skills; to expose those students to literature that represented who they were before approaching required texts that they might find irrelevant; to not

view my students as empty vessels; and to not outlaw their Spanish language in my classroom. Over time, Dr. Martinez-Roldan's advice started to make sense to me.

Years later, as I revisit these original questions as an eleventh-year teacher completing a Ph.D., I know that I cannot disregard canonical works that need to be taught. I also now understand that I must acknowledge students' backgrounds and literacy strengths as I apply the sociocultural principles of literacy, which I value as both a teacher and novice researcher, in my classroom. As I have taught different texts throughout the years, I have been more attuned to my students and wondered: How can I learn about my students' literacy backgrounds? I continue to seek avenues to help them connect their culture, their experiences, and their backgrounds to those texts. As a teacher, I attempt to conceptualize learning situations and experiences that students will find meaningful as they read challenging canonical literature, not only by themselves but also with their peers.

This study grew out of that initial question and struggle that I had as a first-year graduate student and as a fourth-year teacher: How do I teach students literature they were not interested in but which they had to read in ways that students find relevant and useful? After collecting data and analyzing it, the focus of my question has shifted slightly as I realized that (in order to address this first question) I also needed to investigate how those students in my junior English class were afforded opportunities to arrive at multiple interpretations of canonical texts. Like Grater and Johnson (2013), my primary concern is with how teachers of literature might engage today's adolescent students with canonical literature while honoring their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

Positionality

Before this study began and also while collecting data, I taught English to ninth graders and twelfth graders at the research site. Because I had been at the school for seven years, I had access to classrooms, teachers, students, and other resources that facilitated my access to information, people, and data about those people. The decision to draw on existing relationships with students who already knew me was complicated. On the one hand, I was also familiar to students and I had a recognizable role. On the other hand, I did wonder on occasion whether my role as teacher might have influenced students' responses to my questions (survey and interview). To try to avoid this, I made my research interests and data collection goals as transparent as I could (see Appendix B for a copy of the assent form I used), allowed students to choose when and where we met at school, and reminded them that their participation was not required. During the first weeks of observations, I also enlisted the help of Ms. Gravely (pseudonymn), the teacher, who helped me remind the students that I was there as a researcher to learn from them and about their ideas and thoughts of the literature they were reading and the role of that literature in their learning and literacy.

Although they knew me, I still had to build trust with the students so that I was not viewed as a complete stranger while observing their class. At the same time, I did not want to be viewed as their teacher. It was a complicated and interesting balancing act—with students unsure when to talk with me, what to say regarding Ms. Gravely's teaching and their perspectives on *Romeo and Juliet*. In the first week, for instance, students thought it was strange to have the audio recorder at the front of the class. Then, for each

recorded class session after that, Ms. Gravely reminded students that the audio recorder was on, and they became used to it.

Regardless of my role as a teacher at the school, I worked on continuing to gain students' trust by showing my investment in the study and in them. I showed this interest by reading their work and talking to students about what I noticed in their writing. I often complimented them on their insights, which they discussed in class or wrote about in assignments. I also did this before and after class regarding what they had said during the previous class session in discussion. Whenever possible, I connected what students had written in surveys regarding literature and learning or in the poems they had written in the previous unit on poetry with what they were now doing, and I told them about my insights. Throughout the study, students asked me questions on the progress of "the book" (how students referred to the dissertation study), or about college in general and the degree I was going for. I gladly told them about my progress with the research and experiences of college. Talking to students about their questions regarding my research and school provided transparency for my purpose in studying them.

Over time, I became more comfortable as a researcher in the classroom. At first, I did not want students to get overwhelmed with two adults (teachers) in the classroom. As I observed them, I did not want to disrupt their work as I walked around and asked them questions. Being a teacher researcher, I did not take the stance of teacher as students participated in class learning. That is, I did not tell students who were off task to focus, and I did not redirect students who were talking or distracted by their phones, for instance, during instruction. Aware of the limitations of being a participant observer (Bogdan & Biklen 2007), I remained cognizant of my role as researcher and why I was

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there in the classroom—to keep my focus on documenting the instructional approaches and literacy practices the teacher used, and the insights that students said in class. I remained mindful of my participation in the classroom and maintained my goal of the research.

       While collecting data for this study, I was in my tenth year of teaching, and I had taught all levels of English at the secondary level. In the past, I had taught fourth grade, middle school, and Spanish. I am Mexican-American and identify as Chicano. My parents were born in Mexico, but I was born in the United States, and I grew up speaking English and Spanish. While I believe that exposure to canonical works is important, I also believe that it is important to expose students to multicultural and diverse works of literature in the primary and secondary grades. I can recall that one of my first experiences with Chicano and Chicana writers was in a Chicano literature course I took my sophomore year in college. Prior to this course, I had not been exposed to writers whose experiences I could relate to because we were from the same culture. If I had in my public schooling, I have no recollection of it.

Purpose and Research Questions

       The purpose of this study is to investigate how students make meaning while reading, discussing, and interacting with canonical texts. Specifically, the study will look at students' interactions with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in order to understand how the text is taught in one ninth-grade English classroom and how the students respond to and engage in that text under those circumstances. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What modes of instruction does the teacher implement as she teaches *Romeo and Juliet*? When and why does she use those different approaches (e.g. direct or guided instruction, student-centered)?

2. What literacy practices do these students engage in while making meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* (e.g., reading, writing, drawing, role-playing)? What do they say about those literacy practices in relation to their understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*?

3. What interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* do students produce while engaged in spaces of meaning making (e.g., discussion, writing, reading)? What do students say about *Romeo and Juliet* (e.g., during class, during interviews)?

Significance

This study adds to our knowledge of what we know of literature instruction, meaning making, and literacy practices. This study builds on and extends scholarship that investigates the relationship between what teachers ask students to do with texts, the resources that students bring to those activities and assignments, and the meanings that students make of the texts in relation to their repertoire of resources, lived experiences, and existing understandings. Like McKnight (2000), Rodriguez (2001), Archer (2002), and Siddall (1998), I use qualitative methods to document and make sense of how students are making sense of one canonical text—and the instructional approaches that facilitate their interactions with the text, with each other, and with their understandings of their own lived experiences.

Using ethnographic methods, I document how one teacher and her students explored Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a staple piece of the canon and a part of British literature, with a focus on how the teacher fostered engagement, how students responded, and how students made meaning from interacting with the text, their own understandings and experiences, and each other. Because the study focused on one class, I do often provide a thick description of what was going on in the classroom. Informed by Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading, I examine the reading events or "poems" that high school freshmen arrived at during their reading of a canonical work, *Romeo and Juliet*. While the reading event occurs more intimately between reader and text, this study demonstrates how it can also come together for students in a classroom. My study shows that even though students read the text as a whole class, they arrived at unique interpretations, which drew from their cultural backgrounds, histories, and worldviews.

The present study contributes to what we know about literacy practices in engaging students with literature, and what students think about those practices. The teacher's and students' voices that reflect their opinions and experiences of exploring a canonical work add to what we as researchers and teachers of literature know of canonical literature's potential in today's English classroom in secondary education settings. Extending Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework, this study shows us how students created meaning and understanding of a canonical work as a community of learners (Langer, 2011). In reading *Romeo and Juliet* as a whole class, the teacher facilitated students' questions and ideas. Students experienced multiple ways to understand the text and make it relevant, as they learned how the teacher and their peers

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negotiated meaning. My analysis examines how the teacher created a learning environment that facilitated students' engagement with *Romeo and Juliet*, the teaching approaches and literacy practices that were encouraged, and how students drew from their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences while engaging with the assigned text.

This study contributes to our knowledge of how teachers are able to frame canonical works to engage students. How students connected to the text contributes to our understanding of the appropriateness of close reading and adds to existing conversations related to "acultural" (Smagorinsky, 2001) and "correct" (Franzak, 2008) readings of texts in educational settings where the majority of students are minority, marginalized, and developing readers. This study shows us the potential that reading practices which allow students to draw from their resources (cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and experiences) have in making canonical works relevant to students. This work extends Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading by demonstrating how students displayed their reading events or "poems" in creating their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. In their work, students created cultural readings (Smagorinsky, 2001) which displayed their understanding of the text and embedded aspects of their world. Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading has been described as a mirror and window (Willinsky, 1991). I will demonstrate how students actively reflected on their lives, thought about their worldviews, and thought about their futures as they discussed and wrote about the text's plot, characters, and themes before, during, and after reading. In this way, students made the text their own.

The present study documented the types of connections students made to and with *Romeo and Juliet*. A closer examination with Rosenblatt (1978) theory of

transactional reading will help us to understand the reading event that takes place for students as they transact with *Romeo and Juliet*. Reading and meaning draw from students' resources that they bring to the reading and shape the "poem" that they will arrive at as they read. Moreover, as Rosenblatt tells us, it is important to take into account the role of aesthetic reading—or the reader's experience of reading the text while actually reading—into account. In addition, this close look at students' experiences with and interpretations of one canonical text responds to Langer's (2011) call to honor students' diverse understandings of literature. By using Rosenblatt's (1978) and Langer's (2011) theories of reading to examine students' experiences with reading (especially in relation to their questions, viewpoints, cultural backgrounds), this project illuminates the relationship between the instructional decisions the teacher made and students' multiple understandings of a text.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I review literature that explores the canon and literature instruction with a focus on scholarship investigating the teaching of Shakespeare and meaning-making processes. This review of literature will include a discussion of the debates regarding the continued focus on what some call "the canon" in educational research on teaching English literature at the secondary level. This review of literature includes a synthesis of recent articles by ELA teachers and researchers, which document their teaching of canonical works, specifically those by Shakespeare. A major section will be a discussion on meaning making, learning, and literacy, which will establish the sociocultural stance and theoretical grounding that I have undertaken in this study. I draw attention to how different scholars have conceptualized and examined meaning making,

with a particular focus on the role of literacy practices in that process as it pertains to texts and literature specifically.

In Chapter 3, I describe the study's qualitative research design. I provide a description of the site, the sample, and the teacher, and I include a broad overview of the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. I provide a rationale for using ethnographic methods to observe and document students' interactions with the text *Romeo and Juliet* and for documenting their interactions with each other and with their teacher as they worked with that text. I also describe the criteria I used to select the focal students, providing brief biographical sketches of the six focal students. I explain how and when I used focus groups with participants and how the focus groups supplemented what I learned from individual interviews. I discuss my process of data collection and data analysis, providing a rationale for why I collected certain data and how the methods used align with the study's theoretical framework.

In Chapter 4, I identify and analyze the primary modes of instruction that Ms. Gravely used while teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, with a focus on what transpired before, during, and after reading. I show that, although I was surprised to find that Ms. Gravely used whole class reading the majority of the time, I learned that this type of traditional reading exercise helped students to deepen their understandings and interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. I also analyze the ways that different literacy practices were facilitated and utilized during the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, and I examine what students had to say about those literacy practices. Because of this variety in modes of input, students were able to negotiate meaning from multiple perspectives described by their peers in an environment that fostered a community of learners.

In Chapter 5, I analyze students' understandings and insights of *Romeo and Juliet* that they arrived at prior, during, and after reading, through discussions and assignments. I employed Rosenblatt's (1978) and Langer's (2011) orientations of the literary experience to analyze students' interpretative data. These show a range of perspectives and understandings in which students drew from their backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and values as they came to make meaning of the canonical text. Because of the text's age, I was also interested in what students had to say about its relevance to them as high school freshman. I found that students agreed that the text was relevant, despite the fact that its language was sometimes difficult to understand. I also found that their interest and excitement grew as their understandings grew.

In Chapter 6, I revisit the study's findings. I discuss how the study contributes to the scholarship that informs this study. Based on the study, I offer recommendations for the teaching of the canon at the secondary level. I also offer pedagogical implications for the teaching of the canon and its works to students who have diverse backgrounds and are predominantly ethnic minorities in situations where they must read and learn about required texts that do not represent students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. My analysis of such processes has significant implications for teachers interested in processes of meaning-making and their understanding of the role of literature instruction in such processes. As a teacher-researcher, I also discuss methodological implications for teacher researchers conducting studies in their own schools and potential directions for future research in the area of canonical works and literature instruction.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review literature that explores the canon, investigates literature instruction on teaching Shakespeare, and summarizes debates regarding the canon and its influence on teaching literature at the secondary level. Following this overview, I will provide a brief overview of recent articles by ELA teachers and researchers, which document their teaching of canonical works, specifically those by Shakespeare, which build on students' interests and cultural backgrounds. I focus on the role of meaning making, learning, and literacy, and I describe the sociocultural stance and theoretical grounding that this study adopts. I elaborate on how scholars conceptualize meaning making and the role of literacy practices in that process as it pertains to texts and literature specifically.

The Canon

In scholarship on the value and place of what is often called "the canon," there are many controversies and debates, including about whether "the canon" should remain static or be revisited and expanded. Willinsky (1991), in considering literature and literacy in secondary school curricula, offers one influential perspective on the purpose and agenda of defining "the canon." In his discussion, he highlights four major figures whom he sees as influential to literature's direction: Mathew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Louise Rosenblatt, and Northrop Frye. He provides an analogy on how each of these individuals may consider literature: as a church (Arnold), as a fortress (Leavis), as a mirror or window (Rosenblatt), and as a floor plan (Frye). Interestingly, these analogies reflect

central assumptions driving debates about the value of the canon. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) write:

> The canon is itself an argument. It purports to name the most significant literary works within a national literature or historical period. It is also an invitation to students to engage in this argument, and that invitation needs to be framed and extended by teachers of literature. (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm, 2006, p. 167)

While exposing students to canonical works, English teachers sometimes also question what is defined as "canonical" and discuss the canon's influence on what students are required to read and learn. As Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) point to, the canon has formed because of a continuous debate. Students who are knowledgeable and engaged in that debate by their teachers are more critical of what they read, and can also read a text with purpose in spite of its content's relevance.

McClaren (1987), writing on the canon and literacy, named two major positions in the debate, prescriptivists and pluralists, and three forms of literacy: functional, cultural, and critical. Functional he defined as being able to pass a fourth through eighth grade standardized test. Cultural literacy "refers to the acquisition of a broad range of factors which accompany functional literacy, such as familiarity with particular linguistic traditions or bodies of information" (McClaren, 1987, p. 213). Critical literacy, however, is the "exploration of the social construction of knowledge and the ideological processes involved in the reading of texts" (McClaren, 1987, p. 217). For McClaren, prescriptivists fall under the functional and cultural categories of literacy. They promote a set, bounded body of knowledge to be learned without recognizing learners' sociocultural

circumstances. Pluralists may fall under all three categories, but they acknowledge the learners' "broader range of discursive practices" (McClaren, 1987, p. 215). Providing more context on the debate between the two sides, McClaren (1987) adds that:

> At a time when popularizers of cultural literacy are prescribing a literary canon to pry open the 'closed minds' of an American youth putatively on the path to intellectual and moral decline, radical critics, armed with a welter of ethnographic evidence, are attempting to draw our attention to the gendered, racial, and socioeconomic contexts of literacy and the challenge that these new conceptualizations represent. (McClaren, 1987, p. 217)

In other words, while a set body of knowledge should be accessed by all students in order to assure that they are gaining knowledge that is valued in more "mainstream" contexts, what those students already know should not be overlooked either. Students enter classrooms with valuable, varied, and diverse knowledges that should not be disregarded in favor of the dominant group's valued body of knowledge. Instead, what they already know and value should be considered as a resource that can be enriched by what they learn in school.

According to Banks (1992) arguments over the canon by Western traditionalists and multiculturalists have not been productive. Rather than both sides deliberating on whose content is most worthy, Banks suggests that many types of knowledges should be taught to students, that way they can be critical of what they learn. These include personal and cultural knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and school knowledge. Applebee (1996) envisioned the English curriculum as a conversation—where domains of topics and questions would

lead from one unit to the next. He described a teacher who had invited his students to partake in the canon debate as they read canonical works; the topic of the conversation was "Who chooses the canon?"

Ravitch (2002), an advocate of the canon and standard curriculum, argued for a common culture by way of staple content in school curriculum. Her major concern was with the amount of censorship in textbooks and standardized tests (in terms of reading passages). In discussing guidelines for textbooks' content, she noted that textbooks tended to include literature and history that would not offend students, thus potentially leading "to a growing gap between the educated haves and the poorly schooled have-nots—two nations, separate and unequal" (Ravitch, 2002, p. 20). By not exposing students to essential content, those students, the "have-nots," would fall further behind: "Intelligence and reason cannot be developed absent the judgment that is formed by prolonged and thoughtful study of history, literature, and culture, not only that of our own nation, but that of other civilizations" (Ravitch, 2002, p. 20). Similarly, Hirsch (1987), in his popular book *Cultural Literacy*, listed common facts from literature and history that all Americans should know.

According to McClaren, scholars like Ravitch (2002) and Hirsch (1987) would be considered prescriptivists promoting the dominant group's valued body of knowledge. Valued ways of reading or interpreting literature are also commonly sanctioned by educational institutions. For example, literary scholars Bloom (2000) and Foster (2003) advocate preferred ways of reading that influence what teachers might count as valid interpretations of texts. Franzak (2008), who studied marginalized adolescent readers (also described as remedial readers), refers to these preferred ways of interpretation as

"correct" reading, which have "embedded ideological values" (p. 489). Students who have become used to this orientation of understanding rely "on external authority for making meaning from text" (Franzak, 2008, p. 489).

As Rosenblatt (1978) would argue, readers' roles in the reading event is important, as their resources (that make up their thoughts, feelings, and past experiences) shape how they will come to understand the text. In contrast to Rosenblatt's view of reading, Langer (2011) describes typical remedial reading classes as zones where students are trained to look for correct meanings in texts, rather than explore texts to understand their horizons-of-possibilities (the multiple interpretations that can count). For Langer, the goal of literature should be to help students "become aware of how their ways of understanding are complicated and implicated by their personal and group histories" (Langer, 2011, p. 157).

Franzak (2008) found that phantom (unwritten) policies existed for teachers in her study. When asked why they taught *Romeo and Juliet*, teachers stated it was school policy that it should be taught. However, no such policy existed according to the school principal and a district administrator. These phantom policies relating to canonical works—or whatever texts have traditionally been taught at a school and grade level—may lead teachers to assumptions that contribute to the overall static nature of English's curriculum, methods of teaching, and ways of exploring literature (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009).

Despite these concerns, educators have been encouraged to continue to expose ethnic minority and marginalized students to works and content that are valued by the dominant group (Kirkland, 2011). Kirkland (2011), Rose (1989), and Wilhelm (2013) are

concerned with teaching approaches rather than content and argue for increased exposure

to the canon in order to increase cultural understandings that will be relevant to students

later in their lives. The argument seems to be that studying the canon provides these

students with ways of reading that will be valued by institutions of higher education.

Others argue that what teachers can expose students to in the classroom, should

not be limited to the dominant group's valued knowledge (Greenbaum, 1994; Horwedel,

2007; Kirkland, 2013). Instead, they argue that the content of the curriculum should build

on and expand students' existing knowledges. That way, as Banks (1992) suggests,

students are more prepared to be critical of what they are learning and can also decide

how to apply the knowledge they have gained to their lives. In order for students to get

the most out of their education, they do need to understand what they are learning, why

they are learning it, how it is valuable to them, and what counts as knowledge in their

educational institutions (Rubinstein-Avila, 2007). They should also understand that there

are cultural influences on decisions about who decides what content is valuable for them

to learn and why (Rubinstein-Avila, 2007). Many agree that it is best for students to have

a balance, so that what has been traditionally valued (a set body of knowledge) is

honored, but where there is also potential to include other knowledges, literature, and

histories (Banks, 1992; Grater & Johnson, 2013; McClaren, 1987). Applebee (1992)

cautions schools not to marginalize groups of students as they incorporate literature that

may be more culturally responsive for their populations. For example, in a school with a

large African-American population, the school may choose to integrate more African-

American literature, but this should not disregard literature that is responsive to students

of other cultures at the school.

The Canon and English Language Arts Curriculum

Recently, Lapp, Fisher, and Frey, editors of the 2013 edition of *Voices in the Middle,* a journal for the National Council of Teachers of English, dedicated an issue to the canon. Its title *Expanding the Canon: Virtue or Vice?* alluded to the debate that still continues over the literature students should read. A majority of contributors (e.g., Low & Campano, 2013; Perry & Stallworth, 2013; Thein & Beach, 2013) wrote that, rather than revise the canon completely, new pieces of literature should be added, in some cases to replace existing works. They encourage teachers to continue to find ways to engage students with canonical works. Indeed, Lapp, Fisher, & Frey (2013) affirm that:

> enticing students to consider classical themes that continue to shape culture . . . is important, but the approach must ultimately include reverence for an evolving canon, which serves as a pathway on which to form intricate bonds among generations and cultures. (Lapp, Fisher, & Frey, 2013, p. 9)

Witte (2013) added that teachers need to "provide our students with access to both mirrors and windows in the literature we require our students to read as well as a rich abundance of mirrors and windows in the literature from which we ask students to choose" (p. 59). In other words, teachers need to be well equipped to provide students ways of reading texts and making meaning out of them, whether or not they are canonical (Wilhelm, 2013).

Even though canonical literature does not always represent the experiences or views of ethnic minority students, scholars who recognize these learners' sociocultural backgrounds also validate the worth and value of this institutional knowledge for minoritized students (Beach, Appleman, Hynd, & Wilhelm, 2006; McClaren, 1987; Rose,

1989). Some scholars (e.g., Low & Campano, 2013; McClaren, 1987; Rose, 1989) argue that it would be a disservice to ethnic and minority students if they were not exposed to the canon. Rich works by multicultural writers often contain allusions and intertextual ties to canonical works that require and assume readers have knowledge of those texts prior to reading to them. To illustrate this point, Angelou's (1969) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has references to the characters Beowulf and Oliver Twist. Students' negotiation of meaning may be limited if they have not read *Beowulf* or Dickens prior to reading Angelou's work. Researchers have, therefore, investigated alternative ways ethnic, marginalized, and reluctant readers might read canonical works (Fassbender, Dulaney, & Pope, 2013; Grater & Johnson, 2013; Jenkins & Kelley, 2013; Kirkland, 2011; Low & Campano, 2013). Kirkland (2011), for instance, looked at how an African-American student connected with *Beowulf* through the use of a graphic novel version of the text.

What counts as canonical is always changing and expanding. Works by Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, Pam Munoz Ryan, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou are now typically taught in schools. These writers are expanding the canon, as their texts have become more common in secondary English curriculum. In many ways, they have come to constitute a "sub-canon" in elementary, middle, and high schools.

This body of scholarship is important for this research study as I focus on a unit in which students read *Romeo and Juliet*, a canonical text. The students in this study are high school ninth graders who come from diverse backgrounds. Their perspectives regarding reading this canonical work will provide understanding of the value and worth of the canonical work. These will be shaped by their experiences of how the teacher

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taught *Romeo and Juliet* which is also influenced by their specific cultural and personal experiences as students. As McClaren (1987) and Banks (1992) state, there are types of knowledges that are important to acknowledge that do not necessarily come from having read canonical works like Ravitch (2002) and Hirsch (1987) argue. Students' interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* will provide insight into the types of knowledges students bring to the reading. While this study questions the value of *Romeo and Juliet* for high school students to read, its findings should point toward its potential for allowing students to draw on their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and histories in order to connect with the text, specifically students of Latino backgrounds. Recommendations can be made where supplemental texts, resources, as well as alternative methods of teaching the canonical work may be expedient and valuable for ethnic, marginalize, and minority students. While this study looks at the canon, it specifically looks at Shakespeare whose writing is included in the canon. Therefore, I will provide a discussion of various instructional approaches in teaching his texts in the next section.

Teaching Shakespeare

Shakespeare's writings are staple texts taught in schools. In high school, students study two or three of his works (typically, their freshman, sophomore, and senior year, when American literature is not the sole focus). O'Brien's (1993) *Shakespeare Set Free* series has served as a resource for many teachers, providing them with multiple lessons on teaching Shakespeare's works. Teachers and researchers have also published narratives that document how they have taught their students canonical works using various approaches. For instance, Desmet (2009), Shamburg and Craighead (2009), and Wold and Elish-Piper (2009) have incorporated the use of digital and social media in

exploring Shakespeare with students. These narratives have provided teachers ways to

make Shakespeare come to life for those students who are able and willing to embed

technology into their learning. Others have documented reading canonical works using

different reading stances, including critical reading (Borsheim-Black Macaluso, &

Petrone, 2014; Shoemaker, 2013). Canon (2009) explored the use of linked-text sets as

scaffolds as students studied the English canon. Moore (1998) juxtaposed young adult

literature, *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and *Crews: Gang Members Talk to Maria*

Hinojasa (Hinojosa, 1995), alongside *Romeo and Juliet*. Using a semiotic approach, he

analyzed how *Romeo and Juliet* can be located in adolescents' cultures. In exposing

students to various reading stances, these teachers and researchers are providing their

students with multiple ways and perspectives to come to understand a text, which also

prepares them for college as they learn various theories, for instance, related to

psychology and feminism.

Early (2010) has described a multi-genre approach she used in teaching

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Students completed portfolios that documented their

understanding of one character of their choice, reflected on the selection of their

character, presented visuals that related to quotes from the drama, and selected poetry or

song lyrics that related to their characters. Students added a final reflection in which they

documented what they took away from the project and unit. With similar goals, Arastu

and Gebhardt (2015) describe their learning centered approach which helped students to

find ways to learn with and from one another as they studied Shakespeare. These

accounts point toward some of the many ways that teachers can draw upon students'

interests and backgrounds while learning about canonical works. These activities are

examples of ways teachers might provide students avenues for exploring texts and making meaning from them, by making personal connections that then make the reading meaningful.

Thompson (2011) discusses the continued popularity and universality of Shakespeare's works, its influence on American culture, and whether the ways we ask students to engage with such texts should be revised or updated because of the topics the texts raise. Dakin's (2009) book for teachers offers activities that are relevant to the 21st century and appropriate for young adults. Her goal, as she has stated, is to provide teachers and students methods on not only how to read Shakespeare, but on why his texts should be explored. These scholars demonstrate that issues and topics can be developed from the exploration of literature, to make the reading relevant to students from a variety of backgrounds. There should not be a limited way of reading (Franzak, 2008) and making meaning of texts. For example, Thompson highlights issues raised from Shakespeare's texts that can stimulate students' thinking about and questioning of the value of his works and the canon.

The scholarship in this section describes teachers' and researchers' methods of teaching Shakespeare using a variety of approaches that build from students' backgrounds, interests, and knowledges. These perspectives inform this study because I look a Shakespearean work, *Romeo and Juliet*, as well, and investigate the instructional approaches and literacy practices that the teacher implements. This study will add to our understanding of student-centered approaches that build from and enrich students' knowledge while working with canonical texts such as those written by Shakespeare.

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The Literary Experience

Rosenblatt (1978) argued for the readers' role in making meaning with texts. In her work, she noted contemporary reading theories that disregarded the reader's role in the meaning-making process. For her, readers' resources, such as their experiences, their feelings, their thoughts, and their past, influence how they will come to make meaning from a text. Rosenblatt (1978) argued that meanings were specific to readers within the time and place they read a text and with the resources that they brought to the reading. She explains, "A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs as different circuit, a different event—a different poem" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 14). In her view, readers' experiences and resources shape the meaning of the text, which she refers to as a circuit or event. The event is what brings the text to life, or what she refers to as a "poem." In this way, meaning, or the poem, that a reader creates as she transacts with a text is specific to that individual. Reading is, therefore, an active experience, which often "leads us into a new world" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 21).

Since 1965, Rosenblatt has argued for a transactional view of reading where "[b]oth reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning" (p. 27). This view "emphasizes the relationship with, *and continuing awareness of,* the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 29; emphasis in the original). She argued that each reading of text brought forth new meanings. Though she acknowledged that readers could bring new meanings to the text, she did not believe that any meaning would count. That is, there are parameters that do limit the meaning that readers will arrive at—which often consists of

the words or symbols of a text and the meaning those have for readers. The transactional view, she wrote,

> liberates us from absolutist rejection of the reader, preserves the importance of the text, and permits a dynamic view of the text as an opportunity for every new individual readings, yet readings that can be responsibly self-aware and disciplined (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 130) [as the] signs [words and symbols of a text] present limits or controls; the personality and culture brought by the reader constitute another type of limitation on the resultant synthesis, the lived-through work of art. (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 129)

At the same time, even though multiple readings are possible, it is not always the case that all possible readings make sense. Readers are aware of how the words, their individuality, and cultural backgrounds impact the sense they make of texts.

Rosenblatt holds that there are two purposes for reading. There is an efferent and aesthetic form of reading. In the efferent reading, the individual's "attention is directed outward ... toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 24). In this way, the reader has a purpose in the act of reading. In aesthetic reading, "the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 24). Here, the reader is engaging with a text for pleasure, and it is about the experience the reader has with the text, in which they might take in the writing style or a character's development. For Rosenblatt, there are different levels of aesthetic transaction. However, these are shaped by a variety of factors that readers bring to the reading, such as their history and their current state of mind.

While Rosenblatt (1978) recognizes the reader's role in the reading experience, Langer (2011) also acknowledges that role and provides educators a pedagogical framework that validates readers and communities of learners. Literature is "an essential part of how we reason and understand" (Langer, 2011, p. 9), an aspect that, Langer laments, is often ignored in academic settings. For Langer (2011), how students experience literature is influenced by their personal experiences and perspectives. Final interpretations do not exist in literature. They exist in the spaces between lived experience, personal perspectives, and the reader's interaction with the text. In Langer's envisionment-building classroom, students constantly transform the meanings that they make of the literature they are reading. It is in this dynamic meaning-making process where students analyze texts as they consider their developing interpretations in relation to multiple perspectives (critical ones and those of their classmates). This learning environment allows for students' ideas to be enriched and challenged. Thus, literature allows for the creation of "new combinations, alternatives, and possibilities" (Langer, 2011, p. 9). Literature leads to complicated and intricate views of characters and situations that might otherwise never be understood, considered, or experienced. Literature in Langer's classroom disallows taken-for-granted, surface-level interpretations that direct teachers to instruct students to find correct answers and meanings in the text.

For Langer (2011), individuals can experience a text objectively and subjectively. In the objective manner, interaction with the text is discursive where meaning is treated as an object apart from the individual and is "scrutinized with a keen and distant eye" (p. 7). In the subjective manner, individuals treat meaning in an intimate way, relating it to

themselves. Meaning is "interiorized." Readers can consider others' perspectives of texts to their own in this process. Neither the objective or subjective way is exclusive over the other, nor are they in competition. Together they lead to more intricate, complex understandings of texts (Langer, 2011).

For Langer (2011), understanding is interpretation. Individuals have options as they develop textual understandings. She describes these options as "stances" which are embedded in what she calls "envisionment building." According to Langer (2011), envisionments "are a function of one's personal and cultural experiences, one's relationship to the current experience, what one knows, how one feels, and what one is after" (p. 10). As readers explore a text, they partake in envisionment building. The building does not occur in a linear fashion. Instead, envisionment building is like conversation—in flux, where ideas shift and change as individuals move through various stances.

Langer defines an envisionment as "the world of understanding a particular person has at a given point in time" (p. 10) as it pertains to a text. Envisionments "are a function of one's personal and cultural experiences, one's relationship to the current experience, what one knows, how one feels, and what one is after" (p. 10). According to this view, individual understandings are dynamic, influenced by readers' insights, uncertainties, assumptions, and reactions to text at that moment (Langer, 2011). In such ways, envisionments are personal to the individual, even when shaped by external forces (e.g., social or cultural experiences).

Langer divides envisionments into five stances (see Table 1). The first stance is described as "being outside and stepping into the text" (Langer, 2011, p. 17). The idea

here is the reader begins exploration of the text and makes predictions and assumptions regarding what the text will be about. While located in this stance, a reader's understanding is broad and not in-depth; the reader seeks superficial understandings or meanings. The second stance is described as "being inside and moving through the envisionment" (Langer, 2011, p. 18). In this stance, the reader's context, knowledge, and values are brought to bear on their interpretations of what is going on in the textworld. Readers call upon their experiences, for example, in understanding how a text is developing, what is going on with the plot and character development, and the meaning of particular events or interactions. A text's meaning, then, is influenced by the reader's life. Understandings (e.g., why a character made a certain decision) are shaped by certain aspects of the reader's background. Thoughts and opinions of a text's themes or lessons change as they relate to what the reader chooses to bring to the experience of reading the text.

Langer describes the third stance as "stepping out and rethinking what you know" (Langer, 2011, p. 19). While in the second stance the reader's background is what leads to understanding certain situations, in the third stance what occurs in the textworld causes the reader to reflect on their world and experiences. Therefore, the text causes readers to think about their own values and opinions and offers a different perspective or way to look at situations than how they did before reading. The fourth stance is called "stepping out and objectifying the experience" (Langer, 2011, p. 20). Here, readers look at a text analytically—that is, they step away from their own understandings to reconsider the text and their understandings from a distance. A text's structure or the author's craft becomes

Table 1

Langer's (2011) Envisionment-building Framework (Langer, 2011, p. 17-21)

Stance	Description
Stance I	being outside and stepping into the text (where the exploration of a text begins and predications and assumptions of what it will be about start)
Stance II	being inside and moving through the envisionment (where the reader's context and personal knowledge is immersed in the textworld and influences that understanding)
Stance III	stepping out and rethinking what one knows (what the content of the textworld makes the reader reflect on in their world and experiences)
Stance IV	stepping out and objectifying the experience (where the reader looks at the text analytically, looking at structure, the author's craft, and comparing it to other texts)
Stance V	leaving an envisionment and going beyond (where the reader might take on critical aspects of the text)

the focus; other texts are compared to the one at hand as well. It is by taking this analytical perspective that readers add more depth to their understandings. The fifth stance is referred to as "leaving an envisionment and going beyond" (Langer, 2011, p. 21). In this stance, readers take their well-established envisionments and use the knowledge gained from them to consider new and alternative ways to look at situations, which may be unrelated to the text.

According to Langer, there are two types of envisionments, the "local" and "final" one. The local one is the individual's total understanding of a text at that point in time. Local envisionments are critical to the final one, though some local ones are more crucial

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than others. For Langer (2011), each envisionment is qualitatively different from the other. She compares this difference to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, where the entity is in a different form at each stage, but still part of the whole. The final envisionment is arrived at when the text has been completely read. However, for Langer, final envisionments are elastic and can transform as individuals participate in additional literary practices that can potentially shape their emerging understandings and interpretations.

While Rosenblatt's scholarship allows me to understand how students' interpretations stem from the resources that they use as they transact with *Romeo and Juliet*, Langer's framework helps me look at the structure and purpose of different kinds of literature instruction. Drawing on both Rosenblatt and Langer, I examine how students' respond to and engage with text and what their teacher did to facilitate their responsiveness and engagement. I use Langer's envisionment-building framework to understand processes of interpretation and meaning-making that students engage in as they study a text—and their interpretations before, during, and after reading. The findings of this study extend Langer's work in two ways—by focusing on Latino students' understandings and perspectives on a piece of literature, but also by highlighting students' processes of meaning-making as they work to interpret *Romeo and Julie*t. This study shows the value of allowing students to draw on their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and histories as they interact with canonical texts

Meaning Making

Recently, adolescent literacy scholar Kylene Beers (2014) has expressed concern over the current emphasis on close reading and how it may affect students' meaning-

making processes. An exclusive focus on close reading means that other meaning-making strategies are left unexamined and undervalued. Key insights that adolescent literacy researchers (e.g., Beers, Probst, & Reif, 2007; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2008) have contributed to the field go beyond close reading as a strategy. Being able to connect with texts is significant (see Beltramo & Stillman, 2015; Short, 2014) for adolescents since they likely have their preferences toward reading and writing. Teachers, therefore, can work to build students' knowledge (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015) as well as interests (Beltramo & Stillman, 2015) in the literature to be taught so that students can read and learn about the literature and related concepts while also developing their literacy skills.

Close reading is a method used by the New Critics, whose literary movement was established in the 40s and 50s (Morner & Rausch, 1991). In their approach to literary criticism, the meaning of a text is in the text itself. The social and historical contexts of the writer and the reader are irrelevant to the interpretation of the text, as well as the writer's intentions for writing the text (Eagleton, 1996). As Beers (2014) describes, "[m]eaning, for a New Critic, resides in the text (not in the author's life or the historical era), and the reader's job is to hunt down that meaning, uncover it, and make sense of it" (p. 267). According to Coleman and Pimentel (2012), the authors of the Common Core State Standards, the standards "make plain that developing students' prowess at drawing knowledge from the text itself is the point of reading; reading well means gaining the maximum insight or knowledge possible from each source" (p. 1), which conflicts with philosophies of literature instruction and meaning making that teachers and scholars hold (e.g., Gee ,2012; Langer ,2011; Smagorinsky, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1965).

Teacher educators and literacy scholars (e.g., Burke, 2003; Galda & Beach, 2001; Probst, 2004) have encouraged teachers to use a variety of strategies to elicit students' interpretations of texts; however, students' experiences of texts and how meaning is made is essential for educators to understand as well. As Heath's (1983) study demonstrated, students do not enter schools with uniform literacy experiences. When students read a text in class, they will have differing meanings and reactions toward it. Langer (2011) explains that this variety is good:

> . . . most individuals have diverse experiences with literature, experiences that engage them in a variety of thinking. Any theory of literary understanding must encompass this variety, focusing on students as individual human beings—who are also members of various social and cultural groups—coming together as participants within the classroom community. (Langer, 2001, p. 49-50)

Smagorinsky (2001) has written that acultural ways of reading are not possible—that is, reading without being influenced by one's background. Langer (2011) also argues that "Each student is a complex individual belonging to any number of subcultures that can be identified by shared beliefs, mores, and ways of communicating and behaving" (p. 49). Another implication is that literature instruction should allow for multiple interpretations of a text while encouraging a variety of perspectives on and experiences of a text. Scholars have made other recommendations on how to improve the reading experience of students, such as promoting pleasure in reading (Newkirk, 2009), incorporating read alouds (Newkirk, 2012), and reading through theoretical lenses (Appleman, 2009). Beach (1995, 1993) has also offered teachers ways to understand students' responses to literature from a variety of textual response theories and models.

Rosenblatt (1978) reminds us that: "The findings of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (p. 14). Each reader will bring different experiences to the text, and so meanings will be multiple. Similarly, Langer (2011) views the literature classroom as a social environment where students learn from each other and can build envisionments (described above) with one another. She writes that "[t]he ways in which students use literature, their reasons for doing so, and the meanings they derive from their experiences depend on history and context" (Langer, 2011, p. 49). With these perspectives on meaning-making processes in mind, educators learn to validate students' ideas of text. That is, instead of trying to reach a single "correct" reading (Franzak, 2008) of a text, students are encouraged to consider multiple and emerging interpretations of that text.

Meaning does not reside solely in the text nor in the reader. According to Gee (2012), " . . . meaning is primarily the result of social interaction, negotiations, contestations, and agreements among people. It is inherently variable and social" (p. 21). Smagorinsky (2001) has described meaning making as an act of composition. While scholars have weighed in on meaning construction, Smagorinsky (2011) has argued for cultural readings which affirm that meaning:

> lies in the transactional zone and the kinds of processes and practices that readers engage in as they emplot the associations they make with the text with their broader life narrative, generating new texts that in turn make that narrative more comprehensible in terms of cultural and ideological drama that composes their life story and locates that story in a broader social community's political life. (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 163)

As is evident here, meaning is composed of several factors that make up the reading experience for students in classrooms. In addition to the role that the types of practices they use at home and at school, students' contexts (their cultures and communities) also play a role in the meaning that they construct from texts. Meaning is specific to the reader, and in essence, as Smagorinsky writes, they create a new story that involves the complex factors that make up their contexts.

A text's meaning is found, for example, as individuals discuss a text. Smagorinsky and Coppock (1995) described how meaning was negotiated between two students, and how it evolved in their planning and discussion to execute their interpretation of the text through dance. Although the students were given freedom to discuss the meaning they were making, Smagorinsky did note how the teacher influenced their interpretations (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995).

Other researchers have documented how individuals' interpretations can be influenced by other members' interpretations of texts, not just the teacher (Beach & Phinney, 1998). NewKirk (2012) recommends that teachers allow students to take ownership of meaning making for sections of texts by not overwhelming students with text-dependent questions. For Smagorinsky, individuals have "tool kits" that are called upon to make meaning and these tool kits are shaped by experience and background. Once students know that their tool kits are valued, they will demonstrate their meanings of texts in multiple ways (Smagorinksy & Coppock, 1995).

Recognizing the need to honor what students bring with them as individual readers, Wilhelm (1995) and Atwell (1998) have made suggestions on how to develop students' proclivity for reading. Both acknowledge that students' literature experience in

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school is not the same as recreational readings where it is based on pleasure and passions. For example, recreational reading does not need to be documented by class activities, quizzes that require memorization, or the writing of literary analysis papers. Atwell (1998) has provided guidance to teachers in using reading workshops and in providing students the choice to select their reading materials. Wilhelm (1995) has provided suggestions for creating a reader-centered classroom where teaching is purposeful and students are not viewed as deficit. In the same vein, in their respective books, Chadwick and Grassie (2016), Cherry-Paul and Johansen (2014), and Barnhouse and Vinton (2012) have provided teachers with approaches to teaching literature that align to current standards.

This body of research acknowledges and validates students' diverse and cultural backgrounds and argue that these varied backgrounds influence how students come to make meaning out of literature. This scholarship on meaning making is important for this study, as I investigate how students connect and make meaning out of a required text, *Romeo and Juliet*, which does not align to their diverse backgrounds. This scholarship will allow me to see students' interpretations as qualitatively unique and culturally influenced. In this way, reading is not accepted as acultural—that is, only one meaning is valued. This study draws on Rosenblatt's (1978) view where readers' roles shape meaning. It also adopts Langer's (1978) view that meaning is created as a community of learners.

In this section, I have explored scholarship regarding the canon, the teaching of Shakespearean works, on literature instruction, the various ways that readers make meaning out of texts, and the role of lived experience and personal reflection on that

process. Next, I discuss the theoretical framework on learning and literacy which guides this study.

Theoretical Framework

Learning in the English Classroom

For this study, I adopt a sociocultural view of learning where learners are understood as "embodied, situated, and social" (New London Group, 1996, p. 82). I also understand the classroom to be varied and diverse (Gallagher, 2009; Newkirk, 2009). As a result, teachers and students build from and enrich the curriculum based on their abilities, cultural backgrounds, and experiences. While the same content is taught, learning is specific to that community of learners. Understanding from one class to the next will not be the same. From this perspective, theories and accounts of learning require a recognition that students' and teachers' experiences and backgrounds contribute to their understandings of and experiences with literature (Langer, 2011). Gee (2012) writes that "[l]earning involves an active engagement with the world, with words, and with other people. It is not just about information. It is about actions, dialogue, producing knowledge, and changing ourselves and the world, as well" (p. 61). In this view, learning is social and influenced by a variety of factors and dynamics, which include the curriculum, the teacher, and the students in negotiation with each other as they discuss their knowledges to construct new knowledge. That is, learning is never independent of the social contexts in which it occurs. Students' cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and histories shape and influence their learning and what sense they make of school content. It is important that these are acknowledged when working with students whose backgrounds do not reflect those in the content they are exposed to.

Building on this sociocultural view of learning, I also adopt the view that learning should be built from students' backgrounds and existing resources—or their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). Teachers who serve a diverse demographic cannot solely rely on predetermined curricula to educate students. Instead, in these settings in particular, I view learning as organic, growing from students' needs and their histories (Langer, 2011; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). Diverse learners (whether they are labeled as mainstream, marginalized, ethnic, minority, or special needs) produce knowledge that is varied and shaped by their histories and worldviews, and they often demonstrate this knowledge in multiple ways and forms. Recognizing that each classroom and its students are unique, the New London Group (1996) has urged researchers to investigate the multiple modes that learners use to make meaning. These modes include the spatial, the visual, and the auditory. They coined the term *multiliteracies* to represent not only the multiple resources a learner brings and acquires but also a pedagogical approach that recognizes that language and modes of meaning are dynamic, in constant flux by users, and in service of multiple cultural purposes. For teachers who adopt this view, it follows that in each distinct learning environment, teaching is dynamic and multiple perspectives are valued and welcomed because they are necessary to supplement curriculum.

In this study, I accept that learning grows from students' needs and backgrounds, which allows me to complicate the framing of the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* in light of the students' demographics (i.e., their cultural backgrounds, personal histories, linguistic resources) and learning context. Because of my nuanced views of the classroom and the learning processes that facilitate students' understanding of texts in relation to

themselves and the world, I believe that no one method of learning works for all students. I have witnessed and want to explore further (with this study) the potential and utility of varied approaches to teaching the canonical text. Because the present study focuses on one class, it will illuminate how meaning is specific to this group of students.

Literacy

I also adopt a broad, sociocultural view of literacy, which has increasingly informed adolescent literacy research. In the introductory chapter of their *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy,* editors Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009) indicate that "[i]n today's world, literacy comprises so many competencies that even getting a grip on the construct can be a slippery process" (p. 5). Street (1984) and other researchers have critiqued the autonomous model—which views literacy as a neutral and individual process of decoding a text—and have called for a view that recognizes the ideological, social, and cultural underpinnings of literacy. For Street (1984), literacy is ideological and cultural. Therefore, it is complex and it is not characterized as a neutral set of skills that individuals learn. For him, students are socialized in educational institutions (and others such as church); for him, then, he is interested in studying those institutions and how individuals form values for those practices. The theoretical frameworks of New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Gee, 2012) and Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) have helped me identify and understand the literacy practices of youth and how students draw from their resources to demonstrate their understanding of text. I draw on insights from studies that use ethnographic methods to document individuals' sociocultural practices. For instance, in understanding adolescents and literacy, Alvermann (2009) offers the following:

Because many adolescents growing up in a digital world will find their own

reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading and writing to

acquire academic knowledge—it is important that teachers create opportunities

for them to engage actively in meaningful subject matter learning that both

extends and elaborates on the literacy practices they already possess and value.

(Alvermann, 2009, p. 24)

Adolescents' expectations of instruction, in particular that of literature, might not be met

at the outset in most traditional classrooms. For adolescent students, they might

participate in literacy practices that might not resemble academic ones. For these

students, blogging, reading comics, and writing personal poems (to name a few) have

purposeful functions. For instance, for them, creating a blog for an audience that will

respond might prove more authentic than more conventional kinds of academic literacy

practices, like writing a literary analysis paper that only the teacher will read. This

understanding of literacy—that students hold strengths that are not recognized in school

settings—allows me to understand the resources that students bring with them to their

learning of *Romeo and Juliet* in this class.

As Alvermann (2009) has pointed out, the autonomous model of literacy is still

prevalent in schools. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of students' literacy abilities may

be narrow or from a deficit perspective if they do not hold a broad understanding of

literacy. This broad understanding acknowledges the reading and writing that students do

at home in nonacademic spaces. While students might be viewed by their teachers as

disinterested in academic tasks but inclined toward out-of-school activities and

technology, it does not necessarily mean their literacy development has stopped. Gee and Hayes (2011) write:

> In our digital age there are many who claim that core skills associated with the literacy social formation are disappearing. Despite fears to the contrary, reading and writing are not dying. Most of digital media require reading and writing. (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 132)

Gee and Hayes (2011) point toward the deficit view that some teachers hold of students' literacy abilities because of the prevalence of technology. That is, because of technology, students might disregard traditional practices like reading a hard copy book or writing a letter by hand. However, while students might not be reading traditional, hard copy books, they are reading and writing in new ways in digital spaces, where they are able to consume a variety of material and participate in literacy practices that to them may seem more authentic. In these digital, nonacademic spaces, students can showcase their identities, personal lived experiences, and perspectives in ways that they cannot in academic spaces.

Without coopting students' out-of-school literacies (i.e., dismissing students' recreational, purposeful use of them to simply make them academic), teachers can acknowledge and build from what students already know. In literature classes, teachers might build from students' interests in blogging, for example, and have students create blogs from a characters' perspective—documenting what has been read. Teachers may also provide students alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding of a text by providing choice or enrichment. In these cases, a traditional essay on a book's main character might be supplemented with a rap or song that illustrates a student's same

understanding that would have been explained in an essay. With balance, a teacher can build from and refine students' at-home literacies while keeping them aligned to an assignments' standards and goals without coopting them. The literacy view that I adopt acknowledges students' literacy strengths. That is, the students are not viewed as deficit in literacy. Instead, this view accepts that students participate in literacy practices that may not align to school. For this study, then, this view allows me to understand how the teacher might build from students' existing literacy skills and draw on their backgrounds as they participate in practices that are academic in nature (and specifically related to the literature classroom).

In taking academic literacy into consideration, Beers (2003) has emphasized that in order for students to be successful with academic literacy, they need to learn to struggle with texts. In many ways, students need to learn to be biliterate—understanding how to read and write in school, but also drawing from their out-of-school literacies, without blurring the two (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Part of the struggle for students is learning to engage in academic activities that require sustained attention and learning to translate their out-of-school literacies into academic ones, which is not an easy task.

In the present study, I embrace this sociocultural view of literacy, because it helps me understand students' existing literacy repertoires as resources rather deficits. It views students as having language repertoires and linguistic resources to build on and advance in their academic contexts. These theories allow me to see how the teacher attempts to build from students' literacy in academic spaces by building on their existing literacy set (those literacy practices that come from home, from church, and that they participate in by choice) and strengths. In this way, I understand that literacy does not function in one

way—as an autonomous model that disregards outside factors. I view it as more complicated.

Taken together, these theories of literacy and learning inform my analysis of students' literacy, my views on the interpretative contributions of texts, and my understanding of how cultural backgrounds might influence meaning (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995). It informs the nuanced view I have of how students in one high school freshman English class explore *Romeo and Juliet*. A sociocultural view of learning and literacy provides a lens through which I examine how the teacher frames the text for students, how literacy practices have afforded students' various connections and ways to negotiate meaning, and how students' interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* might be embraced and utilized.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the debates regarding the canon in order to provide a rationale for this study and a focus. Following this overview, I provided a synopsis of recent narratives that ELA teachers and researchers have published in order to show that the teaching of canonical works, specifically those by Shakespeare, can (and perhaps should) involve teaching approaches and literacy practices that build on students' interests and cultural backgrounds. Because this dissertation explores and analyzes processes of meaning making, the co-constructed situated nature of such processes texts, and the role of certain literacy practices in learning, I also describe the sociocultural theories of learning and literacy stance and theoretical grounding that this study adopts.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I provide a description of the research site, the methodological orientations that inform what I did, how I did it, the methods of data collection and analysis that I used, and my positionality as a researcher. First, I provide context on the school. I provide a detailed account of Ms. Gravely, the participant teacher, and her teaching as well as teaching philosophy. (All names used are pseudonyms.) In addition to the class sample, I will provide my rationale in selecting focal students. I will offer biographical sketches of each of the six focal students who were selected and whose perspectives and work inform this study. Because this study is focused on students' interaction with one canonical work, *Romeo and Juliet*, I offer a brief description of the activities and goals of that unit (according to my observations and my conversations with the teacher). Next, I discuss the methodical orientations that guided this research. In my data collection section, I will describe what data I collected, how I collected that data, and what research questions are answered by the data collected. Finally, I discuss my methods of analysis, where I focus on the sociocultural underpinnings that inform this study.

Research Context

The study took place in one Freshman English language arts classroom, at a Title I school in a suburban district located in the Southwest region of the United States. The school had a population of around 2000 students, the majority being Latino (72%). Fifty-four percent of students qualified for free-or-reduced lunch. For the 2013-2014 school year, the state department of education assigned the school and district a grade of B, an

indicator of above-average performance. The school's graduation rate was around 80% that year.

In the 2010-2011 school year, the district began to incorporate technology upgrades on all of its campuses. All classrooms were equipped with computer projectors. Other technology included interactive projector boards, Wi-Fi access, and mobile computer laptop and iPad labs. As a result of this new equipment, the school had started to offer students and teachers multiple ways to access and integrate technology in the classroom.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

In the class I observed regularly, there were 26 freshmen: 17 males and 9 females, either 14 or 15 years old; African-American (4%), Latino (88%), and Caucasian (8%). All of these students scored at or below the fiftieth percentile on standardized reading measures. This class was classified as a mainstream or "regular" English class. The school offered an advanced English course and remedial reading courses at the freshman level.

The teacher for this study, Ms. Gravely, was in her second year of teaching. It was also her second year at this particular school. During the study, she taught three sections of mainstream freshman English and two sections of advanced (honors) sophomore English. Previously, she had taught mainstream freshman and sophomore English. This teacher was selected because she was willing to participate in the study and because I respected her as a teacher and colleague. The previous year, I had worked with her as I also taught freshman English. From meetings and conversations with her, I knew that she employed a variety of teaching methods to keep her students engaged with texts in her

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classroom. In her first year, she established herself as an effective teacher among administration and faculty. Along with building good rapport with her students, she was also comfortable with the school curriculum. As an added bonus, I was able to regularly observe her teach a section of freshman English because this class was held when I had a free period (for lesson prep). Therefore, I selected her because of her availability and willingness to participate in the study, as well as because of my confidence in her teaching and knowledge of content.

Ms. Gravely was in her mid-twenties and of Polish, Irish, and Albanian descent. She grew up in Illinois and attended a four-year liberal arts college located in Chicago. From there, she earned a bachelor's in secondary education English with a minor in special education. During an interview (informal conversation), I learned that she wanted to be a teacher from an early age but that her interest intensified during her studies as she became motivated to collaborate with students to help them recognize their potential and achieve personal success. She said that her teaching philosophy has focused on creating a "community of learners" in her classes where students leave with positive classroom memories. Ms. Gravely also said that it has been her priority to build a positive environment and trust in her classes. She maintained that building this type of learning environment helps students fully open themselves to learning. As a teacher, she said she believed students should be given autonomy in the classroom, that they should be provided choice in the literature they read, and they should be given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning of content. Ms. Gravely said that she embedded her interests in literary theory and gender equality in her instruction when it was relevant to the content. As an extracurricular responsibility, she established and

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sponsored a club at the school that discussed gender issues, which was new at the time of the study.

In my view, Ms. Gravely had a broad but still developing understanding of literacy. She seemed to recognize that reading traditional texts was important, but it was not necessarily the standard form of information or entertainment for individuals. I observed that she valued visual and media literacy and learned that she thought these were examples of mediums that should be considered alongside print literature in the English classroom. About literature and the canon, she said that in college she learned to value works that did not hold canonical status and that her professors focused on lesser known texts. She said she thought this experience taught her to question the canon rather than add to it or uphold its power. When reading a novel, for instance, she said she focused on the cultural influences surrounding it, the author's message, and the audience. I observed that in her teaching, she helped students understand the meaning behind characters' lines or gestures in *Romeo and Juliet* by building on text's historical context. Ms. Gravely told me that she intended to broaden her education by pursuing a graduate degree related to English, literacy, and education in the future.

With this study, I examine the teaching and learning practices that occurred when Ms. Gravely taught *Romeo & Juliet*. To provide context for the data analysis provided in the following three chapters, I describe what the focus and content of instruction was prior to the introduction of the unit on *Romeo and Juliet*. In the fall 2014 semester, the teacher taught short stories, a novel, and a nonfiction book, as required by the district for freshman English. She built a classroom environment where students learned as a community of learners, discussed relevant topics in relation to class content, and

demonstrated their knowledge in multiple ways. Concepts she taught included theme, plot, and figurative language for literature; and argumentation, audience, and persuasion for writing. She taught the novel *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) and selections from the nonfiction book *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Schlosser, 2001).

For *Speak*, a coming of age story of a ninth grader's experience in high school, the teacher often encouraged discussions in which students related their experiences to those of the main character Melinda. Students completed journal entries where they reflected on the book's themes, for instance, "sinking or swimming" in high school as related to their social, emotional, and academic experiences. As a final project for *Speak*, the students were able to apply the experiences and transitions they read about and also personally related to in their lives. They wrote their own coming of age story which detailed when they had realized they were no longer "little kids." They were required to include a valuable lesson and incorporate plot elements, which they had learned previously. In these ways, the teacher implemented a variety of methods to engage students with course content.

As a culminating project for *Fast Food Nation*, the teacher surveyed students regarding their favorite features of fast food restaurants. She shared these results with the students and then asked them to create a restaurant of their own. In addition to presenting their restaurants to the class, students were required to select a name and design a logo and billboard that would appeal and be purposeful to their target audience, fellow students. They described the atmosphere of the restaurant and its customer service. They selected menu items and assigned prices.

At the end of the first semester, students read a variety of short stories and poems to study figurative language and its use in those pieces. As a final project, students wrote their own creative piece of writing, which incorporated figurative language to describe their current classes and teachers. Through this creative piece, students demonstrated their understanding of figurative language.

In the spring 2015 semester, prior to introducing the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, Ms. Gravely taught the students *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945). She also introduced students to a spoken word poetry unit. Spoken word focuses on word use, and reading a poem aloud with intonation and inflection. While reading *Animal Farm*, students participated in a variety of activities, similar to *Speak*. For the spoken word unit, however, students were introduced to the history of spoken word, and they read variety of poems related to school, society, and self. Throughout this unit, students wrote three poems, each related to those topics. They were provided two opportunities to read their personal poems to the class, in spoken word form. Ms. Gravely, for example, turned the classroom lights off and placed a podium and fake microphone under one functioning light for students to read their poems from. Though their poems needed to be school appropriate, Ms. Gravely did not censure students' content.

Prior to the study, I learned (through conservations) that the teacher wanted to make her teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* more interactive for students. She based this decision on the experience she had the previous school year when she taught the text for the first time. She told me that during the previous year she found that students were more passive than active while reading the text. She expressed regret over the fact that she seemed to have to tell her students what her meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* was as she

walked students through the text, helping them understand the text at a surface level. For this school year (at the time of the study), her goal was to help students become active readers and learners while interacting with the text. She wanted students to think about the characters, think about their choices, think about topics related to the reading—in discussions and in writing.

The year prior to the study, Ms. Gravely and I had become good colleagues and friends. Throughout her first year of teaching, she regularly met with me and other close colleagues to talk about her teaching and about the challenges she faced in teaching the district curriculum. We discussed what we were doing in our classrooms with her as well. For example, we talked about what we had taught that week, how we had approached a text, and how it had worked out for us and our students. During these conversations, while discussing different ways to teach a particular text, I talked about my own experiences as a teacher—and my own shifts in how I view and think about teaching and the content we expose students to. In response, the teacher talked more openly about how she felt about the approaches she was using that were not drawing on students' interests and backgrounds as much as she would have liked. She also felt that these approaches did not allow students to read the text through ideological, gendered, and social class lenses. For example, she discussed her interests in literary theory and how she learned to incorporate such theories during her student teaching experience—theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. Throughout her first year, she slowly started to incorporate literary theory into her teaching.

In the year prior to the study, these conversations focused on *Romeo and Juliet* and other staple pieces of literature, as I was conceptualizing a study that would investigate a canonical work at that time. Although I did not tell the teacher exactly how to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, I know that she had picked up on some of the sociocultural principles I hold as I talked about my thoughts on teaching as they applied to the text. From conversations, I know that she incorporated teaching approaches from her own progressive education, in which she learned to draw on students' knowledges in learning. With sociocultural principles in mind from her own education and from our conversations, she wanted to create a learning situation for students where they were able to be more actively engaged with *Romeo and Juliet* compared to her first year of teaching. She wanted students to have the ability to think about their own interpretations and understandings and to continue to develop those as they read.

Focal Students

In consultation with Ms. Gravely and with my research questions and selection criteria as a guide, I invited six students from the class to participate in this study as focal students. A number of considerations informed the selection criteria and process. First, I needed students who would be willing to participate in the study and meet a few additional times after school for interviews and focus groups. I was also looking for students who were willing to actively contribute to class discussions. Third, I preferred students who I thought (based on my observations) would be likely to make insightful and critical comments in class and in their initial survey regarding ELA and literature. Finally, it was important to have students with good attendance who represented a range of readers and writers in the class (low and strong readers; passionate readers and atypical

readers). With these priorities as a guide, and taking input form Ms. Gravely into account, I invited three boys and three girls. Although we hoped our selection of focal students would represent the demographic of the classroom, our final selection included 5 Latinos and 1 Black student, with one of the students selected receiving special education services.

The names of the students selected (all pseudonyms) were Eric, Nick, Misael, Mia, Anita, and Diane. The six focal students represent a range of students whose backgrounds differed as well as their opinions of reading, writing, and the text *Romeo and Juliet*. Focal students represented a range of readers: There were students who were strong at sharing insights during discussions but whose writing lacked detail. There were resistant readers to the text but made insightful connections to the text especially in relation to their lived experiences. There were also athletes, students who kept to themselves, and students who were academically inclined. Below, I offer a brief biographical sketch of each focal student.

Eric. Eric was Latino. In class, he offered his thoughts and ideas on various topics that Ms. Gravely brought up, often referring to sections and quotes the class read during a class session. When I talked with him, he said that even though he did not think he needed a story like *Romeo and Juliet* to teach him lessons, he could see why it was important to read a text like it. Though he said that did not have a personal connection to the text, he often brought up aspects of his life as he came to understand the text, which he demonstrated in discussions or in writing. He said that the text was relevant to life and probably also to his classmates' lives as well as to individuals who were his age in general. Consistently, Eric expressed his admiration for Shakespeare's creativity and

intelligence, being able to create a story that hundreds of years later was still influential. Eric was considered a strong writer, but he often did not complete all assigned work.

Nick. Nick was also Latino. He played football in the fall and baseball in the spring and often talked about his athletic experience during class discussions. Throughout the unit, he often took on the role of Romeo during read-alouds and was an active participant in class. He also expressed a range of opinions. In one discussion regarding fate, two classmates had a disagreement over a comment regarding God's role in destiny. Nick was able to look at both of his classmates' opinions and offer his own as well. In his work, in interviews, and surveys, Nick expressed his interest in *Romeo and Juliet*. As he told me in an interview, he had read the text independently the year prior in middle school. He had therefore looked forward to re-reading the text in Ms. Gravely's freshman English class. Though his oral comments were considered insightful, his teacher thought that his writing lacked detail and she mentioned that he did not complete all assignments. He drew on his experiences as a freshman and Latino in his work.

Misael. Misael was Latino and mostly kept to himself during class sessions, preferring to work independently. He was open about not being a fan of English class. He said that he did not like to read, though he had come to like it more and more throughout the upper grades. He often described his dislike for the text *Romeo and Juliet*. He told me that he did not like that the story moved so quickly and lacked so much detail. He was enrolled in a drama class and was used to reading plays. Therefore, he did not find the reading to be difficult. He often read aloud in class as well. During class discussions, he often talked about his personal experiences, such as being an individual who had anger issues when he was younger. In one discussion, he said that he believed that individuals

could change as he had. He was soft-spoken, so it was often difficult to hear what he had to say, and sometimes if asked to restate his opinion, he would rather not repeat what he said, stating that his idea did not make sense anyway. In his work, such as the final essays that were required, he broached the topic of homosexuality in relation to themes prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*. In all, Misael proved to be a critical student of the text, of English Language Arts class, and of himself as well. His writing lacked detail, often misspelling words and writing in the incorrect tense.

Mia. Mia was an African-American student. She was involved in cheer and was often very involved in her work. During class discussions, she often described her opinions of love and connections that she made to the text. There were times where she would make statements that caused a reaction from classmates. For example, in one conversation, she talked about her thoughts on what a woman needs in a man. She had no problem talking about her opinions on matters that she did not agree with, such as when the class discussed the nurse's role in raising Juliet. Mia did not care for the idea of other women raising other people's children and breastfeeding them. In an interview, she told me that the opportunities to discuss ideas with others and gain their perspectives had actually changed her perspective on what she thought men wanted in women, since she was able to hear what the boys in the class had to say. In her work, Mia demonstrated her ability to connect with the text with her own experiences. She was able to express herself well in writing, though there were often grammatical and spelling errors in it. Though she found the text to be challenging to read, she made connections that were relevant to the themes persistent in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Anita. Anita was Latina and mostly concentrated on her studies and was not part of any extracurricular activities. In class, she often talked about her thoughts on topics and sections read. Anita provided a critical look and often challenged students' ideas. For instance, while Ms. Gravely and classmates' noted their dislike for the character Paris (who is in his mid-twenties) and his wish to marry Juliet who is 13 years old, Anita said that during that time, it was acceptable to marry those who were that young in age. Although she did not always go against others' ideas, she did take on a different perspective in looking at the text. She had no problem sharing these ideas, even if it might upset her classmates. Even though she was likely to say insightful thoughts in class, her writing lacked detail. In focus groups, she described her preference toward the film versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, but did tell me that she often got confused as it felt as if they were reading a different book (that is, the movie was a different book).

Diane. Diane was Latina and an outspoken student in class and often volunteered to read aloud. She was an animated reader, often taking on Ms. Gravely's directions on how to sound as she read a line. In class, Diane would enthusiastically agree with Ms. Gravely's points and observations of *Romeo and Juliet*. In class discussions, she talked about her instant reactions toward scenes. She also said her thoughts on her classmates' ideas. She was a hard working student and who consistently approached assignments with enthusiasm and asked questions regarding her ideas as needed. In interviews and surveys, she told me that she appreciated the text *Romeo and Juliet* and that it offered lessons for freshman to learn from. During class, she said that she often related the text to her own experiences. In her writing, Diane was rather detailed. As she wrote, she pulled extensively from quotes from the text. She embedded her own perspective as she thought

about what the text meant to her. In all, she was a motivated reader and learner. Her attendance to class, however, was inconsistent throughout the study.

Unit Description

This class was selected to participate in this study because they would be reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in their ninth-grade English class. The unit on *Romeo and Juliet* lasted seven weeks. Throughout this unit, students learned about Shakespeare, the time period he lived in, and the genre of dramas. Students participated in a variety of activities prior to and during the reading of the text in order to build prior knowledge of the text or sections to be read. Academic exercises included short writes and other activities addressing the themes of love and feuds within and between families. These themes were revisited throughout the unit as students read, discussed, and wrote about the text. Students read the text in a variety of ways: whole-class, independently, in pairs, or in groups. Students participated in close readings of sections of the play as well as a variety of meaning-making activities. The teacher explored topics and issues pertinent to the text, including gender. Throughout the play, students saw film clips from the 1968 version by Franco Zeffirelli; the 1996 version by Baz Luhrman; and the 2013 version by Carlo Carlei.

As students read through the play, they created their own renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*. In this project, students were able to recreate and modernize the plot, characters, and setting. Students had multiple opportunities to talk about their ideas regarding topics that were related to that day's reading selection. Ms. Gravely typically had students write

Table 2

Assignments and activities for *Romeo and Juliet*[1]

Assignment and Activity Type	Name of Assignment
Guides (annotations, guiding questions, significant quotes)	Act II Reading & Film Guide Act III Study Questions & Freytag's Theory of Tragedy (Part I) Act III Study Questions (Part II) '96 *Romeo and Juliet* Film Guide Act IV Study Guide Act V Study Guide
Building Context	*Romeo and Juliet* Guided Notes (Shakespeare and time period) Anticipatory Guide
Close Reading	Prologue Who is Queen Mab
Assessment	Act I Quiz Act II Quiz Act III Quiz Act IV & V Quiz Literary Analysis *Romeo and Juliet* Unit Summative
Meaning Making	Love Connections Act I Important Quotes Act II Juliet's Speech (Night and Imagery)
Meaning and Creativity	Movie Pitch Balcony Scene Journal Entries
Topics to Write About and Discuss	Fate and Dreamers Being Born Good or Bad Men vs. Women Falling in Love A Time You Were Angry
Reflection	You as Romeo and Juliet Text Reflection (Graphic novel, text, and film) '96 *Romeo and Juliet* Film Critique

[1]In Table 2, I list activities that did not count as the 25 which were required to be turned in for credit. For example, Topics to Write About and Discuss were talked about in class, and the teacher did not give credit to students for saying ideas out loud.

out their ideas and then were able to discuss these with the class. Students also discussed key quotes or themes in the sections being read for a class session, noting the meaning and significance that these had.

The *Romeo and Juliet* unit class lasted approximately seven weeks. Over the course of the unit, students completed 25 assignments, including quizzes, essays, and guides (see Table 2). Reading the text together and out loud was a main instructional approach that the teacher used. Literacy practices, such as students talking about the meaning of quotes, were embedded across instructional practices.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design and drew on ethnographic methods. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) write that "the task of the ethnographer is not to determine 'the truth' but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives" (p. 3). In this study, I did not intend to find a solution, a problem, or a best practices approach to how students make meaning out of canonical texts. Instead, I wanted to delve deeper in gaining "understandings about a particular situation" (Stake, 2008, p. 65). That is, I wanted to enter a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a classroom, to see what happens when students interact with canonical texts in this context. This orientation of research also allowed me to interview students, represent their voices, collect artifacts, and document the context of the classroom from my own interpretive perspective.

During this study, I had three roles: researcher, a fellow teacher, and colleague. Because of my role as teacher and researcher in this research, I drew on the strengths of teacher research, which empowers educators to draw on their emic perspectives of classroom experience to develop conceptual frameworks for teaching and conducting

research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This type of inquiry acknowledges and builds upon diverse settings, experiences, and communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) by systematically documenting teacher practices to better understand effective teaching as well as students' needs and processes of learning (Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waff, 2009). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) believe that this line of research "is a powerful way for teachers to understand how they and their students construct and reconstruct the curriculum" (p. 51), in learning "what counts as knowledge in the classroom, who can have knowledge, and how knowledge can be generated, challenged, and evaluated" (p. 45) at this local level. Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, and Waff (2009) hold that because teacher researchers are "more systematically grounded in practice" (p. 3) they are critical of others' theories of learning. They add that because teachers work with young people for longer periods of time, they have "special privileged insight and knowledge (p. 3). Therefore, teacher researchers' work is important for administrators and policy makers to recognize because teacher researchers are able to document and analyze local knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Data Collection

Data were collected throughout the second semester of the 2014-2015 school year (February 2015 through May 2015). Data such as observational fieldnotes, transcripts of audio recorded class sessions, interviews, students' work, and classroom artifacts, allowed me to answer questions regarding the instructional approaches the teacher used and the literacy practices that she implemented. (See Table 3 for information on data collection.) These data also allowed me to analyze students' interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* which they arrived at through discussion and in their work. The theoretical

framework I adopt that learning is situated and that literacy should draw on students'

strengths as well as cultural backgrounds and values allowed me to answer my research

questions in a nuanced way that was specific to this group of learners. All interviews and

focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Class sessions were audio

recorded when the teacher intended to read *Romeo and Juliet* and students were going to

be provided an opportunity to talk about their insights.

Table 3
Classroom Data Collection

Data Collection Technique	Amount of Data
(February-March 2015—Poetry Unit)	
Observational Fieldnotes 51 pages	8 class sessions
(March-May 2015—Romeo and Juliet Unit)	
Observational field notes 97 pages	19 class sessions
Class audio recording 210 pages of transcribed excerpts	16 class sessions

The first data source was a survey[2] (Appendix F) containing seven open-ended

questions administered to students to gather demographic information and perspectives of

English classes and on literature and instruction. The surveys provided data that allowed

[2] In fall 2014, the survey was piloted in four sections of freshman English to determine its utility. Two colleagues (one being the participant teacher) and I surveyed our classes (excluding the sample class in this study). Overall, we found that students were unclear on three questions; in particular, the terms "texts" and "insight" were vague to students. These terms were clarified in the revised survey.

me to compile students' profiles as readers and learners. For example, students were asked to describe and indicate what they looked forward to learning in freshman English for the spring semester. To gain a general sense of students' stances toward literacy and learning in English classes, they were asked to describe and indicate the kinds of texts they liked to study, the types of learning experiences they typically enjoyed, and the ways that they liked to explore literature.

To complement students' surveys and provide an understanding of their literacy backgrounds, I collected a two-page literacy autobiography from students (assigned by their teacher and in response to prompts in Appendix G) in which they described their earliest memories of reading at home and at school; the first book they completed reading; the types of books they might enjoy now and why; and their inclinations toward reading, including struggles and accomplishments. They also depicted this essay through a project titled "My Literacy Journey" that included a timeline with visuals.

At the end of the unit, students completed an end-of-unit reflection (again, assigned by the teacher and in response to prompts in Appendix H) on their learning experience of the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. They were asked to highlight activities they enjoyed, found meaningful, and that enhanced their experience of *Romeo and Juliet.* They were asked to think about what they took away from the text and how knowledge of it might relate to their future. These reflections captured students' perspectives on the unit. They also complemented what students said about *Romeo and Juliet* and the literacy practices they engaged in while they made meaning of it. These data complemented my fieldnotes and my own hunches on the literacy practices students participated in during the study.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with students to talk to focal students one-on-one to gain deeper insight into comments and opinions they described in their survey or literacy autobiography. With each focal student, I had one interview that lasted 20-30 minutes. During these interviews, I asked students to elaborate on or clarify my understanding of observations I had made during class or discussions that were transcribed. If I had questions regarding connections they made in the work they produced, I asked them during these interviews. In these ways, I was simultaneously collecting more data and conducting a member-check on my analysis of already collected data.

I held two focus groups during the study (conducted with focal students only): one during the unit and one after it was completed. These meetings lasted thirty minutes. The focus groups provided students an opportunity to discuss the topics related to literature and instruction and to hear insights from other focal students. These meetings allowed me to hear multiple perspectives from students. I also checked my understanding of emerging patterns and solicited additional input and feedback from my interpretations. For example, I asked Nick to confirm how he was able to take other students' perspectives into consideration as he voiced his own in class. In an interview, I specifically asked him to tell me more about a time when he offered a balanced opinion in a conversation related to fate, where Ethan and Joseph disagreed over God's role in fate. Another example is when I asked Mia to tell me more about a class discussion in which she shared her thoughts on males who are concerned with their looks. She told me that this discussion had changed her perspective because the boys in the class discussed their thoughts on the matter and she reconsidered her initial ideas on this issue after this

discussion. The first focus group discussed how the unit was progressing. During the last focus group, students were asked about their thoughts on learning about canonical works, such as what value they found in learning about Shakespeare's time and *Romeo and Juliet*. I triangulated these data with my fieldnotes, as well as student surveys, in order to understand what students said about *Romeo and Juliet* and literacy practices.

I had informal conversations with the teacher (Appendix I) throughout the study regarding the progress of the unit, the connections and insights that students were making with the text, and her thoughts on teaching the canon in general and this text in particular. These informal conversations took place biweekly prior to the *Romeo and Juliet* unit and then weekly during the unit. Conversations occurred when and as needed, and when and as the teacher initiated them. The teacher and I met after school to discuss events in the class that stood out. For example, early in the semester, we were struck by the students' discussion of fate. The teacher and I talked about how students were drawing on one another's ideas in their discussion. This conversation allowed me to ask the teacher if she had taught students to interact this way with one another in previous units. At other meetings, the teacher talked to me about how she was going to modify assignments based on students' needs and scheduling. These conversations allowed me to ask questions regarding her rationale for changes. During these times, she also told me about her teacher's journal and what insights and challenges related to the unit she was writing in it. I also interviewed the teacher when I needed to confirm my understanding of what was going on; in that process, I learned more about her goals, her discoveries, her decisions, and her questions. These conversations illuminated the choices she had made in terms of instructional approaches and what sections of the text she had highlighted. During these

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interviews, I asked her to elaborate, clarify, or member check observations, discussions, or transcriptions. These data provided insights into the teacher's conceptions of language, literacy, and learning (e.g., whole language, constructivist). Data complemented observational field notes and my own understandings of her decisions in implementing particular instructional modes.

The study focused on one class to allow for multiple visits (at least three) per week, allowing me to provide a thick description of the classroom (Geertz, 1973). I began to observe students in late February once I had gotten clearance from the district superintendent and the university's IRB office. I took field notes of the teacher's instruction to note the teaching practices that were being embedded, the types of activities students were partaking in, and the types of supplemental materials that were used in conjunction with the text. Students' interactions in whole-group instruction were documented, taking note of the insights they discussed, whose ideas were taken up by the teacher and other students, and how the teacher elicited class participation. I also documented students' interaction when they worked independently or with others. I observed the classroom a total of 27 times in which I took field notes. Nineteen of these sessions were for the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. Prior to the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, I observed Ms. Gravely's class eight times as they completed their spoken word unit. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), "such writing is an interpretative process: it is the very first act of textualizing" (p. 16). In this sense, as researchers, we are in the act of analyzing as we observe and document what we see occurring in the classroom. What we document shows our decisions as to what events, actions, and participants we focused on and which held meaning for us in the moment.

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In addition to field notes, 16 class sessions pertaining to the *Romeo and Juliet* unit were audio recorded and excerpts were transcribed from these. My niece assisted me in transcribing these data. I listened to all audio recordings of class sessions and indexed what sections I wanted to be transcribed. These were typed out by my niece, and I then listened to the audio recordings again to confirm and edit them as needed. These data only reflected what the teacher and students said in class, and did not detail students' tone, inflections, or the exact amount of time between utterances. These data allowed me to confirm events in my fieldnotes that I found interesting and that struck me, such as an insight that a student made. As a participant observer, I was sometimes focused on a particular student, reading an assignment, or writing down a significant event in the classroom, so there were other instances of students' talk that I may have missed. The audio recordings allowed me to hear students' talk about the canonical text that I had not heard while observing. From these audio recordings, I transcribed when students talked about the canonical text, such as when they made connections, asked questions, or talked about their insights. I also transcribed when the teacher talked about the text, such as when she framed the text, made comments regarding the text, and asked questions of the students. Enriching my fieldnotes, I was able to analyze students' discussions, students' interpretations discussed in class, and the teacher's comments about the text.

I also collected documents in order to understand how the teacher and students negotiated meaning. These included classroom artifacts, such as unit plans, daily lesson plans, and a teacher's journal. Students' assignments, such as essays, quizzes, reactions to prompts, interpretative drawings, and responses to literature questions, were included as well. These data complemented my field notes of class observations, as well as the

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teacher's and students' impressions of literature learning in the classroom gathered by interviews and focus groups. These documents lent insight into how the teacher framed *Romeo and Juliet* and when and why she employed particular modes of instruction and literacy practices.

Throughout all phases of data collection and analysis, I kept a researcher's journal that contained insights and questions about observations, challenges, and realizations that occurred throughout the study. Because I was a teacher at the same school and taught the same grade level and content as the participant teacher, this journal allowed me to document my emic and etic stances and to consider, in particular, how my familiarity with the site, faculty, and content of teaching might blur what I was already familiar with. I had to work to "make the familiar strange" whenever I observed the teacher's classroom because we had similar teaching philosophies. With the journal, I not only documented the journey I took as a researcher, I imposed an analytic gaze on these reflections and observations. As I attempted to make what was familiar to me unfamiliar, I began to understand the value of seeing everyday practices through a new lens. I also talked to a researcher colleague on a regular basis about what I was observing and noticing. This individual provided a slightly removed but informed view of what I was describing and experiencing.

Data Analysis

I draw on Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory that views reading as an event in which the reader and the text come together. During this time, readers' draw on their resources—which include their memory, thought, and feelings. For Rosenblatt, when the reader and text come together, this experience creates a "poem." Therefore, it is an active

process, but one that is not linear. As Rosenblatt writes, "To again bring a poem into being requires always a reader . . ." (p. 15). The process of meaning making, then, is specific to the reader. I also used Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework as an analytical tool in looking at students' interpretive data, which included insights said aloud or in writing. Langer defines an envisionment as "the world of understanding a particular person has at a given point in time" (p. 10) as it pertains to a text. Envisionments "are a function of one's personal and cultural experiences, one's relationship to the current experience, what one knows, how one feels, and what one is after" (p. 10). An interpretation will likely change as the student engages in further literary practices and also discusses texts with classmates. The sociocultural underpinnings of this framework allowed me to focus on the ways that students' backgrounds, experiences, and cultures influenced their process of reading and developing new understandings of literature. Elements from her envisionment-building framework also helped me in understanding how Ms. Gravely framed *Romeo and Juliet* for students, the literacy practices that were implemented, and the modes of instruction and interaction that took place in this classroom context.

Langer (2011), Gee (2011), and Smagorinsky (2001) remind us that meaning is constructed through interaction with others. Hearing others' perspectives on literature provides students an opportunity to enrich and challenge their own ideas (Langer, 2011). Langer's (2011) principles for her envisionment-building classroom are: 1) that literature is thought provoking and 2) that all individuals are perceived as capable and competent thinkers. Literature is for exploration and generating multiple questions and ideas, not a search for finite answers. Teachers' and students' ideas are not to "direct" thinking but to

"stimulate" it (Langer, 2011, p. 87). Multiple perspectives on literature enrich students' thinking.

Langer tells us that an envisionment is a student's complete understanding of a text at that moment in time. Langer divides envisionments into five stances. I will briefly describe those here, though I have included a more detailed discussion of these stances in Chapter 5 where I look at students' interpretations. These stances include:

> 1) being outside and stepping into the text (where the exploration of a text begins and predications and assumptions of what it will be about start);
>
> 2) being inside and moving through the envisionment (where the reader's context and personal knowledge is immersed in the textworld and influences that understanding);
>
> 3) stepping out and rethinking what one knows (what the content of the textworld makes the reader reflect on in their world and experiences);
>
> 4) stepping out and objectifying the experience (where the reader looks at the text analytically, looking at structure, the author's craft, and comparing it to other texts); and
>
> 5) leaving an envisionment and going beyond (where the reader might take on critical aspects of the text) (Langer, 2011, p. 17-21).

These stances allowed me to understand students' interpretations as fluid, with the potential to further develop during interactions with the teacher and classmates. Because envisionments are personal to the individual, this tool helped me look at students' interpretative data by allowing me to note their knowledges and understandings in qualitatively unique ways. That is, I was able to consider their backgrounds, interests, and

histories that they embedded in their work, and see how that shaped the insights they made with *Romeo and Juliet*.

I examined data I collected, such as field notes, transcribed excerpts of class sessions, focus groups and interviews, and classroom artifacts using the sociocultural principles underscored in Rosenblatt's (1978), Langer's (2011) and others' (Gee, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2001) work. Data, such as interviews and end-of-unit reflections, were analyzed by thematic analysis (Patton, 1991). To address each research question, I read and re-read data that I collected for themes and patterns that emerged that were related to instructional approaches, literacy practices, and types of understandings that the students made with *Romeo and Juliet* (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Themes emerged as I revisited my fieldnotes with my theoretical framework in mind. As I listened to audio recordings of class sessions, I noted sections I wanted to transcribe because they offered the teacher's and students' understandings and perspectives of *Romeo and Juliet*. As I listened to the audio recordings for the first time, I made notes on the teacher's and students' comments that offered perspectives that reflected aspects of the teacher and students, such as their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. As I re-listened to audio recordings to confirm and edit the transcripts, I continued to note insights students said that stood out to me where they drew from their resources (cultural backgrounds, personal histories, experiences, and values). I also compared these instances that struck me while transcribing audio recording with my fieldnotes and students' work as needed. As I revisited the data for multiple purposes (editing, analyzing) and I read printed transcripts and coded and made annotations, it became more apparent how students'

backgrounds and experiences, for example, were embedded in their comments on the *Romeo and Juliet*.

I printed class session transcript excerpts and interview and focus group transcripts for each of this study's three research questions. These data were put into binders—one binder for each question. These data were read multiple times—once to confirm and edit; another time to read with a research question in mind; a second time to confirm those codes and annotations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As I read data again for another research question, I also noted sections that I thought were relevant to a previous question I had already looked at or a future one. I made notes to myself on notepads or post-it notes so that I could revisit sections that struck me and that I wanted to note in specific binders of data. As I read and developed codes, I also used different colors to represent those codes for each question. I created legends that I could then revisit as I analyzed data and wrote my findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Codes for themes were created inductively from the data and deductively from principles of the theoretical framework. This process allowed me to notice any patterns in the data that were interesting and that could potentially be substantial once applied to the theoretical framework. For instance, in my first reading of the data, I highlighted the teacher's questions regarding *Romeo and Juliet*. In my next readings, I applied my theoretical framework to analyze how these questions allowed students to draw on their backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and values

In analyzing the data for the first research question regarding the modes of instruction, four themes emerged: assessment, brainstorming and sharing, learning, and

reading. As I read and reread field notes and transcript excerpts or audio recorded class sessions, I created codes such as "film clip," "teacher elicits students' responses," and "independent reading." In reading interviews and focus group transcripts, I then looked for instances in which these codes emerged in those data. I followed the same pattern for the second question regarding literacy practices. However, I noted the literacy practices focal students brought up, such as creating their own rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, reading, sharing, and discussing their ideas as a class, filling out their notable quotes sheet.

In analyzing students' artifacts, such as quizzes, essays, and ideas discussed in class for the third research question, I also read and reread students' data, annotating textual themes and students' backgrounds and experiences that emerged in their interpretations. I noted how these understandings and insights were in concert with students' experiences, observations, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories. I relied on Rosenblatt (1978) who argues that readers draw on their resources and make meaning of the text which for her is specific to that time and place. Relying on Langer's five stances, I analyzed these responses for where they fell within her framework. In this way, I was able to understand each response in a unique way, understanding that it was demonstrating multiple interpretations of the text. That is, I did not look for a "correct" reading of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a description of the research site, the methodological orientations that inform what I did, how I did it, the methods of data collection and analysis that I used, and my positionality as a researcher. First, I provided context on the

school site. I also provided a detailed account of Ms. Gravely, the participant teacher, and her teaching as well as teaching philosophy. In addition to the class sample, I provided my rationale in selecting focal students. I also offered biographical sketches of each of the six focal students who were selected and whose perspectives and work inform this study. I also offered a brief description of the activities and goals of that unit (according to my observations and my conversations with the teacher). Next, I discussed the methodical orientations that guided this research. In my data collection section, I described what data I collected, how I collected that data, and what research questions are answered by the data collected. Finally, I explained my methods of analysis, where I focused on the sociocultural underpinnings that inform this study. While there were 26 students enrolled in Ms. Gravely's sixth hour freshman English class, these were the six students who I felt would offer a perspective of the text and their learning experience that would give this study substance. Though I selected them for various reasons and strengths, they were not exemplar students of the classroom. That is to say, they represented the average, everyday adolescent, high school freshman student. They were absent for class sessions. They did not complete all of their required assignments. Some days they were not up for sharing or saying much regarding the text in class, in interviews, or focus groups.

CHAPTER 4

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AND LITERACY PRACTICES CONDUCIVE TO

LEARNING ABOUT CANONICAL LITERATURE

In this study, one key finding was that the teacher's instructional practices

(pedagogical choices) facilitated certain literacy practices, certain engagements with the

text, and certain learning practices. The instructional and literacy practices embedded

throughout the unit allowed students to form as a community of learners as they drew

from their own ideas (as well as their teacher's and peers') and rely on their personal

backgrounds, lived experiences, and individual or community values. In these ways,

students had multiple perspectives and resources to consider while negotiating meanings

encountered while reading *Romeo & Juliet*. Relying on a sociocultural understanding of

literacy and learning, I analyze a variety of data to illustrate this finding.

I will examine the instructional approaches that the teacher used and analyze her

views and comments on her practices. I will discuss what Ms. Gravely did before

students engaged in reading (e.g., students responding and discussing their ideas to

current, relevant topics related to *Romeo and Juliet*). I will show how the consistent use

of this practice provided students the ability to consider their own opinions and hear those

of others. These multiple perspectives then provided students alternative viewpoints to

wrestle with as they made meaning of the text. I will describe and analyze other

instructional approaches that Ms. Gravely used during reading. For instance, the teacher

scaffolded the students' understanding of the text by making processes of meaning

making explicit, and this was often achieved by reading sections of the text out loud

together as a class. I will demonstrate how her use of whole class reading, while a

traditional method of teaching literature, was productive in guiding students through the text, providing them an opportunity to discuss their perspectives and gain those of others. Whole class reading, I will show, also allowed Ms. Gravely to model and show her own meaning-making processes. Finally, I will demonstrate how the film versions that Ms. Gravely showed students allowed them to enrich their reading of the canonical text. The films, I will show, provided students additional interpretations of the play for them to consider as their understandings continued to develop.

I will identify and examine the literacy practices that students participated in and their perspectives on those practices. Because reading together as a class was an integral aspect of Ms. Gravely's classroom, I will discuss what students did during this time and show how students came to rely on one another and their teacher to negotiate meaning. I describe routines they learned to use, such as referencing the textbook's resources, in relation to their own observations on what quotes meant. I analyze students' perspectives on the use of multimodal literacies, as well. In addition to reading, students had opportunities to draw or illustrate their interpretations of the text. I will provide examples of their work. As students also viewed films, I will show how the films they experienced provided additional perspectives that they could draw on as they negotiated meaning during reading. The films were opportunities for students to confirm and enrich their developing understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. Finally, students were able to write their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. I will examine students' perspectives on these creative renditions and describe students' creative processes as they collaborated with their peers. I will demonstrate how students embedded elements of the original text's while drawing

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on their own backgrounds, values, and worldviews as they participated in these literacy practices.

With the advent of the Common Core literacy standards, recently published scholarly articles and books (e.g., Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2013) on English language arts teaching practices have offered teachers methods to use with students as they explore a text in order to better prepare them for future careers and college. Many of these methods have incorporated close reading practices (see literature review section for a detailed discussion) that have isolated the meaning of a text to what is on the page and that do not call for the dissemination of ideas among a class of learners. Literature, Langer (2011) states, should be experienced as a community of learners. It is during this time where students' perspectives are discussed and their understandings of a text develop because of the teacher's and fellow students' insights. As she explains, interpretation is shaped from page to page until the text is read in its entirety. Even at the end of a story, a final interpretation is still elastic and can change for an individual, based on ideas talked about by others. Rosenblatt (1978) tells us that the reading of a text is a transaction that involves the reader, the text, and the context. I will argue, however, that this transaction assumes that students willingly approach a text. A text's difficulty and complexity, for example, will influence whether some students choose to engage with it, thus determining if any understanding is made at all. Ms. Gravely's instruction involved approaches that were intended to support and foster students' understanding, thus making the literature experience meaningful and accessible for students.

Context: Reading *Romeo and Juliet*

On the first day of reading Act I of the text, Ms. Gravely had written the names of characters on the white board, located at the front of the classroom. Each day after when students would be reading out loud and together, she continued to write characters' names on the board so that students could put their names next to a character's name (to indicate their desire to play that part when the text was read aloud). Students had the choice to play the part of Romeo, Juliet, or Lord Capulet (to name a few main characters for the reading) for that class session. As I sat in the back of the classroom, waiting for the bell to ring and for class to start, I saw many students go to the board with enthusiasm. Some would write their names. Some would write their names, sit down, and then return to the board again right before the final bell rang to erase their names and write their name next to a different character. In a few cases, students would erase their names permanently, perhaps deciding they did not want to read that day after all.

Throughout the reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms. Gravely sat at the front of the class, guiding students through the text, helping them pronounce a word; suggesting a way to sound as they read a line; highlighting sections of the text that were important or that were difficult for students to understand; and eliciting students' ideas and connections with the text as they read. Ms. Gravely read as well, choosing to be the character who had the longest reading parts for that class session. Regularly, Ms. Gravely showed students film scenes prior to or after reading. This way of experiencing the text ensued for the rest of the *Romeo and Juliet* unit.

Instructional Approaches and Literacy Practices

This chapter is organized by the teacher's instructional approaches used to teach *Romeo and Juliet*. I first examine an instructional approach, and then I follow up with an examination of the students' practices and perspectives on the approach and literacy practices they participate in. That is, first I analyze what the teacher does, and then analyze what the students do and say about those approaches and practices. Relying on a sociocultural understanding of learning, I draw from my observational fieldnotes, excerpts of classroom transcript, the teacher's journal, and students' end-of-unit reflections to provide a nuanced view of the potential Ms. Gravely's instructional approaches had in exposing students to multiple and possible interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as eliciting multiple perspectives from students. These practices were established as routines in the classroom in ways that contributed to a community of learners. The routine use of these practices also helped students negotiate meaning. For the students' practices and perspectives on approaches and literacy practices, I will use documents I collected, such as students' work, and I draw on fieldnotes as well as interview and focus group transcripts to illustrate the variety of literacy practices that students participated in as they read *Romeo and Juliet*. I will discuss what students said about these literacy practices with a focus on what they said about the role of such practices in sense-making. I will analyze students' use of particular literacy practices through a sociocultural lens, and I will show that at least some students understood that through the activities that they participated in, they were expected to draw from their experiences.

As I will illustrate in the following pages, students were provided multiple opportunities in which they were able negotiate the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*, gaining multiple interpretations to compare to and enrich their own. As Nick told me, "since everyone's bringing in all these ideas, it helps me to like create one big one with all their ideas" (interview, 5-5-15). His comment reveals the reliance on one another that students came to expect in this community of learners. Eric explained that if he had read the story by himself and only been exposed to the canonical version, he would have understood it in a different way. In his words, the story "would've been completely different" (focus group, 5-19-15). Eric's comment alludes to the literacy practices Ms. Gravley incorporated, which provided an outlet for ideas to be presented in multiple forms, discussion, drawing, and creative writing. Reading together, sharing and discussing ideas, and experiencing films of *Romeo and Juliet* allowed for multiple vantage points that allowed for students to enrich their understandings of the text by first reading and then revisiting scenes routinely.

Whole Class Reading

Before Reading

On four occasions, Ms. Gravely offered students prompts (questions or statements) which gave students the ability to think about *Romeo and Juliet* prior to that day's reading. Students formulated responses in writing and then discussed them. These prompts drew on students' opinions and experiences regarding general topics that were particularly prominent in *Romeo and Juliet*. Prompts included: 1) Is being a dreamer good? And do you believe in fate? (fieldnotes, 3-31-15), 2) Agreeing or not with the statement: "Men fall in love through their eyes and women fall in love through their

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ears"[3] (fieldnotes, 4-2-15); 3) Are we born good or evil? (fieldnotes, 4-24-15); and 4) Describe a time you got angry and reacted without thinking (fieldnotes, 4-27-15). Ms. Gravely typically provided students about 3-5 minutes to brainstorm their ideas in writing before she would ask them to talk about their perspectives in front of their peers. In their written responses, the teacher encouraged students to think about their opinions and feelings about the topic. As students talked and as I observed, Ms. Gravely asked students to elaborate on what they said; she acknowledged or validated what they told the class; or she assisted them in making their points clearer. Students replied to one another—sometimes in agreement or in disagreement. With the examples that follow, I will illustrate these instances where Ms. Gravely fostered this community of learners where meaning was built together from varied and multiple perspectives.

In one class session, when the topic of dreamers and fate was being discussed, two students had a disagreement over one another's opinions. In this interaction, Ethan and Joseph got into a discussion of religion and expressed different opinions. Ethan said that he did not believe in fate, maintaining that individuals chose their fate. Joseph responded, "God does everything for a reason. That's how I see it. God does everything for a reason" (class session, 3-31-15). Ethan responded to Joseph, "You're sad then. You don't have to just like accept that [God determining everything]" (class session, 3-31-15). Sensing that this discussion might turn into a heated argument, the teacher stopped Ethan and Joseph and reminded students that they were to consider one another's perspectives. Appearing to consider the religious content, Ms. Gravely said, "this is okay, like we should talk about these things" (class session, 3-31-15). After Ms. Gravely's comment,

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[3] Quote by Patti Stanger host of the show *The Millionaire Matchmaker*.

Nick added: "I think they're both right. God doesn't set anything for you. He gives you opportunities . . . so that you're able to do them if you want" (class session, 3-31-15). In this way, Nick took both students' perspectives into consideration and offered his own.

Using this instructional approach, we see how Ms. Gravely was able to pose a question that would provide students an opportunity to draw on their own background experiences and personal values in their answers. While both Ethan and Joseph voiced opposing opinions on fate, Ms. Gravely seemed to validate both students' opinions. By stating that it was fine to have disagreements (e.g., over religion), she did not disregard or value one opinion over the other. We also see how another student, Nick, was able to offer a balanced response in which he acknowledged both of his peers' points. In engaging in these conversations, then, Ms. Gravely allowed for students to consider varied perspectives on fate (some informed by their own experiences, others based on the opinions of their peers). This later helped them understand Mercutio's speech on Queen Mab, in which the topics of dreamers and fate were embedded. By learning how to discuss their differences of opinion, students not only gained experience in negotiating meaning, they engaged in practices that demonstrated the value of participating in a community of learners.

During Reading

Ms. Gravely used whole-class reading to facilitate understandings, meaning making, question asking, discussion, deliberation, and debate. During this time, Ms. Gravely incorporated a variety of instructional modes that helped prepare students for the material in the text and helped them make meaning out of the text independently and in collaboration and discussion with their classmates. It was during this time that the class

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spent most of their time wrestling with conflicting interpretations of the text. The social aspect of students discussing their ideas allowed for a variety of comments and questions—and a number of responses—which promoted meaning making that was substantive, complicated, and situated, as demonstrated by the analysis provided in the following paragraphs.

During whole class reading, Ms. Gravely explained her understanding of the significance of certain sections or quotes. In this way, she facilitated students' understandings of the basic plot of *Romeo and Juliet* during whole class reading. In interviews, Ms. Gravely described that as she planned a lesson, she reflected on how a section's themes might be interesting or challenging for students. For instance, Ms. Gravely decided that she would explain sections of the Nurse's conversation with Juliet and Lady Capulet, when she (the Nurse) is talking about nursing Juliet as a child. During this discussion, after students understood that the Nurse was discussing how she breastfed Juliet, students reacted to the information they now had about the Nurse and Lady Capulet. Mia, for example, told the class about her disgust in the Nurse breastfeeding Juliet. Others had difficulty understanding how Lady Capulet, a mother, could allow someone else to breastfeed her baby. Mia noted, as well, that in order for the Nurse to breastfeed she must have recently had her own child.

In this instance, we see that Ms. Gravely's explanation was purposeful, as she had considered how students might feel about the Nurse's jokes and lines, which in general were difficult to understand. We see that as students discussed their thoughts on the Nurse, they interacted socially as they considered the Nurse's role in Juliet's life. Thus, this example illustrates how the teacher and her choices helped students come to an

understanding of the Nurse and her history with the Capulet family. Students were also able to start to take note of Juliet and the Nurse's close relationship, and how it impacted the plot. With the teacher's explanation, as well, students were able to enrich their own understandings by hearing perspectives from students like Mia, allowing for a variety of viewpoints to illuminate their interpretations. Therefore, as students continued to read *Romeo and Juliet* and learn more about the Nurse's role in Juliet's relationship with Romeo, they could begin to understand why the Nurse would allow Juliet to get married to Romeo without her parents' approval.

In addition to posing questions regarding the significance of quotes or sections of the text, Ms. Gravely offered insights (during interviews and in her teacher's journal) about the decision to focus on themes that she knew were to emerge in upcoming sections of the text. During my interview with her, she explained that one reason she did this was to draw on what students already knew in order to increase their interest in reading a text they assumed would be unfamiliar in both form and content. These pedagogical choices demonstrate Ms. Gravely's awareness that students' prior knowledge needed to be built before reading. For example, she highlighted the section in which Count Paris asks Lord Capulet for his daughter's hand in marriage. Juliet, Capulet's daughter, is 13 at this time. Here, in preparation for the content of the text, the teacher introduced young and arranged marriages as a topic of discussion for students. This was relevant to students as many were close to Juliet's age. During this in-class discussion, students' own questions came up. For example, Joseph asked if Paris would get money for marrying Juliet. That is, he wondered if there was an incentive for marriage that discounted the need for Paris to get to know Juliet on a personal basis. Joseph's questions prompted other students to ask

about the term "dowry," what it meant, and whether the practice still existed today. During this conversation, students, like Mia, expressed their aversion toward this situation. Anita, however, explained that it was considered normal during this period of time. Ms. Gravely invited these types of reactions that were related to the text and invited students to talk about their questions (e.g., what incentive does Paris have in marrying Juliet) and insights (e.g., the apparent benefits and consequences of an arranged marriage) in ways that enabled students to express multiple perspectives and negotiate meaning in a variety of ways.

In another class session, we see how Ms. Gravely provided opportunities for the students to negotiate meaning in response to Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. From my observations, I perceived that the students were having difficulty at first in understanding this section of the text, as they did not talk about as many insights as they had in other class sessions. Realizing this, Ms. Gravely offered students more guidance. For instance, she pointed out a metaphor in the section, emphasizing to students Mercutio's use of the term "childbirth" as a metaphor, which students may not have grasped. Ms. Gravely elaborated:

> Yeah, he started crying. It wasn't very nice. It wasn't very good. If he's talking about dreams, he makes this statement about women. You know they [women] dream of marriage and having families and these kids. And so that's the big picture [for them], that big dream; but then he says those dreams also are quite painful, and he talks about childbirth, and he uses it as a metaphor. Every dream has a painful consequence. And having kids is that painful consequence for the ladies.

In this excerpt, Ms. Gravely's explanation provides students a nuanced understanding of the character Mercutio and his thought process. From her commentary, students learn that Mercutio holds a negative perspective of dreams. Dreams can be painful—a theme or lesson for students to take away from the reading. At the same time, this instructional approach allowed for students to note how the teacher is able to support her claim by explicating the term "childbirth" and how Mercutio uses it as a metaphor. I observed that students did not comment in return after Ms. Gravely's commentary above. Based on my analysis of student artifacts, such as extended writing responses on various questions and writing prompts, I noted that there were students who in their work alluded to ideas that Ms. Gravely talked about in class. For example, in his extended response essay on what character had the best opinion of love and marriage, Eric argued that he believed that Mercutio did. He based his response on Mercutio's cynical view of love, and in the case above, dreams

Teacher directs reading. While reading *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms. Gravely often asked students to read with more emotion (e.g., with excitement, as if they were flustered, or as if they were deeply in love). In interviews, she explained that her rationale was that she was trying to help students understand the tone of a particular comment or passage— which is another way of saying she wanted them to think about the context in which that line occurred and to demonstrate that awareness in their performance. That way, students performed their understanding of the severity of a particular scene or the humor that might be involved. In interviews, Ms. Gravely explained that she knew students who were reading might be embarrassed to read the line the way she told them to. Therefore,

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in demonstrating to them how to read it, she added inflections or changed the tone of her voice. In case the student did not read it as she said, others would know how to interpret that section because of her directions. Below, for instance, we see Ms. Gravely directing Misael how to read his section as Romeo and her instructions for Federico who is Benvolio.

> Romeo [to Misael], you're sad, you're upset. Romeo, your heart's . . . Romeo, you like this girl and she rejected you. Okay. You're a little upset. . . . And now, Benvolio [Federico], get real street here. Okay?

> (Ms. Gravely, class session transcript excerpt, 3-26-15)

Here, we see Ms. Gravely helping her students figure out how to sound as they read lines. This assisted students as they made sense of *Romeo and Juliet* while reading. Misael (who is often Romeo) is directed to sound as if he is lost in love, since at the start of the play, he has a major crush on Rosaline, who does not like him in return. Federico is directed to sound tougher, as Benvolio takes it upon himself to convince Romeo to look at other girls. In this explicit manner, Ms. Gravely helped students enrich their interpretations of situations within the text, as their understanding of the tone of the text allowed for deeper comprehension; and this was all facilitated when they drew on their lived experiences to try to imagine a character's emotional state.

Teacher models thought process. Ms. Gravely was transparent with students when she was making meaning of a quote or section. While teaching students how to transact with a text, she demonstrated to them that meaning was fluid. In the excerpt below, Ms. Gravely painted a picture of Romeo who is depressed over a girl who does not like him in return at the start of the play:

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So imagine you let out a sigh, like you're in love. I was trying to think of what that might look like, so a person lets out a sigh 'cause they're in love and just imagine it like, almost like smoke in the air and [teacher sighs], and so it's like love. And then he [Romeo] says, "so love that makes us so happy"—and we're like [teacher sighs]—"and at the same time love can hurt [teacher says "hurt" as if she's crying]. It can be a sea of tears." So Romeo is being really, pretty overdramatic here. Okay, he's walking around, like Misael's [who was playing Romeo] doing there, like, "Uh, I'm in love. She broke my heart." It doesn't quite mention it, but I'll tell you, he's in love with . . . not Juliet. He's in love with a girl named Rosaline. So, it opens up. He doesn't know who Juliet is [yet]. He loves this Rosaline.

(Ms. Gravley, class session transcript excerpt, 3-26-15)

In this excerpt, we see how this instructional practice allowed Ms. Gravely to demonstrate her own thought process to students as she draws on her personal observations. She shows students how she builds her interpretation from visualizations she constructs in her mind—"smoke" and a "sigh"—as she understands Romeo's emotional state. She demonstrates her awareness of the context and the character's mood as she changes the tone of her voice when she says "hurt" to sound sad. While she talks about her understanding, she provides her own judgement of Romeo as well, by stating that his behavior is "overdramatic." From this demonstration, students can then apply the teacher's meaning-making processes as they read the text on their own or with others. We see that Ms. Gravely reveals to students that meaning is personal and fluid, as she builds her interpretation from what she imagines as she reads.

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As the class reached the middle of *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms. Gravely demonstrated

her annotation process using a speech by Juliet. For this reading, the word "night" and the

text's imagery was the focus. Students worked to interpret the varied meanings of "night"

in each line (lesson adapted from O'Brien, 1993). Ms. Gravely annotated a section of the

speech as an example for students (see Figure 1); she went over it with students,

providing an explanation of her written interpretations.

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Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds
Towards Phoebus' lodging! Such a wagoner
As Phaëton  would whip you to the West,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own Beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Played for by a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
Hood my unmanned blood bating in my cheeks
With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night; come, Romeo, come; thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night;
Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
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Civil can mean well-mannered. Juliet seems to hope that the night will cover her blushing on her wedding night. She wants to look proper and not embarrassed.

Figure 1. Ms. Gravely's annotated example of Juliet's opening speech from Act III,

Scene II. (*Romeo and Juliet* Act III, Scene II—Night and Imagery, 4-29-15).

Prior to reading the speech out loud to the class, Ms. Gravely had students think about the

word "night" and document what came to their mind as they heard or read the word.

After about two minutes to think, students talked about their ideas. She wrote the ideas on

the whiteboard as students said them out loud. Students then talked about a variety of

meanings that came to their minds, such as "freedom," "dark," "quietness," "stars,"

"peaceful," "mystery," "relax," "afraid," and "romance" (fieldnotes, 4-28-15). Ruby had said the word "freedom," and Ms. Gravely asked her to elaborate on what she meant. Ruby explained to the class that she believed that "when we dream, we are able to do things that we cannot do in real life, when we are awake" (fieldnotes, 4-28-15). Ms. Gravely and the other students were impressed with this insight, and the teacher requested that the class snap their fingers for Ruby's "poetics" (fieldnotes, 4-28-15). Here, we see how this instructional practice allowed students to draw on their personal knowledge while building prior knowledge from themselves and classmates. After students discussed their ideas, the teacher read the speech first, and then students reread the section independently and noted their various interpretations of the word "night" each time it was referenced in the speech. In this interaction, we see how Ms. Gravely used a variety of instructional strategies, including eliciting students' prior knowledge, drawing on their experiences, modeling her thought and annotation processes using Juliet's speech as an example and pointing to the text's imagery and repeated use of the word "night." Because of this, afterward, when students worked on their own, they had an understanding of how they might annotate the speech on their own and also consider what the text meant with their peers' variety of viewpoints on the word "night."

In another class session, Ms. Gravely and her students were discussing the meaning of the following quote: "Deny thy father and refuse thy name or thou will not be sworn my love. And I'll no longer be Capulet." (class session transcript, 4-14-15) which is said by Juliet to Romeo. To help students understand its significance, she built from the connections that Eric made between texts (e.g., the quote and texts from popular culture):

Eric: It's kind of like *Twilight*.

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Teacher: Yeah. Has anyone ever seen *Twilight*?

[Several students state that they have.]

Aaron: Yeah. Everybody's seen that. What kind of question is that?

Ms. Gravely: Now you don't have to admit that you watched it, or even if you like it. But in *Twilight*, Bella [the main character in the novels and movies] ditches her family; she pretty much gives up her whole family, all her friends, and everything for Edward [a vampire Bella is in love with] so that she can be a vampire too. So "Deny thy father and refuse thy name or thou will not be sworn my love. And I'll no longer be Capulet." In other words, "if you don't leave your family and refuse your name and where you come from, I'll do that for you." So she's pretty much saying let's abandon who we are, let's ditch our families in the name of love. Misael?

Misael: So basically *Twilight* is based off *Romeo and Juliet*?

Ms. Gravely: I don't know if it is, but I see the connection, though.

Joseph: Like they got some parts from it.

Jose: They don't sparkle.

Aaron: Everything is there.

(Class session transcript excerpt, 4-14-15)

This excerpt shows how Ms. Gravely referred to popular culture to help students make sense of the assigned material by welcoming connections made by students and then building on them. While Eric brought it up, the teacher elaborated on it by stating it out loud to the class. In this interaction among students, we see how this instructional approach of reading as a whole class allowed for Ms. Gravely to pause the reading to

discuss Eric's insight. Next, Ms. Gravely uses this connection to popular culture to expound on a quote by relating and comparing Juliet to Bella (from *Twilight*). Because of this discussion, students gained other students' perspectives. For example, we see how this reference activates Joseph's and Aaron's prior knowledge of the *Twilight* books (by Stephanie Meyer) and movie adaptations and they think about its relation to the canonical text. Eric's insight here prompted others to note the similarities of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twilight*. In this way, students were able to see how meaning can be negotiated by comparing their understandings of *Romeo and Juliet* to other types of familiar popular culture. Pulling from the students' world and popular culture allowed Ms. Gravely to gain students' focus on the canonical text's plot and themes as a means to consider its relevance to their lives, even while working through its language.

In another class session, Ms. Gravley used a concrete example to explain a significant section from the Balcony Scene. In helping students understand the use of the word "moon," which Romeo swears his love upon for Juliet, the teacher drew three circles on the board, which represented the phases of the moon (fieldnotes, 4-14-15). The discussion below illustrates how Ms. Gravely elaborated on her drawings of the moon, to show the significance of the quote:

Ms. Gravely: Romeo's character says, I swear on the "what" that I love you?

Aaron: The moon.

Ms. Gravely: The moon. Okay so I'm going to do a really great job of drawing the stages of the moon up here.

Mia: That's a really good circle.

Ms. Gravely: I know. I was thinking about it when I drew it.

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Jose: That is not a good circle.

Eric: It's not supposed to be.

Ms. Gravely: Okay, so the moon does what throughout the month?

[Students said several comments.]

Aaron: It disappears.

Diane: Gets covered.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah. It changes, it gets smaller. It goes through all these different shapes. So why is it a problem for Romeo to say, "I swear by the moon that I love you."

Diane: 'Cause it gets smaller. His love will only get smaller.

[Other students make similar comments.]

Ms. Gravely: Okay, yeah, here it gets smaller. [Teacher points to the second moon drawing which has decreased in size compared to the first.]

Aaron: It changes.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah, the moon is constantly changing. "If you swear that you love me by the moon your love is going to change for me too. Why would you swear by the moon, Romeo?" She's kind of calling him out like, "You kind of sound stupid, Romeo."

Diane: Dang.

Ms. Gravely: So she's saying, "Don't swear by the moon because that's an inconstant variable" if you think in math, variables always change. She's like, "this always changes. I don't want our love to change. I want it to be forever,

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Romeo." So in that little summary box: "Don't swear by the moon . . . it's always

changing. I don't want my love to change."

[Students have time to write.]

Joseph: He should have sworn by the sun.

Nick: But it goes down.

(Class session transcript excerpt, 4-14-15)

From this interaction, we see how Ms. Gravley was able to help students grasp why Juliet

is not satisfied with the moon as an object for Romeo to swear his love for her by. Ms.

Gravely's use of drawing the phases of the moon served as a concrete example that

students could refer to in order to understand the significance of the line. In this way,

students were able to use another meaning-making process, the use of drawing, to enrich

their understandings. Though Joseph suggested an alternative object (the sun) that Romeo

should have sworn on, we see how Nick can consider why the sun is not a good option

either. This interaction also illustrated the community of learners formed in the class as

we can see that students interacted with Ms. Gravely as she explained her own

understanding of the line through the moon drawings. For example, we see that students

openly commented on Ms. Gravely's drawings, one describing their irregular shape. In

their comments, we also see how some students drew from their own knowledge of the

moon. Eric argued that its shape should be irregular, as he tells Jose that the moon

drawing is not supposed to be a perfect circle. Aaron described that the moon

"disappears" and "changes" while Diane said that it "gets covered." This shows how

students built their perspectives from one another. These multiple understandings allowed

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students to shape their understanding of the moon and its significance for Romeo and Juliet's love.

In an early interview, Ms. Gravely reflected on her teaching and the need for her to facilitate the reading: "With *Romeo and Juliet*, the language is challenging. They're kind of relying on me right now, to just do a lot of interpreting or at least explaining. Like I can't really turn that over to them just yet" (interview, 3-30-15). From these comments, it seems that one of her goals was to help them understand what *Romeo and Juliet* is about and another goal was to develop their interpretive and analytical skills (but with her close guidance at first). In talking to me, she painted a picture of what it looked like, from her perspective, when students have come to understand a section. During our conversation, she commented on this: "And they're all like, 'ooohhh,' and they kind of get all like classic disruptive classroom, all hanging out of their seats and stuff. But if that was there readily for them—like 'Oh I get this. There's some good burns in here'—I think that would be more interactive" (Ms. Gravely, interview, 3-30-15). At the end of her comment, Ms. Gravely alludes to the potential that this canonical text has for students' learning when its content is accessible to them. I surmise that this belief (which she voiced more than once during our interactions) influences many of her instructional choices and the pedagogical approaches used "during reading." She seemed to take into consideration her students' backgrounds, what they might already know (about people and the world), and ways to discuss themes and topics from the assigned text in terms of current events.

Ms. Gravely's role in facilitating the reading was important for students. Focal students, like Anita, acknowledged that their classmates' perspectives were important in

understanding *Romeo and Juliet*, although they also felt that Ms. Gravely's interpretations still mattered. Diane, for instance, described in writing how she relied on Ms. Gravely: "Reading with [the] teacher made me know the real meaning of the text and story" (end-of-unit reflection, 5-19-15). Her response, similar to other students', demonstrates a desire to understand *Romeo and Juliet*'s content, plot, and characters. In writing, Nick mentioned that: "I got more out of the reading with my teacher because she was able to describe and teach us their old language" (5-19-15). Nick perceived the teacher's role in guiding the reading as important because the teacher helps them understand the text's archaic language. In these kinds of ways, the teacher's guidance built the students' foundation and understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* which later aided them to negotiate meaning. This occurs as a community of learners, and through the process, they learn about one another's backgrounds and histories, as they discussed their perspectives.

Students' Practices and Perspectives

Whole class reading. Whole class reading was a literacy practice in Ms. Gravely's classroom that promoted and facilitated a community of learners. Nick, for instance, noted that reading the text together allowed him and his classmates to gain more details from the text. For Nick, the details he added came from his peers' perspectives of the text, which they discussed during and after reading. In these ways, they gained insight from Ms. Gravely's comments and one another as they enriched their understandings of the text.

When focal students told me their thoughts on the benefits of reading together as a class, they talked about engaging with the text at the same pace as their classmates,

feeling as if they were reading a play, and making meaning and talking about their understandings with each other as they were reading. Diane, for instance, said that reading *Romeo and Juliet* in class helped her make sense of the text:

> I honestly felt confused reading by myself. It was hard to try reading on my own and I couldn't understand much. Reading with others helped me understand what they thought about the text, and reading with [the] teacher made me know the real meaning of the text and the story.

<div align="right">(Diane, end-of-unit reflection, 5-19-15)</div>

We see how Diane has commented on the community of learners that developed as students read *Romeo and Juliet*. For her, reading independently was not as conducive to her comprehension of the text as when she was able to gain her teacher's and peers' perspectives on the play's content. Her comment illustrates that she valued others' perspectives and "what they thought about the text"; and that this all helped her understand the value of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here we see that reading *Romeo and Juliet* was done as a community of learners, as students came to rely on multiple and varied perspectives to consider as they read. These perspectives were not readily available when reading independently for Diane.

Eric said that he thought that reading together as a class and at the same pace was important because the text was lengthy and challenging, and he worried that it would be more difficult for students to stay focused and engaged in the absence of whole-group reading. While reading together, focal students noted that Ms. Gravely was available to answer questions and explain words that were difficult. According to Mia, students were grateful that Ms. Gravely was willing to "break down the text" for them or at least guide

them in doing so. In this way, all students experienced the text's language and engaged in making sense of its meaning at the same time. Mia told me that she believed if students were to read in pairs, groups, or independently, there would be the chance that students would miss out on learning about the language. For Misael and other focal students, they saw reading the text aloud as a way to learn not only how to pronounce words but also what words or sayings meant.

Diane noted that whole class reading reminded her and her classmates that they were reading a play. Because students were assigned different character roles to read, hearing different voices assisted in maintaining focus. Misael and Nick said that whole class reading provided students an opportunity to speak as individuals did during the story's time period. Reading together was a way to become familiar with the plot and characters of the play as well as a way to be motivated to want to read *Romeo and Juliet***.** Eric noted that taking on the role of a character made him to look forward to reading. He described his thoughts on reading out loud, as a character in the play:

> I feel like she just used it to for us to get excited to read the book. You know, like I want to be Romeo, I want to be . . . I want to read, to kind of get us pumped to read. And it kind of helps us to understand it a little better, like we're in their shoes. We kind of like . . . it's kind of like we're talking to one another, just in their old text, we comprehend a little better.
>
> (Eric, focus group, 4-14-15)

In this comment, we see how Eric has alluded to the motivation that developed as a result of reading out loud together as a class. As he points out, taking ownership of a character made the reading purposeful for him and provided a reason for him to want to read. Eric

also shows how reading together and out loud was conducive to comprehending *Romeo and Juliet*. While students had opportunities to discuss the play, reading together was also a time when students could take on the characters' identities. Even though students were told by Ms. Gravely how to read a line (e.g., how to sound), being a character allowed them to add their own interpretations by the emotion and tone they used in reading it. In this way, students had the ability to make the characters their own, drawing from their personal observations and experiences on how an individual might sound, act, and feel during specific situations (e.g., being in love, being angry, feeling hopeless). As Eric illustrates, it was as if he and his peers were talking to one another in their roles as characters. Here, we have another example of how reading *Romeo and Juliet* fostered certain literacy practices that the teacher and students believed built motivation, strengthened community, and provided opportunities for learning. Some of those practices were facilitated when the students read together in their classroom.

Altogether, students in Ms. Gravely's class understood reading as a whole class as a literacy practice that offered them several benefits in understanding *Romeo and Juliet*. Reading this text was not an independent endeavor. It was done as a community of learners where they felt confident in each other's perspectives as well as their teacher's. Reading the text as a class was important as it provided students with opportunities to understand the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* taking in their teacher's and peers' viewpoints, which embedded their backgrounds, values, and personal histories, as they negotiated their own. These varied viewpoints allowed them to have a foundation to interpret the various meanings of the text.

Reading guides, notes, and resources. While reading *Romeo and Juliet*, students constructed guides by adding quotes they found notable and questions to guide their reading; they sometimes referred to these guides as "notes." In interviews, Eric, Nick, and Mia discussed their appreciation for the practice of keeping track of their notes with this guide. In Ms. Gravely's class, note taking included a few types of tasks, including annotating (writing thoughts next to quotes) and completing their reading guides. Mia mentioned that she used her notes when she needed to remember key aspects of the text.

Some of the students said that reading *Romeo and Juliet* was like learning a new language. Anita told me about her appreciation for words that Ms. Gravely had exposed the class to prior to reading the text, such as "wherefore." Diane talked with me about the value of using the textbook's features, such as its footnotes, definitions of words, as well as translations of text. These were useful when encountering sections that were difficult to understand. Ms. Gravely highlighted these textbook features at the start of the unit and then later directed students to these textbook resources while they were reading the text. Diane seemed to use the resources available in the textbook often to understand the meaning of the text.

In one class session of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, students came across a phrase in the text that Ms. Gravely wanted students to understand by using the textbook's resources:

Teacher: Whew! What is a "man of wax"?

Mia: [reading the definition in the textbook's footnote] A man so perfect he can

be made of wax statues and the types of sculptures once used for the models . . .

Teacher: A man so perfect artist base their portraits off of him. Probably a really chiseled, good looking man. Paris is a man of wax. He's hot. He's good looking. What's important to the nurse then in marriage and in love?

Students: Looks.

(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-30-15)

This example illustrates how students learned to use the resources that the book offered. While the story was written in archaic language, the textbook offered modern day definitions, and these definitions helped students make sense of the text. Within a few weeks, it became routine for students to reference these definitions to enrich their own comprehension of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Making meaning from quotes. Writing down ideas and talking about them became a literacy practice with significant meaning and influence in Ms. Gravely's class, as students worked on finding the significance to quotes and sections of the text. This was an example of how the text "was broken down into pieces" by individuals and by the group (Diane, focus group, 4-14-15). To describe this process, first, students wrote down their own ideas which they could later talk about when Ms. Gravely opened the floor to discussion. After having time to write, the students talked amongst themselves about the meaning of that quote or section. As students explained their ideas and heard Ms. Gravely's, they gained multiple perspectives that provided alternative ways of thinking about the text. As Mia described, "I'll put whatever it is [the meaning] in my own words, but like we'll talk about it as a class, and then we'll like determine if that's like the main idea or the answer for that one question [or quote]" (interview, 5-11-15). Here, we see that Mia found that this routine activity was useful in facilitating or honing her

understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. While she offered her own ideas, she could also count on the fact that she would also hear her peers' perspectives as well as Ms. Gravely's.

Students also wrote their interpretations when they completed quizzes. In these, students responded to extended writing prompts with short responses that attempted to explain the meaning of a quote. Students also responded to prompts that required an argumentative response. In answering these, students drew from the their knowledge of textworld while referencing their own backgrounds and values. For instance, in their first quiz, students had to write what character they believed had the best opinion of love. Questions allowed for multiple interpretations, as long as students demonstrated their understanding of the text and the characters by providing appropriate textual evidence. The students' work was informed by the multiple perspectives that were discussed as a community of learners during reading.

Character journals. Students were encouraged to create character journals relating to what happened in an act from a character's point of view. Ms. Gravely assigned the character journals during Act IV. In this journal, students had to demonstrate their knowledge of the textworld through the character's thought process and by discussing the character's opinions of what had occurred in that section of the text. Students had to create two journal entries, but each had to be a different character's perspective. In the following excerpt from a character journal, Eric assumed the role of Lord Capulet:

> As I started to doubt happyniss (sic) for my daughter, Paris comes and makes my
> day. He asked to marry my dear Juliet on Thursday and I granted his wish with

my blessing. As I delivered the news to her, she rejected and refused to marry

Paris. Her ungrateful mind has made me come to a solution if she does not attend

the wedding on Thursday[;] if she does not go, she will be disowned and be

kicked out of my house. I do everything for her and she wont (sic) do even the

simplest things for me. She is ungrateful and does not deserve anything that she

has. For if she does not comply, the consequences she will face.

(Eric, character journal, 5-4-15)

In this assignment, Eric is expected to use his own understanding of the text to convey a

character's point of view. In the above example, we see that Eric has chosen to be

Capulet. Eric, as Capulet, expresses the current progression of events that lead to Juliet's

death. Eric expresses Capulet's excitement to marry Juliet, his daughter, to Count Paris,

and then we see that excitement transform to sorrow as he learns that Juliet has died. In

this way, Eric demonstrates his understanding of the text from an alternative viewpoint

other than his own, which embeds his own personal understanding of the character

Capulet and his thought process.

Multimodal Literacies

Ms. Gravely used a variety of multimodal approaches to build students'

understandings and increase their engagement in making sense of the text. For example,

she incorporated drawing so that students could demonstrate their understandings and

interpretations in that mode as an alternative to writing or saying ideas out loud.

Throughout the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, Ms. Gravely also showed film versions of the text.

These films not only enriched students' reading, but also provided students additional

interpretations to think about as they read the text. Below, I will examine these instructional approaches and students' practices.

Drawing

In my observations of the class, from interviews, and the class artifacts I collected, I noted that Ms. Gravely encouraged students to demonstrate their interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* through drawings. In one assignment, students drew themselves as either Romeo or Juliet and depicted their opposite. In creating their own renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*, students drew the setting of their stories as well as characters' appearances and styles of dress.

Below, I have included selected examples of students' drawings. In the You as Romeo and Juliet assignment, students reflected on their personality, characteristics, preferences, and considered a (romantic) partner that would be the opposite of who they are. Misael's drawing included written labels such as "not truely (sic) happy," "ugly," "thinks dark," and "nerd" (see Figure 2). Nick, an athlete, showcased his participation on the football team (see Figure 3). For the Movie Pitch assignments (to be elaborated on in the following sections), students drew how their own versions of Romeo and Juliet would look like. Eric and Janie depicted their characters Angelo and Dahlila, who were their versions of the characters Romeo and Juliet (see Figures 4 & 5). Their drawing shows their characters' tattoos, which in their story are supposed to be identical and signify the love Angelo and Dahlila have for one another. As the New London Group (1996) tells us, meaning can be demonstrated through multiple modes. While these drawings show students' understandings of the canonical text, they also demonstrate how students drew on their own personal lived experiences. In these drawings, we learn information about

the students that emerges as they demonstrate their understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. These drawings also illustrate students' negotiations of meaning as they think about the characters on a more personal level. In this way, meaning negotiation is specific to the student and the text, showing us how multiple meanings are constructed by the students.

Figure 2. Misael's drawing of himself and his depiction of his opposite. (Misael, You as Romeo and Juliet, 3-25-15)

Figure 3. Nick's drawing of himself and his depiction of his opposite. (Nick, You as

Romeo and Juliet, 3-25-15)
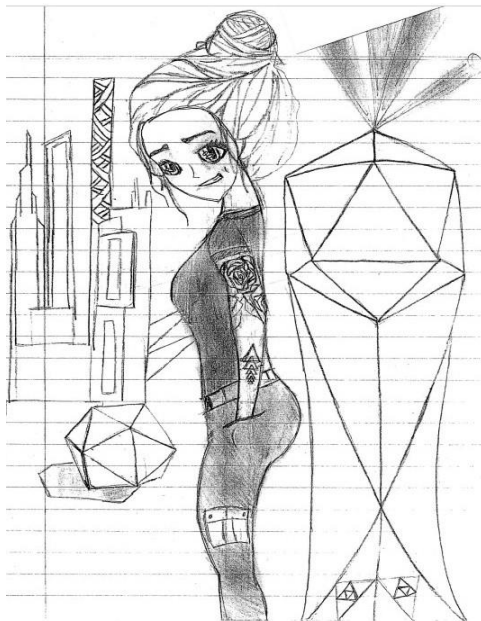
Figure 4. Eric and Janie's drawing of Dahlila for their movie pitch version of the text.

(Eric and Janie, movie pitch, 4-7-15)

Figure 5. Eric and Janie's drawing of Angelo for their movie pitch version of the text.

(Eric and Janie, movie pitch, 4-7-15)

Film

Throughout the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, Ms. Gravely showed three film versions[4] of *Romeo and Juliet*. These were typically shown after students had read a text. As students viewed the film, Ms. Gravely provided students with focus questions or guides which required students to consider the films' purposes and how meaning was being displayed.

Before showing the '68 version early in the unit, Ms. Gravely told students to take note of how the characters "bite their thumbs" at one another (fieldnotes, 3-27-15). The

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[4] Throughout the unit, students viewed three versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. Students were exposed to the 1968 version by Franco Zeffirelli; the 1996 version by Baz Luhrman; and the 2013 version by Carlo Carlei.

teacher had emphasized the meaning of this gesture during prior conversations about the reading. The gesture is the equivalent to flipping someone off, or giving someone the middle finger, which in the students' context is offensive. Here we see how the movie provided students an opportunity to reinforce the meaning of this action by the actors in the film. Using the same '68 version, Ms. Gravely provided students a focus question: "How does Mercutio's mood change throughout this scene in which he talks to Romeo about dreams?" (fieldnotes, 3-31-15). This question provided students with something to focus on while viewing the film—specifically, the actor's interpretation of Mercutio's lines in the text and how meaning was made through words, tone and gestures.

One guide that Ms. Gravely provided students contained a question that asked them to consider the meaning behind the characters' costumes in the '96 version (fieldnotes, 4-7-15). Therefore, while students were viewing *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of various film versions, Ms. Gravely also required that they actively consider its context in juxtaposition to the text's. After viewing the selection, Ms. Gravely engaged students in a discussion of the costumes in the '96 version, in which Juliet is an angel, Romeo a knight, and Paris an astronaut:

> Ms. Gravely: Why might the director and the costume designer have chosen to make Juliet's costume an angel and Romeo's the knight? Does anyone have any ideas about that?
>
> Ms. Gravely: What do you think, Nick?
>
> Nick: Just a guess, maybe because angels are usually known to watch over people and Juliet's watching for, like she's looking for a man.
>
> Ms. Gravely: Okay.

Nick: And then Romeo is the knight in shining amour.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah, definitely. Jose and then Andy.

Jose: Doesn't the maid, like the nurse, say, "Go find yourself a knight."

Ms. Gravely: She does say "seek happy nights to happy days."

Jose: No, but I know she says "find yourself a knight or something."

Ms. Gravely: Oh? I don't know if I picked up on that. Andy?

Andy: I put Juliet is pure in heart so I guess . . . angel . . . And Romeo is a knight in shining amour . . . prince charming.

Ms. Gravely: Okay. Yeah, that charming guy. Misael, did you still want to add something? [Misael nods his head no.] Okay, Eric?

Eric: I think it's because she's [Juliet] kind of like that pure one, and she's innocent so she's like the angel, and Romeo is kind of like the thug. He's a knight . . . he's just not that innocent.

Ms. Gravely: Okay. I like where this is going. Let's throw Paris into the mix. What's his costume?

Students: Astronaut.

Nick: He seems out of this world.

[Ms. Gravely and students laugh.]

Ms. Gravely: His behavior was a little odd. But let's think of Paris. He's an astronaut. An astronaut is like very wealthy; you have to be very smart to have that type of occupation. That's the sort of guy that girls should go for. That good guy. That rich, good looking, smart . . . but she [Juliet] doesn't want that . . . she

wants Romeo, the Knight in shining amour . . . that's the man that she wants.

Misael?

Misael: Juliet, she's the beautiful angel, up there, top class, and Romeo is like

down class, dirt.

Ms. Gravely: Okay. But his dad also does own that competing company, so he is

still wealthy but she is sort of like up on that pedestal. She's so beautiful. She's

the most beautiful thing he's ever seen before.

(Class session transcript, 4-7-15)

This excerpt illustrates the potential of this instructional approach in that students were able to think about film elements, like costume design choices, and talk about their varied perspectives on their meaning in the modern version of the text. While Ms. Gravely provided students a guide to consider as they consumed the film, these questions prompted a variety of observations from students. For instance, Nick, Andy and Eric discussed the costumes and how these director choices relate to the meaning. Juliet, for example, is an angel who is looking down in search of a significant other, according to Nick, while Romeo is a knight and more of a bad influence, as Eric has described Romeo as a "thug." The film and discussion, we can see, caused Jose to think about the text and whether Romeo being a knight in the film had anything to do with a line he remembered. However, Ms. Gravely references a line from the text that she thinks he is thinking about instead. Finally, too, we see how Misael makes an observation regarding the social classes that Juliet and Romeo belong to. He states that Juliet is "top class" and Romeo is "down class." Ms. Gravely, however, corrects him while reinforcing the plot, that both families come from comparable classes. In this interaction, we see how showing the film

and then discussing the meaning behind specific elements, such as costumes, fostered students' ability to negotiate meaning as multiple perspectives were discussed on the film that could then impact the individual and collective understandings of different potential meanings of the text. Students built a community of learners by sharing ideas and building from one another. We see this illustrated as Ms. Gravely welcomes the students' ideas on the costumes' meaning. Nick, an outspoken student, initiated the discussion by talking about his insight on Juliet's costume. Andy, a timid student in class, builds from Nick's insight and reaffirms it, while Eric elaborates on both of their perspectives and extends it by talking about Romeo's costume. This instance shows how students relied on one another's perspectives and built on them as well during discussion.

In interviews and her teacher's journal, Ms. Gravely told me her rationale for showing three films. She said that she liked to show the '68 and '13 versions because they were truer (than the other film version) to the text's time period, providing students context in terms of setting and how characters dressed. Ms. Gravely also told me that she had only used the '96 version the previous year and regretted the fact that it took place in a more modern setting than the '68 or '13 versions. In these ways, Ms. Gravely was reflective on her reasoning for implementing this approach of teaching *Romeo and Juliet*.

The use of film as an instructional approach allowed students to reinforce the reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because viewing film versions was done routinely (weekly), students were able to look forward to confirming the understandings they had come to while reading the text as they watched the films. While students talked about multiple perspectives during reading, in discussing the films, they were afforded more vantage points to consider the meaning(s) of the text. The movies also provided more

concrete examples of what certain actions made by characters meant and looked like as well as context for the tone of an exchange between characters.

Students' practices and perspectives. The focal student seemed to be active viewers of the films they viewed, taking note of the film's setting and its actors' interpretations of characters. Misael, Anita, and Diane saw the films as a way to enrich or expand what they had read. As they watched film clips, they were able to assess or compare their understandings of meaning gained during whole class reading to the presentation of meaning in the film. At one point, Diane seemed surprised by the film and its message: "Oh that's how it's supposed to be!" (focus group, 4-14-15). While Anita believed that the film's focus aligned with what had been presented in the text, Diane thought they were quite distinct.

For both Anita and Diane, watching the films was not a passive act. Instead, they used these opportunities to confirm or change how they had interpreted the text. For Mia, viewing the films was an opportunity to see others' imaginations and compare them to her own. In one class session, students were discussing a scene in which the Prince of Verona has banished Romeo from the city. In this discussion, Jose remembered that the Prince in the '13 version was played by an older actor (in about his 60s) and he questioned: "You know how it says it's the Prince? The prince looked really old in the movie [2013 version]" (Jose, fieldnotes, 4-30-15). This instance illustrates how Jose was comparing his own understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as his own conception of what a prince is and should look like (young), in comparison to what he had seen in that film version.

Viewing the films provided context of the story's time period as well as the tone of the text. In discussing the '68 and '13 film versions, Anita said that she was able to see how the characters dressed during the time period. In addition to the ways characters dressed, she emphasized that the films provided context for how the setting looked—e.g., the city and the homes—and how individuals portrayed themselves in terms of behavior, such as proper demeanor and composure in particular situations.

For Eric and Anita, they were able to gain a better sense of the text's tone as they saw the actors portray expressions and gestures. The actors' tone in the films provided context for the reading. As Eric noted:

> . . . seeing it makes me understand it a little bit better, like the situation. Because sometimes I read it, understand it, but I don't know how they're feeling. And when I see like the clip when she's like shaking her head, it's like she's just agreeing. Or when he's like swinging his arms and like looking at her—he's happy, he's in love, and it kind of like gives you a visual of what's going on in the book.
>
> (Eric, focus group, 4-14-15)

Eric's comments showcased the benefits that showing films has in English classes. As he stated, he understood aspects of the text pertinent to comprehending what he was reading. However, being able to see an actor interpret a character, such as Romeo, allowed him to "know how they're feeling," which might not be captured by just reading the words on the page. The film provides an enriched visual for students to consider in their understandings.

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Viewing the films provided students an opportunity to reconsider their interpretations of the text. The films provided opportunities for students to extend or deepen their understandings of the meaning of the text and context for students, in that they were able to see another perspective to compare to their own. For students, the films did not have the final say in a correct interpretation of the text, but offered another "imagination" to consider, as Mia put it. Because this was a routine practice in Ms. Gravely's classroom, students like Mia, who appreciated viewing the films, could come to expect that day's reading to be reinforced later. In this way, Ms. Gravely was able to supplement her thorough instruction and guidance provided before and during reading, embedded with the relevant prompts and interpretation of quotes, with quality film adaptations.

Graphic Novel

Although students read the graphic novel for only one act (Act IV) and did so independently, students explained their opinions of its use. Before students read it, Ms. Gravley provided students instruction on how to read a graphic novel. For example, she demonstrated to students the direction to follow in reading the text, what different items on a page meant—for instance, the difference between a squared or circular thought bubble. In her interview, Mia said that the graphic novel improved her understanding of the written version of the story by forcing her to maintain her attention on the text in order to follow along. She appreciated the "normal words" in the graphic novel. As she said, "in the graphic novel, they like use normal words instead of words I would never, ever use" (Mia, interview, 5-11-15). That is, she appreciated the modern language that it offered. The modern language, she said, helped her comprehend the text. Mia did note

difficulty in deciphering the characters, however. For her, they too closely resembled one another as they were drawn, making it difficult to tell who was who. As students were reading the graphic novel, I asked Jose for his perspective on the graphic novel version. In my fieldnotes I recorded: "Jose stated that he enjoyed the graphic novel because it was different. The formatting provided him with a visual of the act. For him, it was interesting to have something traditional (the canonical version of *Romeo and Juliet*, in this 'comic book' format which for him was 'new' and 'weird.' He observed that it was different from what he is normally used to reading in class." (fieldnotes, 5-4-15). This observation illustrates the potential alternative formats have for learning. The presentation of the canonical text in this way offered Jose a new, though "weird" method, to enrich his own understanding of the text which he had since built with the original text and to the three films.

Creating Innovative Renditions

Ms. Gravely provided students two opportunities to create their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. In these projects, students were expected to keep the themes and general plot of the text. In the first project, they were to create a pitch (or proposal) for their own movie version of the text. Here, students described their story's plot and included drawings (see Figures 4 & 5 this Chapter; Figure 6 in Chapter 5) of the setting and the clothes that the characters would be wearing. Students were encouraged to modernize the text as they liked. For example, rather than keep to *Romeo and Juliet*'s time period, their stories could take place now or in the future. In the second project, students could either elaborate on their movie pitch or create a new story. It would be written in play script form, including stage directions and what and how the characters

said and talked. Here, students would focus on the Balcony Scene where Romeo and Juliet meet again, knowing who the other is, after meeting for the first time at Lord Capulet's party. Ms. Gravely also wanted students to maintain the symbolism the balcony holds, which represents a barrier that Romeo and Juliet will face as they fall in love and try to be with one another. (In the next chapter, I will discuss four of these projects in detail and provide an analysis of them.) Ms. Gravely had talked about this assignment in our first interviews early in the study and during it as well. For her, it provided students an opportunity to not only draw on their creativity but also on their backgrounds and interests. In these stories, she wanted students to consider elements of the plot and theme and to look at them in a new light. The year previous, she had done the assignment and had collected a variety of stories from her students. This year she intended to do the same.

Students' practices and perspectives. In focus group, Diane was the first student to discuss the impact that creating her own version of *Romeo and Juliet* had. She said, "Ms. Gravely had us do that activity where like we had our own vision or like visual to see what the story was really about. Like you could change it. You could make it to anything you wanted to on how they met each other so just like a different visual" (Diane, focus group, 4-14-15). This comment illustrated her appreciation for making the story her own. Diane told me she liked that she was able to make "her own vision" where she was able to "change it [the story]," making it "anything you wanted to on how they [Romeo and Juliet] met" (focus group, 4-14-15).

Focal students explained to me that for them the canonical version did not offer enough details on Romeo and Juliet as characters and how they had fallen in love. In

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Anita's words, there was no "in between stuff" (focus group, 4-14-15). Therefore, students appreciated the opportunity to add more details related to the plot with their stories. Misael, for example, wrote a story about a book worm and grease monkey falling in love. The two love each other, but what separates them from being together are the social cliques they belong to. Nick and his partner Federico wrote the account of an American girl falling in love with a Mexican boy who works as a painter. They meet on the U.S.-Mexican border. Nationality and socioeconomic status is what separates the two from being together.

During the first and second class sessions in which students worked on these projects, I walked around and observed students collaborating with their classmates (and some independently, like Misael and Aaron). I noted how students were engaged in conversations regarding their stories, or were busy at work drawing up a plan of what their story would be. As I observed Diane and her partner Elaine, they talked about the character Tybalt and his actions toward Mercutio and Romeo in one scene. Eavesdropping on this conversation, Nick and Federico disagreed with what Diane and Elaine had said and offered their viewpoint of Tybalt. I engaged in conversations with Diane and Elaine regarding their story as well. I wondered why they made Romeo poor in their story, but Juliet rich. I had told them that I had observed that several groups had done the same thing with their stories. I also talked to Aaron about his story, in which he took a futuristic and apocalyptic approach. He made his characters into cyborgs, which were an interest of his. In my fieldnotes, I wrote: "Students are attentive to their stories. Some are referring to the textbook, looking at the canonical version as they create their own" (fieldnotes, 4-28-15). My observation illustrates the dynamic nature of the

classroom as students were creative, but used the *Romeo and Juliet* text as their foundation. Throughout, there was a sense of a community of learners who engage with each other's ideas—Nick and Federico talking about their understandings of the character Tybalt with Diane and Elaine.

Mia elaborated on the process of working on the project, as well as working with a partner:

> Yeah, I like how she [Ms. Gravely] told us to make our own story line on the computer and we had a partner and we did it together. Because you had like both of your guys' ideas come together as a group instead of just your ideas on the paper. And we had to like draw how we thought they would look and how we wanted them to look for our story.
>
> (Mia, interview, 5-11-15)

As we can see, Mia considered this assignment as innovative since it required more than just the routine assignments she and her peers had done thus far in the class. In this case, students were able to do more than simply read the canonical work and work through its language. Mia's comment also illustrates how working with a partner allowed them to gain another perspective as to how *Romeo and Juliet* could be interpreted. Sharing the same observation, Anita stated that her analysis of the text was not the same as her partner's. Being able to discuss their ideas together allowed them to rethink what they had come to understand. Mia described this process of partners discussing their interpretations and creating their own rendition as "ideas coming together" (interview, 5-11-15). As I observed Diane and Elaine doing, students discussed and thought about one another's perspectives on characters and the significance of scenes.

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To illustrate this creative process that students engaged in as they created their renditions, I examine Mia's reflection of why she and Estela embedded aspects of popular culture into their story. In an interview, I asked Mia to tell me about her story, as she talked about it, she mentioned *Catfish: The TV Show*, an MTV show.[5] I asked her to elaborate on the show:

> Oh! Okay. So *Catfish* is when you meet someone online and you really don't know if it's actually them. That's why her [Juliet's] mom was scared for her in my story and like, um, I don't know, you have to like, like being a catfish and like not knowing who they are is scary. So it was like an understanding for like a lot of kids that meet people online that sometimes you do fall in love and it does end up okay . . . and it's . . .

<div align="right">(Mia, interview, 5-11-15)</div>

Based on her comments, we see that Mia and her partner Estela were active in thinking about what elements of *Romeo and Juliet* to maintain, such as love, while also making the story relevant to their world. In her response, Mia mentioned the current prevalence of people meeting other people online and later meeting in person. For her, the occurrence of meeting people online does not seem to be a bad thing, though adults might think otherwise. As she told me, in their story, the two lovers meet and it turns out okay in the end. These perspectives were embedded in their story. As this excerpt illustrates, Mia and Estela infused these characteristics of their world, thus "combining their ideas." We see how these students participated in a form of literacy while being innovative in

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[5] In the show *Catfish: The TV Show*, typically one person has lied about who they are (e.g., they used a fake picture) and do not want to meet the other in person because the truth will be revealed. The show forces them to meet in person.

writing their own story, weaving in elements of *Romeo and Juliet*, popular culture, and social issues.

Sociocultural theories of literacy (as socially situated and influenced by context) help us understand how and why the students' practices were personal, purposeful, and meaningful. As Smagorinsky & Coppack (1995) tell us, students have "tool kits" that hold their cultural backgrounds and perspectives, which influence the interpretations they come to as they read. Their stories, each unique, demonstrated their individual and different understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. In recreating their stories, they made *Romeo and Juliet* their own by adding details to the story; changing the story line or themes; and bringing what they had visualized in their minds to life. Eric and Janie's story, for example, alludes to how human societies can divide one another based on wealth and subjugate those who are marginalized. Whether working alone or with a partner, this process provided students an opportunity to revisit the text and enrich their own understandings. As Nate said during a recorded interview, he and his partner needed to understand the original story in order to write their own version. Drawing from their own understandings of the plot, themes, and characters, then, allowed students to think of alternative modes to demonstrate their interpretations. As I observed Ms. Gravely's students do, they referenced the book as needed. Students' use of the textbook as a resource to guide their creative rendition showed students' willingness to maintain and embed elements of the canonical text into their own stories.

I have examined some of the ways that Ms. Gravely incorporated multiple pedagogical approaches while teaching *Romeo and Juliet*—and the benefit for students. I have also analyzed the students' practices and their perspectives on them. Before reading,

students were able to think about topics and themes that might come up and start to build prior knowledge. They discussed their ideas together as a class, thus providing multiple perspectives to later consider when they would read the text and negotiate meaning. During reading, Ms. Gravely implemented multiple strategies that guided students through the reading while eliciting their ideas on significant quotes and sections of the text. Students' interpretations were discussed in ways that allowed them to negotiate meanings before reading and during reading. Throughout all of these phases, Ms. Gravely maintained a leading role and engaged students in discussions of the text's meaning. After watching the film versions, students' comments reflected not only on the films' elements but also on their perspectives as they juxtaposed the understandings they had after viewing with the understandings they had prior to watching the film. With these instructional approaches, Ms. Gravely fostered a community of learners whose perspectives mattered in meaning making. Because students routinely talked about their ideas out loud—before, during, and after reading—in and across instructional approaches, they became more confident in saying what they thought about quotes, scenes, characters, and the plot. Students came to expect and rely on one another's perspectives in order to negotiate meaning as the teacher facilitated their learning.

Summary

This chapter's focus has been on the key finding that the teacher's instructional practices (pedagogical choices) facilitated certain literacy practices, certain engagements with the text, and certain learning practices. I have shown that the instructional and literacy practices embedded throughout the unit allowed students to form as a community of learners as they draw from their own ideas as well as their teacher's and peers', which

were informed by their backgrounds, personal histories, and values. Therefore, as I have illustrated, students had multiple perspectives to consider in their negotiation of meaning of the canonical text. Relying on a sociocultural understanding of literacy and learning, I have described and analyzed a variety of data to illustrate this finding.

I examined the instructional approaches that the teacher used and analyzed her views and comments on her practices. I analyzed what Ms. Gravely did before students engaged in reading, such as students writing about and discussing their ideas to current, relevant topics related to *Romeo and Juliet*. By doing this, I showed how the consistent use of this practice provided students the ability to consider their own opinions and hear those of others. These multiple perspectives then provided students with alternative viewpoints to wrestle with *Romeo and Juliet*'s content. I illustrated the instructional approaches that Ms. Gravely used during reading as well. One way the teacher scaffolded the students' understanding of the text was by making processes of meaning-making explicit, and this was often achieved by reading sections of the text out loud together as a class. Therefore, I demonstrated how her use of whole class reading, while a traditional method of teaching literature, was productive in guiding students through the text, as they described their own and gained perspectives from others. In addition to reading, the film versions that Ms. Gravely showed students allowed them to enrich their reading of the canonical text. The films provided students additional interpretations of the play for them to consider as their understandings continued to develop.

I also identified and examined some of the literacy practices that students participated in while also looking at their perspectives of them. Because reading together as a class was an integral aspect of Ms. Gravely's classroom, students came to rely on

one another and their teacher to make meaning and understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. I analyzed some routines they used, such as referencing the textbook's resources, and their own notes on what quotes meant. I examined students' perspectives of multimodal literacies, which were incorporated. I highlighted opportunities where students were able to draw and be creative as well. The films they experienced provided additional perspectives that they could draw on as they negotiated meaning during reading. Viewing the films were opportunities for students to develop their understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. Finally, I examined the students' creative processes as they collaborated with their peers to create their own versions of the canonical text. I analyzed their practices and perspectives for this process. I demonstrated how students embedded elements of the original text while drawing on their backgrounds, values, and worldviews as they participated in these literacy practices.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION AS A WAY TO CONSIDER SELF

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the teacher's instructional approaches and

literacy practices in the *Romeo and Juliet* unit and showed how these allowed students to

draw from their resources. I also analyzed students' practices and examined their

viewpoints on the practices that the teacher implemented. A second key finding in this

study was that students drew on their personal, lived experiences to make sense and

negotiate meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot, characters, and historical time period. In

spite of the fact that the text's meanings were not always immediately transparent to

students, the quality of their responses and understandings improved as they came to

understand that multiple meanings were not only possible but even welcomed and

encouraged in this teacher's classroom. Students negotiated meaning while participating

in multiple learning and literacy practices and learned that their emerging understandings

were situated between ongoing negotiations with their peers over various possible

interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet.* In these ways, sense making was in flux, dynamic,

co-constructed, and influenced by numerous complex factors and processes.

Drawing on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading and Langer's

(2011) envisionment-building framework, in this chapter I analyze excerpts of class

session transcripts as well as students' work. First, I look at the responses and insights

that students discussed as they build prior knowledge before reading *Romeo and Juliet*. I

show how students draw on their personal histories, lived experiences, backgrounds, and

values as they respond to prompts that the teacher posed. The perspectives discussed

during this time, I argue, are then available to students later when they are reading the

text and negotiating its meaning(s)—i.e., when inside the textworld. Next, I look at different students' interpretations that they arrive at during reading, through discussion, while interpreting a quote, or in their writing. I demonstrate how students' responses represent a range of understandings. They draw on their resources, such as their backgrounds, lived experiences, and personal histories to consider and evaluate elements of the text, like themes and characters' actions; and those backgrounds, values, and worldviews significantly influence the interpretations they make of the text and its meanings. Third, I examine the creative renditions students composed of *Romeo and Juliet*. In analyzing these creative renditions, I show how students maintain elements of the original text while infusing aspects of their own world. As students consider complicated issues such as subjugation, division, and immigration in their stories, I argue that they are taking their well-developed understandings of *Romeo and Juliet* to create alternative ways to look at issues that are prevalent in their world. Finally, I analyze students' perspectives on how and why they think that their experiences working with and making sense of this particular canonical text is relevant to them and their peers. I show how their responses reflect their backgrounds, values, and ideas about the future.

Building Prior Knowledge

In this section, I examine transcribed excerpts of class sessions and fieldnotes from multiple class observations in which students built on prior knowledge by reacting in writing to current and relevant topics (such as anger, falling in love) that emerged while preparing to read sections of *Romeo and Juliet*. Rosenblatt's (1978) view holds that readers draw from their resources as they participate in the reading event, which include "their memory, thought, and feelings" (p. 12). Langer (2011) adds that students'

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experience meaning making as a community of learners as they discuss their questions, ideas, and interpretations of a text with one another. Relying on Rosenblatt, I show how students' responses, formulated before reading, represented a range of perspectives that they drew from their resources to negotiate meaning of the text during and after reading. In my analysis, I will show how these perspectives were informed by students' backgrounds. Drawing on Langer (2011), I will show how these multiple perspectives allowed for students to negotiate the meaning that they came to as they read *Romeo and Juliet*.

A few days before starting to read *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms. Gravely provided students with quotes and statements that were from the text or related to its themes. Students discussed their thoughts on what the quotes meant to them and whether they personally related to the quotes or statements. One of the statements that Ms. Gravely highlighted was, "I have experienced romantic love" (fieldnotes, 3-24-15). There was no response from students at first, so Ms. Gravely continued, "So I'm looking for my people in the audience, you know, you have or have had a sweetieboopkins.[6] Can you say that

_____

[6] "Sweetieboopkins" was a term that Ms. Gravely used while the class read *Romeo and Juliet.* I asked her for her insight into the term. She explained, "My knowledge of the term originated in the Fall 2007 semester of my senior year of high school when my senior English teacher used the term. The term has a flexible meaning. It can mean a significant other, most likely a boyfriend or girlfriend, or someone you want to pursue a relationship with." Relating to the spelling, she wrote, "The correct spelling is unknown; however, when spelled for the students, I use this spelling: Sweetieboopkins" (Email correspondence, 3-15-15)

was true romantic love?" (class session transcript excerpt, 3-24-15). Eventually, Diane described an observation of her and her peers and drew on her personal history as well:

Diane: We're too young probably.

Ms. Gravely: Okay, you're too young.

Diane: That's not always the situation, though. I could say from my parents' situation . . . because they met in 7th grade.

Ms. Gravely: Okay.

Diane: And ever since that, they've been talking, they really liked each other.

(Diane, class session transcript excerpt, 3-24-15)

In this excerpt, we see that Diane draws on her personal knowledge of her parents' relationship, which started when they were in middle school. While Diane talked about her observation that she and her classmates are "too young" to know true love, shortly after she is able to reconsider her generalization, as she states that it is "not always the situation." Here, we see that she is able to negotiate her own ideas on whether she and her peers can answer the question as she considers her personal history.

Later in the same discussion, Mia brought in her own perspective on true love and the question of whether young people can say whether they have experienced it. Mia described her own personal story:

Well, my grandparents have been together since they were like 13 and they're 65. The things that keep them going . . . One day I was like, "Grandpa, how did you see granny, right?" and he's like, "I saw her in this little plaid mini skirt, high knee socks, and I'm still chasing. [Students laugh]

Ms. Gravely: Okay so they're like still attracted to one another.

Mia: Yeah, and it's kind of nasty.

<div align="center">(Mia, class session transcript excerpt, 3-24-15)</div>

Here, we see that Mia draws on a conversation she has had with her grandfather. This experience has provided Mia a perspective to consider whether teenagers can experience true love. She is able to justify that it is possible to experience true love at a young age using her knowledge that her grandparents met at the age of 13, which is close to her age. Embedded in her comment is the attraction that her grandfather had for his wife when he first saw her and that continues up to now. This excerpt is an example of how students' personal histories informed their understandings of issues that would come up during reading but that also served as another viewpoint for all students to consider.

While the two above comments are not specifically about anything in the text, we see how Diane and Mia talked about perspectives that are built from their personal experiences and backgrounds that would later be relevant to their reading of the text. In this way, they are drawing from their resources (e.g., their memory); therefore, the reading of the text will be unique to them (Rosenblatt, 1978). More specifically, they reference the experiences of their parents and grandparents whose histories and stories will likely hold great value to them. Because these viewpoints were also discussed prior to reading, they served as a source for their fellow peers to consider multiple perspectives as they considered the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*. While these perspectives do not pertain to the text specifically, they potentially influence the meaning-making processes that Diane, Mia, and her peers will use as they become immersed in the textworld. For Rosenblatt (1978), then, these perspectives become available for students as resources

(e.g., past experiences) that will shape the reading event or poem during their transaction with *Romeo and Juliet*.

In another class session, Ms. Gravely had students consider their opinions of fate. She posed the question as follows: "Let's have a really quick talk about this thing called fate. Has your whole life already been predetermined . . . are you just following this plan that was set in place for you? What do you think?" (Class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15). The question was open ended so that students could draw from their experiences. In response, Misael talked about his own experience:

> I used to [think my life was predetermined], but then I realized I didn't believe in it because there was (sic) times when I was not the best kid in the world . . . but I changed my ways. And I changed my fate as well, and your fate can keep changing as long as you choose to change them.
>
> (Misael, class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15)

In this excerpt, we see that Misael has drawn on the personal growth he has made with his behavior and his understanding of the role of choice in influencing the course of events. He describes the agency he has to control his own life by choosing to change. By doing so, he acknowledges that individuals have the ability to continually transform. As we will soon see, Misael's viewpoint allows him to (later) be empathetic or even critical toward characters and their actions in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In another class session, Ms. Gravely asked students to think about "a time you got so angry you acted without thinking" (fieldnotes, 4-27-15). Diane described a time when she was involved in a physical altercation because she was standing up for her sister who suffers from a disability:

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So there was this one girl, and her name was Donna (pseudonym). She was

Chinese or whatever. And she was talking about my sister . . . and my little sister,

she has Down's syndrome . . . and she [Donna] started making fun of her. So I

found out at lunch and we were getting ready to go outside. So I confronted her,

and she started laughing in my face. So I punched her. And she was on the floor,

so I kept punching her and she was bleeding. I broke her nose and then I got

suspended for a week.

(Diane, class session transcript excerpt, 4-27-15)

Here, Diane draws from her personal experience in reflecting on the question. In this

story, we see that she justifies her actions of getting into a fight in light of standing up for

her sister who suffers from a condition that marginalizes her among her peers at school.

In this way, her story demonstrates the agency she shows on behalf of her sister. While

fighting in schools is frowned upon, this personal story provides a nuanced understanding

of when such actions might be warranted. In the case of reading, this personal story

potentially provided one perspective for students to consider justification for characters'

actions, such as when Romeo kills Mercutio.

Although Misael and Diane do not comment on elements from *Romeo and Juliet*,

they provide nuanced responses to questions about complicated topics (e.g., fate, anger)

that will come up when they read the text. In these ways, their personal experiences

influence the lens through which they will later consider and evaluate the actions taken

by characters in the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Intentionally, Ms. Gravely drew on students'

personal experiences to help prepare them for the meaning-making process they will

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engage in as they consider the situations that emerge in the canonical work and the perspectives of characters like Romeo, Juliet, and Capulet.

On another occasion, Misael responded to a question Ms. Gravely posed regarding whether people are born good or bad, or if they can decide to be either:

I think it's a choice because no one is born bad or good. I was thinking when I was younger, I used to be more meaner (sic), and I was a bully to everybody. I chose to be that way and later on I chose to be good. I changed. So it's not really that you were born that way.

(Misael, class session transcript excerpt, 4-24-15)

In this excerpt, Misael references his personal experience to think about the role of agency in his own personal transformation and the nuanced view he now has of people and their ability to transform themselves as well. His perspective disregards stereotypes and prejudices based on life circumstances and emphasizes the role of choice. This personal story offers other students another perspective to consider when they (later) have to reflect on whether the Capulet and Montague's grudge against one another could be disregarded by both families, so that Romeo and Juliet could be together.

Responding to the same question on whether individuals are born good or bad, Eric provided an observation related to growing up in particular environments:

I don't think either [that people are born bad or good, or have a choice]. I think it's mostly around your environment. And like what you're around and like how your parents treat you, what's around you, like gang violence or anything like that. Something that will influence you to, it kind of like molds your brain when you're a kid to think that way.

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Ms. Gravely: Okay, so based on your environment, you don't really have a choice?

Eric: Yeah kind of like if you're born into gang violence, there's a good chance you're going to be part of gang violence because that's what goes around in your world.

<p style="text-align:center">(Eric, class session transcript excerpt, 4-24-15)</p>

Here, we see that Eric draws on observations he has made through his life to argue another nuanced point of view. His perspective holds that each person's life circumstance is situational and varied, but greatly influences life events and how a person responds. In this way, an individual's agency is not as influential as his or her environment. To illustrate this claim, he points toward how parents' treatment of their children molds them into the types of individuals they will be. He elaborates on this view by referencing the example of gangs in his response, arguing that those participating in this community of practice are more likely remain in it.

Misael's and Eric's perspectives, though responding to the same question, provide two nuanced but distinctly different ways to look at whether individuals have a choice in being good or bad. Both students' responses were based on their personal views, experiences, and observations. Misael, for instance, uses his personal experience of transformation to reflect on whether individuals have a choice to be good or bad. In contrast, Eric drew on his observations on how one's environment (specifically parents and gangs) has a major influence on whether one is good or bad. Because these viewpoints were discussed prior to reading sections of *Romeo and Juliet* that held these themes, Misael's and Eric's perspectives provided them and their peers multiple

perspectives to use later to negotiate their interpretations of situations and characters in the text during reading. Here, we see how students' resources emerge as they prepare to read *Romeo and Juliet*. While Rosenblatt (1978) holds that reading is specific to the reader, Langer (2011) views it more specifically as constructed among a community of learners. Here, we see that for both Misael and Eric, reading is an active process that involves thinking about aspects of their lives, which will inform the interpretations they make from the text, which shows that meaning is not fixed.

In the remainder of this section, I provide a longer in-class discussion to paint a fuller picture of how these conversations flowed. In this discussion, students talked about their thoughts and ideas on dreamers, in response to the questions: "Do you think it's good to be a dreamer? A person who is always dreaming big has these big plans for the future. Why or why not?" (class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15). The questions were asked in preparation for a section to be read later where Mercutio talks to Romeo about dreams. To address the questions, Diane responds to Arnold, who had stated the dangers of having specific goals that are not achieved as planned; in such situations, opportunities that would have been fruitful might have been passed by and not considered. Diane and Misael touched upon the importance to maintain realistic dreams for oneself:

Diane: It's kind of like what he [Arnold] said. It's like if you dream too much, you're not really thinking in a realistic way. And you're just like, "Oh, this might happen." But what if it doesn't end up happening like the way you planned it.

Ms. Gravely: Okay. So you need to be realistic? Is that what you're saying? Misael?

Misael: . . . It's like the same thing. It's like a good thing to be a dreamer but not

always because if you're a dreamer too long you're going to lose sight of reality.

And once you see reality, it's not going to be good. Your dreams become like

worse for you.

(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15)

In this excerpt, Diane and Misael draw on their values and personal observations as they

talk about the negative aspects of being a dreamer. Although being a dreamer is valued

by many, Diane's comment shows her own values on the subject which do not align to

the view that "anything is possible." For her, individuals need to work toward realistic

dreams and not rely on chance. Misael focuses on the after effects that individuals may

face once they do not achieve goals, because they were too lofty, alluding to depression

or lost hope. These perspectives provide alternative views on dreams and goals that

students could potentially draw from as they negotiate the meaning of Romeo and Juliet's

actions later in the text.

In the same conversation, Nick addressed the questions about dreams and

dreaming by talking about the value of setting goals. Eric added that some goals are

influenced by having dreams of pursuing a particular kind of career:

Nick: I think it's a great thing to be a dreamer because then you set goals for

yourself, and if you push to achieve those goals then you win at it as long as you

tried.

Ms. Gravely: Okay.

Eric: Same thing as Nick. It could be a good thing and a bad thing depending

what your dream is—like if you're dreaming about becoming something like a

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career you're setting. Like you're dreaming about becoming this in the future then

that's like a goal. Like depending on what you're dreaming about.

<div align="center">(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15)</div>

In this excerpt, Nick explained his perspective which is shaped by his

background, his lived experiences, and his values. Nick is a school athlete who played on

the school's football and baseball teams. Nick's response brought up achievement and

"trying," alluding to sportsmanship ideals. Therefore, dreams and lofty goals are valued

in these types of circumstances. In his response, Eric qualified what the term dream

meant to him. In his opinion, dreams are situation specific, and specific goals, such as

career-related ones, are important. Nick and Eric hold varied opinions as to the potential

of dreams and goals. Nick's opinion, for instance, is grounded in his experiences as an

athlete, while Eric has a balanced view that considers the situation of that particular

dream. Even though Nick and Eric are not directly speaking about *Romeo and Juliet*,

these perspectives that draw from their backgrounds and values are now available to

shape students' understanding during reading. This except illustrates Nick's and Eric's

active role in the meaning-making process, which Rosenblatt (1978) argues is important.

Here, we see how these students draw from their resources (based on their backgrounds)

which will then shape the "poem" they arrive at as they read *Romeo and Juliet*.

In response to the students' contributions, Ms. Gravely decided to talk about the

difference between an accountant and a sport star. She observed that, when a younger

person says that they want to be a sport star, they are often not taken as seriously by

adults as someone who says they want to be in a career that is more common, like an

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accountant. Diane, in this instance, told the class her thoughts on what it means to be famous, and why everyone cannot be famous.

Diane: Okay. So like there's always going to be someone that's better than you at something. And it's like not everybody can be like big [famous]. If everybody was big, it wouldn't be like a famous thing. Like a famous sport [star] or a famous singer. You can't always do those things.

Ms. Gravely: So is it good or bad to be a dreamer? Maybe you want to be those things, but maybe you don't have what it takes.

Nick: Life is about taking risks. So . . . YOLO [you only live once]. [Students laugh.]

Ms. Gravely: Okay, [Laughs] YOLO. Eric, last comment before we go on to the next one.

Eric: A lot of people . . . they aim, they dream about being like a sport star or whatever. But as they get older, their opinions will change. Out of a 100% of this group, there will only be a few percent left that will actually make it [as a sport star] because their opinions will change or something will happen to them. Or they just won't end up being sport stars.

(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-31-15)

We see a variety of perspectives that are described by Diane, Nick, and Eric in response to Ms. Gravely's comments regarding accountants and sport stars. In her response, Diane has maintained that becoming famous is not achievable by all individuals. She takes into account, I argue, the special talents that famous individuals have, which separate them from the rest and make them extraordinary. She holds onto to

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that specific ideal of being famous. Therefore, if anyone could become famous, "it wouldn't be like a famous thing." Nick, however, does not seem to agree with her statement and holds to the mantra of risk taking in life. Considering both Diane's and Nick's perspectives, Eric has considered the more situational nature of goals. For him, goals change as we get older and as our life circumstances evolve. In this way, he offers yet another way to look at dreamers and goals. As students interact as a community of learners, the ideas the teacher's question is catalyzed from the students' ideas and discussion regarding dreamers. Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading helps us understand how meaning making is specific to a certain time and place, shaped by lived experiences, and therefore not easily replicated as these ideas are specific to this group of students. That is, the students' experiences and values on dreams and goals have conditioned how readers and text will later come together.

The students' opinions of dreamers were shaped by their backgrounds, values, and opinions. Because they discussed them before reading *Romeo and Juliet*, the perspectives were subsequently available to them and their peers to interpret the meaning of a text. This conversation was meant to build and activate students' prior knowledge, and Diane's opinion of individuals who dream but do not consider life's consequences served as one perspective for her peers to consider the actions taken by the characters Romeo and Juliet later in reading the play. Students could also consider Nick's comments which looked at setting high goals and risk taking in a positive light. Eric's more nuanced comments—considering the context of situations—offered yet another perspective for students to understand the story's plot and characters.

A sociocultural analysis of literature, literacy, and meaning-making processes draws attention to students' varied ideas and how these many different ideas will later influence students' interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. These data reveal the rich viewpoints that students arrive at prior to reading, which then enrich their abilities to make sense of *Romeo and Juliet* during and even after reading. As Rosenblatt (1978) has argued, the text and the reader create a "situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (p. 16). In this case, we see how the students drew on personal experiences and aspects of their backgrounds to think about topics related to the reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. In this way, the reading of this text was a transaction that was specific to this group of readers, at this time in their lives.

Understanding the Textworld

In this section, I draw from excerpts of transcripts of class sessions and students' work in which students demonstrated their understandings and interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Relying on Rosenblatt, we see how meaning is shaped by what the reader brings to the text, as they discuss the same character. As Rosenblatt (1978) writes, the poem is an "active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" (p. 21). Using Langer (2011), I will show how students' responses in class sessions and their work showed a range of perspectives that embedded their backgrounds and values. I will show how these perspectives influenced their understanding of the text, and I will show how the canonical work caused them to think about their own perspectives. Early in reading *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms. Gravely worked with students to increase their understanding of people's views of arranged marriages during the text's time period. In the excerpt below, students had just read the section in which Paris has asked Lord

Capulet if he will allow him to marry Juliet. After Ms. Gravely asked students to consider the meaning of two quotes from this section, students offered comments that revealed their attempts to make sense of those quotes by thinking carefully about their own lived experiences:

> Ms. Gravely: So we just got two quotes from him. Let's take a look at line number 13 for me. Thirteen says, "And too soon marred and those so early made." [Teacher provides three minutes to write quote's meaning.] "And too soon marred are those so early made." To be marred by something means that you're sort of damaged or, you know, horrified or scarred in a way. So while Paris says age really isn't really an issue . . .[by stating] "younger girls than her have gotten married" . . . her dad then turns around and says, "Well young girls that get married are often horrified or scarred by that experience." So how does he [Capulet] think about marriage? young girls shouldn't, you know . . .
>
> Anita: Her dad doesn't really like it.
>
> Ms. Gravely: No, her dad doesn't approve of a young marriage.
>
> Mia: 'Cause that's like a grown man. Oh my God. My dad be like, No, no, no.
>
> Ms. Gravely: [Laughs] Exactly.
>
> Ms. Gravely: So conclusion about Mr. Capulet there: He doesn't approve of a young marriage. You can go ahead and write that down there. From the sounds of it a lot of you guys don't quite agree either. Girls, that would be like if you were married in . . . 7th grade.
>
> Anita: But everybody thought that back then it was okay.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah. I don't know. But if you were to put yourself in these shoes, you'd already been married.

<p align="right">(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-30-15)</p>

In the above interaction, Mia expressed her disapproval of Paris's request to marry Juliet while alluding to what her own father's reaction would be if he was in this situation. Mia regards Paris as being too old. However, Anita considers the context in which the story takes place and the acceptance of such marriages. In response, Ms. Gravely asked students to consider the text from today's perspective; recall that she asked Anita to "put yourself in these shoes." In this instance, I will argue, Ms. Gravely did not take up Anita's viewpoint which was sensitive toward the text's time period and the values that characters held within it.

As Langer might predict, students' responses to Ms. Gravely's questions demonstrate that connecting information from texts to personal experiences allows students to transform a superficial understanding of the meaning of the quote into a deeper and more complicated one. On the one hand, Mia's response showcases her values, which her father also holds, regarding men marrying young girls. In Langer's view, this reflects a second stance view whereby her values have influenced her understanding of the text. On the other hand, Anita's comments reveal that the text has caused her to reflect on her own values based on the interaction between Paris and Capulet. Instead of condemning Paris for wanting to marry a younger girl, as would occur in her world, she considers the time period in which the text takes place.

In the excerpt below, which occurred soon after the previous one, we see how the teacher and her students negotiated meaning in real time in order to understand Lord

Capulet as a father to Juliet. As they worked through the text's unfamiliar and archaic language (e.g., the phrase "woo her"), students' reflected on the textworld in relation to experiences from their own backgrounds:

Ms. Gravely: Okay, so he [Lord Capulet] first says, "but woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart." If someone would please look to the right for me and explain what "woo her" means? Tell me what does that mean? Joseph?

Joseph: Try and steal her heart.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah. So first, he's telling Paris, "You better woo her, you better make her like you." But then he says, "My will to her consent is but a part." I'll let you marry her but she has to give you her consent. What does consent mean?

Students: Permission.

Ms. Gravely: Permission. So not only do you gotta make her like you, but she has to want to marry you too. She has to give you her permission. When it comes to marriage, what do you think the dad values, then?

Mia: Her virtue.

Ms. Gravely: Well, maybe her virtue. But he's also saying, "She's got to like you, Paris, and she's got to want to marry you." What do you think he might think is important in marriage?

Eric: That they both want it. It's not like [only] one [of them] wants it. It's not a forced relationship.

Ms. Gravely: Okay, it's not a forced relationship. They both have to want it. We already know Paris wants it. You have to make Juliet want it too.

Anita: He wants that they love one another.

Ms. Gravely: Yeah, so they gotta both love each other. Good. These are some

excellent conclusions that you should write down. They both have to want it and

they should both love each other. I don't know. Her dad kind of sounds like a nice

guy.

<div align="right">(Class session transcript excerpt, 3-30-15)</div>

In this interaction, Ms. Gravely elicited students' ideas and responses to two quotes.

Students said their understandings of the phrase "woo her" and the word "consent."

Joseph and Mia, for instance, both said literal understandings of what the words might

mean. As students came to understand what these words meant, they were able to build

their understandings of the character Capulet. Eric and Anita, for instance, told the class

about their perspective of Capulet's opinion of marriage and Juliet's role in it. Eric finds

that Capulet's view of marriage is one in which he as the father cannot provide a final

answer or consent until he knows Juliet's desire. Anita more boldly said that Capulet's

view requires that two individuals love one another. This interaction captured two similar

but varied responses on Capulet's viewpoint on marriage, as one emphasizes one's choice

and the other mutual love. Ms. Gravely was thorough in solidifying students' ideas—by

asking them to consider the meaning of smaller parts (such as the meaning of words) as

they came to understand the significance of the section.

In various writing activities, students demonstrated their understanding of the text

by thinking in terms of the textworld. Langer's (2011) view allows us to see how

students' perspectives, backgrounds, and values are embedded in their responses, as

students think about characters and themes. For example, in their Act I quiz, one question

posed to students was: What character has the best opinion of love and marriage? To

answer the question, students had to think about the characters they had met so far in their reading. For this question, students reflected on their own understanding of love and marriage and considered a character's position on it.

In the following excerpt from Misael's longer response to the prompt that asks him what character had the best opinion of love and marriage, we see another example of how students' values influenced their responses and how they seemed to identify and discuss characters who best fit their pre-existing views and perspectives. In his response, Misael agreed with Capulet's decision to tell Paris that he cannot marry his daughter, unless Juliet has also given her consent:

> Love isn't a choice, it's a feeling you get. Marriage lasts a long time[;] you want
> to be happy with the person you want to be with. That's why I agreed on
> Capulet's opinion.
>
> (Misael, Act I Quiz extended response, 4-7-15)

Misael's statement that love is "a feeling you get" and his assessment of marriage and happiness seems to be based (at least in part) on personal experience. He also makes a nuanced claim that love is not a choice but should also not be forced—arguing that before individuals get married, the two should get to know each other and determine whether they do in fact love one another. Misael is able to make these claims, I argue, because he views Capulet as a peer, as someone with shared dilemmas and challenges. Misael's response is characteristic of Langer's second stance as he has showcased his position that love is a choice, which reflects Capulet's position as well.

Diane also shows that she believes that Capulet has the best opinion of love and marriage. In her response, she emphasizes Capulet's wish to let Juliet decide who she

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should marry. As she wrote, "[Paris] has to put effort to win her heart[;] then it will be her choice to choose" (Act I quiz extended response, 5-1-15). This comment shows Diane's understanding that love requires work from both individuals. In such ways, Diane's background seems to have influenced her understanding of Capulet's perspective of love in relation to Paris's request for her hand in marriage. Like Misael, she pointed out that Capulet respects Juliet's choice in who she will have to marry. Diane's response is characteristic of Langer's second stance, as she shows how her background influences her understanding.

In responding to the question on love and marriage, Eric chose the character Mercutio as having the best opinion of love. In the following excerpt, he explains Mercutio's perspective of love and considers it in light of his own experience:

I feel like he [Mercutio] understands that you are just not going to be happy with every girl you meet. There will always be more people coming in your life that will get your attention. But also there could be a misfortune[;] for example she does not love you back or she is already taken. Love will not always be on your side but it does not mean to give up. Sometimes you may be the one that is hurting and sometimes you may be the one hurting others.

(Eric, Act I quiz extended response, 4-7-15)

In this excerpt, Eric identified and reflected on one of the text's major themes—that love does not always work out. We are able to see that Eric gravitates toward Mercutio's cynical or realistic understanding of what love means. This response is within the textworld as Eric has established his ideas of love while considering Mercutio's perspective. In this case, he has established that love is situational (not always working

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out) and that there are multiple possibilities. This response shows how Mercutio's perspective of love has caused him to think on his own opinions. Therefore, the text has caused Eric to reflect on his own world, which is indicative of Langer's third stance.

Anita, in considering the same question, also chose Capulet as the character who had the best opinion of marriage. Her response differed as she took a critical perspective of the characters' actions in the text. In ending her response, she wrote, "Another reason I agree with him [Capulet] is because marriage should be about love, not looks and money" (Anita, Act I quiz extended response, 4-7-15). In her response, Anita maintained that marriage, as Capulet states, should be "about love." In this response, she not only alludes to and critiques Paris, but also the love that Romeo and Juliet have. Based on her response, she is in Langer's fourth stance, as she looked at the Paris's, Romeo's, and Juliet's actions from an analytical standpoint. In writing "marriage should be about love, not looks," Anita critiques the character Paris who wants to marry Juliet for material reasons—after all, he is from a comparable family and marrying her would benefit him financially. He asks for her hand in marriage despite not knowing her well, as Capulet emphasizes. Anita has critiqued Romeo who she believes has fallen in love with Juliet's beauty rather than knowing her at a deeper level, such as her personality. In this response, Anita described her understanding of the textworld while embedding critical opinions of characters.

The responses I have examined display an array of perspectives despite their main focus being on the same question (what character has the best opinion of love and marriage). The writing excerpts that I have provided were representative of the types of interpretations students came to in writing. In their writing, we see that students'

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understandings are characteristic of Langer's second, third, and fourth stances. When readers' values are imposed on or are in line with the text's, they showcase traits of the second stance. In this analysis, we see that Misael's and Diane's responses showcase these traits as they were in concert with Capulet's perspective of love and marriage. That is, their backgrounds and values matched those of this character. Moving to the third stance, this is where readers' perspectives, opinions, and values are changed and influenced by the text. We see how Eric displays characteristics of this stance by drawing on Mercutio's cynical perspective of love in establishing his own ideas. Eric's interpretation is shaped by the text's lessons on love as he relates it to his own experience. In Langer's fourth stance, readers are analytical or critical of the text. We see how Anita showcased these characteristics, as she was critical of Paris, Juliet, and Romeo and their superficial inclinations of love.

At the end of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, students were required to complete a unit summative essay. Ms. Gravely provided students with six universal themes (e.g., family obligations, the consequences of loyalty, and lack of communication), or they could create their own. In the essay, students were required to state how the theme related to the play and to modern society.

Below, I examine Misael's understandings of two different universal themes as communicated in this end-of-unit assignment. In the first answer, he responds to the universal theme of: "Love causes us to behave in ways we did not think we could." He focuses on the dangerous actions that Romeo and Juliet take in order to be together. He also discusses how he sees this as related to issues prevalent today:

I think this theme is part of the story because Romeo and Juliet [have] done really

dangerous things. Romeo trespassed on Capulet's grounds. Juliet marr[ies] a

Montague. They do all these things because love. "With love's light wings did I

o'verperch these walls; for stony limits cannot hold love out, And what love can

do, that dares love attempt" (Shakespeare 973). How does this theme relate to our

lives? Well, teen boys go ditch school to go hangout with his (sic) boyfriend or

other things I will not speak of.

(Misael, summative essay, 5-14-15)

In this response, we see that Misael draws on his own experiences, observations, and

values. He considers the acts that are "unusual behavior" for Romeo and Juliet as

dangerous. Because Romeo has trespassed onto Juliet's family's property, he has

committed an act that is illegal and that puts Romeo in danger in case he is caught by the

Capulet family. He also makes a claim that Juliet has participated in "dangerous things"

by marrying Romeo. Under normal circumstances where she was not in love, Juliet might

reflect on marriage and consider her parents' perspective. Finally, Misael applies the

universal theme to his world, considering how gay teenage "boys" might also participate

in "dangerous things," such as skipping school, in order to be together. In this

commentary, Misael is possibly alluding to the lack of acceptance that gays still

experience today. In Misael's response, we see that he wrestles with the universal theme

of unusual behavior as related in *Romeo and Juliet* and how it has caused him to reflect

on his experiences and values in his world.

In his second answer, he responds to the universal theme of: "Our obligations to

our families can interfere with our personal desires." (*Romeo and Juliet* Unit

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Summative). He considers what keeps Romeo and Juliet from being together; as well, he provides insight into the couple's relationship. He also discusses how families can influence individuals' lives:

> Romeo and Juliet love each other but their family's (sic) hate each other. "From ancient grudge break to new mutiny" (Shakespeare 941). At first they were in love with each other at that party. Then, they found out that they are from the familys (sic) that hate each other and are confused. These relates (sic) a lot in our lives. When a person is gay, but the family doesn't like gays. Or when child doesn't belive (sic) in god, but his own family wants him too.
>
> (Misael, summative essay, 5-14-15)

Here, we see that Misael considers Romeo's and Juliet's perspectives within the text world in light of his worldview, which is informed by his lived experience. As he points out, the two characters initially fall in love, but once they realize who they are, they "are confused"—one is a Capulet, the other a Montague. He makes sense of the grudge that the two families hold against one another by comparing this dynamic to contemporary issues that he is familiar with. In relating the text to the modern world, Misael considers families that do not accept their gay children. He alludes to religion as well, by considering individuals who do not connect or find value in the religions that their families participate in. For Misael, then, these viewpoints—acceptances of alternative lifestyles, religious affiliations—are what conflict with an individual's desires, causing confusion. This universal theme as related to the text has caused Misael to reflect on his own experiences and observations.

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In Rosenblatt's (1978) view, the "poem" that Misael has arrived at through his transaction with *Romeo and Juliet* draws from his resources, which are his memories, thoughts, and feelings on specific issues pertinent to his world and experiences. Misael's perspectives reflect how he was able to take *Romeo and Juliet*'s characters and plot and apply universal themes in order to relate the story to his worldview, observations, and values. In his comments, we see that he presents topics that have consequences for his peers. These topics and issues, such as the acceptance of gays and religious beliefs, were brought to light as he thought about how they were represented in the text. In these different ways, Misael's meaning-making processes draw on his real-world experiences. As Smagorinsky & Coppock (1995) might argue, Misael's "tool kit"—which include experiences, culture, and experiences—has allowed him to think about themes in *Romeo and Juliet* as they relate to contexts that are political, ideological, and cultural. In Smagorinsky's (2001) view, then, Misael has arrived at a cultural reading.

Understanding through Innovation

In this section, I analyze four creative projects that students completed in which they created their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. Relying on Langer's (2011) theory of envisionments, I show how students' stories represent the fifth stance, as students went beyond the text by providing alternative ways to look at the canonical text. I show how students embedded multiple worldviews, histories, experiences, and social issues within their stories. For these projects, students were able to work with one other student if they chose. Students were provided the license to display an array of understandings of the text through the movie pitch and Balcony Scene projects. With these projects, students included various drawings, indicating the setting, what the characters looked like, and the

clothing that they were wearing. Students first completed the movie pitch assignment which later transformed into the Balcony Scene project. Though most of the final Balcony Scene projects built from the movie pitch assignment, there were some students who ventured a new route.

Below, I will examine parts from movie pitches and Balcony Scenes that students created. Here, I wish to show how students were able to demonstrate their understanding of the text while having the ability to make the text their own. In these stories, students pulled from elements of the play, such as plot, symbolism, and themes, but displayed features within their stories that were specific to them in the process. In considering Langer's envisionment-building framework, the four stories below are examples of stance five, as students went beyond the text in creating their own stories using the knowledge they had thus built from reading *Romeo and Juliet*.

Nick and his partner Federico decided to create a story in which they embed the U.S. and Mexican border. In their story, Juliet comes from a family that owns gas stations, and Romeo is a painter. His family is from Mexico and Juliet's from the U.S. One day, Romeo crosses the border while Juliet is checking up on one of her family's gas stations. As Nick and Federico wrote, "They see each other outside the store and fall in love right there" (movie pitch, 4-7-15). We see that Nick and Federico keep to the text's plot in that both characters instantly fall in love. In this case, both are separated by a border, have different nationalities, and are from different ethnicities. In this way, Nick and Federico addressed issues that were prevalent in their world: issues of the border, immigration, and race. Nick stated that they decided to include the U.S. and Mexican border within their story because it was a love story that for them would not be common

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or showcased. Below I provide the descriptions that Nick and Federico created to describe their characters, as well as their depiction of their story (see Figure 6):

Romeo is brown toned skin color. He has brown eyes and a mustache. He works as a painter. He wears pants, boots, and a button down shirt.

Juliet has blue eyes and is light skin toned. She wears a dress and wears heels. She just checks up on the gas stations but then she doesn't do much but stay in her house. She always has her hair in style and always dressing up.

(Nick and Federico, movie pitch, 4-7-15)
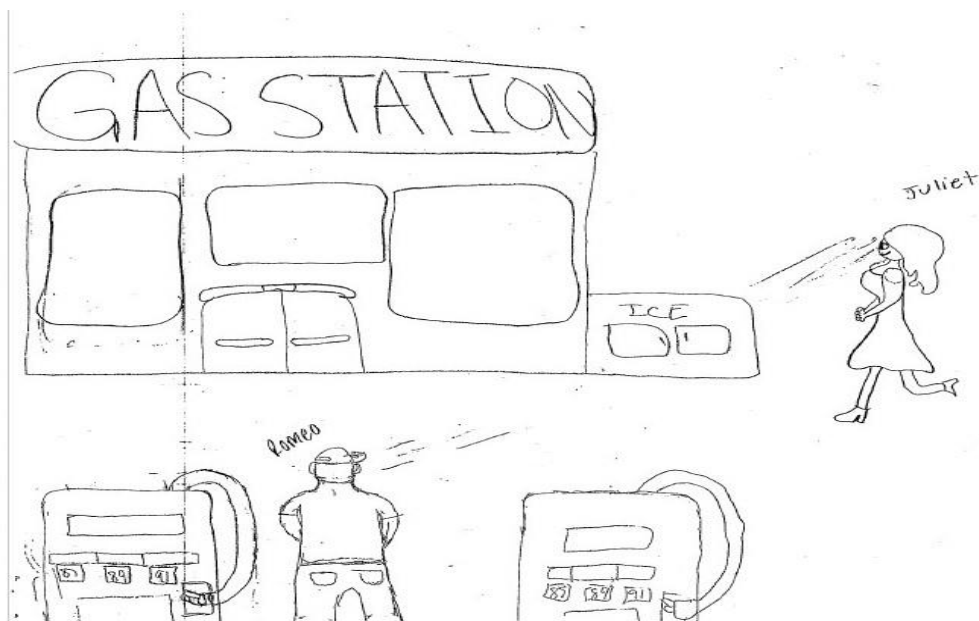
Figure 6. Nick and Federico's drawing of their movie pitch. (Nick and Federico, movie pitch, 4-14-15)

In this version of the love story, in contrast to the canonical version, Romeo holds a lower economic status than does Juliet. Nick and Federico, both of Mexican descent, have created a story which we might assume mirrors their lived experiences with and personal views of Mexicans who come to the U.S. in search of work and a new home. On

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the one hand, Romeo has a job as a painter. On the other hand, Juliet has a job with her family, but she "doesn't do much but stay in her house" (Nick and Federico, movie pitch, 4-7-15). We can see as well how Nick and Federico introduce race. Juliet has blue eyes and her skin is light, while Romeo's eyes are brown and his skin is dark. Their story demonstrates their understanding of the themes in *Romeo and Juliet*, such as love at first sight while also showing their acute awareness of the divisions that exist in their own world. In Langer's view, as readers go beyond the text they take their understandings of a text and find new, alternative ways to look at situations that exist in their world. Here, we are able to see how Nick and Federico saw issues such as immigration in a new light, as something that contributes to division and problems in communities and in families. They also note the preference that mainstream society has toward European features, as they show the stark difference between both characters' physical appearance. In this sense, students were able to offer critiques of their own society—while drawing on the text and the many messages it offers.

In contrast to the plot in *Romeo and Juliet*, Eric and his partner Janie weaved in a futuristic perspective into their story. Rather than name them Romeo and Juliet, their characters' names are Angelo and Dahlila. (See Figures 4 and 5 in Chapter 4 for drawings.) Angelo is poor and Dahlila is wealthy. Her father is a scientist. Though they come from different economic circumstances, both attend the same school. Both show their love for one another with identical arm tattoos that display six triangles, which Dahlila purchased. The two are in love until "one day, there was a giant wave that flooded eastern Europe and when people went to investigate they found out that the moon has moved into the earth's atmosphere" (Eric and Janie, movie pitch, 4-7-15). While

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exploring the moon (since it is closer to the earth now), scientists discovered an element called "titanium steel," which is expensive. The rich, therefore, have mandated that all the poor be transferred to the moon, where they will live in internment camps and be referred to as peasants. It will be the peasants' job to mine for this element. Because the two are in different worlds, Angelo and Dahlila cannot be together.

In this story, Eric and Janie maintained elements of the *Romeo and Juliet* textworld. Angelo and Dahlila are two lovers who come from two households that should not be together. But Eric and Janie also created their own twist to the original text. For example, the characters fall in love over time and have identical tattoos, unlike Romeo and Juliet who fall in love instantly. Here, socioeconomic status is what separates the two. Angelo belongs to a family that is forced into internment camps, while Dahlila can proceed with life as usual. She feels an obligation and guilt that Angelo's family is being subjugated by society's elite. Angelo, however, lets her know that it is not her fault. While Eric and Janie are going beyond the text (Langer, 2011) in creating an alternative story that takes place in the future, it alludes to historical events in which groups of people considered inferior have been subjugated to mistreatment. In this way, Eric and Janie have made the text relevant to themselves by using it as a mechanism for trying to make sense of the inequality that humans have experienced historically and continue to experience today. In their story, Eric and Janie were able to highlight their understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* by expanding the story into one of love, status, and division.

Misael worked independently on his movie pitch and Balcony Scene. His story takes place in the 1950s. His characters' names are Romeo and Juliet, as well. In his story, as in the canonical version, the two characters come from the same socioeconomic

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strata. As Misael detailed, "Both family's (sic) are wealthy and have these rivalary (sic) who is [the] richest and greatest family" (movie pitch, 4-7-15). While their socioeconomic status is the same, "Juliet is a bookworm and kind of nerdy" (Misael, movie pitch, 4-7-15). In contrast, Romeo is a "grease monky (sic) [who] likes cars" (Misael, movie pitch, 4-7-15). It is this difference—one is a nerd, the other is a greaser— that separates the two from being together. Misael provided the following descriptions of how both characters look and dress:

Juliet wears glasses, a red dress, long hair brown (sic), brown eyes.

Romeo wears a leather jacket, red shirt, black pants, jell (sic) [gelled] hair, black hair, drak (sic) [dark] brown eyes.

(Misael, movie pitch, 4-7-15)

In Misael's Balcony Scene, Romeo pulls up to Juliet's driveway on his motorcycle. While she is on her balcony, she says, "Why, oh, why does he [Romeo] have to be such as pretty boy?" (Misael, balcony scene, 4-21-15). Romeo who is below hears her and responds, "Juliet[,] my love, oh, how I love you so much, but why do we have to be different? I want to ride my motorcycle with you." (Misael, balcony scene, 4-21-15). The two lovers continue to talk about their love for one another. They talk about what their peers think about them being together. Romeo tells Juliet: "I know that I am a grease monkey and you're a book worm, but I don't care[.] I love you, don't you see?" (Misael, balcony scene, 4-21-15). Juliet responds, "My friends said that we shouldn't be together because we're two different people that can't be in love" (Misael, balcony scene, 4-21-15). In spite of their differences, Juliet decides that she should not care about others'

opinions. Both characters express their love for one another and "rode on their motorcycle into the sunset" (Misael, balcony scene, 4-21-15).

In his story, Misael maintained elements of the original text's plot. One, the characters have the same names (Romeo and Juliet). Two, both characters come from comparable families that are wealthy. Like the families in the canonical version, these families compete with one another over who is wealthier. Despite this competition between the two families in Misael's story, it is not the reason that keeps the two from being together. In this story, the lovers question their love because they come from different social cliques. A nerd should not be in a relationship with a greaser, at least according to their friends and common practice. As described, Juliet is a bookwork, and a nerd might not be as much as a risk-taker and as outgoing as a greaser, who is likely to be apathetic toward school-type activities, like reading. Thus, Misael has gone beyond the text (Langer's fifth stance) to provide an alternative view of what may keep two individuals from openly being together. Here, Misael made sense of the text by reflecting on what he already knew through lived experience—and by raising issues that are prevalent among peers in school (e.g., social cliques). Although these individuals might have the same socioeconomic circumstances and be part of the same ethnicity and nationality, these labels and differences in characteristics, preferences, and style can cause division among peers.

In Mia and Estela's story, Romeo and Juliet meet online and maintain communication through their mobile phones. The story takes place in the future, the year 2020. They have not met in person, until Romeo texts Juliet that he is going to be in Verona that weekend and wants her to pick him up at the airport. Therefore, the two can

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finally meet in person. Juliet cannot drive yet, and she is hesitant to meet him because she will need to have her mother drive her to the airport. She worries that her mother will question who Romeo is since she does not know him nor has met him in person. Finally, after convincing her mother to pick Romeo up at the airport, Romeo and Juliet finally meet and spend the weekend together. Romeo takes a flight back home with intents to return once it is his spring break.

Below, I provide an excerpt of the story, which shows the back and forth conversation between Romeo and Juliet taking place through mobile texting:

Monday 1, 2020

6:00 a.m.

Romeo: good morning baby

Juliet: umh good morning

Romeo: have u [you] decided if Ur [you're] going to meet me at the airport?

Juliet: Well…. Idk [I don't know]. I'm scared to meet u in person but I realllllllly want to see u before you go home but my mother doesn't know about you and I don't think she will approve of me meeting you bc [because] I met you online.

Romeo: but you know it's me… if you love me she will too

… [represents time in which Juliet has not responded]

Are u going to respond?

Juliet: You know things are very complicated and I have to work some stuff out before I pick you up

Romeo: Go ask your mother if you can come get me from the airport

(Mia and Estela, balcony scene, 4-15-15)

The excerpt shows how Mia and Estela typed Romeo and Juliet's conversation to represent that it is taking place through mobile texting. In it, they include the date and the time. The content of the message is typed in short hand, typical of texting language—e.g., "u" for "you"; "Idk" for "I don't know"; and "bc" for "because."

Mia and Estela have kept to the plot of the original story by maintaining the same names of the characters and city. The two characters also cannot openly see each other. In this case, however, it is because of distance; they do not live in the same city. Rather than having met in person and instantly falling in love, Romeo and Juliet have met through the Internet, but have never met in person. In this way, Mia and Estela have added a twist to their creative rendition as they have incorporated technology as a means of meeting new people and maintaining communication. They have also embedded features of popular culture. This story also embeds aspects of *Catfish: The TV Show*, an MTV show where people who have met online but not in person, yet they fall in love with each other.[7]

In contrast to the canonical version, this story does not showcase a division between the families which then causes a rupture in the relationship between Romeo and Juliet. Instead, there is a sense of support from Juliet's mother, as she is willing to take her to the airport to pick up this "stranger." This way, Mia and Estela have made parental approval a theme of this story. This story has elements of Langer's fifth stance of meaning making, as Mia and Estela have considered alternative ways in thinking about the themes from the canonical text. In this creative rendition, both girls have taken their understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* beyond the text as they have reflected on what

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[7] In the show *Catfish: The TV Show*, typically one person has lied about who they are (e.g., they used a fake picture) and do not want to meet the other in person because the truth will be revealed. The show forces them to meet with one another, documenting the meeting by video.

separates Romeo and Juliet from being together in a new light. Here, the lovers have feelings for one another despite only knowing each other through texting. However, because Romeo and Juliet are transparent about their relationship with Juliet's mother, both characters are able to be together openly.

Rosenblatt (1978) argues that multiple meanings are possible, but that they are also limited—i.e., "self-aware and disciplined" (p. 129) by an individual's personality and culture. The renditions I have examined show how they are specific to students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. For Rosenblatt (1978), as readers transact with a text, the textworld and real world sometimes blur as ". . . the literary work of art . . . leads us into a new world" (p. 21). In these creative renditions, we see how students' ventured into a "new world." Readers used their well-established understandings of the text and used knowledge they gained from the text to consider alternative ways to look at situations (Langer, 2011). While Rosenblatt (1978) describes how readers enter "a new world" as they read, Langer (2011) qualifies and sets a purpose for it (e.g., providing alternative ways to look at situations). The four above stories illustrate how Nick, Federico, Eric, Janie, Misael, Mia, and Estela have taken the canonical version of the story to shed light on issues prevalent in their world. In these cases, students brought in a variety of issues that they thought would keep the lovers from being together openly. Beliefs about immigration, nationality, and race influenced their interpretation of why Romeo and Juliet could not be together in Nick and Federico's story. These were issues that both partners saw as prevalent in their world. Eric and Janie explored issues of subjugation and division in their story, and how these affected Dahlila and Angelo from being together. These perspectives underscored historical events that both partners know

of where this division has occurred. Misael alluded to issues that are prevalent among peers, in particular schools, where social cliques often determine who will be friends with who. In these ways, he considers everyday issues teenagers experience daily in places like schools while making sense of the assigned reading. Similarly, Mia and Estela addressed issues relevant to the widespread use of the Internet to meet new people, even as they made sense of the phenomenon of becoming emotionally attached to someone that one has never met in person.

In an interview, Nick explained that creating this story facilitated his own and his peers' understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. Without an understanding of what was going on in the text, he and his classmates would not be able to create their own stories. There were elements, such as plot, themes, and character development, which needed to be understood before students could create their own movie pitch and Balcony Scene. Here, Nick seems to be in the process of what Langer's (2011) has described as stance five, where he has taken well-developed envisionments and considered new alternatives in light of what he has learned from reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Though I focus on only four stories here, the projects demonstrated ways in which students made meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* from multiple viewpoints. While the text is a story about love at first sight between two individuals from comparable families, Ms. Gravely's students also showed that it could also be valued as a story about individuals from different social and economic statuses, nationalities, and social cliques. Smagorinsky (2011) reminds us that meaning is composed in various ways: it is influenced by one's cultural and social community, as well as the way an individual has learned or has been afforded to make

meaning and transact with texts. Here, students demonstrated the ability to take their

views of the world to compose alternative meanings to *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Relevance of *Romeo and Juliet* to Freshmen

In this section, I draw on interview and focus group transcripts to analyze focal

students' thoughts on the play's themes and the relevance those had to their lives. In

many ways, they seemed to believe that *Romeo and Juliet* had been written just for them,

high school freshmen. They said they were able to relate to the ages that the characters

were. Juliet is 13, very close in age to them (most were 14 at the time of the study) and

Romeo is the equivalent of a high school junior or senior. Students told me that they were

new to high school and new to love and in search of what some of them called a "bae"

(local slang for "a special someone"). Mostly though, the students I interviewed seemed

to believe that the text offered relevant lessons to consider as they moved on in life and

with love. Students comments reflected how the textworld caused them to reflect on their

life, opinions, and perspectives, and future (Langer, 2011).

In considering how the text related to them as high school freshmen in the year

2015, Eric described his thoughts on why *Romeo and Juliet* was relevant to him and his

peers. In his comment, he addressed the lessons that the text had to offer which were

relevant to today's freshmen:

> Well, um, kind of, yeah because, you know, this is like a time when you meet new
>
> people and you kind of like, you get attracted to people a lot faster because you
>
> know you just, like, you're meeting a lot of people and it comes at you hard, you
>
> know. It [*Romeo and Juliet*] kind of teaches you a lesson not to like just fall in
>
> love with someone just because they look good. Just like, kind of take your time

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to get to know them because I know there's consequences in the book and

because they end up doing what they do [committing suicide].

<div align="right">(Eric, focus group, 4-14-15)</div>

In this excerpt, we see that Eric considers his own experiences as a high school freshman. He alludes to the new relationships that are formed during this first year of high school. In his case, the school had over 2,000 students enrolled at the time of the study. For most students, this is the first time they are part of a larger educational setting. Therefore, there are more new people to meet—to form new relationships. Some of the relationships that individuals will form their first year of high school will include romantic ones. Taking this into consideration, we see that Eric takes the lessons that *Romeo and Juliet* offers regarding falling in love too quickly. As Eric noted, the text's lessons is to "take your time"; otherwise, there might be consequences that will have to be faced. Because he applied the canonical text's themes to his life experiences, we see how Eric showcases aspects of Langer's third stance, but also considers how they apply to his future.

In thinking about the relevance that *Romeo and Juliet* has for him and his fellow peers, Misael thought about his own life experiences. His comments showed that he considered the story's themes irrelevant. As he explained, "I feel like it doesn't do any of this [hold relevance to freshmen]. I mean like, like love at first sight. I don't think it relates to anything. No one has . . . like I don't care if you think it's, 'Oh love at first sight.' I don't kind of, I don't believe that. I don't think it's like really related to our century right now" (Misael, focus group, 4-14-15). In this comment, we see that Misael has drawn on his own experiences and opinions in considering one of the main scenes of the text, when the characters Romeo and Juliet fall in love, without knowing each other in

depth. Based on his observations, this does not occur today. Because of this perspective, the text does not offer a real sense of relevance to him. Applying his own observations of life, Misael shows how he was not able to connect to the text at this time in his life. In Rosenblatt's (1978) view, Misael's "poem" might change in a future reading as his life experiences change.

Diane described why she found *Romeo and Juliet* relevant for herself and her fellow freshmen peers. She focused on relationships and what they are based on, love or lust. She explained:

I do [find the text relevant] because some people can look at someone and automatically think like, "I want that person," so they easily get attached. And then like they want to know more, and it's lust. Between lust and love, it's like if you love someone you're going to take their time and talk about each other instead of just looking at someone and just falling in love.

(Diane, focus group, 4-14-15)

Diane's response shows her connection to the story's general theme of love. She is able to connect to the text based on her personal observations and experiences, as she considers how individuals decide on whether or not they want to pursue a relationship with another person. *Romeo and Juliet* has caused her to reflect on the difference between love and lust. In this case, she has alluded to the characters Romeo and Juliet who rush into their relationship. She maintains that love takes time to build with another person, which the main characters do not do. For Diane, love and lust and how it is portrayed in the text has not changed, based on her observations. People still fall in love quickly based on superficial reasons. Therefore, in her view, the text offers relevance for her and her

peers. Diane response shows characteristics of the third stance, as the text causes her to reflect on her observations.

As these perspectives show, students connected to *Romeo and Juliet* in a variety of ways and particularly in relation to its theme of love. Though students gravitated to the same theme of love, they revealed varied understandings of it. Eric has taken the text as a means to understanding how love works and maybe what one should do when in love—in real situations. For him, as well, the pace of falling in love is important to consider when meeting someone new. Here, Eric shows how he relates what the text has taught him in relation to his own experiences. For Diane, the text does remain a relevant piece of literature for her and her peers. In her response, she took the difference between lust and love as an integral aspect of *Romeo and Juliet*. From her experiences, individuals falling in love out of lust instead of knowing someone in depth still occurs. Diane's comments show how the text has caused her to reflect on and enrich her own understandings of love and lust. Misael, however, maintained that the text did not relate to real-world situations. Rosenblatt (1978) holds that the reading event is not linear and is conditioned by a variety of factors, including past experiences. Based on his observations, the themes that are prevalent in *Romeo and Juliet*, such as falling in love at first sight, do not occur in his world, so he maintained that the text did not relate to him. Each of these students demonstrates how the text was an event or "poem" that was specific to them, based on the resources they brought to their reading of *Romeo and Juliet* (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Diane and Mia both told me about their thoughts on love from an adolescent perspective. As Diane considered her position in the world, she connected to Juliet's age and the situation she found herself in with Romeo.

. . . we're in high school and she's [Juliet] about our age range, like how we are

now, it shows you like what it was back then and what it is now. And even like

back then, it could still happen now, you know? They fall in love. People here like

our age tend to like fall in love easier. They think it's love because they, you

know, they want someone. They want to feel like having a partner, and they don't

know that in the future there might be someone else where they'll understand you

better than just looking at you and wanting to get at you.

(Diane, focus group, 4-14-15)

In this commentary, Diane reflected on her experience as a high school freshman

as she considered the text's relevance. From her view, the text was relevant to her and her

peers for two reasons: 1) the characters are about the same age as they are, and 2)

teenagers do still fall in love with one another quickly. From her perspective, being in

this age range, adolescents are more prone to want to be in a relationship because they

wish to be with someone. Similar to Romeo and Juliet who fall for each other's

appearances and not so much personalities, they might not prioritize looking for

substance in someone else. For Diane, the text's lessons have prompted individuals like

herself to consider that the future may hold an individual who will see beyond superficial

aspects.

Mia, too, described why she found the text to be relevant for herself and her peers.

In her comments, she provides an example of adolescents' disregard of consequences

when they are in love:

. . . a lot of us young teenagers who fall in love with someone who's either older

or younger than us. And like your parents don't really want you guys together

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because you need to pay attention in school or either they're no good for you. Or there's just so many reasons, and *Romeo and Juliet* is like that. Their families are fighting. They thought that they had no reason being together because of whatever happened [between their families]. And like us teenagers we think the same way: "Oh, we're in love. We can do whatever we want." They died in 3-4 days. Like us as teenagers, we're like, "Oh yeah. We want to be with them right then and there." But you guys don't think about the future and if you're going to actually stay together after high school.

<div align="right">(Mia, interview, 5-11-15)</div>

Mia draws on her experience as well as observations as a teenage girl in considering the relevance that *Romeo and Juliet* has for her and her fellow freshmen. For Mia, teenagers are more likely to jump into a relationship without regarding their parents' approval. In her comment, Mia has embedded a nuanced claim that captures the importance of adults' (or parents') perspective and approval when it comes to relationships. She highlights the disregard that teenagers have for the future as they live in the now (and when in love). By disregarding a more experienced individual's perspective, they do not consider the consequences of rushing into a relationship. In this way, she alludes to how Romeo and Juliet did not seek their parents' approval for their relationship, as they know that their families hold a grudge against one another. In addressing consequences, she ties the text in to her observation by also alluding to how Romeo and Juliet did not think about their future by taking the drastic measures to be with one another—i.e., committing suicide.

Like Diane and Mia have addressed here, many students also felt that Romeo and Juliet focused on each other so much that they disregarded future relationships with

people who might have had more substance. The characters' youth added to this naïve view of life. These perspectives relied on students' backgrounds, observations, and experiences as high school freshmen. In reading the text, students' ideas regarding themes and characters did not reflect one solidified answer. Each response was nuanced. Above, we see how Diane's response focuses on teenagers' proclivity to jumping into a relationship without considering the future. She deliberates on how there might be more relationships based on looks rather than personality. In contrast, Mia's response focuses on adolescents who fall in love despite of age range differences. She considers how parents' approval is disregarded in those cases, as well, and that there is no consideration for the consequences adolescents' choices will have for their future. Both Diane's and Mia's comments reveal how *Romeo and Juliet* has caused them to think about and reflect on their own perspectives of love.

This shows how Diane and Mia actively engage with the text as readers and learners, in particular with a canonical text. As Rosenblatt, Langer, and Smagorinsky have explained: students draw on their resources while they discuss multiple perspectives, which then inform and shape their understandings that they arrive at later. They are what Smagorinsky calls cultural readings. We see that Diane's and Mia's viewpoints were not simply literal comments indicating surface-level understandings of the plot or characters. Instead, they draw on their experiences and values as they think about their opinions of characters. They think about their worldviews and their thoughts on issues prevalent in their world. As Diane's and Mia's viewpoints show us, their experiences in learning about *Romeo and Juliet* (through meaning making processes and

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literacy practices) caused them to not only reflect on their present lives, but to think about their future as well.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed this study's second key finding: that students drew on their personal, lived experiences to make sense and negotiate the multiple meanings of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot, characters, and historical time period. I showed how the quality of their responses and understandings improved as they came to understand that multiple meanings were possible as well as welcomed and encouraged in this teacher's classroom, in spite of *Romeo and Juliet*'s meanings not always being transparent to them. I demonstrated how students learned and came to understand that their own and their peers' understandings, negotiations, and justifications of *Romeo and Juliet* were constructed and influenced by varied and complex factors. This understanding was developed by students' continued participation in multiple learning and literacy practices.

The above findings are in line with Rosenblatt's and Langer's view of reading, which hold that meaning is not fixed and that readers draw from their resources. Throughout this chapter, I have shown how students drew on their resources in making sense of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot, characters, and themes. I have also explored how students displayed their understandings of the text while creating their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. While Rosenblatt's & Langer's theories discuss multiple meanings, these tend to be displayed through writing, discussion, or drawings that are directly tied to the text. In this study, students were creative by making their own versions of the text as they saw them related to *Romeo and Juliet*. In this way, students composed cultural

readings (Smagorinsky, 2001) that displayed their understandings of the story, as well as their interpretations of how they saw the story relevant to their lives.

Drawing on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transaction, Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework, and Smagorinsky's (2001) view of cultural readings, I analyzed excerpts of class session transcripts as well as students' work. I looked at the responses and insights that students discussed as they built prior knowledge before reading *Romeo and Juliet*. I showed how students drew on their personal histories, lived experiences, backgrounds, and values as they responded to prompts that the teacher posed. I argued that these perspectives were then available for students to consider while they read *Romeo and Juliet* and were immersed inside the textworld. Next, I analyzed a variety of students' understandings which they arrived at during reading while in discussion with classmates, in interpreting a quote independently or with the class, or in writing their own interpretations of a situation or quote. I demonstrated how students' responses represented a range of understandings. I showed how students drew upon their backgrounds, lived experiences, and personal histories to consider and evaluate elements of the text, such as themes and characters' actions. I also showed how *Romeo and Juliet* caused them to reflect on their backgrounds, values, and worldviews. Next, I examined the creative renditions students composed of *Romeo and Juliet*. In my analysis of these creative pieces, I explained how students maintained elements of the original text while embedding aspects of their own world. Issues such as subjugation, division, and immigration were embedded throughout the students' stories. In doing so, students took their well-developed understandings of *Romeo and Juliet* in order to present alternative ways to look at issues they highlighted, which were prevalent in their world. Finally, I

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analyzed students' perspectives on how and why *Romeo and Juliet* was relevant to them and their peers. Students' responses to prompts from the teacher demonstrated how they embedded aspects of their backgrounds and values while they also considered how the canonical work caused them to think of their future. They also did this as they justified why *Romeo and Juliet* was still relevant to them as high school freshmen.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Despite the diverse backgrounds and experiences that today's students bring to

the classroom, the texts that Applebee (1989) found to be prominent in secondary English

curriculum still remain in place. While many argue that there is value to be found in these

texts, and that they hold universal themes for readers, today's adolescent students'

personal lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and values might not always align to

these texts. In an effort to make these required texts more meaningful and relevant for

students, teachers have tried to implement instructional approaches and literacy practices

that they believe will allow students from a range of different backgrounds to build on

what they already know in order to negotiate meaning from multiple perspectives. This

effort is especially important for students who come from ethnic minority and

marginalized backgrounds. This dissertation investigated how one ninth-grade teacher

endeavored to make *Romeo and Juliet* more meaningful and relevant to a diverse group

of ninth-grade students, their responses to her pedagogical choices and the text itself, and

what this might mean for debates about the canon in today's high school English

curriculum.

Recently, Beers (2014) addressed concerns over currently valued methods of

reading that devalue students' cultural backgrounds and interests. Beers and other

scholars (Langer, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1965) argue that students' varied

backgrounds in fact influence their reading. The exploration of literature should be

sensitive to factors that play in the negotiation of meaning. Teachers and students are at a

disadvantage when they both must work hard to connect with and find relevance in

required texts that do not seem to mirror who they are, where they came from, or what their priorities are. Instead, we must find reading methods and teaching approaches that value what students bring and know, build on that existing knowledge, and extend that in ways relevant to teachers' and students' interests, personal lived experiences, and values.

With this study, I investigated how selected ninth-grade students made meaning with and found relevance in a canonical work, the teaching and learning strategies that were of most use, and what these students and their teacher said about the processes involved. Because I had taught Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to my own freshman for the previous four years before I conducted the study, I knew that it was a text whose language and content were difficult for students in general. Working at a Title I school that continues to value canonical works in spite of a large ethnically diverse population and in spite of students' general struggle with literacy in academic spaces, I had wondered if *Romeo and Juliet* was a text suitable for teachers to continue to develop students into readers, writers, and academic thinkers.

In the present study, I used a qualitative research design drawing on ethnographic methods so that I could observe one class over time and understand how it functioned as the teacher taught *Romeo and Juliet*. This design allowed me to gain a thick description of the classroom (Geertz, 1973). Specifically, I wanted to document the instructional approaches that the teacher used in order to foster students' knowledge and the literacy practices that students participated in while reading, digesting, or discussing canonical work. I was interested in the potential of purposeful and innovative pedagogy to help students learn how to talk about their own and hear different perspectives on the canonical work. This research agenda required that I observe and audio record class

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sessions and collect documents, such as students' artifacts in order to analyze students' interpretations and understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. The theoretical framework I adopted understands the classroom as diverse (ethnically, racially, linguistically), learning as situated, and literacy as social. This understanding allowed me look at what students' said, created, and wrote about the canonical work as influenced by their cultural backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and values. Therefore, I was able to look at their interpretations in a qualitative manner, with the understanding that each one was unique.

The study resulted in two sets of findings. One was that the teacher employed a variety of instructional approaches that facilitated the students' use of literacy practices that allowed them to draw on their cultural backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and values as they read *Romeo and Juliet*. For instance, reading and discussing *Romeo and Juliet* was done as a community of learners. I also observed and analyzed the ways that the instructional approaches that the teacher used became routine for students—and the benefits of this for their learning. As my analysis of data shows, before reading, the teacher provided students with prompts and topics that allowed students to recognize or build prior knowledge of what they were going to read for that class session. Because the teacher allowed students to talk about their ideas and discuss them, students were provided multiple perspectives to shape their understanding of the text during reading. During reading, the teacher facilitated the reading by directing students how to read, providing concrete examples to demonstrate the significance of lines, and inviting students' ideas on the meaning of quotes. This work was done while students read as a whole class. During this time, students were able to talk about their ideas openly and gain

one another's perspectives. Finally, the teacher showed films, which enriched students' understandings of the text. These films also allowed students other interpretations to consider as they negotiated meaning. Therefore, the teacher's consistency in instructional approaches facilitated students' ability to navigate through the text and negotiate its meaning. As the unit progressed, students became more confident in reading the text. As illustrated in the study, students participated in a variety of literacy practices, in which they read, wrote, and drew about their understanding of the canonical text as well. The instructional strategies that the teacher employed allowed students to draw on their lived experience while writing about the textworld, and this helped them understand the significance of characters and plot events. Because of the variety of these instructional approaches and literacy practices, students understood that meaning was multiple and could be negotiated.

The second finding (which was facilitated by the first) was that students drew on their personal lived experiences, backgrounds, and values as they made sense and negotiated the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot and characters. Although the canonical work's meaning was not immediately obvious to students (or singular), students became increasingly aware that multiple interpretations were welcomed and even encouraged by this teacher in this classroom. As students progressed through the unit, they came to understand that their own and their peers' understandings, negotiations, and interpretations of the canonical work were informed by a variety of complex factors. Relying on Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework, I showed the range of understandings that students displayed throughout the unit before, after, and during reading. I illustrated how students discussed their personal lived

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experiences, observations, and personal histories as they built prior knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*. I analyzed how students pulled from those aspects of their lives as well in discussing, interpreting, or writing about the canonical text. In creating their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, students demonstrated their ability to negotiate meaning as they maintained elements of the original version and embedded aspects of their world into the stories. In discussing the relevance of the canonical work to their lives, students revealed how they connected to the characters Romeo and Juliet because of the proximity of their age to their own. They also considered the text's lessons to be relevant to them as high school freshman who were new to high school and meeting new people.

Contributions of the Study

This study looks at one classroom and how meaning was made in this class. Because it does not look at multiple classrooms (and across multiple contents), I am able to provide a rich description of how students made sense and understood *Romeo and Juliet*. We see how meaning is made and is specific to this range of learners. In Rosenblatt's (1978) view, we see how students were able to make the text their own during their transaction with the text. For instance, the teacher used teaching approaches that facilitated literacy practices that allowed students to draw on their resources. As students engaged with the text in meaningful ways, they were able to draw on their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and interests as they made sense and negotiated meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*. These understandings were specific to this time and place (Rosenblatt, 1978)—a Title I high school classroom where students were able to make a canonical work relevant to themselves and make meaning with it in their own special, unique way.

Valuing the Canon

Students were asked throughout the study to consider whether the text should continue to be taught. Despite the text's age and difficulty due to its language, they generally agreed that *Romeo and Juliet* should continue to be taught, and to high school freshmen. Eric's statement below captures the ideas and thoughts of several students who said that they would require that freshmen to read the text if they were the teacher. Eric explained that even though he did not relate to the story personally, there were still aspects of the text that were important for him and fellow students to take away:

> Yeah, and it didn't relate to me personally with like any situation because there's more than one throughout the entire story, but I've seen like different situations and conflicts with other people, and I feel like it does relate to us as freshmen, the entire group. It does relate to a lot of us, not all of us, but to a lot of us . . . it's something you just like . . . I'm astonished by it because honestly for a guy that 400 years ago to think of a story like that—that still relates to a lot of people today is pretty like, Wow. Makes me wonder like how he . . . how his imagination was.

(Eric, focus group, 5-19-15)

This study looked at a canonical work and how adolescent students make sense of it. As this study reveals, students not only arrived at multiple meanings of the text, but they also found it relevant to their lives. While the debate about whether the canon itself should be revised or expanded will likely continue, teachers cannot wait for a decision on this to decide whether and how they will teach texts like *Romeo and Juliet*. This study shows that canonical literature has value for adolescent students when teachers frame the

text in ways that offer students the ability to draw from their cultural backgrounds or "tool kits" (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995). The teacher in this study, Ms. Gravely, implemented instructional approaches and literacy practices that valued students' backgrounds, cultures, a worldviews. As a result, the experience of reading *Romeo and Juliet* was fruitful and students displayed their understandings of the canonical work in a variety of ways.

This study shows the value of canonical literature and points us toward a conversation that regards a balance in the type of literature students are exposed to in secondary curriculum. While some have argued that we need a set curriculum (Ravitch, 1992; Hirsch, 1987), others have stated that we need a canon that is more inclusive of writers from marginalized backgrounds and that represent minoritized students' backgrounds (e.g., Greenbaum, 1994; Horwedel, 2007). This study points to how students from minoritized, marginalized, and linguistically diverse backgrounds were able to connect with and find relevance in *Romeo and Juliet* despite its age and its archaic language. As Kirkland (2011), Wilhlem (2013), and Rose (1989) have argued, the approaches that teachers implement are sometimes more important to consider than the content This study illuminates the importance of how the teacher was able to approach the text in a way that allowed students to draw on their backgrounds, cultures, and histories as they discussed, thought about, and made meaning of what was going on in with its plot, characters, and themes. Without the use of instructional approaches or literacy practices that allowed students to draw from their resources and to engage with each other's ideas, their transactions with the *Romeo and Juliet* would have been limited. The study shows that reading together as a class, reading out loud, and demonstrating

meaning in multiple ways (including creativity) allows students opportunities to connect with the text by themselves and with their classmates. However, as this study points, the teacher has to maintain a reflective and active role in the learning process as students negotiate meaning of canonical works, or texts in general, that do not align to students' backgrounds.

Studies (e.g., Desmet, 2009; Shamburg & Craighead (2009; Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009) have detailed approaches to teaching canonical literature that incorporate supplemental texts, multimodal literacies, and digital technologies. While a variety of resources can and should be implemented in literature instruction to enrich students' understanding, this study illuminates that resources used consistently and purposefully (such as film) have the potential to provide students new and alternative interpretations to understand a text. They also have the potential to allow students to draw from students' resources (experiences, backgrounds, cultures) as they experience them.

The present study shows us that canonical texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* still offer themselves to young students. For example, students were able to not only think about the text as it related to their present lives and personal histories, but also how its themes made them think about their future. In this way, the reading event that students experienced was unique to them (Rosenblatt, 1978). Similar to Early's (2010) approach to teaching *Hamlet*, students in Ms. Gravely's class drew from their lives (interests, backgrounds, popular culture) in making sense of the text. For example, in discussing the text, they brought in their own opinions and views on matters and issues related to *Romeo and Juliet*. In creating their own versions of the text, we see how students were able to bring in their own histories, interests, and understandings of their world as they

understood aspects of *Romeo and Juliet*'s plot, characters, and themes. These examples affirm Rosenblatt's (1978) and Langer's (2011) view of reading that allow for multiple and new meanings. They affirm how these meanings build from students' resources to make meaning of the text in their own way, which was specific to them at that place and time (Rosenblatt, 1978). This study shows us how readers and students in the classroom can continue to make an old story that takes place in another place and time relevant to them, which prompts teachers to continue to use teaching approaches that provide students multiple ways to engage and connect with a text. While Rosenblatt and Langer do acknowledge multiple meanings that students arrive at in discussion or in writing, this study shows us how students also arrive at understandings in creativity, as they wrote their own stories, which Smagorinsky (2011) might argue were cultural readings that embedded aspects of their life narratives and social communities.

Experiencing Literature

I drew on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading and Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework to analyze data collected for this study of teaching and learning practices. Their theories of reading and views of literature instruction are founded on a sociocultural theory of learning which encourages that meaning be built among a community of learners. This study demonstrates the value of applying both frameworks while examining the specific ways that one freshman English classroom studied a canonical work where students were from minoritized and diverse backgrounds. As the analysis of data shows, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading helps explain how students transact with *Romeo and Juliet* and experience the text as a "poem" in which their resources (thoughts, feelings, and past experiences) shape their

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interpretations. It also shows us that students' reading was aesthetic. As Rosenblatt tells us, aesthetic reading is about the experience a reader has with the text. Because students thought about the text's plot, characters, and themes and how they related to their lives, their reading of *Romeo and Juliet* was not simply about a literal understanding of the text. Instead, they were actively involved in the reading process, as they created a "poem" through their transaction with the text. As Langer's framework acknowledges, each student's unique interpretation demonstrates the range of perspectives that exists among them while also displaying their cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and values. In all these ways, reading did not mean the search for one correct answer.

This work shows us that students continue to connect with texts in multiple ways and as a community of learners (Langer, 2011)—that they continue to transact with the text in individual and specific ways, to make texts come alive (Rosenblatt, 1978). This study shows us how one teacher was able to provide students with a learning experience in which they engaged with the text in meaningful ways and were provided multiple perspectives to consider. When students are able to connect with a text, it is fruitful for their learning. However, I will argue that students need to approach a text willingly in order for them to transact with it. If students do not connect with a text, do not find interest to read, or are not willing to approach a text in the first place, they will make no meaning of it at all. In these cases, teachers' approaches to teaching texts is important. In this work, we see how Ms. Gravely created a learning situation that allowed for students to draw from their lives and other resources while making the text conducive and interesting for them to read and relate to. This study also shows how learning is done as a

community of learners. However, in this case, the reading event occurs with not only one reader, but multiple ones through literacy practices that facilitate multiple perspectives.

The study shows that students' cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and values influence their meaning-making processes. Throughout the study, students showed how they drew from these aspects of their lives. Before reading, the students' built prior knowledge based on their observations and opinions regarding topics, such as fate. In Chapter 5, for instance, I examined one discussion of fate where two students disagreed. One student, Joseph, had based his opinion on his religious background, which did not fit in with Ethan's perspective. Misael based his opinion on his personal lived experience as he saw how he was able to change as a person by his personal choice. During reading, students recalled aspects of their lives as they discussed issues like arranged marriages. Mia, for instance, drew on her values as well as her father's as she discussed her disapproval of Paris's (who is in twenties) request to marry Juliet who is 13. After reading, I demonstrated how students were able to display a variety of perspectives in their creative renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, Nick and Federico discussed immigration in their story, as Romeo was Mexican and Juliet a U.S. citizen in their story. These understandings showed how students did not view meaning as acultural, as they took the license to embed aspects of themselves and their worldviews in their interpretations.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have a number of implications for the theory and practice of teaching. First, teachers should continue to expose students to canonical or required texts. These works do hold value and are important for students to read and

understand in order to understand other texts or multimodal works, such as films, that they will consume which have intertextual connections. These connections are important to understand. In this study, for example, Eric brought up *Twilight*, whose plot he thought was similar to that of *Romeo and Juliet*. While all students were reading *Romeo and Juliet* at the time, not all students had read *Twilight* (or seen the movies); so those who had not were unable to fully understand Eric's connection. Canonical works will have more influence than a work like *Twilight*; therefore, knowledge and understanding of staple works is important.

While I agree that students should continue to read canonical works, I also suggest that a variety of instructional approaches should be used to facilitate that exposure. As I have shown, students were able to negotiate meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* in part because of the instructional practices that Ms. Gravely used. The consistent and routine use of these instructional approaches was important to students' understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because these practices allowed students to draw from their personal lived experiences and values, they were able to enrich their connections of the text in relation to their worldviews. Students were able to listen to each other's perspectives of the text as well as experience the text in multimodal forms, such as film and graphic novel. These instances provided students the ability to confirm or enrich the understandings they had arrived at through reading.

Pedagogical Implications

Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) and Applebee (1996) have discussed the value of having students engage in dialogue regarding the canon. In doing so, students become aware of the impact that such texts have, understand why they read

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and study those texts in school, and can offer their evaluation of texts based on that knowledge. While in this study students did not partake in that sort of discussion of the canon in class, they would have likely contributed their opinions on the worth and value of *Romeo and Juliet*. The canon is complex terrain for teachers and students whose classrooms are diverse and varied. While there is a need to engage students in this discussion, students who are at Title I schools, like those in this study, also require support in their development as readers, writers, and academic thinkers. Teachers will often focus on one or two learning goals for a unit. In this case, the teacher focused on students negotiating meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* while helping them understand the text's plot, its characters, and its themes. Because of the text's length and the unit's time span, those two items took precedence for the teacher. A future unit, however, would benefit from embedding a conversation regarding this text and its place and value in the canon.

Because of the text's length and the time it took to teach it, it was important for the teacher to implement a variety of instructional practices to keep the students engaged. In this study, Ms. Gravely provided students opportunities to draw on their resources (Rosenblatt, 1978) before reading; to talk about the text as a community of learners (Langer, 2011) as she facilitated learning during reading; and to experience and negotiate the meaning of the text (i.e., transact with it) through film and creative work after reading (Smagorinsky, 2001). These became routine, and there was a balance that she needed to maintain, so that students' confidence in exploring the text increased as they became familiar with these approaches. With a longer piece of literature like *Romeo and Juliet*, teachers may be tempted to use too many instructional approaches where students are not

able to develop as learners because of the lack of consistency. Therefore, one to three well established instructional approaches for longer texts is beneficial for students' learning.

In English classes, despite what students are reading—literature or informational texts—students continue to develop as readers, writers, and academic thinkers. The current value of literacy instruction that devalue students' backgrounds is of concern (Beers, 2013). This has pedagogical implications for the teaching of canonical literature, as these texts already do not represent the backgrounds, cultures, or values of several students. In this study, students were 88% Latino reading about characters whose backgrounds and life circumstances did not relate to their own. In classrooms like this one examined for this study, it is vital for teachers to validate and draw on students' backgrounds. Otherwise, learning, instruction, and reading are fruitless endeavors. Therefore, while reading models that value acultural (Smagorinsky, 2001) and correct readings (Franzak, 2008) are promoted by new trends, standards, and expectations, teachers should use their discretion on what works best for their students and base instruction on students' needs.

Methodological Implications

For this study, my goal was to investigate how *Romeo and Juliet* was taught in one high school freshman English class. I did not want my presence in the teacher's classroom to influence her teaching philosophy and style. I also did not have an intervention that I wanted the teacher to use, to see what the outcome of its use would be. Therefore, it was important for me that Ms. Gravely would not change her teaching style because I was in the classroom as a researcher studying it. I told her that I was not there

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to evaluate her teaching or how students responded. Instead, I was there to see what happens when a teacher teaches a canonical work to high school students. Consistent observations made by the researcher prior to the start of data collection are important as participant teachers are less likely feel that they are being evaluated.

Because it was the end of the school year when the study was being conducted, it was important to maintain the students' interest—not only in the study but also in reading and learning about *Romeo and Juliet*. Without the students' own investment, this study would not have been possible. I showed my own investment in their classroom, in what they had to show in their work, and in what they had to say about the unit. Regularly, I would look through students' work and tell them my thoughts on a recent piece of work they had submitted, or compliment them on an insight they made. I was there to learn from them, and it was important for me to show students that I was actively looking through their work during the study.

In interviews and surveys that I provided students, I wanted them to be honest about their work, and so did Ms. Gravely. One of the benefits of being a researcher and teacher in this study was that students already knew me as an educator at the school. However, I did not want them to give me responses to my questions that they thought I would want to hear as an English teacher. Therefore, I consistently reminded them that I was there to learn from them and their experiences. It seemed to me that students were generally honest in their responses and comments. In the fall semester, Ms. Gravely had informed the class that I would be conducting a study with them during the spring semester. She let them know that it would be for a doctorate I was completing. When I started to collect data in February, I was often asked by students about my Ph.D. studies.

Students seemed generally excited to help me achieve my goal of attaining a Ph.D. Ms. Gravely and I often described the study as a book that I would write later, and students have continued to ask me about my progress on writing the book. This level of transparency was helpful in eliciting students' willingness to participate in the study and talk about and describe their experiences with me.

In order for the study to be successful, it was important for me to maintain a positive and supportive relationship with the participant teacher. While Ms. Gravely and I were colleagues, I did not take this established rapport for granted. Ms. Gravely was a major support throughout this process, and I do not think that the students' investment in the study would have been the same without her encouragement to students to be honest with me about her teaching and their experiences as learners. Learning to support Ms. Gravely was important as well. Ms. Gravely was supportive in getting me the students' work promptly, but I assured that I made copies of the work and helped her as much as I could, considering that I was limited on my time as well, as I observed her class during my free class period. Reciprocation was important to honor.

Finally, it was important for me to learn how to navigate my research agenda as I got permission and support from my school principal and the district superintendent to conduct the study. I did not want my own research in a colleague's classroom to cause more work for the teacher and students, and cause them to stray from the set curriculum. As well, I had to learn to balance time with my own obligations as a teacher—keeping up with my students and classes, using my time wisely during my free class period. Planning and time management were key in this study.

My Identity as a Teacher and Researcher

As I complete the study—analyzing data, writing—I have thought about my own teaching and ways I myself can enrich my own teaching practice. In thinking about the study, I have been able to expand on my own understanding of the sociocultural principles that I have applied in my own teaching over the last ten years. As a teacher, I know that there are decisions we must make every day that do not account for the consequences they will have on learning: for example, having something planned for students to do and having a particular amount of reading and activities to coincide with the text being taught. We also make decisions based on classroom management. In managing a classroom full of teenagers, we can sometimes disregard developing students' ideas on text or engaging students in a meaningful discussion regarding a text because we are focused on their behavior instead.

Conducting this study—collecting data and analyzing it—has caused me to rethink my own ideas of students' talk. In this study, I have seen how what students talked about during the *Romeo and Juliet* unit was relevant to the text and how it impacted their interpretations (though at first I might not have thought of their comments as relevant to the learning environment). For example, when Diane and Mia talked about their own personal histories regarding their parents and grandparents falling in love at a young age, I did not consider these comments as relevant to the discussion. In retrospect, after data analysis, I can now see how these comments related to the text of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Although in my journey of graduate school I had learned to appreciate and acknowledge the diversity of perspectives and understandings that students can bring to a

reading, through the present study I learned about myself—that I still had a limited view of what counted as meaning. In this study, I learned firsthand how students' personal observations, histories, cultural backgrounds, and experiences do in fact shape the meaning that students (and all of us) make. As Rosenblatt (1978) reminds us, readers bring resources to the reading. It is in reading—in the transaction that takes place—in which meaning is made and shaped from multiple and complex factors that make up who we are. In analyzing data for this study, I was able to see the sociocultural principles promoted by scholars, such as Rosenblatt and Langer, come to life. It was in the analysis phase on my study where their theories were put into perspective.

In conducting this work, I have been a full-time high school English teacher. Because I entered Ms. Gravely's classroom as a researcher, I was able to see her practice and her students' engagement as an outsider. I was able to see what the students experienced from their perspective. From my specific vantage point, I was able to note how students' ideas were important or meaningful not only to them but to the teacher. I saw how students were able to build knowledge and show their understandings of *Romeo and Juliet* in a variety of ways. I saw how they were able to bring in aspects of themselves—cultural backgrounds, experiences, histories—and embed those in their work. My positionality allowed me to appreciate students' interpretations as a teacher and as a researcher. As I continue to grow as a teacher and researcher, I am able to see as well how the complex factors students brings to their learning impact, shape, and form their interpretations and how they come to understand class content. I have learned that students' contributions—what they say and talk about in class related to content—are not simply arbitrary understandings (as I might have considered them to be in the past). Now,

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I see how they are drawn from the resources, as Rosenblatt (1978) would state, that the students bring to the reading and have an important role in meaning making.

As I think about the goals I had for this study, I wanted to highlight what the teacher did—that is, I wanted to examine her teaching practices. Often, we, as teachers, take our teaching practices and approaches for granted and expect students to do what we ask, but we do not demonstrate or model to students how to do what we are asking. In this study, we see how the teacher consistently modeled and demonstrated to students how to interpret or complete tasks in her instructional approaches. For example, she discussed her own interpretations of sections of the text and walked students through her own annotations. In her teaching, as she discussed the meaning she made with the text, she shows students how she arrived at her interpretation. However, we see and so do the students how she is able to justify her interpretation; in essence, students see how Ms. Gravely negotiates meaning—and how meaning is dynamic.

In representing students' interpretations from their writing and what they discussed out loud, I wanted to show what they came to understand, how they came to understand, and how they showed their understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*. I wanted to showcase, for instance, how they drew from their personal experiences, histories, and personal observations as they thought about the significance of certain sections of the text. I also wanted to show how in their creative renditions they came to create their own stories, which embedded aspects of themselves, parts of their world, their interests. In another way, I wanted to show how reading *Romeo and Juliet* was not just about reading the text, answering a few comprehension questions, and interpreting some quotes.

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Instead, based on their work, I wanted to show how it was an active thing—creating, thinking about, rethinking, understanding *Romeo and Juliet*.

As I came to this study, I was able to not only think about what my interests are as a researcher but also think about what I do as a teacher. Teach literature, which is often canonical literature, was one of my main interests. From this work, I was able to rethink my own ideas of teaching a text like *Romeo and Juliet*. From my experience and my conversations with fellow teachers, I know that teaching this text presents many challenges. However, as I came into the study and as I analyzed the data I collected, I was able to see how students found the text relevant, how meaning was purposeful and meaningful to the students—that is to say, meaning was not arbitrary. Meaning was in fact specific to the students in this study. I came to see that it is not so much the text, but it is the approach that a teacher uses in presenting a text to students. In this case, the teacher was able to teach the text while drawing on students' backgrounds, cultures, histories, and values. In this way, students were able to transact with the text while they drew from their resources, their thoughts, and feelings (Rosenblatt, 1978).

As I come to the end of the study, I see that the challenges I faced were making the familiar strange—i.e., noting that students' backgrounds and cultures were there in what they discussed, said, and wrote about *Romeo and Juliet* all along. In examining students' work, I slowly came to see how students' cultures, backgrounds, and histories were embedded. This realization I came to highlights the importance about what meaning really is as students read literature.

This study builds on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading. I have extended her work by examining the reading events or "poems" that high school

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freshmen arrived at during their reading of a canonical work, *Romeo and Juliet*. During readers' transaction with texts, Rosenblatt tells us, that the reader and the text come together. This transaction is specific for that reader and text, and cannot be replicated. While the reading event occurs more intimately between reader and text, this study demonstrates how it can also come together for students in a classroom. My study shows that even though students read the text as a whole class, they arrived at interpretations that were unique to them, which drew from their cultural backgrounds, histories, and worldviews.

This study shows us the potential reading practices which allow students to draw from their resources (cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and experiences) have in making canonical works relevant to students. Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading has been described as a mirror and window (Willinsky, 1991). I have demonstrated how students reflected on their lives, thought about their worldviews, and thought about their futures as they discussed and wrote about the text's plot, characters, and themes before, during, and after reading. In this way, students made the text their own. This work extends Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading by demonstrating how students displayed their reading events or "poems" in creating their own versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. In their work, students created cultural readings (Smagorinsky, 2001) which displayed their understanding of the text and embedded aspects of their world.

I also build on Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework. This study shows us how students created meaning and understanding of a canonical work as a community of learners (Langer, 2011). In reading *Romeo and Juliet* as a whole class, students posed questions and discussed ideas, all of which the teacher facilitated.

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Students experienced multiple ways to understand the text and make it relevant, as they learned how the teacher and peers negotiated meaning. I extend Langer's work as I demonstrate how the teacher created a learning environment that facilitated students' engagement with *Romeo and Juliet*—by examining the teaching approaches and literacy practices that allowed students to draw from their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

While Langer (2011) does promote that reading be done as a community of learners and Rosenblatt (1978) allows that students come to multiple interpretations, this study shows us how multiple readers from multiple backgrounds, experiences, reading abilities, and perspectives made meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* at the same time. Though these scholars have shown us the potential that students' interpretations have when allowed to draw on their backgrounds, in what they talk about, discuss, and write on a text, in this study, relying on Smagorinsky's (2001) view on cultural readings, I show how the students, in addition to discussing and writing about the text directly, also actively created their own versions on *Romeo and Juliet*. In these stories, we see how students were able to show their understanding of the text, while also creating a version that embedded their cultural, histories, and understandings of the world. These stories showcased the ideologies and cultures that make up students' contexts.

Future Directions of Research

In addition to Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transaction, I relied on Langer's (2011) envisionment-building framework in this study to analyze students' interpretative data. While the teacher held a developing sociocultural philosophy toward teaching, learning, and literacy, she was not familiar with Langer's work. Future research might involve helping practicing teachers understand the utility (and limits) of Langer's

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envisionment-building framework with minority students and canonical texts. Participant teachers might begin by reading Langer's work to understand how her envisionment-building classroom functions. In this case, Langer's framework could be used as an intervention to teaching. Longitudinal studies that document multiple teachers' classrooms throughout a school year would yield findings showing us teachers' and students' reception of the framework and its potential for students' negotiation of meaning with canonical works.

While this study looked at the instructional approaches used during one literature unit, future research could investigate what approaches are used throughout an entire school year—across texts and units. Analysis might focus on the potential of certain approaches with particular types of texts. In this study, for instance, showing films to supplement the reading of *Romeo and Juliet* was a beneficial approach for students. It would be interesting to examine whether its continued use over a year in multiple classrooms would demonstrate if and how students come to rely on the approach and build their ability to negotiate meaning. In this study, instructional approaches also allowed students to build a community of learners as they relied on each other to negotiate meaning through discussion. In future work, it would be useful to examine whether the consistent use of instructional approaches throughout a school year and in multiple classrooms helps a community develop and grow.

Future research might also continue to investigate the literacy practices used in multiple classrooms especially in terms of how they afford students' ability to connect with a variety of texts, not simply literature, and negotiate meaning. In this study, students participated in a variety of literacy practices that allowed them to demonstrate

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their understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* in multiple ways—in discussion, drawing, and writing. However, a more in-depth focus on a few literacy practices carried on throughout an entire school year with a variety of readings (or multiple canonical works) would add to our understanding of the impact these literacy practices have for teaching and learning.

Future research might also consider the utility and students' reception of supplemental reading and resources for canonical texts that are culturally responsive. This study showed students' ability to connect with and discuss one canonical text, with multimodal resources, which enriched students' understandings. The films that students were exposed to were not culturally responsive, however. Because this study looked at a class of predominantly Latino students' interaction with *Romeo and Juliet*, a potential extension of this work would embed supplemental resources that were tied to students' specific cultural backgrounds. This research would show us how students' interpretations and understandings are enriched and informed by culturally responsive resources.

Conclusion

In this study, my goal was to understand how *Romeo and Juliet* is taught in one ninth-grade English classroom. Drawing on Lapp, Fisher, and Frey's (2013) discussion on the canon, these findings point to the importance of allowing students to draw from their cultural backgrounds as they negotiate meaning with texts (Smagorinsky, 2011), specifically canonical ones, and to welcome and encourage multiple meanings in the English classroom. Throughout this dissertation, I have provided illustrations of the instructional approaches that the teacher implemented to engage students with the canonical text. I have also discussed the literacy practices that students participated in while they negotiated meaning and examined the interpretations and understandings that

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students arrived at before, during, and after reading. My analysis of the teacher's instructional approaches and literacy practices revealed that their routine use and ability to allow students to draw from their own personal lived experiences and values fostered a community of learners in which students were able to negotiate meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*. My analysis of students' work revealed that their cultural backgrounds, personal lived experiences, and histories informed their interpretations of the canonical text (Langer, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky, 2001). Students demonstrated their understanding that meaning is multiple (Langer, 2011). They also revealed that in spite of *Romeo and Juliet*'s age (about 400 years old), the text was relevant to them as high school freshman and that it offered valuable lessons for them to consider in their futures.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Doris Warriner
English
480/727-6967
Doris.Warriner@asu.edu

Dear Doris Warriner:

On 2/16/2015 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Making Meaning Out of Canonical Texts in Freshman English
Investigator:	Doris Warriner
IRB ID:	STUDY00002120
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None

APPENDIX B

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

MAKING MEANING OUT OF CANONICAL TEXTS

My name is Felipe Baez. I am a graduate student at Arizona State University, and also a teacher at this school.

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how students interact with literature like *Romeo and Juliet* and the types of textual connections they make. I want to learn about the types of activities that the teacher might use in class (ways of teaching) when it comes to literature that students find useful in reading and understanding literature. Your parent(s) have given you permission to participate in this study.

If you agree, you will be asked to complete a survey, write a literacy autobiography, and an end-of-unit reflection. You will also participate in interviews and focus groups throughout this semester. When you are working with other students in class, I will audio record your interactions. I will also observe and take notes of your interactions as well. I may also take photographs as you are working with another student or presenting in front of the class (such as completing a skit.) In interviews and focus groups, you will be asked about your opinions regarding the activities your teacher has you do when reading *Romeo and Juliet.* Interviews and focus groups will last approximately 20-30 minutes. You will also be asked to clarify any comments (your interpretations) you made regarding *Romeo and Juliet*. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to do this study. Even if you start the study, you can stop later if you want. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study. Even if your parents or teachers ask, I will not tell them about what you say or do in the study.

Signing here means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.

Signature of subject_____

Subject's printed name _____

Signature of investigator_____

Date_____

APPENDIX C

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

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MAKING MEANING OUT OF CANONICAL TEXTS

Dear Teacher:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Doris Warriner in the Department of English in College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. I am also an English teacher at the school. I am conducting a research study to document and describe the ways students interact with and make meaning out of canonical literature.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve that you fill out a survey; participate in informal interviews throughout the semester that will be audio-recorded and last approximately 30 minutes; and keep a teacher's journal. I will also collect class artifacts, such as unit plans, unit plans, and students' work. I would like to observe your class at least three times per week during sixth hour for the spring semester, beginning in January through May, where I will observe and audio-record class sessions. I may also photograph students participating in class activities.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Your participation in this study is not required. Your participation is fully your choice and you may stop at any time during the study. You may also ask questions about the study at any time. Your name will not be used at any time. Pseudonyms will be used in any written reports.

The benefits of participating will be that information from this study may be used to inform teachers and researchers on methods of literature instruction and how students connect and interact with canonical works. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in your staff's or students' participation. Arizona State University's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) will review the study. The study will adhere to their policies and procedures.

Comments will be kept confidential. Individuals will not be identified. You and your students' confidentiality will be protected and maintained. Any audio recordings or pictures will be uploaded to a computer that requires a password to be accessed. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your, your students', and the school's privacy. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your school's name will not be used.

I would like to audio record interviews that we have throughout the study. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do <u>not</u> want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at felipe.baez@asu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Doris Warriner, at doris.warriner@asu.edu. We would be happy to talk with you. If you have any questions

about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

By signing below you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name:

Signature: Date:

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

MAKING MEANING OUT OF CANONICAL TEXTS

Dear Principal:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Doris Warriner in the Department of English in College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. I am also an English teacher at the school. I am conducting a research study to document and describe the ways students interact with and make meaning out of canonical literature.

In the spring semester (2015), I would like to observe the instructional activity that takes place in one of your teacher's Freshman English class. I would like to document her instructional methods of teaching literature and how students' engage with the text and interact with one another.

Along with observing, I would like to audio-record students' interaction with classmates as they complete activities pertaining to literature, specifically Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I will conduct focus groups and interviews with students in which I will ask them questions regarding instruction throughout the semester. I may also conduct interviews with administrators, the English department chair, and Freshman English team leader to gain perspectives on canonical works, literature instruction, and the impact of current educational policy. I will collect data such as lesson plans, students' work, and a questionnaire regarding students' literacy backgrounds and opinions of literature instruction. I may also photograph students participating in class activities. I am asking your permission to conduct research in your school and with this teacher.

Parental consent forms will be obtained prior to the start of this study. Participation is completely voluntary. Comments will be kept confidential. Individuals will not be identified. Your staff's and students' confidentiality will be protected and maintained. Pseudonyms will be used to protect students', teachers', administrators', and the school's privacy. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your school's name will not be used.

The benefits of participating will be that information from this study may be used to inform teachers and researchers on methods of literature instruction and how students connect and interact with canonical works. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in your staff's or students' participation. Arizona State University's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) will review the study. The study will adhere to their policies and procedures.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at felipe.baez@asu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Doris Warriner, at doris.warriner@asu.edu. We would be happy to talk with you.

Sincerely,

Felipe J. Baez Jr.

By signing below, you are giving consent for me to conduct research in your school.

_____ _____
_____

Signature   Printed Name   Date

APPENDIX E

PARENTAL CONSENT/PERMISSION FORM

MAKING MEANING OUT OF CANONICAL TEXTS

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Doris Warriner in the Department of English in College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. I am also an English teacher at school. I am conducting a research study to document and describe the ways students interact and make meaning out of canonical literature.

This semester, students will read a variety of texts including Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The study will last the entire spring semester. Throughout that time, I would like to observe the instructional activity in their Freshman English class, in which your child is enrolled. I am asking your permission to talk with your child regarding his or her in- and out-of-school literacy activities and about their instruction and literature experience in English over the study. I am asking your permission for your child to complete a survey (attached) and to participate in interviews and focus groups. I am also asking your permission to collect your student's work so I can analyze it.

During class time, I will audio record students' interactions with texts in class. Outside of class, interviews and focus group sessions will be audio recorded, which should last approximately 20-30 minutes at the end of the school day. That way, I can transcribe these later for analysis. These recordings will be stored in my office and will be destroyed after being analyzed. Questions that students will be asked in the survey, in interviews, or in focus groups are included with this letter.

Your child's confidentiality will be protected and maintained. Their responses in surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be confidential. However, complete confidentiality cannot be maintained due to the group nature of the discussions and class observations. They will not be identified in any collected data such as class work or class observations. Pseudonyms will be used to protect students' privacy if the results of this study are used in reports, presentations, or publications.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. For example, it will not affect their grade. Your child may also choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. There will be no penalty.

The benefits of your child's participation will be that information from this study will inform teachers and researchers on methods of literature instruction and how students connect and interact with canonical works. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in your child's participation.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at: felipe.baez@asu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Doris Warriner, at: doris.warriner@asu.edu. We would be happy to talk with you.

Sincerely,

Felipe J. Baez Jr., M.Ed.

By signing below you are giving consent for your child
_____ (child's name) to participate in the above study.

_____   _____
_____

Parent Signature   Parent Printed Name   Date

If you have any questions about your student's rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you he or she has been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

(Spanish Form)

Estimado Padre o Guardián:

Yo soy un estudiante licenciado bajo la dirección de la Profesora Doris Warriner en el Departamento de Inglés en el Colegio de Artes Liberales y Ciencias en la Universidad Estatal de Arizona. También soy maestro de inglés en la escuela. Estoy conduciendo un estudio de investigación para documentar y describir las maneras en que los estudiantes interactúan y hacen sentido de la literatura canónica.

Este semestre, los estudiantes leerán una variedad de textos incluyendo *Romeo y Julieta* de Shakespeare. Este estudio durará todo el semestre de primavera. Durante este tiempo, me gustaría observar la actividad instructiva de los estudiantes de primer año de inglés, en la cual su hijo/a está inscrito/a. Estoy pidiendo su permiso para hablar con su hijo/a acerca de sus actividades literarias dentro y fuera de la escuela y acerca de la instrucción y experiencia literaria en inglés a través del estudio. Estoy pidiendo su permiso para que su hijo/a complete una encuesta (adjuntada) y participar en entrevistas y sesiones de grupos de enfoque. Yo también estoy pidiendo su permiso para recoger el trabajo de su hijo/a para que pueda analizarla.

Durante la clase, grabaré entrevistas de audio, sesiones de grupos de enfoque, y la interacción de los estudiantes con el texto en clase. Fuera de clase, entrevistas y sesiones de grupos de enfoque seran audio grabado, que duraran aproximadamente 20-30 minutos al final del dia escolar. De esta manera, podré transcribirlos para analizarlos en el futuro. Estás grabaciones serán conservadas en mi oficina y serán destruidas después del análisis. Las preguntas que se les harán a los estudiantes a través de un cuestionario, entrevistas, o en grupos de enfoque serán incluidos con esta carta.

La confidencialidad de su hijo/a será protegida y mantenida. Sus respuestas en cuestionarios, entrevistas, y sesiones de grupos de enfoque serán confidenciales. Sin embargo, confidencialidad no se puede mantener debido a la naturaleza del grupo de las discusiones y observaciones de clase. No serán identificados en cualquier dato recolectado como trabajos en clase u observaciones. Seudónimos serán usados para proteger la privacidad de su hijo/a si es que los resultados de este estudio son usados en reportes, presentaciones o publicaciones.

La participación de su hijo/a en este estudio es voluntario. Si decide que su hijo/ no participará o si desea retirarlo del estudio en cualquier momento, no habrá castigo. Por ejemplo, no afectará su calificación. Su hijo/a también puede optar por no participar o retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento. No habrá consecuencia.

El beneficio que tendrá su hijo/a de esta participación será que la información de este estudio informara a maestros e investigadores sobre métodos de instrucción literaria y como los estudiantes conecta e interactúan con trabajos canónicos. No hay riesgos previsibles o molestia en la participación de su hijo/a.

Si tiene alguna pregunta relacionada con el estudio de investigación por favor comuníquese conmigo a: Felipe.baez@asu.edu. Usted también puede comunicarse con mi asesora, la doctora Doris Warriner a: Doris.warriner@asu.edu. Nos complacerá hablar con usted.

Sinceramente,

Felipe J. Baez Jr., M.Ed.

Al firmar este documento usted este dando su consentimiento a su hijo/a_____ que participe en este estudio mencionado ya mencionado.

_____   _____
_____

Firma del padre   Nombre del padre Impreso   Dia

Si tiene alguna pregunta acerca delos derechos de su hijo como participante de esta investigación, o si siente que él o ella ha sido puesto en riesgo, puede ponerse en contacto con el presidente de Sujetos Humanos Junta de Revisión Institucional, a través de la oficina de la Universidad del estado de Arizona de la integridad de la investigación y aseguramiento, 480-965-6788.

APPENDIX F

STUDENT SURVEY

Name:
Age:
Gender:
Date:
Period:
Class Title:

1) What do you expect to learn about this semester in Freshman English? (types of literature, types of writing, and content)

2) In English class, what types of texts (poems, short stories, novels, fiction, nonfiction, informational) do you prefer to read, and why?

3) What types of activities (like interpret quotes, draw scenes, write essays or summaries, create journal entries, complete worksheets) do you like to complete as you read a book in English class? (Be specific)

4) When reading in class, do you prefer to read alone, in pairs, in groups, or as a whole class? Why?

5) As you read, how do fellow students help you comprehend or understand what you are reading?

6) As you read, how does the teacher help you comprehend or understand what you are reading?

7) If you could decide, what would you change about English classes (such as the kind of literature you read and how you learn)? Why?

APPENDIX G

LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

You will create a timeline that will depict your life as a reader and writer. In this timeline, you should include visuals, dates (the grade you were in, the year), and phrases and words to describe each memorable moment. Along with the timeline, you will write an essay, create a PowerPoint, or you may choose another method of presenting your literacy biography that is teacher approved.

Think about what literacy is to you. What does it mean to read and write? (How is literacy at home different from school?) You will write about your life as a reader and writer. Use the following questions and prompts to help guide you think about your own reading history from as early as you can remember up to now:

A) When do you first remember reading and writing in your life? (such as nursery rhymes, prayers, poems, trips to the library, songs, your parents or teachers reading to you.)

B) Do you recall the first book you ever read? Write about your current favorite books or reading material and why you enjoy it (such as magazines, comic books, online blogs, or webpages).

C) Think about your opinions on reading; your struggles with it (being placed perhaps in remedial reading programs or classes); and the accomplishments you have had (for example, maybe you scored high on an AR test in middle school, had the most books read in 5th grade, or advance in Lexile score).

APPENDIX H

END-OF-UNIT REFLECTIVE ESSAY

In an essay, describe your experience of studying Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*?

What learning activity did you enjoy the most and why?

Think about what you got out of reading by yourself, with others, or the teacher.

What do you remember most from the drama? What will you take away from this unit?

How has your view of reading and writing changed (or not)?

Do you think all freshmen should read *Romeo and Juliet* and why?

If you had a choice for selecting the required reading for Freshman English, what books or texts would you select and why?

What is your opinion of "canonical" texts and their place in the high school classroom?

APPENDIX I

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) How is the unit going?

2) What activities do you think are making the experience of *Romeo and Juliet* a

   comprehensible for the students?

3) What parts of the texts might be confusing or difficult to teach? Why?

4) What parts of the texts might be confusing or difficult for the students? Why?

5) How is *Romeo and Juliet* relevant to your students?

6) What types of modifications have you made and why?

7) What supplemental materials have you included and why?

APPENDIX J

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1) As we get into the second semester, what are some learning activities, concepts, and pieces of literature you look forward to learning and reading? (to be asked once in January)

2) How is the unit going?

3) What activities that you are doing make your experience of *Romeo and Juliet* more comprehensible?

4) What parts of the texts might be confusing or difficult?

5) How is *Romeo and Juliet* relevant to you as a freshman in high school?

6) What types of activities would make *Romeo and Juliet* more interesting for you to learn about?

7) What types of activities or topics that the teacher introduces keep the reading relevant to you?

8) Is there value in learning *Romeo and Juliet*?