

Agency and the GED: Personae and Artifacts in the Figured World of a Literacy Welcome Center

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Abstract The GED test has served as a mechanism for granting high school equivalency in the United States for decades, and some states have funded tutorial services because they have imagined the GED to be a means for getting a job or increasing one's wages. Based on field research conducted in literacy welcome centers in a small city in Upstate New York, we argue that teachers' and students' discursive reflections show that they attain agency in multiple ways during participation in tutorials. On the one hand, students build and hone their skills required for successful testing. On the other hand, teachers embody the caring disposition that the world inhabited by the students lacks. We argue that the GED and its practice exams are artifacts that only partly account for the agency of teachers and students, and, when reflected on by an administrator, erase crucial aspects of that agency. [agency, figured world, literacy, neoliberalism, GED]

Since the 1970s, the United States has seen the rise of neoliberalism, a "withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision" (Harvey 2007, 3) and a concomitant focus on the individual as a locus of citizenship configured by the notion of the market as a consumer. Massive reductions in federal and state assistance have occurred since the 1980s at the same time that the federal government increasingly has shifted responsibility for the provision of services to states. States have come to compete for funding for specific initiatives calling for the empowerment of citizens through their embrace of individual responsibility (Carr 2009, 2011; Collins and Mayer 2010; Katz 2008; Kingfisher 1996; Schram 2000; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Responsibility comes in the guise of a self-sufficient individual, standing in contrast with an image of someone who depends on income that is derived from a public entity. Often what is on offer is a credential with an evaluative instrument that has been developed and is owned by a corporation. Some of the payment for the credential's acquisition comes in the form of tax-derived grants, and the credential is sought after by people whose efforts add to the burdens they accrue from working at low-wage jobs.

This article considers a literacy initiative funded by the New York State Education Department meant to enable participants to escape poverty by passing the General Education Development Test (GED).¹ Most scholars have studied the GED by questioning whether students realize the goals of its attainment in the form of employment or higher income. Passmore (1987), for example, has argued that GED recipients earn more than their dropout counterparts, but much less than high school graduates. Work based on survey data of

employment outcomes has shown that the acquisition of the GED has not brought about the wage increases that motivate state subsidies and tutoring programs (Cameron and Heckman 1993; Heckman, Humphries, and Kautz 2014a, 2014b; Humphries 2014; Smith 2003).² Scholars who have seen a rise in wage growth resulting from the attainment of the GED describe it as “modest” (Murnane, Willett, and Boudette 1995). Thus, studies of the GED have stressed the credential’s inability to bring about changes in employment or income.

In this article, we ask questions that cannot be addressed by a focus on outcomes alone. How do students make progress toward completion of the test? Who else is involved and what are their contributions to students’ progress? Is income the only result of the test that students deem worthwhile? What else might students be seeking in their attempt to obtain a GED?

One of the most overlooked aspects of previous studies is the fact that the work of both teachers and students was necessary for the literacy initiative to operate. And the way that teachers and students represented students’ work in the literacy initiative raised questions of agency, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001b, 112). In order to identify the particular contributions that teachers and students saw as crucial to the work they were accomplishing, we conceptualize the literacy initiative as a “figured world” configured by “socially produced, culturally constituted activities” (Holland et al. 1998, 40–41). On the one hand, students progressed toward completing the test by improving the skills necessary to answer questions. On the other hand, students made progress because teachers showed them care and concern, which kept students coming to the literacy initiative and made students feel like they could succeed at the test. Both forms of agency were required for students’ progress toward completing the exam. Furthermore, teachers and students used a notion of their own, “literacy,” to understand the possibilities and limitations of what students would be able to do with the GED. By exploring dimensions of agency within the figured world of the literacy initiative, we complicate the literacy center’s own representation of the GED—as well as studies of the GED—as providing agency to students in and of itself, and only in terms of employment or better income.

Furthermore, we address an additional question: why have teachers’ and students’ insights about the complexity of students’ work failed to gain any traction in more public representations of GED preparation such as that offered by the New York State Education Department? In an effort to answer, we introduce the director of the literacy initiative who seemed to ignore the complex form of agency that made work in the literacy center possible for students. Although he included teachers in his rendition of the work of the literacy initiative—unlike representations and studies of the GED—he colluded in simplifying the agency that is required for students to engage in the initiative. Moreover, the director explained the work accomplished at the literacy initiative without regard for the insights of teachers and students.

Our investigation of the literacy initiative argues that it is important to consider what makes student work possible and valuable from the perspectives of teachers and students because

studies oriented to outcomes and public representations of the literacy initiative simplify that work. They make it seem as if the GED provides, or should provide, agency to the student within an extremely narrow domain of activity, employment, or better income. By doing so, they erase the part played by teachers and students in acquiring the credential as well as what teachers and students think the credential should enable students to change about their lives.

Figured Worlds: Personae, Artifacts, and Agency

Holland and her colleagues have proposed the notion of figured world to allow participants' understandings of the activities in which they are mutually engaged to inform the activities' meanings but also to leave as an open question the ways in which social activities and the contexts in which they occur shape one another. The work of scholars such as Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and Vygotsky has influenced the development of the notion of figured world. Their work has shared a general tendency to problematize the use of dualisms such as individual and society, subject and object, and agency and structure to understand human activity. The notion of figured world entails that accounts of knowledge should cast it as situated—emergent in particular activities—and as mediated—produced in social activity outside the individual. Studies that have used the concept of figured world have focused on a number of ethnographic domains including Alcoholics Anonymous, the negotiation of romance in higher education in the United States, and the disposition of women in Nepal's structures of caste and class (Holland et al. 1998). The notion of figured world has been used to emphasize that each of these domains presents those people involved with particular possibilities of social action as well as particular constraints on what they might do.

In order to account for the literacy initiative as a figured world, we bring to bear three interrelated concepts: persona, artifact, and agency. A figured world is populated by personae, not just participants. The notion of personae is distinct from the notion of participants because personae constitute the positions that participants learn to inhabit or orient to as they begin to engage in a figured world.³ A participant's ability to take up the position of a persona sometimes depends on the attainment of a more or less institutionalized mark of expertise, such as a degree or a token of longevity of involvement. Personae are not just the means of referring to participants or, as entailed in some notions of identity, identifying participants' attributes. Personae emerge over time and depend on shared knowledge and action. Participants can be said to inhabit a figured world when their capabilities are informed by the contexts underpinning their activities (as personae) and when they come to orient to other personae in ways that are legible in the figured world (Holland and Lave 2001, 4).

A figured world is also populated by artifacts with which personae engage and through which personae engage with other personae. Holland and her colleagues have defined the notion of artifact broadly as “the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful” (Holland et al. 1998, 61; see also Bartlett 2007a, 2007b; Bartlett and Holland 2002; Holland and Leander 2004; Hull

and Schultz 2001; Moje and Luke 2009). Artifacts can be material, as in Vygotsky's (1978) original formulation. But, in the rubric of figured world, Holland and her colleagues have asserted that an artifact is that which mediates relationships between personae. Artifacts thus include membership tokens (in Alcoholics Anonymous) as well as notions of romance (in higher education) because they are key artifacts by which personae in figured worlds orient to themselves and to one another.

The ability of personae "to make a difference in, if not on, a social world" invokes the notion of agency (Holland and Lachicotte 2015). Agency is a theoretical notion with a longer and more diffuse history than the notion of figured world.⁴ Ahearn notes that scholars began to use the term in the 1970s to try to combat some of the excesses of structuralism, which had made an interest in human activity in particular contexts irrelevant (2001a, 54; see also Ortner 1984). Often, however, agency "has been constructed in specifically Western ways as a possessive property of an autonomous individual" (Holland and Lachicotte 2015). Wortham and Reyes note that the concept of agency has often come to rest on "misleading assumptions about autonomous rational minds and about the individual as the relevant level of analysis for meaningful phenomena" (2015, 180; see also Wortham 2004 and 2006). To contextualize such uses of the notion of agency and to make conceptual space for other models of self and action, Thomas has argued, "actions and their effects are . . . not discrete expressions of individual will, but rather the outcomes of mediated practices" (1998, ix).

Indeed, agency in a figured world depends on the interactions of personae and the artifacts that mediate those interactions. Just what a persona can do or achieve in a figured world can depend on the actions, investments, and authorizations of other personae. An artifact can shape the interactions between personae and shape what personae are able to do and achieve in a figured world. Consider the ways that a grade mediates the personae of teacher and student in educational institutions. The artifact of the grade continues the shape the agency of the persona of the student as it joins other grades to determine, partially at least, what further educational options the student might have. Agency in a figured world can be complex because multiple artifacts can come to mediate the interactions of personae such that one persona might interact with another persona in multiple capacities. A grade, for example, might not exhaust what mediates the interaction of teachers and students in institutions of higher education. A student's major might constitute an artifact mediating the relationship in a very different way than the grade. The teacher and student's discovery and elaboration of common life experiences might provide yet another artifact. Such arrangements of artifacts inform what a particular persona might achieve or accomplish within a figured world—a student's acquisition of a letter of recommendation, for example.

Sometimes, personae themselves use artifacts to reflect on what enables (or prevents) a persona to act in a figured world. Holland and Lachicotte refer to such activity as "meta-agentive discourse" which they define as "local concepts and theories deployed in disputes and debates about particular accounts [of agency] and agency in general" (2015). Meta-agentive discourse emerges from experiences and struggles of particular participants in a

figured world trying to inhabit personae and engage with artifacts. A number of scholars, for example, have investigated the ways in which working-class students' rejection of an orientation to grades and other artifacts of schooling in the United Kingdom and the United States reflects some recognition that such artifacts were not created for their class dispositions (Eckert 1989; Foley 1990; Willis 1981; among many others). Discourse from participants in a figured world is valuable to consider because it can reveal those aspects of a figured world participants find problematic in terms of being able to inhabit personae, interact with other personae, or engage with artifacts.

It becomes especially important to trace and appreciate the complex forms of agency in a figured world when representations of the figured world radically simplify the activity of personae and their use of artifacts. Neoliberal renditions of agency in particular tend to pick out a single persona, detach that persona's activity and accomplishments from other personae in a figured world, and pick out a single artifact from the figured world to account for the persona's achievements. In the process, an artifact can come to seem as though it provides a persona agency and not the interactions of multiple personae whose interactions and achievements are often complexly entangled in artifacts. By considering the literacy initiative as a figured world, we counter the simplification that a GED provides graduates employment or higher income. And, in light of the GED's less than hoped for outcomes, questions about agency—including what makes people able to participate in a figured world, what can be learned from reflections of those people involved, and what gets hidden and ignored in representations of the figured world emanating from outside—are important to ask.

The Literacy Welcome Center as Ethnographic Context

The General Education Development Test (GED) has served as the way in which people in the United States have been able to acquire the equivalent of a high school diploma since the State of New York began to recognize the GED in 1947 for nonmilitary dropouts (Quinn 2002, 2014). In the small city in upstate New York in which we conducted fieldwork, a not-for-profit adult education organization administered a number of literacy welcome centers in which the GED tutorials took place. GED tutoring was a primary activity offered by the literacy welcome centers because the US Department of Education has long envisioned the successful completion of high school as a mechanism that enables people to escape poverty (Grubb 1997; Heckman and Kautz 2014, 9; Rivera-Batiz 1995, 313; Smith 2003; Tuck 2012).

The way in which the literacy initiative was funded and the welcome centers were created reflects the neoliberal emphasis on competition for grants and focus on the individual person's improvement through the avoidance of state support (Grabill 2001; Riemer 1997, 2001). In 2010, the New York State Education Department announced that five million dollars of Federal Title II funding were being made available in a "reform initiative to close the achievement gap in urban and rural communities of concentrated poverty and high concentrations of families and adults with limited literacy skills or English language

proficiency” (NYSED 2010). A not-for-profit organization had to be able to show in a grant application that an area of a city had concentrated and persistent poverty. Successful applicants would have the area designated as a literacy zone by the state and the funds received would go toward the establishment of literacy welcome centers. The evidence of poverty to which an applicant could refer included “census data, public assistance and food stamp eligibility, community health data, school lunch eligibility, planning data, and data that identifies gaps in accessing benefits, services and supports such as attainment of the Earned Income Tax Credits, health insurance, and food stamps” (NYSED 2010). The implication was that passing the GED would enable people to attain employment and no longer contribute to the various indicators of an impoverished area. By 2011, the New York State Education Department recognized 51 literacy zones.⁵

A not-for-profit adult education organization received a grant from the state and had a section of the city in which we conducted fieldwork designated as a literacy zone. The organization eventually came to operate five literacy welcome centers offering GED tutorials. A teacher was hired for each one. The centers served anywhere from 16 to 30 students each except the location downtown, which served only a handful of students because it was located far from students’ residences. The teachers called the location downtown “the main office” and explained that they visited it primarily for administrative meetings.

Teachers worked at the literacy welcome centers Monday through Thursday and were available for GED students eight hours a day. Students primarily came either early in the morning or early in the afternoon and typically studied for two to three hours. Teachers dedicated Fridays to preparation of tutorial materials, as well as to a group meeting with the director at the main office to talk about tutorials. On arrival at the centers, students filled out an attendance sheet and began to work. For the most part, students worked on their own through packets of assignments that teachers had photocopied from one or more of a great number of published GED preparation guides. Teachers moved from student to student, asking questions about the assignment. Every teacher told us that students’ complicated job and childcare obligations necessitated the open schedule by which students attended the literacy welcome centers. Indeed, all but a handful of students across the literacy welcome centers were employed. Many had full-time employment in minimum-wage or near minimum-wage jobs, but many had more than one job, all at, or only slightly higher than, minimum wage. Teachers warned us not to count on seeing specific students regularly, and we noticed that some students attended regularly at set times, some students attended regularly but at different times throughout the week, some students attended sporadically, and some students came only a handful of times. The literacy welcome centers did not advertise, and most students told us that they had heard about the centers from friends and neighbors who had attended GED tutorials.

The authors and two other college students wrote a grant application to the college for the students to conduct summer research on ideologies of literacy in the literacy welcome centers. The director at the main office initially assigned each of us to one of the four welcome centers away from the downtown location. We were to utilize a new software package to

encourage broadband usage among the GED students because the GED's testing format was being digitized, and because broadband, like the GED, was envisioned by the software developers as a mechanism for the amelioration of poverty (LaDousa 2014). Teachers assigned students to work on the software tutorial during the first week. After the first week, teachers asked us to join them in helping students with their GED exercises once students finished the software tutorial or once they complained that the tutorial was too remedial for them.

We spent the next six weeks with students working on their GED practice exercises. We worked with students approximately seven hours a day and wrote field notes for the last hour when no students typically were left. Toward the end of the six weeks, LaDousa rotated among the literacy welcome centers to help the students conduct interviews. We conducted open-ended interviews with eight students in each of the four literacy welcome centers away from the main office and interviewed the four teachers twice each.⁶ LaDousa spent an additional 20 weeks of research at two literacy welcome center locations other than the one in which he started, and Baldrige continued to tutor for four hours a week for an additional two years.⁷

Skill as Artifact and a Focus on the Student as Persona

The primary way in which teachers talked about students' progress toward successfully completing the GED was by invoking the notion of skills. In the rubric of figured worlds, skills were an artifact that helped to constitute the persona of the student as oriented to another artifact, the GED. The teacher was a persona whose position was oriented to the student in a support role vis-à-vis the artifact of the GED and the skills needed for its mastery. Teachers' uses of the notion of skills to characterize the persona of the student and her relationship to the exam were complex. Teachers could use the notion to refer to seemingly commonsensical divisions of knowledge or describe individuals or cohorts. One teacher, for example, described the need to teach students "long division and other math and computing skills." Another teacher explained that one of the most pressing student needs was "comprehension skills" and the need "to know how to write a sentence." Yet another teacher explained that it was hard to manage her classroom sometimes because she had "someone that's at a first grade level, and then students that are at a twelfth grade level, and just that broad range of skill levels in the classroom makes it really challenging." What Hull (1997) has described as the "skill metaphor" has become so ubiquitous because, in part, it can be used with bodies of knowledge, actions, and persons.

Indeed, a discourse of skills has been used widely in the United States and elsewhere to talk about work generally, as well as the knowledge that work requires (Darrah 1997; Spenner 1990). Darrah (1997) has pointed out that discourse that renders knowledge as a skill tends to reinforce that the skill is important to the work at hand, that the skill is required, and that the skill can be abstracted from the people whose practices its identification assumes. All of these factors have contributed to the "uncritical acceptance of the skill metaphor—that is, of the belief that literacy as a skill is a neutral, portable technique" (Hull 1997, 17).

Sometimes teachers overtly mentioned the applicability of the notion of skills to the various sections of the GED exam. A teacher described a student who came to the literacy welcome center with generally high scores on a GED preparation exam she had taken. The teacher explained that she “needed a little math work, so we worked on math, and finally got the skills up.” The same teacher reported having to tell two students who wanted to “jump right into” taking a preparation exam that she had to “work with you guys on your multiplication skills and some things that are going to help you speed up your calculations.” Skills usually referred to operations like computation and writing mechanics, but they never referred to the “soft skills” like flexibility and communication that Urciuoli (2003, 2008) has identified in elite education discourses in higher education in the United States.

Teachers’ notions of skills could render student capacities relevant to the GED even when teachers did not mention the test. One of the teachers described a student “who can read but at a low level because they’ve only been taught sight reading.” She explained that she had to work with such students often and had to “go back and re-teach phonics, even though they know sight words, because phonics is so foundational.” The same teacher claimed one of the hardest things for her to teach came much later in the students’ work: “teaching how to write an introduction and conclusion.” This was made particularly difficult because she had to get across to the students that the introduction and conclusion “are almost saying the same thing.” While the teacher’s move from reading to writing to mark progression and advancement was in keeping with hegemonic notions of literacy generally in the United States (Heath 1983), the teacher’s comments about an essay’s introduction and conclusion seemed also to be informed by the requirement of an essay on the GED exam. Teachers unanimously claimed this to be one of the hardest parts of the exam for students to accomplish, especially for those for whom math was not difficult.

The fact that aspects of the GED shaped teachers’ constructions of the persona of the student via the artifact of skills was tied to student attendance policy and its relationship to funding for the literacy initiative. After approximately 50 hours of student attendance, teachers were required to administer a preparatory exam, the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Teachers stressed to us that students would not be excluded from the program should their scores not improve the next time they took it, after approximately 50 more hours in tutorials.⁸ But all of the teachers talked about the “gains” made in test scores as a sign of the student’s progress. They congratulated students for gains made in the various domains of the test and tried to encourage students who did not improve to the degree required for taking the final GED exam. Very intense displays of affect always accompanied these sessions. News of significant gain or inadequate progress was often accompanied by teachers hugging students, and, on several occasions, we saw teachers cry alongside students. Such displays of affect exhibited the strong ties between students’ status as dropouts and their senses of self and demonstrated the ways in which the artifact of the exam helped to constitute the persona of the student (Lukes 2015). Such displays of affect between the personae of teachers and students hint at a construction of the personae of the teacher and student not focused on skills.

Care as Artifact and a Focus on the Teacher as Persona

A different way in which teachers and students reflected on their work at the literacy welcome centers was to note the affect displayed by teachers. Teachers and students understood such displays of affect as evidence that teachers cared about students. Care served as an artifact that intertwined teacher and student as personae. When focusing on the artifact of care, neither teachers nor students foregrounded the artifact of skills. Rather than having the test mediate the relationship between teacher and student, as in reflections on skills, reflections on care invoked the distinction between the figured world of the literacy welcome center and the world outside as well as the life of the student in the wake of the failure to finish high school.

One teacher explained that she gave students “a lot of verbal encouragement.” She mentioned that she had seen a great deal of change in one of her students that she believed was the result of her own “nurturing and patience.” The teacher reported that the student had recently told her, “nobody ever believed in me before,” and the teacher claimed to have seen in the student an increase in his “confidence and self-esteem.” Another teacher stated that she “brings in cookies, and pretzels and candy, and pats the students on the back and hugs them.” She proceeded to explain, “I just try to be their mother. And some actually call me ‘mom.’” Yet another teacher described practicing “tough love” with her students. She said that one student would come in “every day, [and would say] ‘I don’t get it. I can’t.’” The teacher reported that she encouraged the student to continue, repeating regularly, “you could pass.”

The teachers saw their relationship with their students as familial. They used the relationship to characterize the literacy welcome center as a safe and comforting place to go. One teacher stated, “They [students] always help each other and everybody appreciates everybody else. And nobody feels like they can’t ask me a question. They all feel comfortable.” Another made explicit that she manages her own emotions to hide negative affect from her students: “When I’m feeling really frustrated, whether because of their [students’] attitude or outlook for the day, I just try to walk away so they don’t feel frustration on my side because a lot of them get frustrated enough with themselves and I don’t want this to be a similar experience of failure and frustration.”

Sometimes teachers invoked students’ failure to finish high school in order to account for their affective disposition toward students. One teacher remarked:

Of course I want them to go on and do big things with their lives. Because, as I said before, they’re not stupid. Their lives are difficult. You know, they made mistakes along the way. They made choices that weren’t so great. But most of them could go beyond high school, and have decent jobs and decent lives. I just hate to think that could have been me. If I didn’t have some kind of support when I was younger. If I didn’t have a family watching out for me. I just want the best for them.

The teacher invoked the dichotomy between not moving beyond high school and having a “decent life” but here intimated that she could play a part to compensate for what contributed to the students’ predicament, the lack of “a family watching out for me [the student].”

Teachers' reflections on their affective disposition toward students could stress that students' lives outside of the literacy welcome centers were filled with uncertainty and hardship. Although teachers did not explicitly link the condition of their students to the effects of uneven school funding and institutionalized racism and sexism, they nevertheless refrained from attributing students' predicaments to individual choice at such moments (Fine 1991). One teacher explained:

The circumstances of our students' lives, you know, sometimes they'll be coming to class consistently and then, all of a sudden, something will happen that they need to . . . basically that distracts them from school. You know, and that's difficult because they might have been making good progress and really getting close to the point where they'll be able to take their tests, and then they'll miss a couple of weeks and it slows things down. You know? We end up having to repeat a lot of the things they forgot, or need more practice [on]. And that's frustrating just because you know that they're close, and it's like, life almost won't allow them to get over that last little hill.

Indeed, the teachers consistently stressed their affective disposition toward students as a way to acknowledge that a temporal boundary—constituted by completion of a high school degree—served to differentiate their students and them. Teachers enjoyed the support of kin that enabled a successful transition to adulthood, and now they can play that role for their students.

Students too saw the literacy welcome center as a place of refuge. One student explained generally, "the literacy zone is a big help for anybody if you're struggling." Another student remarked, "it gives a sense of, like, you're somewhere like a home even when you're not home because you feel comfortable. I think this is a good place." One student claimed more directly, "To me, I call this, like, home. Like, I don't feel shy here. I don't feel restricted or anything." One of the primary ways in which the literacy welcome center emerged for students as a positive space is that the teachers care. One of the students remarked:

If I need help, or access to a computer, or sometimes just a teacher to talk to, because . . . nothing related to work, you know . . . if I have a bad day at work. Like last week, Beth helped me fill out an application. And that's not part of her job. She doesn't need to do that. So for me . . . I'm really grateful because people do things that they don't need to do. A teacher [in high school] could come and explain to you once or twice something and if you don't get it, you don't get it. But the teachers here are not like that. It gives you a sense of, like, you're somewhere like a home even when you're not home. Because you feel comfortable. And that's why I like coming here.

The student drew a contrast between the world outside the center as a place of work where there is a lack of care and the world inside the center where teachers care so much that they do things for students that the job does not require. In comparison to skills, the artifact of care allowed wider temporal and spatial frames to emerge in the constitution of the personae of teachers and students. The artifact of care opened the figured world of the literacy initiative to the relevance of students' current predicaments shaped by the failure to finish high school.

Literacy as Artifact: Teachers' and Students' Different Reflections on Skills and the GED

Like the artifact of care, the artifact of skills could invoke a much wider temporal and spatial horizon than reflections on the GED itself allowed. Indeed, teachers and students alike made explicit that skills could be understood as comprising “literacy” and that the artifact of literacy encompassed a much wider domain of activity than the GED exam. Teachers’ and students’ reflections presented herein bear out what Street (1984) has called the “ideological model” of literacy. A number of scholars have questioned the notion that literacy refers to a singular cognitive skill that has predetermined effects for those who possess and utilize it. Rather, they have come to see literacy as a set of social practices “rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, [and] being” (Street 2001, 7). Street and other scholars (Ahearn 2001a; Collins 1995; Collins and Blot 2003; Heath 1983; Finnegan 1988; Hull and Katz 2006; Riemer 2008; Shuman 1986; Street 1984; among many others) have argued that there is no one definition of literacy because literacy is always embedded in social practices and that the uses of literacy are always tied to the contexts in which they emerge. They have also stressed that there exist different notions of what literacy requires, entails, and makes possible. This exploration of the literacy initiative joins scholarly work that has sought to explain the ideological underpinnings of literacy practices in two ways. First, as discussed above, multiple artifacts must be considered in an account of what underpinned the work of the literacy initiative, and the artifact of care gives evidence that literacy practices were partly dependent on artifacts that did not involve reading and writing per se. In other words, literacy practices must be considered in the contexts that give them importance, and skills oriented to the GED provide only a partial account. And second, teachers and students had their own notions of literacy as an artifact that aid in bracketing and contextualizing any notion that a single artifact could account for the work of the literacy initiative.

One teacher described literacy explicitly as “the ability to function in society.” Another teacher, nodding toward a student working on an assignment packet, said, “He has the skills he needs but he doesn’t apply them. He possesses the skills but he can’t function in society.” When one of us asked what she meant by “function in society,” she replied, “someone who can read signs, or fill out an application, or . . . use print of any type they’ll encounter . . . to get the news . . . someone who can take those reading and writing skills and apply them in various ways in society so that . . . it won’t be a hindrance.” Yet another teacher explained more generally:

I guess they’re [students are] literate when they’re able to read, write, talk, and compute things that are going on in their daily lives. If there’s a paper that comes home from their school and they can’t read it, and they can’t understand it, or they can’t write back to the teacher . . . when they can is when they become literate. You know, being able to follow directions, follow prescription labels, balance their checkbook so they don’t go into debt.

The artifact of literacy, unlike the artifact of skills oriented to the GED, always depended on the relevance of the world outside of the confines of the literacy welcome center. The

artifact of literacy invoked the context of students' lives in ways that the artifact of skills oriented to the GED did not.

One teacher talked about her own past in terms of the acquisition of a skill to satisfy a pressing demand:

When I had my daughter, I wanted to be able to stay at home with her, but I needed to provide an income. I had my nursing background, and someone had told me about medical transcription, but I needed to be able to type quickly in order to do that. So I knew I could find a book at the bookstore to teach me keyboarding. I could go online to find exercises to practice my speed. So literacy to me is . . . you might not necessarily know about something or how to do something, but you have the skills necessary to pursue that.

For the teacher, the skill gained was instrumental in satisfying a pressing need—to be a good parent—and not in understanding the world of medical transcription. The teacher's successful invocation of the gendered relationship of mother and child, and several of the students' descriptions of their reasons for desiring a GED presented below, recall Wendy Luttrell's insight that reflections on adult education programs often reveal that class distinctions matter in who is able to "abide by idealized norms of motherhood" (1997, 105). Literacy included the successful support of the self and others outside of the literacy welcome centers. Teachers mentioned such activities as reading signs, filling out an application, talking, and typing and such text artifacts as prescription labels, checkbooks, and transcriptions, all of which have no relationship to the aspects of the GED preparatory exams to which much of their work is directed.

In order to address the larger, more encompassing notion of literacy necessary for a successful life, the teachers shifted the ground of their discussion from the literacy welcome center to the world outside. In a discursive construction shared by students, teachers consistently intimated that the reason that students are now seeking help at the literacy welcome centers is tied to the condition of their lives outside, itself an effect of not finishing high school. One teacher explained:

I think a lot [of the students] struggle with learning, so probably . . . a lot of them are from New York City and from urban areas where I'm sure the student-teacher ratio was huge, and teachers really couldn't take the time with someone that needed so much help developing their skills. Some of them, a lot of them, were labeled, or just got into trouble, and dropped out.

While only a handful of students were from New York City and while the city in which tutorials were conducted was an urban area, the teacher's comments reflected the temporal underpinning of the failure to finish high school and the spatial distinctiveness of the literacy welcome center from life outside.

Whereas the teachers saw dropping out of school as an explanation of the student's current predicament, they did not share students' optimism that the attainment of the GED, per se,

might provide the causal link to a more successful life. One of the students explained, for example, “That’s why, like, today, I’m working at KFC [a popular fast food chain paying low wages], not wanting to, but because I didn’t finish high school. If I would have finished high school, I would have choices of where I want to be, not where I am, it’s two different things. I could choose, with a degree, where I want to go, instead of telling me, this is what we got.” Another student explained that she was “being rebellious to my father. I dropped out. I shouldn’t have but I did. There’s things we go through as kids, so I regret that I did it, but that’s why I’m trying to make it up now.” For students, the attainment of the GED itself could repair the spatial and temporal rift that the failure to finish high school created. A student made this glaringly apparent when he explained, “The hardest thing for me is . . . since I waited to get my high school diploma . . . now that I’ve got my life, you know, a woman at home, kids . . . so like having a regular life, I’m trying to get in this time machine to go back in time to finish something that should have been finished.”

Most students’ accounts stressed that life after dropping out of high school became extremely hard. One student explained, “Everything just turned upside down. Everything got harder when you leave school . . . You don’t know how to work, and deception, and no money in your bag. It’s never enough because you don’t have a trade. It’s like, what you do? Nothing.” He added a few seconds later, “It’s ugly outside man, ugly, you know, only getting worse.” The student proceeded to compare the failure to finish high school with being illiterate and noted that both amount to being “unprepared for life.” When asked to elaborate on the notion of being illiterate, he stated:

Illiterate? Oh man, that means like, what I don’t want to be [laughter]. That’s like being blinded to everything. That’s what I understand by that word, like, you’re just blinded. Not even about like if you don’t know how to read, or you can’t understand something, just completely blinded to the fact that like, there’s so much to learn. And some people choose, you know, to stay on the other side, there’s two sides, it’s like two sides to a coin.

The student linked several negative conditions to the failure to complete high school, both to define his trajectory and to define what he hopes to avoid.

Sometimes students did not use the word “literacy,” yet the manner in which they constructed the welcome center as a spatial refuge recalled the artifact of literacy rather than care because students focused on themselves rather than teachers as personae. One student talked of the difference between people who are “well-prepared” and people who are “unprepared.” “Well-prepared” people, he explained, “finished school and do not even know the word ‘poverty’.” “Unprepared” people “have to worry about the prices of milk and gas.” He continued, “Being unprepared changes the way you eat. Because you don’t work, or you work a job where they don’t pay you enough. You got to limit what you eat. You can’t go on and eat snacks every day or go out to the Olive Garden. You can’t be doing that. And everything just turns ugly.” Another student drew a similar connection between the completion of school and the overall ability to live in a way not marked by deprivation: “You know, right now I have the time to come to school [the literacy welcome center], to finish,

to be, some, somebody. I can't get a job anywhere because they're going to ask for your preparation, they're going to ask for your GED." The student made especially clear that he saw the literacy welcome center as a place wherein a spatiotemporal dilemma could be solved by the attainment of the GED and intimated that its acquisition might bring about the amelioration of some of the barriers erected by the lack of a high school diploma.

One student came very close to blaming people for their present predicament by linking the failure to finish school with poverty through indolence: "Only to the people who are poor, or let's say not well-prepared, school was something like, 'I'll do it later, or whatever. Who cares?'" He explained that he wanted to complete the GED to be able to say to an employer, "Hey! [pounding fist on the table] I need 15 dollars an hour, I need 25 dollars an hour!" Another student noted that employment was precarious and unstable. When talking about the acquisition of the GED, the student blended knowledge and sustenance in a particularly poignant way: "There's going to be something there as long as I'm ticking [with the attainment of the GED]. I'm going to eat because of what I know. Tomorrow, where I work, they could say, 'You know what? We're closing down. We're tired of this business.' Or, 'I'm selling it to the next person. We're going to make this a park now. We're just going to destroy this store.'" Such statements showed that students saw the attainment of the GED to be aligned with some of the possibilities offered by the artifact of literacy.

Agency in the Figured World of the Literacy Initiative

In the literacy initiative's funding logic, agency is realized in the individual's attainment of the GED, which, in turn, is meant to enable the individual to live without the resources of the state. The agency that underpins the logic of the literacy initiative is neoliberal as described by Gershon (2011). Gershon explains that neoliberal rationality exists when responsibility for improvement is invested in the individual and when improvement is tantamount to enhancing one's marketability. The enhancement of responsibility through marketability comes to seem like a choice, itself a sign of responsibility. Kingfisher has argued that within a neoliberal logic, "Autonomy, the pursuit of rational self-interest and the market are mutually constitutive" (2002, 18). Just how the attainment of the GED will enable the students in the program to escape poverty the literacy initiative's funding logic never makes clear. Such is typical, Gershon (2011) explains, of neoliberal logics. Nevertheless, the literacy initiative and its funding logic narrow the parameters by which one might enhance one's responsibility by defining relevant people as impoverished and reliant on the state.

In some ways, when teachers reflected on skills oriented to the GED to inform the construction of their persona with respect to that of students, they invoked constructions of agency that underpin the literacy initiative and its logic of funding. Students were rendered as individuals whose abilities were narrowly reduced to skills oriented to the exam. Agency was configured by the students' ability to improve those skills which a diagnostic exam had shown to be in need of improvement. The teacher's agency was also shaped and constrained by the artifact of the exam and its attendant notion of skills. Teachers helped decipher practice test results and aided students in improving their skills.

A much more complicated understanding of agency is required, however, to account for the work conducted by teachers and students in the figured world of the literacy centers. When reflecting on personae through the artifact of care, teachers and students invested teachers with a degree of agency that they lacked in the artifact of skills oriented to the GED. Teachers' care for students infused the literacy welcome center with a degree of comfort for the student and helped teachers and students alike to explain why students kept coming for tutorials in the face of their taxing family and employment responsibilities. Furthermore, teachers' care was an artifact that intertwined the personae of teacher and student directly from a point of view inside the figured world. By considering the artifact of care, one is able to perceive that the pursuit of the GED mediated by the notion of skills cannot account for the work of the personae at the literacy welcome center. Thus, two types of agency existed in the figured world of the literacy welcome center, each underpinned by an artifact and a different engagement of personae. Without the development of skills, students could not have prepared for the test; without the caring disposition of the teachers, the literacy welcome center would not have been different from the world outside.

Though he does not use the terminology employed herein, Mehan (1996) has offered a compelling account of how an educational identity, the learning disabled student, depends on the narrowing of the relevance of activity such that the views of only certain kinds of people are recognized as significant and consequential. The ways parents describe their children, for example, tend not to fare well in subsequent steps toward the acquisition of the identity of learning disabled because the authoritative means of describing the student belong to the psychologist. The description that matters presupposes that the student's problem is "beneath his skin and between his ears" (Mehan 1996,268). Similarly, the literacy initiative's funding structure picks out the exam and the student as the relevant artifact and persona and ties the student's agency to the single artifact. The notion that teachers' support is also crucial to the student's work in the program (and, thus, the student's mastery of the exam) complicates the direct tie between student and exam in the literacy initiative's logic. The reflections of teachers and students reveal that both skills and care are necessary for the work accomplished in the literacy welcome centers, that the agency of teachers and students cannot be mediated by a single artifact, and that the logic of the literacy initiative's funding structure is ultimately insufficient to account for the work accomplished.

Not only did teachers and students provide a more complex picture of how artifacts mediate relationships between personae in the literacy initiative, they also used the artifact of literacy to conceptualize their work in a much wider temporal and spatial frame than skills oriented to the GED could address. Yet, teachers and students used the artifact of literacy to reflect on the same personae quite differently. Teachers used the artifact of literacy to cast attention outside the literacy welcome center and warned that there, they would not be able to help students. The artifact of literacy prompted teachers to look backward in time in order to make sense of why students might not be prepared for the application of skills once outside the confines of the literacy welcome center. Teachers thus invoked well-documented deficit views of education (Collins 1988, 2009; Hicks 2002; Trueba 1988; Valencia 1997; Valenzuela 1999) whereby educational failure is seen as a result of the inadequate efforts and abilities

of students and their families rather than as a result of the partiality of what counts as educational success (Levinson and Holland 1996), the social and cultural capital which an engagement with education presupposes and helps to reproduce (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron 1994), or the constructions of failure and the predictable categories of people whom they come to describe (despite their focus on the individual) (McDermott 1996; Varenne and McDermott 1999). The teachers in the literacy initiative were all pursuing or had attained graduate degrees in education. The artifact of literacy allowed teachers to cast doubt on students' ability to function in society even with the attainment of the GED.

The artifact of literacy prompted students to see in the GED an enhancement of their agency. Attainment of the GED would allow for students to demand better wages and might allow students to forego the particularly unattractive situations of employment in which many of them were engaged in which wages were extremely low, breaks short, and employers uncaring. Whereas literacy prompted teachers to cast the personae of student in the past, the same artifact prompted students to reflect on their future possibilities. While students often claimed to have made mistakes in the past to account for dropping out of school and their present predicaments, they saw in the attainment of the GED an embodiment of literacy and the possibility for success outside of the literacy welcome center.

We do not claim that constructions of agency underpinned by the artifact of literacy in the reflections of teachers or students accurately reflect the future of students. Teachers offered pessimistic views of student capabilities that were overdetermined by class-based ideas of what constitutes successful education, and students offered connections between attainment of the GED and success outside the literacy welcome center that analyses of employment outcomes have shown to be overly optimistic. Rather, we want to emphasize that teachers and students exhibited complicated and different ways of reflecting on the figured world of the literacy initiative that required multiple artifacts and resonances with personae, as well as reflections on their work which the GED, mediated by the artifact of skills, could not address.⁹ Indeed, the teachers' pessimistic view of the students' ability to demonstrate the attainment of literacy outside of the literacy welcome center provided an implicit critique of the way that skills oriented to the GED narrowed the parameters for understanding students' agency. Teachers' pessimistic views brought into focus students' lives outside the literacy welcome center, something teachers could not do when focused on the artifact of skills oriented to the GED. And, even if students might be accused of being overly optimistic about what the GED would allow, their particular claims about what literacy would enable them to do included the ability to bring their needs to an employer's attention as well as an escape from an uncertain and uncaring market of employment. Both of these goals helped to construct students' agency, helping to account for what the students sought in the program. Yet, neither had any connection to the exam and the skills necessary for its mastery in the logic of the literacy initiative.

The Work of the Literacy Initiative Rendered Otherwise

One might ask why it is that the teachers' and students' insights that the figured world of the literacy initiative involved multiple artifacts which engaged personae in multiple

ways—and which were themselves open to different reflections—went unrecognized outside of the interactions between teachers and students. We introduce another perspective that emerged from a position in the literacy initiative somewhere between that of teachers and students, on the one hand, and the administrators responsible for the literacy initiative's creation and funding structure, on the other hand. We had come to know the director of the literacy initiative at the main office before starting fieldwork, but then only saw him sporadically during the course of the research because his office was located at the main office and because he had a busy schedule overseeing other programs of the adult education initiative. We asked him to engage in an interview toward the end of our research and he readily agreed. In his rendition of the work that is accomplished at the literacy welcome centers, personae, the types of work done, and the goal to be accomplished all lined up rather neatly. However, this alignment depended on the emergence of a new persona, the social worker. The director explained the work of teachers and social workers at the literacy welcome centers and their duties thus:

So, what the literacy zone does, Anne and Lucy [social workers], is, they try to help those people [students] solve all those other problems, and the teachers try to solve the education problem. But Anne and Lucy help them solve all the other problems they bring. And you may bring no problems and you may bring a ton of problems. But we know you're not going to come back to school if we don't find you a place to live, if we don't find you food from the food bank, if we don't get you food stamps, if we don't, you know, help you with those things. So that's where Anne and Lucy come in. Teachers focus on the education and Anne and Lucy focus on the . . . they're like social workers, case managers . . . they focus on helping the person with all the other stuff.

The director made a sharp distinction between problems that students bring in the form of needs and problems that students bring in the form of needing to study for the GED exam. The persona of the social worker, he explained, is oriented to the persona of the student by solving the problem of needs, and the persona of the teacher is oriented to the persona of the student by solving the problem of education.¹⁰ The personae of the social worker and the teacher lined up perfectly with the moral geography of the student, bifurcated by the literacy welcome center and the world outside. Never did the director express awareness or recognition that students saw teachers as distinct from others outside the literacy welcome centers because of their displays of affect. And never did the director express awareness of the artifact of literacy whereby the world outside and inside the literacy welcome center might come to reflect on the other or emerge differently depending on whether teachers or students were engaged in reflection. The complexity reflected in the fact that the artifacts of skill and affect were both necessary for constructions of the personae at the literacy welcome centers and the underpinning of their agency disappeared as the director imagined personae and artifacts to be neatly aligned.

Conclusion

The literacy initiative described herein was funded because the state saw in the GED a credential that the poor might be able to acquire to forego a reliance on the resources

of the state. Since the massive reductions in the availability of public assistance over the last few decades, such credentials, often accompanied by high-stakes exams, are often the primary ways in which the state offers the poor any means to escape their predicament. There is no question that students at the literacy welcome centers saw the acquisition of the GED as important to being able to acquire a better job. Yet, to appreciate the literacy welcome center as a figured world, one must appreciate a complex array of artifacts and their mediation of the activity of personae. Agency from the point of view of the literacy initiative's funding logic was structured by a test and the sample tests that would mark students' progress, all in the effort to forego reliance on the state. Agency from the point of view of the personae of teachers and students was much more complex. The contributions of two personae, wrapped up differently in two artifacts, were required to account for students' progress.

Furthermore, teachers' and students' reflections complicated the rather straightforward funding logic of the centers. First, students could not achieve the GED on their own. Second, teachers and students problematized the logic of the literacy initiative itself with an artifact of their own, literacy. Teachers used it to note that acquisition of the GED might not enable students to attain the benefits of literacy, whereas students used it to point out that they were already employed and saw in the GED a way to earn autonomy, respect, and an enhanced capacity to care for others. All of this went unrecognized, of course, in the neoliberal focus on the test as a way for students to enhance their employment opportunities to forego reliance on the state. All of this also went unrecognized by the director of the literacy initiative. By leaving the agency underpinning the teachers' and students' reflections unacknowledged, the director's reflections left no trace of the contradiction at the heart of the figured world: that the acquisition of skills—"solving the education problem" in the words of the director—might never be enough to achieve what students desired.

Neither the funding logic for the literacy initiative nor the explanation of the director reflects the work required to pass the GED test or the problems that students are trying to address by attaining the GED. Representations from outside the figured world of the literacy initiative narrow the parameters of students' identity to a state of poverty and construct the student's agency as the attainment of employment and avoidance of the state's support. Such simplifications imply that the acquisition of the GED is an individual pursuit and establish that the acquisition of the GED provides evidence that one means to be productive and self-sufficient. What is lost in such simplifications is the social complexity that the acquisition of the GED requires, as well as any acknowledgment that aspirants have already foregone reliance on the state—because most are already employed—and yet still wish for their lives to be less precarious.

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Notes

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1. In 2011, prior to our fieldwork, the American Council on Education announced the involvement of Pearson in the test's new alignment with the Common Core, and, in 2014, after the fieldwork reported on herein, the New York State Education Department started using McGraw-Hill's TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Completion) in place of the GED. Thus, the state no longer uses the test reported on herein to recognize high school equivalency. The GED as well as the TASC exam are now owned and offered by for-profit companies.

2. Scholarship on indicators drawn from survey data has tended to argue about categories of identity among those who have completed the GED and how they bear significance with respect to dropouts and people who completed high school. For example, Heckman, Humphries, and Kautz (2014b) have argued that female recipients of the GED tend to work longer hours than female dropouts, but do not make a higher hourly wage, while Rivera-Batiz has argued that "for Blacks and Hispanics, the economic gains achieved through a high school diploma are significantly higher than those received for a GED. For Whites, the GED and a high school diploma are equivalent" (1995, 325). While such insights are sociologically valuable, they do not attempt to account for what makes the GED worth doing from the perspective of those involved.

3. *Personae* is a notion informed by Bakhtin's (1982, 1984) notion of voices, what Agha defines as "typifiable speaking personae" (2005, 39).

4. For other reviews of the concept of agency, see Duranti (1994, 2004), Keane (2003), and Kockelman (2007).

5. One can find them on a webpage of the New York State Education Department: <http://www.nys-education-literacy-zones.org/index1.php?id=LiteracyZones.html>

6. The interviews were conducted with people who explained that they had not finished high school while living in the United States. Recently arrived refugees did not reflect on their own lives in the manner of the students represented herein. Indeed, some of them had finished high school, but they were seeking to pass the GED because their high school diplomas went unrecognized in the United States.

7. The teachers and students used their reflections on *personae* discussed herein to make sense of the researchers' presence. Teachers initially saw us as a distraction from the work at hand, as people sent by the main office to implement a special project involving computers. Teachers were pleased to discover that we could join them in helping the students. Students, on the other hand, expressed appreciation for our help with GED exercises, but they consistently asked how long we would be coming to the literacy welcome centers. They did not see us as making the same contribution through affect, encouragement, and long-term commitment as teachers and never included us as inhabiting the *persona* of the teacher in their reflections.

8. Although none of the teachers understood what was done with preparatory exam results since, in the words of one, "no one gets kicked out of the program if they keep coming," they guessed that preparatory exam scores were

used by the state to track attendance and improvement. The teachers used the scores to ascertain when a student would be ready to schedule and take the GED exam.

9. See Barton and Tusting (2005) for a call to examine contradiction and inequality within a community of practice, a concept that, like figured world, stresses actors' understandings of the terms of their engagement with others and the artifacts that mediate their engagements.

10. Students drew a contrast, however, between social workers, who demanded paperwork and signatures, and teachers, who provided consistent support and encouragement. Students also drew a contrast between their infrequent meetings with social workers and their frequent, sometimes daily, meetings with teachers.

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