

Chapter 28

Emotional Investments and Crises of Truth

Gender, Class, and Literacies

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Introduction

Joanie was six years old and beginning her first grade year in a high-poverty urban community in the United States when she committed 30 minutes to a written piece about her mother (see Figure 28.1). Like most mothers in the community, Joanie's had a complicated relationship with school including substantiated fear of school authorities reporting her family to the State Child Protective Services for unfit parenting. Joanie's mother was often harshly judged by middle-class school authorities, a reality reflective of research on working-class and poor mothers in the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g., Jones, 2004, 2007; Osgood, 2011; Steedman, 1986, 1987; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, 2001; White, 2001). In Joanie's text (see Figure 28.1) readers may see 'I (heart) U mom' in three places as well as several variations of 'My and my mom' – or, as Joanie read it, 'Me and my mom.' Additionally, mom is spread throughout the text alongside hearts and Joanie represented through 'me.'

Young children's discursive practices and text production have been studied extensively by scholars committed to disrupting theories of socialization and illuminating the creative and powerful ways children engage socio-cultural tools – including discourses – available to them (e.g., Davies, 2003a; Dyson, 1997; Hicks, 2004; Marsh, 1999; Orellana, 1999). In this chapter we review some of these rich inquiries into children's texts and set them alongside sociological, historical, and psychosocial scholarship on social class, gender, and working-class mother–daughter relationships (e.g., Reay, 2004, 2005; Steedman, 1987; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001), and emerging theories and philosophies of emotions and education (e.g., Boler, 1999; Reay, 2004, 2005). Weaving together research on interpreting children's texts and discursive practices, working-class mother–daughter relations, and theories of emotions in education animates our work toward a theory of literacy practices as not only *social* and *ideological* but also *emotional*. This work also contributes to a project of theorizing emotions and histories of girls' and women's emotions as not located in individuals 'but in a subject who is shaped by dominant discourses and ideologies and who also resists those ideologies through emotional knowledge and critical inquiry' (Boler, 1999, p. 20). The young participants in our own projects were well aware of discourses and ideologies operating at the state and school level

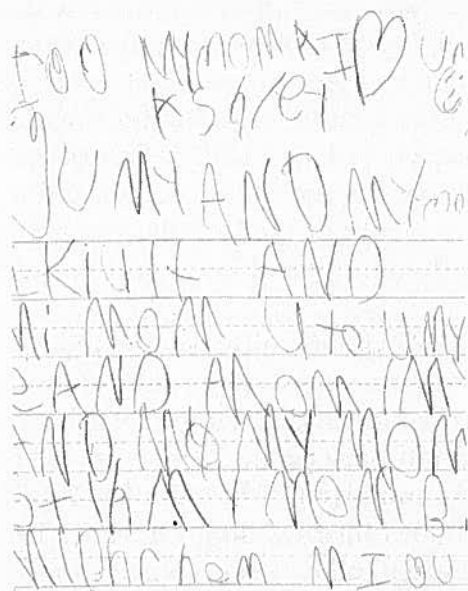


Figure 28.1 I love my Mom, by Joanie (fall, 1st grade)

about working-class mothers, and their textual productions reflected a resistance to dominant discourses and resistance through emotional investment from and in their mothers.

In what follows, we explore how researchers concerned with issues around gender, race, social class, and equity have interpreted children's writing. Next we briefly introduce feminist scholarship focused on psychosocial experiences of social class, gender, and mother-daughter relations to set the stage for our argument that literacy practices are not only *social* but *psychosocial* and bound up with emotions significantly influenced by social class and institutional power. In other words, we take for granted that literacies are *social* practices refracted through the political and spatial (e.g., Comber and Nixon, 2008; Janks, 2000; Vasudevan, 2010) and that the psychic is 'formed in and through the social' (e.g., Luttrell, 2006, p. 48). Thus, literacies impact the psychological and emotional just as the psychological and emotional impact literacies.

On Children's Texts, Discursive Practices, and the Feltness of Literacies

Carolyn Steedman, feminist historian and educator, provides rich analyses of children's writing from the 1800s through the twentieth century in her study of little girls' writing (1987). Steedman's work emphasizes the classed and gendered nature of young girls' writing historically and in contemporary times in the United Kingdom. Steedman's analyses of young working-class girls' writing (and their talking about that writing) in her own classroom in England in the 1970s demonstrated that the girls 'knew that their parents' situation was one of poverty and that the presence of children only increased it . . . that children were longed for, materially desired, but that their presence meant irritation, regret and resentment' (p. 25). Discourses of social class, gender, femininity, and childhood in the working-class girls' writing in Steedman's classroom were complex and disruptive of the dominant discourses surrounding girls and women. A mother's ambivalence toward a child was one theme in the girls' writing that challenged mainstream expectations that good mothers are happy and fully satisfied to sacrifice their personal needs and desires to care for their children. Steedman calls for a commitment for researchers to study young working-class children to get a better sense of

through what means they understand their circumstances and come to class-consciousness. She argues that we have substantial evidence of working-class women's *recollections* of childhood and class consciousness in memoirs and through interviews, but that working-class children themselves have so rarely been the focus of critical inquiry that the fields of childhood studies and child development are severely lacking (1987). Part of Steedman's concern is related to overdetermined socialization processes and she argues that her interpretations of working-class children's writing is 'valuable evidence of the fact that children are not the passive subjects of their socialization, but active, thoughtful and frequently resentful participants in the process' (p. 31).

Literacy researchers working from socio-cultural and poststructural perspectives of language, literacy, and subjectivity have written extensively about children's creative use of socio-political tools available to them. This work buttresses the argument that children are not passive subjects of socialization but rather powerful players in their sense-making of sociopolitical discourses through which they live, work, and play (Davies, 2003a, 2003b; Dyson, 1982, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2003; Marsh, 1999, 2000; Millard, 2003; Orellana, 1995, 1999; Wohlwend, 2009). Davies' (2003a) work tends specifically to the constitution of gendered subjects through discourses and she argues that socialization theories are related 'to the individualistic humanist theories of the person that . . . obscure our recognition of the complex and contradictory ways in which we are continually constituting and reconstituting ourselves and the social world through various discourses in which we participate' (2003a, p. 6). Children's discursive practices and text production, these scholars would argue, are creative engagements with available discourses that afford and constrain possible subjectivities – not simple reconstitutions of self and other within binaries that produce a powerful/powerless dichotomy.

Pushing the boundaries of socio-cultural research on literacy as social practice, Hicks (e.g., 2001, 2002, 2004; Hicks and Jones, 2007), Dutro (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), and Jones (2004, 2006b, 2007, 2012a, 2012b) engage scholarship within the nexus of literacies, gender, and/or social class that is most closely aligned with the psychosocial work we attempt here. In two longitudinal ethnographic studies, Hicks situates young children's and young adolescents' literacies within psychosocial lived experiences saturated with feeling and emotion. Hicks draws on cultural understandings of particular literacy practices and poststructural understandings of discourses and subjectivity to argue for literacy research that is embedded in the concreteness of lives and attuned to emotional ways of knowing and feeling. Her multiyear study of two young children (2002) demonstrated the ways that coming to know the world through language and literacies was intractable from coming to know the world *with* intimate others. Dutro grounds her work in the same assumption and enters the conversation around children's and youth's emotions and literacies through feminist literary studies broadly, and the constructs of testimony and witness specifically (e.g., 2009a, 2009b). She argues that children are 'everyday documentarians' and their testimonies about life often lived through struggle and challenging relationships with schools articulated through conversation and written text production need and deserve ethical *response* or *critical witnessing* in the school space.

In addition to the significance of the psychosocial within literacy practices, we ultimately draw implications that challenge assumptions about school literacy acquisition as always positive and productive. Acquiring school literacy, argues Viruru, 'is very much a process of both loss and gain, of contradiction and accommodation, of colonization and agency' (2003, p. 17). For our purposes, this may be especially true for working-class girls forced to adopt literacies that contradict their lived experiences and aim for a hypothetical 'upward mobility' that constitutes them as differently, and 'improved,' classed subjects from their mothers. Viruru's ethnographic research in India (2001) and her review of similar work from a number of countries (2003) emphasize the importance of researchers considering the colonizing work of

educational institutions. Scholars such as Hicks, Dutro, and Viruru help foreground emotions and the feltness of literacies, the losses and gains afforded by school literacies, the personal and political nature of literacies, and the intricate ways literacies are embedded in the psychosocial. One way to focus on such losses and gains is through the lens of social class marginalization and mother–daughter relations.

On Working-Class Mothers, Daughters, and Emotions

[T]he fairytale of social mobility has no happy ending. It is always at others' expense. Cinderella becomes a princess but a whole host of young women take her place in the gutter. And what happens to Cinderella's mother? Killed off in the fairy story but alive and slighted in most working class children's lives. Once you put the social back into individual transformation others bear the costs of self-betterment and you are left with guilty gratitude – the dirty pleasures of privilege that have always left me feeling slightly soiled. (Reay, 2004/5, p. 7)

What, indeed, happens to the mother when the little working-class girl beats the odds of class reproduction and finds 'success' in upwardly mobile fashion by aligning herself with school and school authorities? Feminist sociologist Diane Reay challenges the individual trajectory of upward mobility by pointing to the social nature of the transformation of the self, drawing attention to the reality that most people don't experience upward mobility and the cost of 'slighting' family members who are left behind. This slighting may be particularly painful in the mother/daughter relationship and Reay's extensive work with working-class children pointed to a particular theme where mothers were powerful in the home but 'need[ed] her children to stand up for her in the outside world' (2004/5) where a 'multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions' (Foucault, 1990, p. 33) to construct the working-class mother as a pathology and in need of surveillance and correction. However, children might not be positioned to defend their mothers if they do not recognize the precarious positioning and potential judgment of the mother, and if the mother had not invested emotional capital in, or demonstrated an overt emotional investment toward, the child.

Reay's critique and extension of Bourdieu's capitals (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990, 2000) to include a theory of emotional capital aligns with other contemporary feminist efforts to theorize embodiment and emotion (e.g., Boler, 1997, 1999; Bordo, 1987; Davies and Gannon, 2009; Dutro, 2008, 2011; Grumet, 1988; Sedgwick, 2003). These scholars and others make the case that emotions and embodiment have been historically undertheorized and blatantly dismissed as 'private' issues, reinscribing men and theories of men as 'public' and the socio-political space of women as 'private,' therefore not worthy of theory or philosophy. For Reay, emotional capital is conceived of as the emotional work invested in a child by the mother toward the child's education. Her assertion that when mothers distance themselves from school, they might actually create more space to devote to the overall emotional care of their children is crucial for us to consider as we analyze the presence of the mother in little girls' school texts juxtaposed with her relative absence in the physical school. Reay would argue this emotional distance *from* school could result in more positive emotions devoted to the child and may well equip the child with the confidence necessary to achieve academically *in* school. This is a direct challenge to a mainstream expectation, in the United States, that children's parents (especially those from working-class and poor backgrounds) must be physically present and closely linked to the school in order for their children to succeed academically.

Boler (1999) argues that emotions 'are experiences in which economic power and dominant culture are deeply invested' (p. 21) and pastoral power and regimes of truth (e.g., Foucault) produce a terrain of feeling power where those investments are felt. She argues that emotions

are sites of social control as well as resistance, a powerful force working toward conformity and hegemony on one side and against control on the other. For our purposes it is worth considering how working-class mothers are constructed as either too emotionally involved or not engaged enough (or 'not caring') about their children's success in school and how emotions – perception and judgments about others' emotions – are intimately involved in the constructions of 'truth' about mothers. Further, how children's emotional investments in their mothers are produced, recognized, or dismissed in school as potential disruptions of dominant discourses about deviant mothers.

Building on feminist literary scholars interested in reading practices around trauma narratives, Boler further suggests that a reader of any genre can position herself to be shaken by a text, to reconsider what it is she thought to be truth before the reading, and to be willing to recognize herself implicated in inequitable power relations that produce human suffering and challenges. This orientation toward reading is what Boler calls 'testimonial reading,' or the reader's responsibility to engage with text empathically, to be moved to action, and to 'radically [shift] [her] self-reflective understanding of power relations' (p. 158). Scholarship focused on young working-class girls' writing could benefit from reading the texts *testimonially*, aware of the socio-political context in which the girls were producing texts, and interested in the ways emotional investments between working-class girls and their mothers manifest in discursive practices and text productions in school.

Reading Girls' Texts for Crises of Truth

Resistance to stereotypical gendered discourses

Drawing on feminist theories of emotion, we use Boler's (1999) notion of testimonial reading to situate young girls' texts as 'historically situated in power relationships . . . To enquire about these [testimonial] readings tasks, we might ask, what crisis of truth does this text speak to, and what mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result?' (pp. 170–171). Educators and scholars must be willing to embrace a 'mass of contradictions and struggles' when they examine the intersection and frequent contradictions of truths constituted in state institutions with truths produced by students caught up in the webs of those institutions. One way researchers and practitioners might prepare themselves to *experience* crises of truths in their reading of young girls' textual productions is to ask themselves what truths are readily available for making sense of the girls and how those truths are constituted. For example, one readily available truth for researchers and practitioners to access is that stereotypically 'girl' commercial toys and media are potentially socially and psychologically damaging since they are assumed to carry and project gendered ways of being that position girls and women as subordinate to – and in service of – boys and men.

Karen Wohlwend's work (2009) on analyzing the complex ways kindergarten-aged girls consumed and produced gendered identities through their textual play with Disney Princesses is an example of a researcher prepared to experience a crisis of truth in reading just these kinds of texts. While Wohlwend doesn't use theories of emotion to frame her work or call on Boler specifically to situate her work, she resists the carefully constructed and reproduced 'truth' narratives available to her to recognize the girls' play with mass produced commercial princesses as a sedimenting of stereotypical gendered subjectivities. Rather, Wohlwend draws on ethnographic observations, textual artifacts, and classroom conversations to stitch together a transformative portrayal of young girls 'select[ing] from the universe of possible identities and contexts for pretense, [and taking] up disparately empowered subject positions within discourses of emphasized femininity and creative expression' (p. 76).

This creative expression resulted in the girls rewriting and revising scripts and play-roles to position the girl princesses as wielding tremendous power in the fantasy world of castles, dragons, and princes. Their reworking of the well-known gendered scripts from the Disney movies produces a crisis of truth around the notion that young girls are passive consumers of media. The materiality of the toys produced by entertainment conglomerates and presumed stand-ins for stereotypical gendered performances (the Disney princess dolls in this case) 'offered concrete repositories that carried and stabilized story meanings and were paradoxically packed with potential for transformation' (p. 76). In other words, there is a truth operating around girls and 'girl' products that doesn't account for girls' creative and complex engagements with circulating ideologies in texts and society. Socialization of girls doesn't take place without the 'active, thoughtful and frequently resentful participants in the process,' (Steedman, 1987, p. 31). Wohlwend's work offers an empirical example of very young girls recognizing ideological truths circulating in and around princess dolls, and actively resisting those truths through their production of texts in school. Such textual productions are inevitably invested with emotion as the children negotiated who would play what roles with the princess dolls and what the storylines would be, what dialogue characters would speak, and the physical movements characters would make. And with emotional investment, the girls produce possible storylines that may endure and strengthen over time.

As researchers concerned with the mother–daughter relationship and emotional investments in particular storylines aligned with mothers or institutions, we wonder if and how Wohlwend's girl participants explicitly produced their mothers in school texts. If we had access to that kind of data, we might ask ourselves how and if those particular storylines might have influenced their textual play with the Disney princesses. In other words, we would ask about traces of the mother in the girls' productions of subjectivities available for themselves and others. While Wohlwend doesn't describe the social class positioning of the three focus participants in this article, readers can acknowledge that these very young girls are producing texts as resistance to stereotypical femininities and doing so while they are playing with merchandise most adults would believe only constrain gendered possibilities. The contradictions are fierce, and a testimonial reading and crisis of truth affords the contradictions to emerge.

Resistance to stereotypical discourses of working-class mothers

Fierce contradictions emerged in one of our projects as we set out to read for crises of truth in young working-class girls' textual productions of their mothers in school. Looking across data from three separate studies about working-class girls' literacies and identities (Jones, 2004; Jones, 2006b; Jones, 2012b), we were overwhelmed by the explicit presence of the 'mother' in drawings, writings, and oral conversations. The girls were in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades (approximately 5–8 years old), had families that would be considered working-class or poor, had experienced observable marginalization in their classrooms or the school, and all had mothers who were not well respected by school authorities.

Through our analyses, we constructed three ways through which the girls produced their mothers that create a crisis of truth around working-class and poor mothers: (1) Mother as valued worker; (2) Mother as provider of physical and emotional needs; and (3) Mother as vulnerable and needing defending or care. These were not the only ways the girls constructed their mothers, but they were ways through which girls produced positive and powerful portrayals that counter dominant discourses.

While we don't claim to know the girls' intentions or motivations in their writing and conversations around work, we can situate these conversations within regimes of truth – or discourses – about lazy poor mothers who never work hard enough, whether that work is for

earning money or for appropriately raising children (e.g., Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2007; Osgood, 2011). These discourses of the undeserving, financially irresponsible, lazy poor mother are legitimized through various state institutions. State welfare agencies require mothers receiving state benefits to live by certain rules regarding work and how food benefits are allowed to be spent; child protective services often evaluate the quality of mothering on the cleanliness of a home and children and therefore on her perceived productivity or her laziness; and authorities in educational institutions often judge a mother's quality of parenting based on her physical presence, appearance, and mannerisms on school property.

These girls, however, produced an alternative discourse of poor mothers, portraying them as hard workers who control the money and wield power in the home, including influence over what the girls imagine as possible futures for themselves:

- HEATHER: Can we talk about what we wanna be when we grow up?
 STEPHANIE: Let's do that.
 CALLIE: Help kids. Like when they're in the nursing home and there're little kids that need help.

Callie's mother worked in a nursing home as an assistant and as a custodial worker. Here Callie merges one desire – to work with kids, with another desire – to be like her mother, and readers can experience another crisis of truth: working-class jobs are valued and even desired. Callie was not the only girl to present her mother's labor as admirable and desirable, and the conversation continued:

- TRACY: I wanna work at a nursing home like my mom – or a hospital.
 STEPHANIE: Doing what?
 TRACY: Helping old people.
 MICHELLE: Work in a nursing home cuz you get a lot of money.
 TRACY: In a hospital you get more money than in a nursing home.
 STEPHANIE: What would you do at the nursing home?
 CALLIE: My mom works at a nursing home and she has to change diapers.

Moms reign powerful in the discursive practices of these young girls. While some dads were in jail and other dads constantly pursued more stable employment, it was the mothers who held full-time positions and probably provided the bulk of the family income – meager as it was. Moms have the jobs, moms talk about money, moms have and control the money – and power – and these were popular subjects for the girls' free writing and discussion in and out of the classroom. These realities buttress Reay's argument that working-class mothers are often powerful inside their homes, but experience extreme marginalization and judgment outside their homes by middle-class others. In these examples we can see how mothers' focus on their work and the necessity of paid labor to provide for the girls points to emotional investment in the girls by the mothers, and vice versa as the daughters produce their mothers as productive and powerful, and worthy of becoming.

All the girls brought their mothers into school each day and wrote, drew, and spoke them into existence when they were physically absent. In the piece below Christina, who lived with her mother and grandmother and did not know her father, writes a fictional story about visiting France with an illustration (see Figure 28.2) depicting both a mom and dad

- I was in the car in the night.
 We parked at the hotel then we went to the fourth floor. I went in the room.
 I put on my pajamas and turned on the T.V. and we had popcorn.

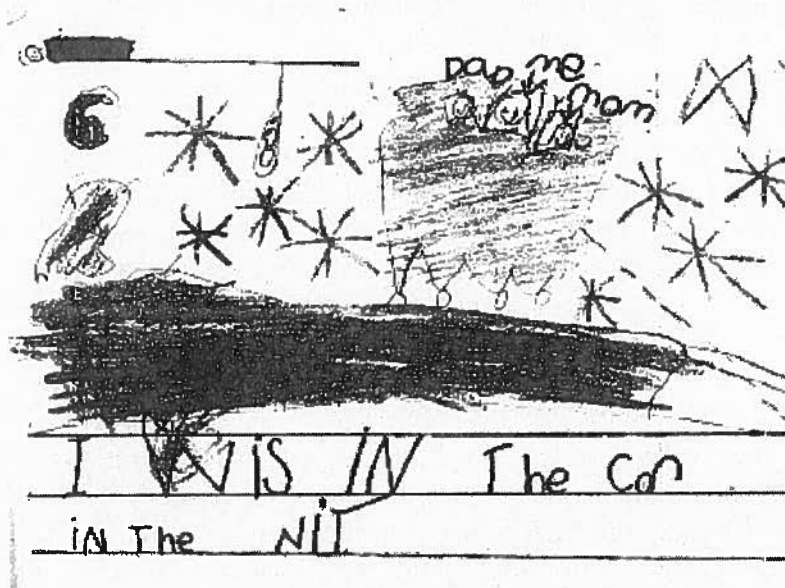


Figure 28.2 When we went to France, by Christina (2nd half of Kindergarten)

Christina's inclusion of a 'Dad' in the illustration alongside Christina and her mother might be read as her desire to have a traditional family that includes a mother and a father, or even as a fictional representation of her own family to be more like her friends in the classroom who mostly had two heterosexual married parents in the home. But Christina disrupted both interpretations later in the year when she read the book *What Mommies Do Best/What Daddies Do Best* (Numeroff, 1998) and reported:

- CHRISTINA: My mom is my dad.
 STEPHANIE: What do you mean?
 CHRISTINA: It's the same thing because my mom teach you how to ride a bike and take care of you and that is what dads do best too.
 CHRISTINA: Because I don't have a dad but my mom is my dad.
 STEPHANIE: She's both.
 CHRISTINA: Yeah.
 STEPHANIE: How did you know your mom is your dad too?
 CHRISTINA: Because she tells me.

Christina's mother is the provider for everything in Christina's life, including an unknown father. During the reading of the book she regularly commented about how her mom performed all the physical acts represented on both sides of the 'Mommies/Daddies' book. Christina's assertion that her mother tells her that she is both the mom and the dad points to her mother's emotional investment in Christina, and Christina's textual production of her mother as *both mother and father* portrays a reciprocal emotional investment on the part of Christina. The mother defies a mainstream narrative in the United States that a single African American mother is a deficit to a child by telling and showing Christina that they are a complete family together – she is both the mom and the dad – a crisis of truth.

We suggest that two dominant discourses – school as providing potential upward mobility and school as judge of working-class mothers – collide and contradict one another when working-class girls' texts are read testimonially, or with a willingness to reimagine one's assumptions about the 'truth' prior to the reading and one's role in inequitable power relations

embedded in the text (Boler, 1999). This collision of upward mobility discourses and the judging of mothers positions young working-class and poor girls in an impossible situation and reinscribes social class by not producing alternatives to either choosing loyalty toward their harshly judged mothers or loyalty toward an institution that can potentially lead to upward mobility. This analytic window into little girls' text production illuminates the complexities of social reproduction in-the-making *through* school literacies – ironically the very site through which educators and policymakers claim can catapult working-class and poor children into an upwardly mobile trajectory. Another crisis of truth.

Literacies, Emotions, and Children's Textual Productions

Literacies and emotions are inextricably linked – each producing the other within broad sociopolitical contexts, circulating discourses and regimes of truth, and intimate moments of being with others. Some emotional investments in textual productions might be observable and recognizable as indeed 'emotional' such as the sadness, crying, and anger present in the studies by Dutro and Hicks, or the joy and animated physical activity of role-playing in Wohlwend's work, and the pain of loss in Viruru's work. Other times it may not be possible to observe some emotional change in a child producing a text, such as in the examples from our project, but having access to girls' performances across contexts can provide insight to some of the emotional investments embedded in their seemingly emotion-neutral texts. Inscribing emotion into text through crayons drawing, fingers typing, pencils writing, voices speaking, and bodies acting is an act embodied in the fullest way: social, political, psychological, and material. All textual productions won't carry the same emotional weight over time, but tracing the persistence of particular emotional investments across time might lead researchers to crises of truth and the production of new – and inevitably contradictory – understandings about girls, social class, and identities.

Social class and gender play a central role in the production of literacies and emotions, emotional investments in storylines for one's future, and in implications for educators and scholars. The scholarship included in this chapter can make significant contributions to studies of literacies, identities, gender, and class. We draw on this wide range of work to offer two suggestions here for literacy researchers.

First, the close documentation of young girls' textual productions of classed and gendered lives is important work. This kind of work can answer Steedman's call for studies of gendered and classed childhoods from children's perspectives rather than from adults' recollections. Documentation of this sort can provide opportunities for tracing emotional investments through texts across time and space, and also within particular times and particular places. Close analysis of girls' texts can also challenge simple theories of socialization and reproduction, and offer researchers and education practitioners an opportunity to read their texts testimonially.

Second, while significant work has been conducted on working-class and poor children's literacies and identities, much more work can be taken up. Working-class and poor children (particularly girls and mothers) are still too frequently produced as deficit in one way or another, but mostly because they are simply positioned as always 'having less' of everything compared to their middle-class and affluent peers. Work reviewed in this chapter portrays working-class and poor children and families as resourceful, resilient, insightful about circulating truths and ideologies, and resistant to powerful institutional forces attempting colonization.

Young girls navigate complex terrain between home, school, emotions, and literacies and – knowingly or not – begin to construct gendered and classed storylines for themselves in relation to truths created through state institutions. Emotions and literacies have everything to do with

this shaping of oneself as resilient and not dominated by institutional others. Boler (1999, pp. xvi–xvii) believes that,

By rethinking the absence of emotion, how emotion shapes how we treat other people and informs our moral assumptions and judgments . . . we have the potential to radically change our cultural values and violent practices of cruelty and injustice, which are often rooted in unspoken ‘emotional’ investments in unexamined ideological beliefs.

Our emotional investments as researchers – commitments to challenge sexism and classism and foreground lived experiences of how working-class children disrupt dominant discourses – shape this work just as much as educators’ emotional investments in ideological beliefs shape perceptions of children and children’s literacies in school. Rethinking the absence of attention to emotion in research and practice around young children’s literacies and considering how emotional investments in people or ideas influence selective seeing, hearing, and believing on the part of adults can prompt us all to be willing to experience crises of truth and move uncertainly toward more inclusive and powerful practices for everyone.

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