Kara Poe Alexander

Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: “Master” and “Little” Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre

This article examines the “master” and “little” cultural narratives students perform in literacy narratives. Results show that students incorporate the literacy-equals-success master narrative most often, yet they also include in little narratives figures such as the hero, victim, and child prodigy. I consider how these findings can improve instruction on this topic and conclude with pedagogical recommendations.

Third grade was haunted by state-mandated writing portfolios. Pressures on the teachers and changes in the curriculum because of KERA became evident to me, even in the third grade. The hamburger method, brainstorming, and pre-writing worksheets took away any enjoyment I had with writing. I neglected the pencil and paper outside of the classroom and cringed at the mention of writing. Writing was no longer a leisurely activity for me but a required assignment. Being forced to write took away whatever joy was once there for me and replaced it with contempt. I wanted to give up writing all together.

Rebekah, first-year composition student

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In the epigraph above, Rebekah reflects on the circumstances and pedagogical methods that took away her passion for writing. Stories like hers provide instructors with a glimpse into what students write about when they compose a literacy narrative, a popular assignment in composition courses and textbooks (e.g., Bullock; Deans), because of what such narratives reveal about student identities, schooling, and literacy. In general, literacy narrative assignments prompt students to explore and reflect on how their past experiences with language, literacy, and schooling inform their perceptions of themselves as writers and literate beings (see Fox; Ryden; Soliday). Such assignments also “foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy” and “challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (Eldred and Mortensen, “Reading” 513). Ultimately, literacy narratives aim “to define who we are and what we want to become, both as individuals and as a community” (M. Young 26).

Scholars have identified one common feature of student literacy narratives: dominant, archetypal stories. These common stories follow conventional patterns of narration and correspond to prevailing cultural representations of literacy perpetuated through literature, film, television, and the news media. They also help organize and configure reality, thus shaping our understandings of ourselves (Bruner 88; Butler 11, 77; Foucault 110–11). For example, Shirley K. Rose finds that the literacy narratives students construct draw from dominant gender myths and that while men view literacy as a way to gain social autonomy, females consider it a means to social participation (250).

The most common “cultural narrative” that scholars observe students performing in literacy narratives is the conventional literacy success story, a narrative that assumes the more literate one is, the more successful he or she will be. This cultural narrative affirms the romanticized power of education (Eldred and Mortensen, “Reading” 515) and “equate[s] literacy acquisition with a progressive narrative of development and liberation” (Ryden 22). Stephanie Paterson observes that the success stories students construct are about the accumulation of literacy: students write about going to school to make good grades so that they will earn more money and be more successful later (103). Here the focus is on future outcomes of success. Stephen Fox similarly notes that students characterize their literacy pasts with terms like “development, progression, struggle, growth, evolution, or emergence” (17). In sum, success narratives paint literacy as pragmatic and utilitarian, a means to economic, cultural, social, and political success (Graff 350; Street 1–2; Yagelski 41–2, 48–52).
It is not surprising that students invoke the literacy-as-success cultural narrative: the upward mobility literacy myth has been enmeshed in our culture since its founding and is propagated through literary and autobiographical texts, film, and the media. Janet C. Eldred and Peter Mortensen find, for instance, that for nineteenth-century women writers such as Hannah Webster Foster, acquiring written fluency in mainstream English indicated achievement and accomplishment and was a means to power and advancement (*Imagining* 7, 143). The success narrative is also appealing because it promotes the idea that anyone—no matter their social background—can move up in “status, income, reputation, and self-esteem” (Bloom 667). In short, buying into the trope that literacy leads to enlightenment and liberation carries “tremendous cultural cachet” and “is an irresistible plot for students to plug into” (Paterson 99).

It does seem, however, that students rarely explore the possibility that the literacy-equals-success narrative is a faulty or, at the least, an overly generalized myth, even though many scholars have noted this point. Historian Harvey J. Graff, for instance, maintains that connections between schooling and social mobility are not natural ones, and he argues convincingly that actual realities challenge and contradict our assumptions about the inherent connections between literacy and success (264, 340–42, 350). Likewise, in *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, Robert Yagelski shows that although literacy can lead to possibility, hope, and power, it can also marginalize and disempower people (14). In similar ways, Vershawn Ashanti Young highlights the conflicts and tensions that arise for African Americans when literacy-as-success is viewed as “the trope for black class ascension” (8). Some costs of aligning oneself to the success narrative include homelessness, unhappiness, and loss. Other costs include social, cultural, and personal permanent displacement, which lead people to “alienation, despair, and impulses to suicide” (Christopher 80).

Because the cultural narrative that literacy necessarily leads to success is simplistic and even inaccurate, it can be characterized as a “master” narrative, which, according to Jean-François Lyotard, is an overarching story people tell themselves about their experiences in relation to the culture, literature, or history of a society (31). Also known as “grand” or “metanarratives,” master narratives both have the unfortunate result of gross overgeneralization and act invisibly to structure and define our lives (Daniell; Levine; Lyotard; Scott).
Lyotard views master narratives as limiting because of their normative, institutionalized, legitimizing, and canonical tendencies (31). Likewise, he suggests that not until we recognize master narratives at work and their role in constructing experience can we truly examine, analyze, and work to change them (31).

One example of master narratives’ propensity toward simplification can be found in history textbooks, a popular setting for metanarratives because history represents the telling (or not telling) of stories (see Alridge; Cox and Stromquist). Derrick P. Alridge points out the problems with master narratives of history:

The dominance of master narratives in [history] textbooks denies students a complicated, complex, and nuanced portrait of American history. As a result, students often receive information that is inaccurate, simplistic, and disconnected from the realities of contemporary local, national, and world affairs. (663)

Invoking the literacy-as-success master narrative in one’s personal story has many of these same negative results, including a naive and partial understanding of literacy and one’s relationship with it. But if incorporating the master narrative that literacy automatically leads to success is incomplete and even inaccurate, then what other representational options do students have when they compose a literacy narrative? Recent postmodern discussions have emphasized and privileged the importance of the “little” or local, more specific, narratives of literacy that contrast with and challenge the master narratives (Lyotard 31, 37, 60). Whereas master narratives, like the success narrative, are orthodox and legitimate, little narratives are unsanctioned, artistic, and imaginative; they are less generalizable and more individualized and situated (Lyotard 31, 60). In fact, little narratives assume that “literacy is multiple, contextual, and ideological” (Daniell 403), and they “present many truths about literacy, not one Truth about it” (406). In addition, little narratives are often told by marginalized groups, such as women and minorities, whose stories run counter to the dominant literacy myths (e.g., Brodkey; Daniell; Gere). Although little narratives do take into account similarities and differences of communities, they do not try to reify experience or stereotype large groups of people like master narratives do. Rather, little narratives allow us to see “their importantly oppositional, or critical, social, and political energies” (Kreiswirth 310): the little narratives critique and challenge the dominant master narratives. In sum, little narratives “are more restricted in scope, [ are] more contextually bound, and seek to make sense of lived experience in a particular domain” (Sandlin and Clark 1002).
Studies like Beth Daniell’s demonstrate that little narratives offer valuable insights about specific literate practices of communities by providing alternatives to the dominant narratives often emphasized. Little narratives are important because, as Daniell explains, they help us see “that the dominant tradition is not the only one, that counter-traditions run alongside, that history is usually more complex than it is presented” (407). In fact, because little narratives situate literate experiences within specific ecological contexts, they highlight the range of factors that shape our literacy and the stories we tell about our literate histories (e.g., Selfe and Hawisher). Furthermore, because little narratives allow glimpses into the lives of people whose stories have traditionally been overlooked, they are also more multicultural. Little narratives thus help us “gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive [and literate] species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species” (Lyotard 26). When we consider the “multiple ways of understanding the meaning of communities,” we are “aware of the capacity for human communities to have different ways of narrating their stories” (Olson 401). And, as Daniell argues, “As the little narratives proliferate, the grand narratives seem to lose their power” (404).

Looking at the little narratives students perform in literacy narratives is thus a valuable enterprise, one I sought to explore through two major questions:

1. What are the little narratives students invoke in literacy narratives, and how often are they invoked in comparison with the master narrative of literacy equals success? If little narratives do exist in student essays, do they challenge the success master narrative, thus causing it to lose some of its power, or reinforce it?

2. Do the cultural narratives (little and master) vary according to demographics, such as race, class, or gender? We might expect marginalized groups to invoke little narratives or “counter-stories” more often, but do they?

In exploring these questions, I hope that answers to them will enable us to better understand how students interpret their literacy experiences and construct themselves as literate individuals. Furthermore, discovering the little narratives students employ and who is more likely to invoke certain narratives gives us a richer, more diverse picture of our students’ experience of literacy. It might
even disempower the master narrative that literacy brings success, thus taking away some of its power. Taken together, these elements can help us improve our pedagogical approach to literacy instruction.

In the rest of this essay, I assume an empirical perspective by looking at the ways in which cultural narratives—both master and little—operate in student literacy narratives. First, I explain the study’s methods and the basis for my empirical discourse analysis of student literacy narratives. I then determine which cultural narratives students were most likely to perform and compare these data to student demographic data to discover the stories to which various groups tended to gravitate. I conclude by discussing implications of these findings for the classroom.

Methods of Discourse Analysis of Literacy Narratives
To examine the extent to which students perform cultural narratives in literacy narratives, I collected literacy narratives and demographic information from students in first-year composition classrooms. Sixty students in these classrooms, all at a large Midwestern university, participated in this study: 25 students were male, and 35 were female; 11 were African American, 3 were Asian American, 1 was Hispanic, and 45 were European American. Participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in both parental income and parental level of education. In addition, 47 students attended public high schools, while 13 attended private high schools.

Student participants submitted first drafts of their literacy narratives and a demographic questionnaire about gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other like data. Although the literacy narrative assignments came from five different instructors, they were similar in that they all asked students to reflect, examine both past and present experiences with literacy, explore instances of both reading and writing, investigate several stages in their literacy development, and write an essay between three and five pages in length. The assignments differed, however, in their definitions of literacy.

To examine the cultural narratives students invoked, I coded the literacy narratives in three ways. I first coded them into “episodes.” An episode represented a paragraph unit relating to the same topic with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end (see Florio-Ruane; Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith) and was based on Barton and Hamilton’s definition: “observable episodes which arise from [literacy] practices and are shaped by them” (7). Dividing each literacy narrative into smaller episodes allowed me to categorize the many different
performances students made throughout their texts. In all, student literacy narratives contained 734 episodes. After this initial coding, each episode was then coded according to the cultural narrative being told. The cultural narratives emerged from my reading of dominant scholarship on common stories in literacy narratives; they included one master narrative (success), six little narratives (hero, child prodigy, literacy winner, victim, outsider, and rebel),7 and one category I called “Other” that accounted for stories that did not fit into the other categories. Table 1 shows the cultural narrative coding categories, the published scholars who found these cultural stories in literacy narratives, and an explanation of each cultural narrative.

Each episode was coded only once by cultural narrative, and all episodes fell into one of the eight coding categories. However, student papers could theoretically contain all cultural narratives (since multiple episodes were in each student’s paper).8

In addition to coding the student essays for cultural narratives, I also coded them according to whether they were written in the abstract or with a concrete context. It is useful to look at this aspect because of how master narratives are typically written in the abstract without a context and little narratives are typically contextualized and situated.9

**Cultural Narratives in Student Essays**

Close examination of student essays shows that when students compose a school-based literacy narrative, they invoke cultural narratives, including both the master narrative of success and other little narratives. The average student essay included at least five cultural narratives; one essay contained all seven, and no essay contained fewer than three. These findings demonstrate that students are not relying solely on the success master narrative to frame their literacy experiences, but rather are using multiple stories to communicate their experiences.

Of the cultural narratives students used, the success master narrative was by far the most common: almost one-third (30%) of all episodes aligned to this cultural narrative. Other cultural narratives were invoked as well. The two most common little narratives in student essays were the victim and the hero (19% and 15%, respectively). Table 2 details the percentage of episodes in
### Table 1: Coding Schema for Cultural Narratives of Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Narrative (Published Scholars Who Have Written about the Narrative)</th>
<th>Explanation of Coding Schema</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success</strong> (Eldred and Mortensen, “Reading”; Fox; Graff; Paterson; Ryden; M. Young, <em>Minor</em>).</td>
<td>Equates literacy acquisition with success, liberation, development, progression, and upward mobility; emphasizes literacy, rather than the <em>individual</em>, and improving reading and writing <em>skills</em>; invokes optimistic and future-looking rhetoric; views literacy as utilitarian and useful, a means to economic, cultural, social, and political success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hero</strong> (Carpenter and Falbo; Paterson).</td>
<td>Equates literacy acquisition with success, liberation, development, progression, and upward mobility; emphasizes <em>individual</em>, rather than <em>literacy</em>, perseverance, self-reliance, and determination; establishes self as hero of literacy story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child prodigy</strong> (Paterson).</td>
<td>Excels at reading and writing from an early age and is put on display for others to see his or her brilliance and intellectual acumen; includes tales of prolific reading, trips to the library or bookstore, abundant exposure to literate texts, and being read to by parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy winner</strong> (Carpenter and Falbo; Paterson).</td>
<td>Includes accounts of winning extrinsic awards, rewards, and prizes for literacy, such as young author’s awards, verbal compliments, high grades, and test scores; is a successful consumer of literacy who amasses “academic currency” by winning extrinsic rewards, awards, and prizes for literacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Victim</strong> (Fox; Paterson).</td>
<td>Is a victim of negative literacy experiences, in or out of school; casts blame for negative literacy experiences; discusses how someone <em>took the fun</em> out of reading and writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outsider</strong> (Bhabha; Villanueva).</td>
<td>Portrays self as an outsider in relation to something else in the story, such as literacy, pedagogy, other students, the school system, etc.; does not fit in at home or school and is therefore located as an outsider in a third space; displays a negative, apathetic, or hopeless attitude toward literacy; does not assign blame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rebel</strong> (Carpenter and Falbo; Paterson; Williams).</td>
<td>Does not necessarily dislike writing or reading but attacks and rebels against established beliefs and institutions, particularly in school settings; includes tales of resistance, subversion, and transgression of what is typical and conventional; talks about how he or she has been misunderstood by educators, schools, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Does not fit any of the other seven cultural narrative categories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
student texts that aligned with the various cultural narratives. In the discussion that follows, I examine in more detail each cultural narrative, beginning with the most common one invoked and moving to the least common. I also discuss how demographic factors affected which narrative students invoked.

Table 2 illustrates that the success narrative was the most common cultural narrative invoked. All but one student in this study performed this master narrative; thus, it was performed by students of both genders and all represented races and socioeconomic classes. These findings make obvious that students see their literacy path as a journey to success. In fact, they value it so much that it was located significantly more often in conclusions than any other cultural narrative. Indeed, only two conclusions out of sixty did not contain a success narrative. Jeremy, for instance, incorporating a success narrative into his conclusion, sums up his experiences positively: “Luckily, the joys that reading offered prevailed in the end after being burned out by reading so much literature that didn’t interest me.” Even though Jeremy had detailed some negative literacy experiences, he, like others, still ended his essay on a positive, forward-looking note, expressing optimism about his literate future.

In addition to being the typical way students concluded their essay, success narratives were most often told abstractly, without reference to a specific time, place, or instance in the student’s life. In fact, success narratives often contained broad, abstract claims about literacy, as an episode from Anna’s literacy narrative illustrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Cultural Narrative</th>
<th>Number of Episodes (n = 734)</th>
<th>% of Episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hero</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Child Prodigy</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Literacy Winner</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rebel</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In my opinion, literacy is a survival tool in our society today. . . . As a whole, I have learned that literacy is ever changing and moving forward. Everyone, poor or rich can gain something from literacy. Literacy is extremely essential because it is the stone on which the people of the 21st century will expand on and further.

Here, Anna emphasizes that literacy is a necessary tool for survival and achievement and that anyone can reach for this tool and gain success. Students like Anna value the success master narrative as a lens through which they understand their literate experiences, and they do so by generalizing about literacy and its power of pointing to future success.

Perhaps students perform the success narrative more than other cultural narratives because they know how much this narrative is valued in our culture. Their educational training has been defined by how well they do in school, and so it should come as no surprise that writing about an unwavering belief in the power and necessity of literacy is a common theme throughout these texts. Yet, it is still troubling that they end with this positive, abstract conclusion about literacy’s power and tendency to lead to success when they had included other narratives that contradicted and challenged the success narrative.

The success narrative was not the only cultural narrative invoked, however: collectively, the little narratives of literacy encompassed almost three-fourths of all episodes, which indicates that students also envision their literacy journeys in other ways. The most common “little” narrative in student literacy narratives was the victim story, which almost one-fifth (19%) of episodes invoked. In victim narratives, students wrote about negative school-based literacy experiences that stigmatized and marked them, including being misread by poor or insensitive teachers, having a “masterpiece” ruined by a teacher’s notorious red ink, or being forced to write research papers and read books for critique rather than pleasure. Aaron, for instance, reflects on the time his mom made him write as a form of punishment: “I said something inappropriate to another kid, and my mom made me write a two-page paper as punishment. I wrote the paper and hated it. I would say that that incident probably spurned my distaste for writing.” This one instance becomes the lens through which this student viewed his entire writerly identity.

Many students also gravitated toward the victim narrative: over 80% of students incorporated it at least once. However, unlike the success narrative that was invoked equally by all groups of students, the victim narrative was invoked more often by socioeconomically and educationally privileged students like Kristy.10
I still continue to love to write, but my aspirations to become a writer drifted after starting high school for the simple reason that I felt like I couldn’t really write what I wanted to write. I had to write about what was assigned. I couldn’t just let my mind go free. The required course materials are what tore down my love for writing.

Kristy comes to dislike required school writing and even blames it for her change in attitude toward writing. Perhaps Kristy’s willingness to adopt the victim role may be the product of entitlement where, from her privileged socioeconomic place, she sees it as a natural right to critique schooling and pedagogical approaches, whereas others without such privilege may not (see Wiley et al.).

The popularity of the victim narrative in student texts indicates that students associate school-based literacy practices with oppression and even cruelty. When asked to reflect on past experiences in the confines of the literacy narrative, they remember these experiences that haunted them and took away their freedoms. They also might see victim narratives as constituting a critique more in line with the assignment expectations than other moves might be. In sum, the popularity of the victim cultural narrative is important because it allows us to understand that although students may view their literate futures in terms of success, they view their literate pasts in terms of victimhood.

Another little narrative popular in student essays was the story of the hero. Encompassing 15% of all episodes, the hero cultural narrative was incorporated at least once by 85% of the students and emphasized the individual and his or her specific literacy achievements and accomplishments. In these narratives, students portrayed themselves as the superman or superwoman who overcame challenges and struggles to become more literate. The hero narrative is very similar to the success master narrative in that both cultural narratives view literacy as leading to success, but they differ in the specificity defining hero narratives, which are always tied to a specific time, place, and instance. Although the hero narrative perpetuates the notion that literacy brings success, it contextualizes these claims within an individual account, as we see in Lauren’s account of how she faces and overcomes challenges:

During junior high, the major steps in the writing process were taught, but I had trouble with a few of them. My problem was that my prewriting and brainstorming ideas weren’t very good, and it became harder and harder for me to generate any ideas for my stories. Because of my writer’s block, I began to write poetry. Poetry helped me to cure my trouble of trying to discover an interesting topic, and it was easy for me because I thought all poetry had to rhyme and I was good at rhyming. At this time, I also began to really write about things that mattered to me. I found
myself writing well and complimenting myself on word choice and different ideas for each paper I wrote. I had finally excelled.

In this hero narrative, Lauren focuses on what she does to overcome her struggles of writer’s block and poor ideas. Because she tries hard enough, the story goes, she is ultimately successful. Little narratives of hero, then, support the notion that specific versions of individual effort and hard work are the ultimate factors in literate success.

In addition to these three most popular cultural narratives that encompassed 64% of all episodes, students also invoked other little narratives but to a lesser extent. All other episodes followed five narratives: child prodigy (11%), literacy winner (8%), “Other” (7%), rebel (5%), and outsider (5%). These little narratives, although performed less often, give us a more robust picture of student literacy histories and the kinds of identities they value when they compose a literacy narrative.

The child prodigy narrative, the fourth most common cultural narrative, promotes the idea that unless children are exposed to (middle-class) school literacy and learn these values at an early age, they will not be academically successful. When students portrayed themselves as child prodigies, they conceived of themselves and their literacy abilities as exceptional, highlighting moments when their literacy skills were put on display to amaze and astonish their audience. Child prodigies were read to by parents, visited libraries and bookstores, had abundant access to texts at home, and could not remember a time when they did not know how to read or write. In all, child prodigy narratives highlighted joyful moments when reading and writing were fun, personal, and social, as we see in Brent’s child prodigy narrative:

When I entered public school in the third grade, I noticed that I was ahead of most of the other children, and it was easy to impress my teacher with my knowledge and skills. One time my teacher even assigned me to sit at the front and help the other students when they got stuck on a word.

Brent concludes his literacy narrative by discussing his life-long love of reading, a view that was informed by his perception of himself as a child prodigy.

Child prodigy narratives, like the hero narratives, also reinforce the notion that literacy leads to success. However, child prodigy narratives hold true to little narratives in that they were never written in the abstract. Instead, each time students constructed themselves as child prodigies, they tied it to a specific, concrete instance in their life, as Danielle’s narrative exemplifies.
My brothers often read to me in bed at night. They are two and four years older than me, so I would lie between them and they would take turns reading me bedtime stories. They even tried to teach me to read and write, in hopes of showing off to my parents who would then be proud of all of us.

As this example shows, Danielle invokes the child prodigy narrative based on a given memory. This specific remembrance makes it a little narrative, but the narrative itself still affirms the literacy-equals-success idea by showing that from an early age, students place value on being seen by others as smart and successful.

Students of differing socioeconomic background invoked the child prodigy narrative differentially. White students were somewhat more likely to invoke it than nonwhite students. We might hypothesize that white students performed this narrative more often because such an identity was valued and even encouraged, given its alignment with middle-class values of individuality and self-reliance (Bloom).

The fifth most common cultural narrative in student texts was the “literacy winner” little narrative (8%). In literacy winner narratives, students presented themselves as successful consumers of literacy who amassed “academic currency” (Carpenter and Falbo 21), such as good grades, high test scores, and other literacy awards. Literacy winner narratives typically reflect the extent extrinsic rewards (both positive and negative) impact students’ developing identities and beliefs about themselves as readers and writers. An episode from Jack’s essay serves as an example of a literacy winner narrative:

In fifth grade, my teacher challenged me to enter a Governor’s Cup competition in which I would compete against other students from around my district by writing a theme. At first I was reluctant, but I soon gave in to his requests, and submitted my essay. When the results came back, I had placed first, and was awarded a gold medallion, which I still wear to this day. Okay, I don’t really wear it, but it was pretty cool.

In this little narrative, Jack indicates how important winning at literacy was to him. This narrative, like the hero and the child prodigy, supports the literacy-equals-success master narrative by highlighting how honors and achievements produce personal motivation and external recognition and worth.

Most notable about the literacy winner narrative is that whereas the child prodigy narrative was invoked somewhat more often by white students, the literacy winner narrative was told more often by African American students.
Although only eleven African American students participated in this study, we might hypothesize that this narrative was more popular with this group because of the power and prestige winning at literacy brings to them in academic arenas. Whereas their more privileged peers may come to school already confident in how others view their abilities, African American students may not possess this same level of assurance or confidence in how the dominant culture will regard them. Accepting an identity that says extrinsic rewards and distinctions bring power and prestige might mean more to students who at first may not feel accepted or valued in the school setting.

In addition to child prodigy and literacy winner, those narratives deemed “other” were also uncommon. Ranked sixth overall, only 7% of all episodes did not fit into one of the other cultural narrative categories. The episode below by Shelecia is an example of an episode marked “other”:

I can remember as far back when I was four years old running around my grandparents’ house, not because I didn’t want to get my hair combed. I was running around the house because I didn’t have to go to school that year! I couldn’t go to kindergarten due to my birthday being in December and school started in August.

Although Shelecia’s narrative emphasizes her excitement about not having to go to school, it is more of a memory rather than an experience with literacy and, therefore, would be deemed some other narrative. Though few episodes fell into the “other” category, the fact that there were some highlights how students invoke many different identities when composing a literacy narrative. Additional research could look at other little narratives students might invoke, such as those of domesticity and benevolence (Robbins), transformation (Soliday), boredom, resentment, or anxiety.

The two cultural narratives performed least often were the rebel and the outsider, each at only 5%. In rebel narratives, students wrote about resisting traditional literacy beliefs, conventions, and ideologies by rebelling against them. Rebels did not necessarily dislike reading and writing but rather portrayed themselves as resisting the system and bucking conventions by choosing to dismiss values and pedagogies promoted in schools, all the while highlighting unsanctioned literacy activities and abilities. These “underlife” activities (Brooke) included skipping school to go to the library, reading a novel or passing notes during class, and being outspoken in class because they perceived the teacher to be wrong. Claire, for example, incorporates a rebel narrative when she talks about unsanctioned reading:
I was always a reader. I enjoyed losing myself in books. In fact, I usually got in trouble for reading in class. I specifically remember several times in fourth grade I got in trouble for reading. Also, throughout math classes in high school, I was usually reading [the assigned reading] for my English class, all because I just enjoyed reading. There were many times, though, that I got in trouble for reading because I was supposed to be doing something else.

Claire, like others, uses the practice of reading books to rebel against the task at hand. Adopting this identity might produce a strong ethos for students who predict that an English teacher would like to see students engaging in literacy activities, even if unsanctioned and unauthorized.

Like rebel narratives, outsider narratives, in which students constructed themselves as a stranger in a foreign land, were also rare in student essays. When students did invoke this cultural narrative, however, they tended to express regret over not viewing themselves as readers or writers, as they believe they should. Other outsiders wrote about how they were not interested in furthering their literacy skills (although they thought they should be) or they did not fit in with the literate community (as others do). Outsiders thus often occupy a “third space” (Bhabha 53–56) where they remain in limbo, wondering where their place is in the world. Charlie, for example, invokes the outsider narrative about his speaking skills:

Throughout my life I have struggled expressing myself. As a young child I was extremely shy and hardly ever spoke. I did my best to express myself by simply pointing my finger, shrugging my shoulders, or nodding my head. Even when I learned how to talk, I didn’t. Not surprisingly, I didn’t have very many friends, and I often found myself alone on the playground. Eventually my parents took me to a speech therapist because I would only speak when it was absolutely necessary.

Immediately after this outsider narrative, Charlie says, “Despite all of this, however, I did love to read.” Even the way that Charlie interprets his negative experience as an outsider is framed through this lens of success. In sum, although rebel and outsider narratives were not performed as often by students in their literacy narratives, these two little narratives provide us with a richer account of the stories students tell about their literacy paths and identities.

**Complementary and Competing Narratives of Literacy**

In this project, I sought to understand more about the cultural narratives students perform in literacy narratives, particularly those “little” narratives of literacy less evident in dominant discourse on the genre. Results show that the
most popular cultural narrative with students is the master narrative of literacy-equals-success, yet little narratives were also present in student texts and together comprised more episodes than the success master narrative. These little narratives ranged from the more popular victim, hero, and child prodigy to the less popular literacy winner, “other,” rebel, and outsider. In this section, I examine these findings in greater detail by discussing some effects of framing our literacy lives in terms of success and what little narratives have to offer students and instructors. I conclude this essay with recommendations for improving instruction on the literacy narrative assignment.

**Success Master Narrative**

This study finds that although students do incorporate a variety of little narratives into their essays, they still incorporate the success master narrative most often. Almost one-third of all episodes were success narratives, and 98% of students incorporated it at least once. The popularity of the success master narrative in student essays confirms how intricately this notion is tied to our culture and to the ways in which we talk about literacy: students in this study mostly defined their literacy histories in terms of success.

Although students' invoking the success narrative is not shocking, it leads to a pedagogical question: What are the results of characterizing our literacy journeys in this manner? One consequence is a view of literacy as utilitarian and practical, a means to an end rather than something that can serve other purposes, such as pleasure, satisfaction, self-awareness, self-expression, or learning for learning’s sake. When we view literacy as serving specific means, we limit its influence and effect. It becomes a simplified master narrative rather than a contextualized little narrative that challenges, contradicts, or even confirms the success narrative.

Another result of students’ portrayal of literacy in terms of success is a simplistic view of literacy that emphasizes future outcomes of literacy, or what literacy will enable them to do in the future. Success narratives were found significantly more often in conclusions of essays, and students relied on success narratives to “sum up” their experiences, even when their concluding point did not logically follow from earlier stories in their literacy narrative.
This one-dimensional definition of literacy as ultimately leading to success is not the reality for many people, and it can actually hurt students when they realize this is not the case.

One reason students might overuse success narratives when they write about their experiences with literacy is that they think it is what teachers want to see. The concept that literacy leads to success seems evident, especially in an English classroom where literacy is taught and valued. Students are rhetorically adept at incorporating statements about the importance of literacy because they know that teachers who value literacy and education are their audience. Whether students believe the success narrative or not, they may be invoking it in the context of the composition classroom because they assume it will earn them a good grade on an assignment.

Another reason students might rely on success narratives to tell their stories is that the assignment itself, perhaps unwittingly, asks for such a response. The assignments to which students in this study responded, for instance, asked students to examine their past literacy experiences and reflect on how these experiences shaped and formed them into the present literate beings they are today. The assignment prompt thus values a kind of move that claims literacy is both worthwhile and powerful. In addition, the fact that students are composing such an essay in the first place testifies to the importance instructors place on literacy. The assignment, then, inherently asks for success stories, and the students produce them. This finding should give instructors pause, especially since scholarship on literacy narratives complicates the success narrative, thus indicating a disparity between our theories about and our pedagogies asking for literacy narratives.

Finally, students might also rely on success narratives more than other cultural narratives because of the consumerist mentality they have when they enter our classrooms (see Schweitzer). Students expect teachers to give them the tools they will need to succeed, especially in their careers. They expect teachers to guide them down the path where literacy leads to success and to not waste time doing so. Whereas most composition teachers possess a decidedly more nuanced view of literacy than the one espoused through the success narrative, students entering as consumers may not want to challenge this position because then their whole consumerist view is challenged as well. Although we want our students to be successful, when students view the most important element as functional literacy that leads to success, they are missing the point about the complexity of both literacy and success, as well as the purpose of college in general.
As teachers, we have a responsibility to challenge students to interrogate the assumptions they have about literacy leading to success, including the broad, general claims they make about what literacy can do for them. We could be more intentional about asking students to unpack and deconstruct such instances where success is framed in simplistic or abstract terms. If we challenge students to look more critically at success narratives, we encourage them to arrive at complex and nuanced understandings of how literacy works in their lives. Only when we make students aware of this master narrative can we really work to help them find other ways to view their literate lives.

**Little Narratives of Literacy**

Although the success master narrative was the most common cultural narrative in student essays, “little” narratives of literacy were still frequent in student texts. In fact, collectively, the little narratives were utilized 70% of the time, more than doubling how often the success master narrative was incorporated. Little narratives show us that students do contextualize their literacy experiences with specific, personal accounts. The child prodigy narrative, for example, was never written abstractly and was always tied to specific situations. Tangible, contextualized little narratives like those analyzed here allow us to glimpse additional ways students frame their literacy experiences and contribute to a more comprehensive view of students’ literacy histories.

These little narratives also show that literacy is intricately connected to identity. The variety of little narratives performed by students (with the average essay invoking five cultural narratives) indicates that students have varied literate identities. Readers do not find one dominant story of literacy; rather, we are exposed to multiple and varied selves along the literacy journey. Recognizing themselves as multivocal can help students realize that “[they] are not just one story but many stories, often conflicting, sometimes in concert” (McVee 189). Ultimately, we develop a clearer picture of how students use this assignment to negotiate and grasp various identities. They claim one identity and then move on to another, all the while allowing their instructors to observe which cultural narratives carry the most weight for them at various instances in their lives.

Lastly, the little narratives students invoked in this study illustrate the extent to which students’ literate identity is connected to success—in ways that both reinforce and challenge it. Three little narratives—hero, child prodigy,
and literacy winner—reinforce the success narrative by focusing on individual achievement and recognition and demonstrate the power of the success master narrative. However, they also extend our conversations on the success narrative by showing what literacy-equals-success looks like when it is contextualized and individualized. In fact, when literate success is framed in concrete terms as in the hero, child prodigy, and literacy winner, what results is a positive literacy experience. On the contrary, success master narratives, because of their generalizing tendencies, were often written in neutral, or even negative, terms: the student expressed regret that this outcome was the way it had to be and not necessarily the way they wanted it to be. Although instructors may not always approve of narratives that reinforce the idea of literacy leading to success, the little narrative in which this notion is embedded does prove more persuasive than an abstract and general success master narrative.

In contrast to the little narratives that affirm the success narrative, some little narratives provide counterstories to the master narrative of success. The victim, rebel, and outsider narratives do not reify or support the success narrative; rather, they provide alternative ways of viewing our literate lives. The victim narrative, for instance, where students expressed how they felt stigmatized and marked by negative literacy experiences, was second only to the success narrative in terms of how often students invoked it (19% of all episodes). Although these negative experiences leave indelible impressions on student identities and become the lens through which they read themselves and others, victim narratives show us, most profoundly, that not all stories are framed in terms of success. Victim narratives in fact challenge the success story by highlighting the negative consequences of literacy.

What is puzzling about the victim narrative is that it was invoked significantly more often by socioeconomically and educationally privileged students. Whereas we may think that underprivileged groups are more likely to be “victims,” those students from privileged homes were more likely to perform this narrative. Although this finding at first seems paradoxical, it is possibly their privileged stance that makes them feel entitled to claim such a subjectivity. In addition to the victim little narrative, the rebel and outsider narratives also provide alternatives to the success narrative, although to a lesser extent than the victim because of how little they were used. Rebel narratives highlight moments of subversion and transgression, when students use literacy in unsanctioned ways, while outsider narratives portray a literate self who does not
fit in and looks in on the literate activities in which others seem to participate as part of the norm. In sum, these three little narratives demonstrate that anguish, loss, and hopelessness are also parts of the journey toward literacy: much of what characterizes our literacy experiences involves a great deal of pain and hurt, loss and struggle.

In sum, the concept of little narratives offers us a more nuanced understanding of the ways students frame and perceive their literacy experiences. Students do not view their literacy paths only in terms of success. Instead, more often than not, they frame their identity in other “little” terms that enables us to learn more about students’ particular and unique literacy histories. These little narratives also both reinforce and challenge the master narrative of success, thus providing students with alternative ways of representing their literacy paths and identities while providing instructors with a more robust picture of their literacy journeys.

**Pedagogical Recommendations**

These findings highlight the need for some modifications to our pedagogies. This research shows, for example, that we need to extend our class conversations about literacy and literacy narratives to include discussions on master and little narratives as well. These concepts allow both teachers and students to see that the stories we tell are part of larger cultural conversations on literacy, language, and schooling. We are not alone in our literacy experiences; rather, our stories are connected to and informed by others. By explicitly examining the narratives common to literacy narratives, we can aid students as they compose their own literacy narratives, helping them become more aware of what they are writing and the stories they tell about themselves. They may then more carefully consider how they are represented and what the stories they perform communicate about them.

Most importantly, master and little narratives lead students to understand the implications for characterizing literacy in various ways, thus impacting their own understanding of literacy and the stories they tell about themselves in relation to literacy.

One class activity could involve a discussion of the concepts of master and little narratives common to the literacy narrative genre. Instructors could give students a list of the seven cultural narratives examined here. Then, as the
class reads exemplary literacy narratives such as those by Rodriguez, hooks, Douglass, or Villanueva, students could locate the cultural narratives these published authors use to tell their stories. They could then determine whether the cultural narrative is a master narrative or a little narrative and discuss how viewing the literacy narrative through either lens changes the reading of the story. Such analysis might even lead students to greater understanding of how cultural narratives function in this genre.

Instructors could also ask students to bring a rough draft of their literacy narrative to class. There students could read through their own essays and identify the master and little narratives as they see them. When they locate a master narrative, such as the literacy-equals-success motif, they can flesh it out so that it is not so simplified and abstract but is instead more specific and situated. Instructors could even ask students to critique and complicate their success narratives by showing how success is often determined by other factors such as luck, opportunity, and family background (see Gladwell). These strategies would allow for students to recognize the complexity of literacy and further their own definitions of literacy.

Further, instructors could have students examine the little narratives in their essay to see whether they are fair representations of their stories, or if they intend to fully own the identity they are adopting at that moment. Students can then question and probe these identities further to notice what they are communicating about themselves and revise as needed. This activity allows students to apply the concepts of master and little narratives to their own essays and thus come to understand that their stories are informed by the culture around them. Yet, it also teaches students that they still have agency in what they choose to say about themselves, and they should be cautioned to carefully consider the manner in which they represent themselves.

In addition to discussions on master and little narratives, this research also points to the need for revising the literacy narrative assignment. Currently, our assignments ask for certain types of narratives—most notably, the success master narrative—and students reproduce them, performing stories they may believe instructors want to see. While they may always read their teacher-audience as wanting to see success narratives, they most definitely will if our assignment prompt asks for it, even implicitly. We therefore need to look at the role our own assignments play in the creation of simplistic master narratives like the success narrative in student essays. Beyond examining our literacy narrative assignments, we could also create new assignments that
ask for different types of performances and narratives. For instance, instead of asking students to report on their entire literate experiences from birth to college, we could ask students to examine and reflect on one formative literacy experience. This narrow focus might limit the number of master narratives students invoke. It could also be a much more specific, situated experience—a true “little” narrative. Another assignment prompt could ask students to compose a literacy narrative that only uses one cultural narrative rather than multiple identities throughout the essay. Then, students would need to connect all their experiences to this one cultural narrative to show how views on language and literacy have been shaped by this identity. This dominant “little” narrative could become the lens through which they and others understand their literacy experiences.

One final way we could expand the literacy narrative assignment is to ask students to create both print and multimodal literacy narratives. We could then ask them to compare the cultural narratives they tell in each mode and examine why the cultural narratives invoked might vary according to mode and medium. Encouraging students to translate their written texts into some other form may open up ways for students to read and understand their own literacy histories. They can recognize how certain media provide various affordances, which may also determine what cultural narratives are performed. Moving between print and multimedia might even give students a broader understanding of their own literacy journeys.

Overall, we should be deliberate and intentional as we design our literacy narrative assignments, for it is our role to ensure that the process of composing a literacy narrative teaches students about their literate lives and also helps them claim agency for themselves.

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**Notes**

1. In 1990, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that Kentucky’s public schools and the way they were financed were unconstitutional, which led to the passing of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). This legislation led to drastic changes in Kentucky public schools. One change was that all students now had to create a portfolio of writing in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades.

2. See the following works for more information on dominant narratives in the literacy narrative genre: Carpenter and Falbo; Clark and Medina; Fox; Paterson; Williams; and Morris Young’s *Minor Re/Visions*.

3. Discussions of the negative consequences of performing the success narrative can be found in Lucha Corpi’s novel *Delia’s Song*, Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography *Hunger of Memory*, Eldred and Mortensen’s book *Imagining Rhetoric* and their article “Reading Literacy Narratives,” and Mike Rose’s “Narrowing the Mind and Page.”

4. This study was approved by the IRB of the Human Studies Committee. All student and instructor names used here are pseudonyms.

5. Twenty-one students came from homes where the total family income was less than $60,000; 39 came from homes where the total family income was greater than $60,000. In addition, 28 students came from homes where one or more parents earned at least a GED but not a bachelor’s degree; 32 students were from homes where one or more parent earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.

6. Some variations existed between instructor assignments. Three instructors encouraged students to explore alternative literacies, such as composing music, speeches, Web pages, and comic strips. Three of the instructors also encouraged students to connect their literacy narratives to Deborah Brandt’s idea of “sponsors” of literacy.

7. Although these narratives have ties to the dominant culture like the master narrative of success, they are deemed “little” narratives because they are concrete, contextualized, and individualized.

8. A random sample of the literacy narratives was coded by an independent rater, and the interrater reliability was estimated with Cohen’s Kappa and found to have an agreement of: $K = .94$.

9. This coding was performed once by me and once by an independent rater, and the interrater reliability was estimated with Cohen’s Kappa and found to have an agreement of: $K = .98$.

10. Educationally privileged students were classified as having one or more parents with at least a bachelor’s degree; economically privileged students meant that the total family income was more than $80,000.
11. This finding is $\chi^2 (1) = 4.05, p < .05.$
12. Specifically, the finding is $\chi^2 (1) = 5.71, p < .025.$

**Works Cited**


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