



The Women in Literacy and Life Assembly  
*of*  
The National Council of Teachers of English

Current Editors:

Hannah Furrow [hannahf@umflint.edu](mailto:hannahf@umflint.edu)

Edna Brabham [brabhed@auburn.edu](mailto:brabhed@auburn.edu)

Fall 2001

Volume 10

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## Angel and Me: Knowing Your Place within Literacy Learning

Margaret J. Finders  
Washington University  
Missouri

I met Angel in the fall of 1996. Angel is a highly motivated, enthusiastic and self-directed learner. She reports she loves to read and reads "almost every day." To many, Angel and I might seem very similar. We are both white, both mothers. Both of us take our roles as parents very seriously. If asked, we would each point to reading and writing as both hobby and vocation. We each see ourselves as competent and capable women. But this story is not about the similarities between Angel and me. Quite the contrary, the very things that I point to that make us similar created a huge crevasse between us.

The story I tell focuses on Angel Reed, fifteen-year-old resistant student, and the other students that I met at the Teen Learning Center (TLC). This middle school (sponsored by three school corporations and the judicial system) is located in the rural Midwest and provides an alternative education program to middle school students in the county who have been expelled from school and who, as wards of the court, are ordered to attend. Through support from an NCTE Research Foundation grant and a Purdue Research Foundation grant, I served as the language arts teacher at TLC for the 1996-97 academic year. Angel was placed at this school two years earlier because of her pregnancy, her refusal to defer to authority, and her frequent absences from mainstream school.

In this article I will address my naive approaches to literacy instruction and what I learned from Angel, but most importantly, I will address how teachers and researchers must carefully examine their own assumptions of what counts as social and academic competence from multiple perspectives, what counts as literacy learning, what counts as "good performance." For Angel was a highly competent reader and writer in my classroom, yet I was unable to appreciate her academic competence because her social competence did not match my view of what it meant to be a competent and fully functioning member of my classroom. Angel was vocal and assertive, attributes I thought I admired in women. However, her refusal to be docile, and her explicit attention to her sexuality created obstacles for me in recognizing or accepting Angel's strengths. From my perspective, Angel didn't know her place. And if you asked Angel about me, she would probably say the same. As she reminded me on multiple occasions at my invitations to writing, "It's none of your damn business."

## Knowing Your Place

Literacy proved a tangible means for both Angel and me to assert power. Literacy teaching is always about power. James Gee (1990) explains, "Literacy as 'the ability to write and read' situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in the society of which that person is a member. As such it obscures the multiple ways in which reading, writing and language interrelate with the workings of power and desire in social life" (p. 27). Gee explains that membership within any community provides a kind of what he calls an "identity kit" that comes with ways of seeing, acting, thinking and talking. Angel came to TLC as a highly competent, fully functioning member of a community of juvenile offenders. This community membership influenced her school performance. As Angel explained, "You know we did a lot of things to prove we were the way we were. We were *Juvenile Delinquents*. And so we gotta be worse."

Her "identify kit" included a way of being in the world that demanded "we gotta be worse." Angel knew her place. She was the most respected senior student at TLC, and her status and prestige were tied to her abilities to perform her role as juvenile offender. Reading, writing, and language practices served to maintain her powerful position within her group, as one who was "worse."

Davies (1993) created the term "category maintenance" which she describes as actions "whereby children ensure that the categories of person, as they are coming to understand them, are maintained as meaningful categories in their own actions and the actions of those around them" (p. 18). As juvenile offenders, each TLC student orchestrates actions for the purpose of category maintenance. Their membership, their place is affirmed by their peers, and junior members are explicitly schooled by peers in what counts as "we gotta be worse" behaviors.

When people speak or write, they are engaging in dialogues socially situated within multiple relations of power (Dyson, 1992). TLC students are keenly aware of the social and power relationships explicit and implicit in their talk and in their actions. Such forces in the dialogues at work in any school create great challenges to those of us engaged in literacy programs. Language and literacy shape how people come to understand the world in which they live, how they judge the worth and actions of self and others. The workings of power and desire, the social and power relationships in Angel's life contrast sharply with my own. However, the link between language and power becomes clearly visible in the daily interactions at TLC. 15-year-old Angel and I operated in different communities, communities that set each other with the self as powerful and the *other* as deficient.

## Introducing Angel

"Like I care!" 15-year-old Angel, a European-American mother of a two-year-old, yelled out on the first day I visited TLC Middle School. Expelled from a mainstream middle school and on probation, 15-year-old Angel vehemently denied school engagement and enacted a rigid set of rituals performed to preserve a sense of self that was in contrast to the self school would ask her to be. Angel was the senior student at TLC, having been enrolled there since she was thirteen. Only the head teacher, Jennie Carter, had been there longer, and Angel was not afraid to let anyone know that she considered herself in charge of many of the daily routines at school. Angel said of her relationships with the other TLC students:

I'm the mom. They were my kids. She-Ra Mom is what they called me. I kept everybody in line. There wasn't a moment that anything happened there that I wasn't there, that I wasn't in the middle of. ...now, everybody came to me with problems. It's like I was there ...I was their mom. I kept everybody in place, and it worked.

Angel's view of herself as a strong, self-sufficient woman both helped and hampered her at school and in the community. "I take care of myself" was a central theme that ran throughout Angel's life. The belief that few will assist made it imperative for her to operate from a firm value of self-determination.

Angel lived with her mother and her two-year-old son, Tyler. Angel claimed that it was her pregnancy at the age of 13 that landed her at TLC. She described herself as if through the eyes of her teachers:

The biggest thing is [I'm a] slut cause I had a baby. No teacher called it to my face. But they looked upon me like that. They looked at me like I was nothin' at all cause I had a baby when I was 13.

In another interview she reported:

Yeah, they thought, 'You're no good. You'll never amount to anything.' The sheriff, the teachers, and they kept saying it, 'You're no good.' That's what they think, but I take care of myself. I take care of my son. I take care of him when he's sick. I make sure he's got what he needs. I'm a good mom to Tyler.

However, official records attributed Angel's enrollment at the alternative school to frequent absenteeism and her volatile nature in the mainstream middle school classroom. Even at TLC, Angel was frequently absent. With her own mother working, Angel struggled to find childcare for Tyler. Late nights as a dancer in a local bar interfered with her schooling, but as she said, "It's good money, and I don't have to take my clothes off."

It was Angel's "I take care of myself" theme that allowed her to work over twenty hours a week, tend her toddler, help her mother, attend middle school, and support her friends socially and academically. Given even this, Angel did not fit my category of what it means to be a competent middle school literacy learner.

While Angel did not neatly fit my category of what it means to be a middle school literacy learner, unfortunately I did fit her category of "English teacher." As she said: "You don't have a clue, do you Peg? You don't understand anything about me. You think that reading some book is going to make some big difference. You think you are better than me. You think I'm a little slut, don't you?"

I'm afraid she was right. Her ways with words, her explicit attention to her sexuality, and her physical prowess cast her as deficient in my eyes. When a guest arrived at TLC, Ms. Carter asked each student to introduce him or herself. Angel, appearing to just be waking up, stretched and yawned, "Uh? Oh I'm tired. I was out all night with my boyfriend if you now what I mean. I didn't get any sleep. Ha. You know what I mean." Angel was quick to flaunt her sexual self.

Likewise, my ways of being in the classroom caste me as deficient in her eyes: "You don't have a clue, do you, Peg?"

## Introducing Me

I came to TLC as a 13-year veteran middle school language arts teacher with an extensive research background on schooling for middle schoolers (Finders, 1997). Feeling both confidence and challenge, I set out to provide a literacy education that would support the learning of Angel and the rest of the TLC students. Entering TLC with my years of experience as a middle school teacher, I naively began my year with Angel, confident that I would be able to do one thing well. By importing popular culture into the language arts curriculum, I believed I would implement a language arts curriculum that was relevant to these students' lives. I thought that at the end of that year, I would have a story to tell, a story of how critical literacy studies created spaces for Angel and the others to engage productively with texts, something that hadn't happened in their mainstream elementary and middle school classrooms. I knew I would face challenges. I knew that I would be working with students who brought resistance to the literacy classroom. This story is not about what I taught Angel. Instead, I attempt to share with you what she taught me about group membership, relevance and literacy learning.

## Good Performances and Competing Memberships

Erickson (1987) argues that high school diplomas serve for low SES students primarily as "docility certificates" (p. 208). Angel, a low SES student, had earned her reputation by not being docile. Angel explained it this way:

We're not afraid. We don't care if we get expelled. We don't care at all. We're careless. And that's the big bad thing. We can do what we want. I don't care. It's just the way we are.

For Angel, good performance with her peers equaled a "we can do what we want" attitude. Yet central to the construction of good performance for Angel was also a home and family membership. But "domestic" and "docile" were by no means synonymous for Angel. Angel did not perceive good performance as being submissive. Quite the contrary, Angel prided herself in her abilities to be assertive. She called herself "She-Ra mom" and perceived that her status as "mother" gave her power over and responsibility for her peers. She-Ra mom physically and verbally whipped the younger students, even the boys, into shape.

Good performance for Angel was also based on her "I take care of myself" attitude. In the following transcript, the now 16-year-old Angel shares with me her decision to return to school after the death of her second son who was born prematurely.

It'll be tough. Sherry's like, "You're going back to school? Don't you like to sit at home?" And it's like, "Well, yeah, but I don't want to be doing that the rest of my life, living in a cardboard box," and especially now I have to think about Tyler and my future kids and marriage and everything like that. I want a good job and hopefully going to college, but I don't know if that's gonna happen. I just might be a manager somewhere.

One can sense tensions in Angel's conflicting perceptions of her performance as mother, student, and friend. While she felt competent as parent ("You know, everybody came to me with problems. It's like I was

there. You know. I was their mom"), she felt her pregnancy had cast her as incompetent as a student ("You're no good. You'll never amount to anything.") Likewise, Angel's sense of responsibility for her son included, "I want a good job and hopefully going to college." Good performance for Angel was based on her "I take care of myself" attitude. Her self-determination involved taking care of her son, working part time, and attending middle school, yet all of this was bound up in a set of social and power relationships that hampered her academic performance at TLC.

### **"That's Just School": Good Performance at TLC**

Multiple sets of rules, those defined by school authorities and those controlled by the peer dynamic operating within the classroom, demand adherence to competing expectations. Such competing expectations are visible at the start of each day at TLC.

Jennie Carter, the head TLC teacher, started each morning talking about TLC as a community. In what was called Family Meeting Time, she focused discussions on the importance of shared vision, goal setting, and positive attitudes. She initiated a reward system to recognize positive behaviors and academic success at school. During Family Meeting Time, she might ask particular students to come forward to be recognized for earning 100% on an exam or perfect attendance for a two-week period. During this Family Meeting Time, students were asked to discuss such things as racial tensions, age-specific smoking laws at a national and local level.

Jennie set up Family Meeting Time to create a space for democratic interactions. Students were invited to freely share their views on issues. However, Jennie Carter or the teaching assistant Jerry Brown usually proposed a conversation about legal and moral behaviors and consequences for particular choices and actions. Jerry and Jennie struggled to create this sharing time, which never played out as they had hoped. The exchanges were always forced and slow. Only when an issue hit too close to home such as Jerry's insistence at imposing a dress code did conversations take off and most often resulted in yelling, fighting or even calling the police. While Jerry and Jennie viewed good performance as a sharing of the authority within the classroom context, TLC students did not recognize this talk time as any real opportunity for power. For students, their competing community membership demanded a very narrow band of appropriate behaviors within the school context. As Diego said, "If you talk about it, they'll use it against you." TLC students self-monitored their interactions. While they all reported a strong affection, trust, and deep respect for Mrs. Carter, their history as students constructed Family Meeting Time as school time and that carried with it certain expectations of how one must act. And it carried certain consequences ("If you talk about it, they'll use it against you. ").

For each student another community, more permanent and more powerful than the one at TLC, competed with TLC. Angel's best friend, CJ, explains his views of Family Meeting Time

M.F.: Do you think that Family Meeting Time helps others? C.J.: No. I think it's retarded...I'm just there. I'm at school. And they kept trying to do these different things. Like don't look at it as school. Look at it as a community and a family. I'd always agree with it, (as his public performance) but I couldn't ever. I have a real strong family. This is just a school.

Angel agreed, "I think the only people it worked for was Mrs. Carter." In contrast to how Jennie envisioned good performance during Family Meeting Time, Angel often used the space to showcase her sexuality. She often spoke of her morning tiredness due to one of two things: her boyfriend "keeping me up late if you know what I mean," and her job, "I danced at Harry's all night and I made over a hundred bucks." Communicative competence in Family Meeting Time for Jennie Carter and for Jerry meant a movement toward successful rehabilitation for these juvenile offenders. Good performance for Angel always included asserting her independence and her defiance of authority. At times to mock Jerry, Angel would deliver an over-dramatized rehabilitation narrative ("I have learned my lessons. I will be good. I want to learn.") Other times, Angel would start a fistfight if someone sat in her place.

People with the least amount of economic capital must rely on symbolic capital to create a sense of individual in good standing within a community, of good performance. Low SES creates a greater dependence on the accumulation of symbolic capital, and for TLC students symbolic capital was "badness." Both boys and girls at TLC earned symbolic capital through the standards of the community of juvenile offenders. Those with power with those who had the most physical prowess, money, and court records. For TLC students, the meanings attached to participation in Family Meeting Time denied them as a competent members in the more powerful community of juvenile offenders. For them, participation in Family Meeting Time meant deference and docility while participation as a youthful offender meant prowess and prestige.

As noted earlier, Erickson argues that for low SES student a high school diploma is nothing more than a docility certificate. TLC students would agree. Positioned as competent members of one community (youthful offenders) and deemed incompetent in their schooling (having no power) made their performative choice an easy one. They preserved their self-identities as resistant students. As Angel stated: "Yeah, people try to make you feel like losers. Get under your skin and so you have to prove your strength."

Students who were becoming academically successful at TLC were trapped in conflicting values. Since their identities were so constructed through their deviant behaviors, the reward system and emphasis on community for academic success worked against positive change. Students did not want to be singled out as doing well in school. Jennie's overt requests for them to reform could not compete with the group's covert demands to be bad.

Life had handed great obstacles to most of the TLC students; in addition to schooling, TLC students were attending to jobs and children and probation hearings and support for younger brothers and sisters. As C.J. reported, "This is just school." "Just school" created a very different understanding of literacy instruction than the one I brought to the classroom.

## Good Performance and Literacy Learning

I began the year by attempting to consider the curriculum through the eyes of each student, to make connections between students' lived experiences, interests and desires and the curriculum, to monitor and adjust strategies in response to learner feedback. And as you have already read, I came to expect much learner feedback from Angel: "You don't understand anything about me. You think that reading some book is going to make some big difference," and "It's none of your damn business." Clearly, this is not the kind of feedback I was accustomed to hearing and quite frankly, I didn't understand it as feedback for many months. I heard it as nothing more than Angel's defiance, and I struggled to find any connection to Angel because I didn't like her attitude. I didn't like the way she talked. I didn't like the way she dressed or her attention to sexuality. Angel made me uncomfortable.

What West and Zimmerman (1987) call the "doing of gender" was played out in school performances and specifically governed literacy learning in distinct ways at TLC. For male students, "literate learner" and "juvenile offender" were constructed as mutually exclusive categories, and these students have had far too much success with the latter to risk re-categorizing themselves.

For females, "you gotta be bad" came with a very different set of expectations and consequences. The socially dominant view of female sexuality underscores many traditional elements of a woman's place, particularly that she be controlled. Determined to establish an identity as powerful in the non-dominant society, Angel and the other females at TLC enacted behaviors as highly sexualized beings, as out of control. For example, Angel began writing an advice column. She wrote letters and responses in two different voices and inks.

Dear Dying, I need your help because next year I am going back to (mainstream middle school) and I am afraid I'll get kicked out again because I don't like to get up in the morning and leave my man. I won't get up in the morning and I'm usually late to school. I usually stay up late with men. And man, I am tired in the mornings. Please help.

-Too much in bed.

Dear too much in bed, I know what you mean. Are you supposed to pick school over men? No WAY! I say who needs school? School should be late so you could sleep in HA! Sleep in with your man and still go to school. But you better go to school so you can get a good job like that. I hope you can party and go to school.

For the girls, literate learner and youthful offender didn't seem to be mutually exclusive categories. They read and wrote regularly. They were, in fact, competent readers and writers. Note how adeptly Angel plays with the genre of advice columns. Parody and play were evident in much of her writing. She was also an avid reader, but as you might guess, her selections of text did not match mine. The girls at TLC used reading and writing to prove they were bad, and they used their bodies in the proof. They spoke, read and wrote about their sexuality.

"Category maintenance" constrained literate engagement in this court-ordered transitional school for youthful offenders not only for the adolescents, but also for the adults. And it was certainly at work on me.

I too brought certain expectations for how individuals must act to the school context and judged the value of individuals in relation to these expectations. The construction of the female self as a highly sexualized being may create great obstacles for middle-class teachers. It did for me. I was accustomed to middle school girls who are for the most part nice and helpful and found these girls, especially Angel, to be mean, obscene, and disgusting. For middle class teachers, literate learner and sexualize adolescent female may have been exclusive categories. This, of course, denied the girls' positions as competent communicative members of the classroom. Adults, denying these females positions as competent members, left them no possibilities.

The connection between good performance and docility positions girls and their nurturing teachers in

positions that privilege helpfulness as the highest level of attainment (Walkerdine, 1990). This notion of good performance is based on white middle-class cultural views. And Angel simply didn't match my views. Fordham's (1993) research documents the diversity of gender constructions. She explains that what counts as "femaleness" is based on only one group's definition—white middle-class American women—and explains that social groups who do not share this cultural construction are cast as deficient (p. 8). Clearly, this denial of diversity of gender roles in the school context serves to marginalize working-class and lower-class girls like Angel whose actions do not match their middle-class teachers' view of good performance with private sexuality.

Although I came to TLC with what I thought was a broad definition of literacy, I found myself constantly struggling to push the TLC students closer to a traditional definition of literacy. For example, while I was willing to work with popular magazines, I viewed them as bridges into more "appropriate reading materials." While I was willing to change the texts, I continued to hold a narrow view of what counted as literacy learning in my classroom. We read song lyrics as poems. We read magazine articles as essays. "Category maintenance" was for me a self-monitoring system in which I regularly tried to reestablish a traditional view of literature. Applebee's (1974, 1981, 1990) historical studies of the teaching of writing and of literature reveal that while there is no nationally mandated curriculum for English, there is a homogeneity in the English curriculum across the nation. While innovative practices are abundant in professional literature, "category maintenance" is certainly at work in many public school English departments across the nation. It was clearly at work on me at TLC.

For me, a self-monitoring system was in operation which regularly and systematically reestablished a traditional view of literacy, and a middle-class view of female sexuality, both of which denied Angel a position as a competent member of my classroom.

### **Finding Our Places: Redefining Literacy Learning**

Throughout the year, Angel helped me to see that my own assumptions of what counts as social and academic competence interfered with my teaching. It was only when I could begin to examine why I didn't like Angel that I could examine what counts as literacy learning and what counts as good performance in my classroom. In many ways, Angel did match my assumptions of what it means to be a middle school literacy learner, yet in profound ways, the mismatch created great obstacles for each of us. Until my assumptions of my students became visible to me, I could not find a place for Angel in my classroom. Likewise, Angel could not find a place for me in her life.

Students came to TLC with narrow and negative views of texts, narrow and negative views of teachers. Texts had been used against them to prove them as incompetent.

### **How Change Occurred: Expanding Critical Literacy**

With students like Angel, docility can no longer be the means with which we evaluate good performance. Although cynical about typical school literacy projects, previously marginalized students may willingly embrace a curriculum that places them at the center, contrasting a sense of powerfulness for the powerlessness they had felt. This creates a new agenda for literacy programs.

Scholars are calling for a literacy pedagogy that builds from an awareness of the influence of both language and culture upon our lives (Cherland, 1994; Lewis, 1997; Moss, 1995). Cherland, for example, calls for a critical pedagogy that explores vested interests in texts and examines the ways in which individuals are positioned to read and respond in certain ways. We began again in my classroom by selecting reading that the TLC students found pleasurable. Students brought in song lyrics and favorite magazines. (For a clear and thorough discussion on approaches to critical media literacies, see Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999). During language arts time, TLC students and I brought in texts and began reading as ethnographers, looking at how the characters were constructed in particular texts and contexts, looking for official voices embedded in the texts. We tried to find the "identity kit" that suggested how one should feel, think and act. We focused on uncovering the implicit values and assumptions that governed the actions and judgments of particular characters. In other words, we examined the politics of the text and the discursive positioning at work within the texts. We read for assumptions, attitudes, and values implicit in texts. Having a long history as juvenile offenders, TLC students were very adept at understanding politics and privileges embedded in texts. They knew from first-hand experience the power of texts.

Not without adversity and controversy did we undertake this new approach to literacy. "You gotta be bad" as the defining mantra for the students at TLC created obstacles for this approach to literacy. If "you gotta be bad" can be enacted through one's choice in music that advocates sexual and physical violence, then what happens when authorities within the school context sanction that avenue? In contrast, teachers may feel prone "to expose students to the degradation of their young minds," which Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999)

define as a highly ineffective approach to critical literacy. There were, there are, no easy answers.

Regardless of the text content, the dynamics of literacy experiences as enacted at TLC or any school demands particular performances, and the classroom is, of course, clearly a social space in which students stand to gain or lose status among their peers. At TLC, students self monitored their interactions and monitored the actions of others in terms of their history as incompetent students and competent juvenile offenders, and their actions were often designed to "be bad. Like prove somethin."

I must admit that while I ended up banning particular materials after discussing the constructions of "academically appropriate materials" as viewed by school and judicial justice authorities, we did use other adolescent content. And it was then that I stumbled upon a more relevant literacy curriculum for Angel and the rest of the TLC students.

An opportunity arose as we struggled together that year to make a place for each other in the literacy classroom. While we were exploring how young people were represented in magazines and music videos, a series of articles about the possibilities of relocating TLC were published in the local newspaper. Community members wrote letters expressing their concerns with placing a school for juvenile offenders in their neighborhoods. Drawing on her critical skills, Angel reflected on the local newspaper's construction of herself and her peers. "So they've constructed us as juvenile delinquents. They make it look like we are all in trouble or on welfare or something like that. They try to make it look like we are all wards of the court. That's BS." Her work as an ethnographic reader led her to organize classmates to write the following letter, which was published in the newspaper:

We the students of TLC would like to speak out on our own behalf and rights. We are not all troubled kids or wards of the welfare system and most of us asked to return to TLC. It is true that we have had trouble in the past, but we are taking positive actions to change our behaviors so we can be respected, trusted and looked upon as young adults rather than juvenile delinquents. We have a 95% attendance rate at TLC. We earn A's and B's. If we earn lower than a B, we redo our work until we are successful. The atmosphere at TLC supports our learning. We feel respected as people. We take responsibilities for ourselves and each other. No one here laughs at others. We respect our differences and learning needs. TLC is a school for second chances. Everyone deserves a second chance. We are proud to be TLC students.

Getting "my name in the paper for something good" proved effective for Angel and the other TLC students. Angel found that she could use literacy to prove something to probation officers, social service providers and the juvenile court judge. Angel was truly delighted when her invitation to her probation officer to come and visit TLC was accepted.

I began to understand Angel's feedback "you don't understand anything ... You think that reading some book is going to make some big difference." For Angel, "some big difference" depends on real and immediate purposes for literacy with real and immediate audiences, not on long term benefits of literacy or the pleasure of reading. Her life was filled with real needs and real issues, and it was foolish to waste her time on what she rightly recognized as, "stupid little kid stuff." When we began to use the newspaper and weekly probation reports as the focus of our literacy classroom, Angel and I began working together. The consequences of our work had real and immediate purposes for Angel.

For students like Angel, literacy can't be about some distant, external outcome like getting into a good school or getting a good job. Knowing that literacy will benefit you in the distant future doesn't motivate Angel. It has to be about the here and now. She has to get something out of it right now or it's not worth it. It has to make "some big difference." And that difference must be immediate.

At first reading, the suggestion for real purposes and audiences may appear as nothing new in terms of appropriate pedagogy. Scholars and practitioners have long recognized "authentic" as a key to success in teaching. But it is the *degree* of real and immediate, of the here and now that I began to understand. Relevance needed to be immediate and the consequences prompt. Angel rewrote her letters to the editor several times. She thought carefully about her rhetorical moves in our school newspaper. She had a real and immediate purpose for literacy.

When we distributed our newspaper to her probation officer, her social service provider, and Judge Hansen, Angel and I knew our place, together in the literacy classroom. Angel described the significance of writing for the newspaper in the following way:

I mean, well if you don't do your assignment, you're getting a zero-who cares? I don't want to be here. They (her peers) don't want to be here. I don't care about some assignment. But I do care about the newspaper. I have to care about my probation. I want to show them that I'm not some loser.

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**Reference Citation:** Finders, Margaret J. (2001) "Angel and Me: Knowing Your Place within Literacy Learning." *WILLA*, Volume 10, p. 3-11.

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