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The Story of Their Lives: Understanding Our Students' Literacy Practices and Events

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Abstract

The relationship between teacher and student, teacher and class, and teacher, student and class has been acknowledged as one of the most influential structures in a students' life which can effect their identity, their cognition, and their fundamental humaneness within the societal structure of their culture. The foundation of this paper is to investigate and honor students' shared understanding of literacies both in and out of school, utilizing the knowledge they bring from sociocultural contexts. I believe this vision holds great promise as an avenue of extending the literacy paradigm currently available to children in school.

Introduction

The premise of this paper is that learning to investigate and honor students' shared understanding of literacies, both in and out of school, by utilizing the knowledge they bring from sociocultural contexts holds great promise as an avenue of extending the literacy paradigm currently available to children in school. I believe any real improvement in the evaluation of the discourse of school literacy, with the advent of new state standards, is not likely unless the students' uses of, and experiences with, reading and writing from within their lives, are given the same cultural capital, the same respect and honor, as the existing predetermined criteria for educational success.

If we want to understand how to build upon what our students' know and learn from our teaching, understanding and valuing practices within the students' life literacies, the literacies they negotiate on a daily basis, is a critical activity for educators. In everyday schooling contexts literacy has been associated with an individual's ability to read and write (Richardson, 1998). This view, which regards literacy as a set of asocial individual skills dislodged from their socio-cultural moorings in human relationships and communities of practice, neglects the role and influence of situation, activities and participants. Within this reductionist model literacy becomes a set of skills for individuals to undertake reading and writing. Mistakenly, it is implied that once these skills are acquired early on in a child's life they are then seamlessly transferable without impediment across contexts and situation.

I believe that there are school literacies and educational discourses which are situated within the context of specific schooling orientations and, it can be said, one must learn this terrain in order to negotiate the land. But, the amount of weight placed upon this specific discourse as the

measuring stick of literate acceptability within a society commits a serious injustice to the sophisticated ways in which the majority of society negotiates their everyday literacies.

My Experiences

From my experience as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, and university professor, I have found that many educators state that all children can learn, but few of them really believe it. Previous teacher education usually focused on research that linked failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single parent households. When many teachers receive this kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to their strengths (Delpit, 1995). To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school to be able to recognize their strengths.

Ira Shor (1992) explains that people begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings, and that children naturally join the world around them. "They learn by interacting, by experimenting, and by using play to internalize the meaning of words and experience" (pg. 17). According to Shor, we are what we say and do. The ways we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. "Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us" (1999, pg.1). The world, explains Shor, addresses us to produce the different identities we carry forward in life: men are addressed differently than are women, people of color differently than whites, elite students differently than those from working families. Shor maintains that: "we can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects" (pg. 2). It is with these thoughts in mind that I began my journey into the outside of school lives of my students.

Throughout my career, as I walked through the halls of schools, I listened to the words spoken by teachers and parents. I thought about what they were saying and what they meant by their words. I tried to guess what were the unspoken messages of their thoughts. I wondered about the lens through which learning was viewed and I wondered about their expectations of achievement, which are held up for their students' and children to obtain.

Look at her, she's an air head, she'll make someone a wonderful wife." Britt, a brown haired, blue eyed third grader sat at her desk twirling a strand of hair around her finger as she looked at the math work sheet in front of her. There were ten word problems on the page. Britt has just begun to read the *Henry and Mudge* Series by Cynthia Rylant. Her classroom teacher is very frustrated with her and often talks about Britt's inability to keep up with the class. Britt receives reading support in the remedial reading program four times per week and math remediation two times per week.

This is Carly. She's in Rennie's class. Carly's the good reader. Rennie wishes she could read like her, don't you Rennie?" Rennie's mother was introducing Rennie's tutor to Rennie's friend Carly just before their reading hour together. Rennie was being tutored in reading and writing over the summer. She had not made enough progress in first grade and was considered to be "at risk" according to her teacher who cited the year-end testing battery as proof of Rennie's difficulty.

"Oh Jamal can't read that. He can't read anything. He's just like his father." Jamal is sixteen and attending a military high school. He spends his weekends at home in the Bronx working with his father at his repair shop. Jamal does not like to read. He often complains when he is given his reading assignment and does not complete the work until after the due date. The work that is handed in is often minimal and does not give the teacher the sense that Jamal actually read the text. Jamal did become interested in one assignment, however. According to his teacher, he had to rewrite Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, in "rap." Jamal handed that assignment in on time, and he offered to perform it in front of the class.

"Listen to that accent, no wonder he can't read." Jim's family is from Laos. They speak Laotian at home. The family was flown over from Laos through a community effort whose goal was to offer a safe haven for a refugee family in a wartime situation. Jim's immediate and extended families have made their home for the past twenty years on Long Island. Jim's father was one of the last members to join the family and had lived on the street of Laos for ten years. Education is very important to Jim's family. He will often share with Jim's teacher how his father viewed schooling in Laos and the physical consequences of not achieving acceptable grades. Jim is in third grade. He receives ESL support two times per week and remedial reading support four times per week. He is considered to be "at risk" for fourth grade, according to the district mandated assessments, and testing by the Committee on Special Education Team in his school is scheduled for early October of this year.

The Discourse of Schooling

There is a common thread that runs through these statements. It is a vision of schooling and learning and literacy, as understood by the speakers, which is expected to be achieved by the students. These descriptions of literacy learning, or not learning, are based on different underlying assumptions about what "counts as literacy" (Goodman, 1999). These speakers are focusing on school expectations, not the other aspects of these students' lives outside the schooling environment.

Nieto (1996) describes three major theories in order to explain the "school failure of students, particularly those from culturally diverse and poor backgrounds." In the deficit theory, school failure is viewed as being "the fault either of the students themselves, who are genetically inferior, or the social characteristics of their communities, which suffer from economic and cultural disadvantages." (Nieto, 1996, p. 229) An economic and social reproduction theory suggests that schools reproduce the economic and social structures of society. A cultural incompatibilities perspective proposes that school failure is caused by contrasts between the culture of home and the culture of school. Nieto points out that while the "characteristics students bring with them to school, including their race, ethnicity, social class, and language," often have an influence on their success or failure in school, there is not a causal effect between these characteristics and school failure. Nieto describes it as "the school's perception of students' language, culture and class as inadequate and negative, and the subsequent devalued status of these characteristics in the academic environment," that help to explain school failure. (1996, p. 230)

Britt and Rennie are just learning how to negotiate the print on the page. For Britt to read directions, compute in her head, and then write the answers may at this point be beyond her emerging ability. Rennie is just finding her way in reading books, yet she is being labeled and her developing abilities are being deemed "not good enough" in comparison to others who are the same age. Jim is living between two borderlands, his father's and his school's. These stories are not new or different. There are many others like them, some better, some much worse, but the existing commonality is the stereotypical belief that the product - the math page, the size of the texts - not the process utilized to achieve understanding, is what indicates the true ability. What Rennie, Britt, Jamal, and Jim bring to school, their literacy practices (Barton, 1994) honed at home, internalized through practice and experience, developed as the situation demands, is not necessarily what is *counted* as literacy practices at school.

What is Fair and Equitable?

Currently, in many schooling environments, reading and writing and speaking are assessed, and the child's literate worth is gauged, by being able to successfully participate in the "top" reading group, by successfully answering comprehension questions at the end of a story contained in an anthology, and by completing a "creative writing" essay and receiving an "A" in mechanics. These dominant school-based definitions of literacy are often at odds with what people do in their everyday lives. We all know that a child can be a great athlete, a wonderful mechanic, or an outstanding artist, but, if that child does not meet the criteria set in the educational world for a "good student," meaning one who receives acceptable grades in the core curricular areas, those other talents don't count for much. Goodman (1999) describes "a disturbing and regressive return to deficit driven school policy in the last several years," citing a New York Times profile of a group of Brooklyn third graders who are in summer school learning how to pass a test that is their "ticket to the fourth grade." Not only is this test the determining factor of who will pass or fail, but it also dictates "what books to read, when to read them, and even what is to be written on the chalkboard" (Goodman, 1999). What 'counts' for these children is not their literate lives outside of school but the test scores.

The State Department of Education currently has within its educational community schools that are within a percentage point of meeting the same percentages of legally enforced apartheid maintained in the south, fifty years ago. Furthermore, the past ten years of high school graduation data have shown that, in some city districts, of the two thousand students' enrolled in these high schools, approximately only eight percent meet the standards for an education in a more "successful school" (successful meaning a higher percentage of graduating students') and less than sixty five percent meet the criteria for graduation from their neighborhood schools (Kozol, 1999). In addition, according to state records, approximately \$5,000-\$8,000 is spent on each student in these schools. On the average most districts usually spend approximately \$11-18,000.00 on each student. Therefore, the question becomes: How is it possible to provide the same materials in a school which receives less money, but which needs to teach the same curriculum? How can we, as educators, create fair and equitable environments where learning is authentic, purposeful, and meaningful to each student, when the chances of equitable success are minimal?

Literacies as Cultural Capital

Carole Edelsky (1996) makes the literacies distinction by describing literacy employed mainly for instructional or evaluational purposes as an 'exercise' and all the other non-exercise literacies as those which are initiated for "something beyond instruction or evaluation of the literacy itself" (p.86). The differences lie within the purpose of the literacy event. Exercises in literacy are often what the students do in school. Ultimately, it refers to the amount of control a person has over the literacy event. For example, in school there is usually a topic or a goal for the students to write toward, and their choice of topic may be limited or non-existent. In school, we as teachers are constrained by the curriculum, state testing protocols, and district mandates. Many teachers struggle with trying to fit it all in and the idea of adding on to an already overloaded curriculum by implementing a writer's workshop (Graves, 1984), or allowing for free writes, does not seem worth the risk. Therefore, more often than not, the writing is designed to match the upcoming tests, the end of the year reports, or to fulfill a curricular demand. It is this issue, and the struggles I have encountered as a teacher, that have led me to inquire into ways in which I would be able to meet the educational mandates of my district but also be able to invite my students into a world of literacy where their voices count.

In *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, (1989) David Barton writes: "School literacy is one of many forms of communication and should be developed alongside other forms, such as spoken, graphical, and physical communication. Institutional and social networks are essential in determining the purposes literacy serves. Schooled literacy is a form of cultural capital; other forms of literacy do not necessarily carry the same cultural capital" (pg.7). Cultural capital refers to the behaviors, values, and practices that are valued by the dominant society. It is a collection of powerful practices: ways of behaving, talking, acting, thinking, moving, etc. These practices are determined unconsciously by the dominant culture and are used to promote success for specific groups in our society. Often, literacy capability in the schools is connected to achievement. There is reading and writing that 'counts' in school and there are the other kinds that are not considered to be schooled literacy events. Black and Martin (1982) and Moss and Stansell (1983) distinguish literacies as 'school reading' and 'home reading.' Florio and Clark (1982) contrast 'authorized' versus 'unauthorized' writing. Often children also distinguish these categories. For example, many of the children Hudson (1988) studied refrained from calling the 'unauthorized', furtive notes they passed to each other writing, reserving that designation for something connected to achievement.

We know it takes more than the ability to read and write and speak to succeed. It takes more than receiving an 'A' in mechanics. We know it takes mental and emotional strength. It takes reading and writing and speaking and listening and thinking. It takes living and understanding within one's culture. It takes the understanding of other cultures and communities. It takes synthesizing all that is known and developing new concepts and ideas within our own lives. It is taking the traditions and stories of lives lived before, and with, the children and creating new stories. We know it takes a new vision for literacy. What it takes is a more social view of literacy that incorporates the whole child.

Literacy as Social Practice

The research and theories of the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990, Barton, 1994, Street, 1997) see all literacies as being situated, offering the idea of multiplicities of literacies which exist in

any culture rather than the concept of literacy as something solely located in people's heads as cognition (Barton, 1998). Spoken, read and written language are seen as occurring and being located in particular times and places. Research from the New Literacy Studies represents learning and knowing as participatory activities. Advocates of this paradigm recognize that the social construction of community discourse is directly dependent upon the setting and the purpose that determines the ways of being for the members. School literacy, therefore, can become a dynamic process in which what literate action means is continually being constructed and reconstructed by the community in the classroom setting, in respect and collaboration within the community lives lived outside the classroom (Green, 1992).

What this means is that we need innovative curriculum that will challenge prevailing attitudes and empower students' to examine critically the world within which they live. James Comer (1988) cautions that there is "no cheap easy fix" for the problems facing the educational system. Comer (1980) advocates, as a first step, professional development schools which concentrate on a whole spectrum of development issues. Child development, according to Comer, means focusing on the "whole child," including physical, emotional, and family-related aspects of the child. This perspective considers the child's socioeconomic status as well as her or his individual strengths and weaknesses. Every child is seen as equally capable when given equal resources and opportunities. According to Comer there is a need to change the belief in school systems from "those who can, will" to "all can!" As Delpit (1988) suggests, it is within the power of educators and curriculum developers to determine the view of the world presented to children.

Learning About the Students' Histories

This alternative view of education places much greater emphasis on the importance of educational activities being meaningful and relevant to students at the time they engage in them (Wells, 1995). This alternative view involves the teacher negotiating the curriculum and accepting that the most valuable learning opportunities are often those that emerge when students are encouraged to share the initiative in deciding which aspects of a class topic they wish to focus on and how they intend to do so. This alternative view proposes that, by acknowledging and learning about the socio-cultural literate experiences with which children arrive at school, and building upon what they know, real improvement in the discourse of schooling can be achieved.

Literacy is not a generic process located solely within the heads of individuals, or a process that is the same for all people in all situations (Baker & Luke, 1991; Bloome, 1986c; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Street, 1984, Green, 1992). Socio-cultural factors interact with cognitive factors in extremely complex ways and are of critical importance in the achievement of academic literacy. It is this awareness and understanding of the implications of socio-cultural-educational factors for the students and for the teachers that needs to be addressed. The students' lives outside of school need to be invited within the school. But, within this invitation, there has to be a knowledge base that the teacher can draw upon, which connects the multiple lives the students are living in and out of the classroom.

Inquiry into students' literacies brings many benefits for students and teachers. Educators can discover the life stories students bring to their school experiences and learn more about their

home and local literacies (Barton, 1998). The connections that the students make to school literacies can enable teachers to gain insights into how the students have learned the discourses of schooling and what they have learned. I believe if learning involves creating meaning, more meaning in our lives and more meaning in how the subject connects to our lives, then it is 'story', the students' story, that is the means through which they can make and shape their own personal meaning.

Inviting the Students to Teach

Students' stories and talk about cultural histories and traditions can be included in various ways in the classroom and within a curriculum. For example, there is the structure of group discussions, where current events and their impact upon the students' lives can be addressed. Students can choose items of interest and prepare for discussions, interpreting connections between their lives and the information being reviewed. Personal written or oral responses to books, movies, and other media events, which contain biased or stereotypic illustrations, are another avenue where the perpetuation of the disenfranchising of a people can be brought to the consciousness of the students and where this public manipulation of the consciousness can be addressed and deconstructed. These possibilities of course will not bring answers or closure to the issues addressed, but they will allow for discussions that may foster the students' awareness, precipitating their empowerment to make choices when confronted with the potentiality of similar situations personally experienced.

Such textual experiences can provide powerful means of self-instruction also, as readers experience the thoughts of others and internalize them, changing and reconstructing their own understandings with the additions of the new knowledges. As Lotman (1988) states, texts are not only valuable when read "univocally," in an attempt to reconstruct the author's intended meaning; treating the text "dialogically" (Bahktin, 1986) can be even more productive, as the readers use it as "a thinking device" to develop meanings that are new not only for the reader but perhaps also for the culture as a whole.

For example, Jorge attended a military academy on Long Island, N.Y. I was his "supportive reading teacher." On weekends he went home to his family's apartment in the Bronx. As midterms were approaching, Jorge began to look tired. I asked him about his studying habits, thinking that perhaps he was cramming for the tests. Jorge's response was not what I expected, "Mrs. B., I'm staying up late to read my notes, after my little brothers and sisters are in bed. Can't do anything when they're around. It's weird though. I'm ducking down on my couch cause the gun shots are so close and I keep thinking one is going to come through the window. It's weird. I'm here during the week and I'm ducking bullets on the weekend." Then he gave me a big smile and said, "But, I'm studying. I'm gonna do good." and he walked away. Toward the end of the military school year, my students and I completed a project where we entwined photography with our writing. One of the most powerful pieces written was by Jorge in relation to his photograph. His photo was of his apartment. Specifically, inside the door of his apartment where there was a coat rack, the kind that is nailed into the wall. There weren't any coats on the pegs, only a handgun, hanging by the trigger. Beneath the rack was Jorge's sister playing with her toys. The title of his paper was "Gun Control".

In another study I focused on Terry, a fourth grade student, in order to analyze her comprehension level according to personal reflective connections, in addition to the prepackaged questions included with the reading series used by the school. She was considered to be a struggling reader and writer, according to formal and informal benchmark testing, in relation to her grade level placement and performance. One particular instance stands out in my memory as evidence of the depth of understanding and connection a reader can create when encouraged to develop a personal relationship with the text. We sat together in my classroom reading *Night of the Twisters* (1986). We had paused for a minute to discuss what had just occurred in the story (the main character's father had picked the son up by the arm and dropped him in anger over a bicycle left outside). I had begun the conversation by asking Terry what she was thinking about. She said she was uncomfortable with the angry behavior of the father in the story. She said it reminded her of her grandfather, who had become quite angry with Terry for something she had done that had been out of her control. Her grandfather had slapped her across the face because he had thought she was allowing her nose to 'run' on purpose.

Connections past and present, histories repeating, realization of self in the stories of others and the possibility of self-actualization within one's own story can be the stories students tell which can suggest how they not only interpret the discourses of school literacies, placing meaning, authenticity, reality in correlation with mandated curricula, but more importantly, the stories of our students will also suggest how we, as educators, interpret the discourses of our students' life literacies.

Did Terry comprehend the text? Of course she did. She understood the story, she internalized it, and she connected it to her own life experiences. She connected the violence of the character in the story to her own experience with violence. She transcended the print on the page and traveled across the words to her life. But, how is this assessed? Where does the educational system allow for Terry's ability to personally interpret text, evidencing a high level of understanding, to count for something? How can she choose a multiple-choice answer that will illuminate her thinking? How will she meet the school's criteria for an accomplished reader? How can her story be incorporated in school? What do educators need to be cognizant about the learning processes, socially, and culturally, in order to understand the abilities Terry possesses?

What do the comments about Brad, Britt, Jamal, Rennie, and Jim suggest? How does Terry's story fit into the mix? Could Jorge write? Could he move the reader with his story? Were their difficulties specific to the environment of schooling? Were they due to immersion in unfamiliar discourses? (Taylor, 1991). Over a hundred years ago, educator John Dewey, one of the forefathers of fair and equitable education, regarded the most effective language learning as one that involved students "having something to say rather than having to say something." A century later, are these students being judged because they are 'having to say something' or is it still their unfamiliarity with having to negotiate the discourses of schooling? (Taylor, Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Dewey continued, "Language teaching, in other words, should be done in a *related* way, as the outgrowth of the child's social desire to recount his/her experiences and get in return the experiences of others" (original emphasis; Dewey, 1900, 55-56).

Conclusion: Learning To Listen When Our Students Teach....

I believe we can empower our students by being powerful in our teaching. The students' knowledge needs to be no longer treated as separate from the schooling context and the stories of their lives need to be not just the events that have happened. The story, their stories, is how the event is interpreted from their experiences. Donald Murray writes in *Crafting a Life*: "Story allows us to bring order to experience, to find pattern in events, to discover meaning in confusion and story allows us to share the order, pattern meaning. Through story we remember, understand, instruct, entertain, celebrate. The range of all human experience and the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual response to experience is held within story. Stories contain and reveal our beliefs, our fears, our hopes, our knowledge of how the world works" (1996, p.77).

Katherine Bomer and Randy Bomer, in their forthcoming book, *Writing for Social Action*, suggest some 'habits of mind' (1999) that enable this type of social action, where the students will not be passively listening to facts that are not connected to their lives. They suggest critiquing issues of fairness and setting things straight, searching for the truth between the lines, trying on the perspectives of others, questioning what is needed for happiness and well-being, questioning authority, critiquing feelings of anger and indignation, identity and affiliation. The Bomers propose collective action: getting people together to do something and empathizing and critiquing difference. By investigating family structure, culture, race, sexuality, class, gender and age the students, according to the Bomers, can write for social justice in their lives, their schools, and their communities.

Inquiry into how students negotiate text, reflect upon their understandings, and make connections intertextually and personally, can begin by teachers listening to their talk, their stories about the texts and their worlds (Green, 1992). By teachers critically and analytically questioning, the students' voices can be stirred and then their voices and stories will be heard. By encouraging and teaching the students to question, interpret and critique the texts, by bringing something to the text that is not in the text, by examining the silences and the deliberate "sounds" within texts, these opportunities for the empowerment of knowing and questioning can become a habit of mind for the students.

Powerful learning involves creating meaning; thus the way we teach depends on our understanding of what it means to know (Sanders, 1998). Educators need to be able to articulate their vision of knowing. Teachers may not change the financial inequities faced by their schools, but by connecting what they know as professionals to what the students' know upon entering school, they can develop a dynamic way of 'knowing.' By expanding their knowledge base to include not only the theory of teaching and learning but also the life stories being brought into the school room by each student, teachers can create effective ways of implementing curricular instruction and of incorporating an effective, respectful discourse of schooling.

An asocial perspective on literacy and learning is no longer appropriate as we begin the journey of learning from, with, and about our students. Once we begin to accept that language and literacy are social processes, our idea of what it is to 'mean' changes completely. Literacy is enmeshed in our daily lives. It is related to and with cultural, ethnic and religious identity, social and economic status, community mores, gender identity and political beliefs. It is entwined with issues of national identities, national economic developments, citizenship, languages and cultures. Critical reading and writing demonstrate that the discourse of literacy education has a wonderful and positive future if students are provided the opportunity to exercise control over

their literacies with respect to their lives. Students can learn to appreciate different discourses in order to work and live in harmony; students can expand educational discourse to allow themselves the freedom to question the authority of text, to think for themselves, to write for themselves, to tell their stories, and to act democratically, responsibly, and compassionately. They can use their literacies to make sense of their lives.

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