The Diversity Disconnection:

Discourse in Mainstream Literacy Instruction

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Teaching students to become literate members of society is an awesome responsibility. The degree to which students feel confident and competent in their ability to read, write, speak and listen among other members of society can and probably will determine in large part the course of their lives. Future careers, socioeconomic status, political and democratic involvement - all of these and more are influenced by a person's degree of literacy.

In the United States, the idea of what constitutes literacy in the classroom is mostly determined by White middle-class school officials and state and federal administrators. The discourse of minority populations, particularly involuntary minorities such as Black Americans, is marginalized and not readily recognized or incorporated into mainstream instruction (Delpit, 1995; Corson, 2001). This impacts not only the ability of these students to be accountable members of the classroom community but also their future chances of becoming powerful members of a society whose voices are heard and respected.

There are many reasons why a student might struggle to perform in the literacy classroom. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on current and relevant studies that can be generalized to determine the cultural and class factors at play in this issue. More specifically, I examine the interplay of

culture and class with the quality and quantity of student discourse surrounding literary topics. I define literacy in the traditional sense as the ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively in a variety of situations. In particular, I will discuss orality and literacy within the setting of middle grades classrooms. This review of the literature will attempt to answer the following questions: 1) How do culture and class impact the way that students talk about literature in the classroom? 2) How do highly regulated schools limit the opportunities for success for students from more oral cultures? 3) How do the expectations of a mainstream classroom limit or marginalize certain diverse discourses?

Gee (2001) argues that reading the word cannot be separated from reading the world. In other words, the real-life experiences of students are inextricably tied to the ways that they think, talk, speak, listen to and act upon the literature to which they are exposed in a classroom. Gee (2001) specifically discusses the "social languages" or Discourses that students know and learn in order to participate in literacy learning. Given the opportunity, students can then use these Discourses to achieve their literacy goals. What may be in question is whether mainstream schools actually offer students this opportunity.

According to Gee (2001), the language of students has two main purposes or functions. First, there is a scaffolding function by which students shape their actions and interactions in the social world. Students in a middle grades literacy classroom are frequently jockeying for position among peers and with their instructor.

Take the example of Joel (Bills, 2001), a middle school student who was observed in his English and Technology Studies classrooms. Joel was a relative newcomer to the area in which he lived and went to school, an area in which the longevity of residency determined one's social position as much as wealth, culture or class. As a result, he seemed to feel the need to make marked conversational moves in order to establish himself within classroom discussions.

In one instance, Joel was assigned to a collaborative group and directed to talk with peers about some applied technology. He continually interrupted the flow of conversation by talking out of turn or inserting an adjacency pair intended to gain a response, and therefore entry into conversation, from his group. Sometimes Joel was able to gain himself an extended turn; other times, his peers displayed marked moves to exclude him and his stories from the discussion.

In another instance, Joel was observed in conversation with his teacher. His discourse changed in that he was no longer

conversing with an approximate status equal; now he was attempting to gain the attention and interaction of a higher-status individual and one for whose attention the entire class was often competing. To accomplish this, Joel introduced his topic by asking for confirmation about an idea. This elicited a response from the teacher, whereby Joel was free to continue in his talk.

Regardless of the response of his listeners, Joel was clearly attempting, albeit subconsciously or automatically, to scaffold interactions in his social world. Gee (2001) would state that the way in which Joel was making meaning of these actions and interactions in Technology Studies did not differ from the way that he would make meaning of a text in his English classroom. For both he would need to use situated actions and concurrent mental images as points of reference in order to comprehend.

Literacy teachers can hereby infer the essential nature of teaching students how to make text connections, both text-to-self and text-to-world, as they talk about literature. Without connecting a story or text to real actions and mental images, students will fail to understand. These connections can be guided through a teacher's explicit instruction in mini-lessons and conferences or through simulated actions such as those in a

Reader's Theater drama and spoken word performances (Dyson, 2005).

Second, according to Gee (2001), students' language can function as an attempt to get others to join their perspective on a given topic or experience. This can most prominently be seen in middle grades literacy classrooms during reading partnerships, book clubs and whole-class read-aloud discussions. In reading partnerships or book clubs, students use language to discuss the salient points of the story. When disagreement occurs, members of the group may use their knowledge of both the text and the world to convince others to join in their thinking. One of the main goals of a partnership or book club talk is to create and adopt new thinking; through this common goal students can both push their own perspectives as well as pursue the thinking of their classmates.

In a whole-class read-aloud talk, students often use more proscribed talk moves to try to enjoin others in their thinking. Some examples of elaborating on others' perspectives include "I agree with ____'s thinking because..." or "I would like to add on to what _____ said...". In addition, students may use moves such as "I disagree with _____..." to introduce a new perspective into the conversation.

This type of conversational move is known as linking and works to achieve accountability to the learning community (Wolf,

Crosson & Resnick, 2006). It is one of the least frequently observed accountability moves used by students and teachers in classroom talk. Often, students and teachers are more accountable to accurate knowledge and rigorous thinking than to perspectives of the learning community. This creates an obvious disconnection between students-to-students and students-to-teachers and may even influence the achievement gap which tends to widen during the middle grades. Those who comprehend the knowledge of the mainstream literature and relate to the thinking of the mainstream classroom are bound to succeed. Culturally different students, on the other hand, need the accountability to the learning community and the linking moves to bring their perspectives out of the shadows and into literary discussions. Wolf et al (2006) also found that the occurrence of student moves was approximately parallel to the occurrence of teacher moves; in other words, when a teacher introduced more linking moves, the students responded with their own. In this way, it can be seen that teachers have a great responsibility in ensuring the inclusion of all students through linking in discourse.

In fact, nothing ever stated in these discussions is neutral in perspective (Gee, 2001). The very way in which students frame sentences and talks through words and grammar demonstrates their perspective. Certain words will bear

different weight or connotation than others; a particular intonation will indicate to listeners the speaker's intentions or perspective. Many middle grades teachers view the act of retelling a narrative in a book discussion as too obvious or simplistic of a move. However, in light of Gee's argument, even the narrative retelling itself will be nuanced with perspective. A teacher may notice which characters the student chooses to explicitly name or to which events does he or she devote the most time in retelling to gain an understanding of that students' perspective.

Students learn both how to express perspectives and the perspectives themselves from advanced peers and adults in their lives, including teachers. Hence, teachers must make a conscious effort to model and teach the exchange of perspectives in order to create and include more diverse thinking in the classroom. Also, when planning book clubs, teachers may need to group students heterogeneously to create a situation in which more advanced peers model thinking and talk moves for classmates.

Understanding the vocabulary, syntax and discourse used in a community of practice is essential to succeeding within that community. Within this context, the community of practice at hand is the mainstream middle grades classroom. However, this knowledge is rarely explicitly taught in school. Teachers may

provide a few talk moves for students to use in literary discussions, but largely the issue of communities of practice is not addressed. Those students whose cultural discourse background more closely matches the literary community of practice in school are more generally bound for success than those whose culture does not. In learning what constitutes the discourse of their own community of practice at home, students are learning to adopt the identity of that community.

When culturally different students arrive in a mainstream school in which the discourse and expectations are dramatically different, their ways of communicating may be seen as withdrawn, inappropriate, ill-timed or disruptive. One spoken discourse in which students take part is story-telling. Sharing is an important part of the literacy block in most middle grades classrooms; it may take the form of reading a written narrative aloud, retelling a tale from an oral tradition or sharing a published work and taking questions as the author. In many diverse cultures, listeners are expected to participate in the narrative (Corson, 2001). They may be expected to add on to the story or respond to the story in some fashion.

Corson (2001) finds that one determining factor in whether students expect their audience to participate lies in their cultural tradition of orality or traditional literacy. If students are accustomed to authoring stories as a community,

they will elicit more audience participation. One example would be the call-and-response of the African-American story-telling style. These students may expect ongoing feedback and exclamations from their listeners as they narrate. By many mainstream teachers, this can be seen as creating a disruptive or noisy atmosphere that contrasts with the traditional ideal of a quiet, industrious classroom.

Many African-American girls also use an episodic style of story-telling. In this style, the narrative progresses through a series of personal anecdotes, usually linked only by the word "and". The speaker does not explicitly identify the theme or topic that links the individual episodes, which causes teachers to assume that the narrative is incoherent. Teachers then interrupt at inappropriate moments in the story, disrupting the flow of the narrative and disorienting the speaker. Rather than incoherent, however, Corson (2001) states that these stories do have features that give them narrative status as a whole: rhythmic chunking, pausing, holding pitches and vowel lengthening to mark points where the episodes come together. When mainstream teachers are ill-informed about the nature of the diverse students' oral traditions, it puts the children at an obvious disadvantage. This misinterpretation leads to a growing sense of incompetence and outsider status which can impact the students for their entire lives.

One way in which culturally different students can make their voices heard in a more natural way within the literacy classroom is through spoken word. Dyson (2005) studied spoken word as an oral and written form for students. Many schools in which the student body is comprised mainly of involuntary minorities are regulated, test-monitored, inner city schools focusing on the literacy "basics" of reading and writing. In these sorts of schools, literacy instruction is often delivered in isolation and involves a great deal of written texts, with very little consideration given to discourse and oral traditions (Gee, 2000). In spite of this fact, Dyson (2005) points out that students still infuse the daily curriculum with a great deal of speaking and listening. Through this abundant orality, they gain their narrative voices in a process of listening, appropriating and revoicing.

As stated by Corson (2001), the narratives of African-American students and females in particular are often episodic and rhythmic in style. This lends itself quite easily to later development into spoken word poetry and performance, a way for students to "publish" their pieces to the world at large and make their unique cultural voices heard. Dyson (2005) focused on a six-year-old girl named Tionna as her case study. She observed the pattern of listening, appropriating and revoicing as Tionna borrowed a friend's figurative statement about the

heat in the room and revoiced it into a rhythmic narrative about the two girls and their teacher.

As written language became the standard for what was considered educated language in the 1980s, the language of children from more oral cultures, such as African-American students, began to be heard as non-standard, too oral and uneducated by the mainstream schools (Dyson, 2005). Students from White middle-class backgrounds whose culture was more reading- and writing-based were being read aloud to at home and questioned about written stories in particular ways. Because the written language was viewed as the educated standard, these children naturally arrived at mainstream schools better prepared for the types of assignments they would be asked to tackle. However, consider that some of the best and most beloved writers of children's literature often write in an everyday vernacular: Shel Silverstein, Gary Soto, Eloise Greenleaf. Clearly, writing in a speaker's voice can lend itself to great creative expression.

Gee (2000) conducted a study of several middle grades students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds. One group of teenagers was from working class families in a financially unstable urban area; the other group was upper middle class students who attended either private or wealthier public schools. All were from Massachusetts. Gee notes that the

pedagogies of "back to basics" schools seem to equipping students for the lowest rungs of workers in the "new capitalism" - the so-called backwater workers who work on demand for minimal benefits and low pay. In contrast, the models of flexible grouping in reading partnerships and book clubs, with a variety of collaborative skills and discourses to be used depending on the task at hand, more closely resemble the expectations of the top tier of workers in this new capitalism. There is a subtle racism and classism inherent in this dichotomy since most back to basics, highly tested and regulated schools are those schools in which the student population is mostly made up of minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In his study, Gee (2000) found marked differences in the way that students spoke in and about their academic lives and future potential. He found that the working class teens spoke mainly about desires, abilities, constraints and present actions. Their conversation assumed an ongoing dialogue with the interviewer about topics; their conversation was filled with topic-associated narratives. In contrast, the upper middle class teens focused more on cognitive and achievement-based statements and topics. Their talk was much more topic-centered and explanatory rather than narrative. In this way, the educated standard of similarity to written text was reflected in the voices of the upper middle class students. These

differences have deep and long-lasting consequences for our economy and society.

Godhino & Shrimpton (2002) also analyzed the ways in which different types of schools impacted students' talk in the literacy classroom. Their study lacked focus somewhat; it may be unclear to the reader whether they were mainly concerned with gender, class, age or type of schooling in their analysis. In addition, they failed to discuss why the two teachers interviewed in the case study appeared to have dramatically different perspectives on the role of cultural diversity in literacy instruction. This seems to have been a missed opportunity for analysis since the teacher's perspective and values may have influenced the type and quality of instruction.

The study consisted of twelve teachers in three suburban schools with 120 total students. Specifically, Godhino & Shrimpton observed heterogeneous literature discussion groups within these classes in which the cultural diversity was representative of the overall school population. There were three girls and three boys in each of these discussion groups. The selected teachers were asked to choose a read-aloud text and conduct a 10-30 minute discussion about the text. In addition, the researchers also interviewed the teachers and the students involved.

In spite of the limitations of the study due to small sample size and uncertain focus, Godhino & Shrimpton (2002) were able to draw some useful conclusions. They found that boys dominated the discussion, contrary to what teachers' stated beliefs in interviews. However, although boys talked more quantitatively than girls, there was little qualitative difference in their talk moves. Because of this, the researchers argue that the sociocultural positioning of the students was more important than the simple gender differences. In other words, it was more important to examine which specific girls were talking or not talking; which boys' voices were being heard or not heard. Since the quality of talk has been found to be greatly impacted by the teacher's talk and guidance of talk, this implies that actions need to be taken to ensure that both boys and girls are given more rigorous opportunities to think and talk in classroom discourse.

In conclusion, there are several important implications to be drawn from this review of the current literature. Culture and class have a huge impact the way that students talk about literature in the classroom. Students from middle class backgrounds are raised with books and read-alouds. These literary artifacts and experiences are usually rich with questions from more advanced siblings or adults that are similar in type to the questions and assignments they will later

encounter in school. In other words, the language of school is the language of the middle class. Further, the language of school, based on the standard of written language, is regarded as the language of the educated; this has heavy implications for the future chances of students who were raised with oral traditions rather than literate ones.

Highly regulated schools tend to limit the opportunities for success for students from more oral cultures. These schools are often applauded by the federal government for adopting a "back-to-basics" approach - devoting large blocks of time to accurate word reading, spelling, grammar and technical writing. Speaking and listening, essential to the oral literacy traditions of African-Americans, are largely ignored, thereby limiting opportunities for students from these cultures to share their knowledge and become part of the learning community. In addition, by limiting the amount of discourse in these schools, teachers are not able to build accountability to the learning community that comes from linking thoughts and building perspectives through talk.

Finally, the expectations of a mainstream classroom limit or marginalize certain diverse discourses. Students who tell stories differently from the White middle class are seen as unable to tell a coherent story or downright disruptive to the academic environment. Spoken word, although popular with a

large Hispanic or African-American students, is underutilized as a form of oral and written expression for students from oral cultures. In fact, the storytelling of these cultures is rich with content, rhythm, audience participation and speaker intonation that make these narratives a beauty to listen to and a joy in which to take part. Teachers and administrators who restrict the use of diverse discourses in their classrooms do a great disservice to their students, their schools and society at large.

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