When School Literacy and School Discipline Practices Intersect: Why Schools Punish Student Writing

Amanti, Cathy, cbamanti@gmail.com
Georgia Perimeter College, Georgia, USA

Abstract

This article provides an exposé of the ironic fact that students both learn to write and are punished for writing in schools. It explores and considers what type of student writing may precipitate a discipline event. These infractions consist primarily of unauthorized writing, such as text messages and writing on clothes, bodies, and walls, whose literacy aspects are often invisible when viewed through the lens of predominant normative perspectives on literacy found in schools. A sociocultural approach, on the other hand, makes the literacy aspects of unauthorized student writing visible. The implication is that problematizing views of what counts as literacy in schools is an important step toward countering the unjust practices on which this article focuses.

Key words: school-based literacy practices, student writing, sociocultural, discipline gap, restorative discipline

"The achievement gap is a *mirror image* to the punishment gap." (Yang, 2009)

Several years ago, Alexa González, a 12-year-old New York City public school student, was arrested for writing the following on her desk: "I love my friends Abby and Faith" and "Lex was here" (Monaghan, 2010). In response to this perceived misbehavior, school personnel called the police, which resulted in Alexa being led out of school in handcuffs and detained for several hours at a local police station. While representing an extreme case, this incident illustrates the fact that students are sometimes disciplined for writing in schools. Ironically, schools are places where writing is both taught and punished.

Reading the story of Alexa's arrest is not the first time I became aware of the fact that, under some circumstances, students are punished for writing in school. I observed this phenomenon many times when I worked as a middle school assistant principal. One of the responsibilities of assistant principals, at least in the school district where I worked at the time, was discipline. On many occasions I witnessed students being punished for writing such things as notes to friends and text messages. If this was not the first time I recognized the irony in this practice, Alexa's story made me realize the extremes to which some educators will go to limit and curtail certain forms of student writing. It also made me realize the importance of exposing this practice, which has the potential to negatively impact not only student achievement, but also student attitudes toward literacy and school, not to mention students' beliefs about their writing abilities.

What follows is an exploration of why, and under what circumstances, students are punished for writing in schools. It draws on my firsthand experience in the role of school disciplinarian as well as an analysis of 38 photographs of unauthorized student writing taken over a two-month period at the public middle school where I worked during the spring of 2010 (see Figures 1 and 2). By unauthorized student writing I mean those student-produced texts that are not officially sanctioned and whose content, mode of production, or function violates school-based literacy norms. The photographs I took were initially taken to document the variety of forms that unauthorized student writing may take. However, a close examination of the writing captured in the photographs suggests possible explanations as to why students engage in literacy practices that can potentially lead to their being punished.

Traditional Perspectives on School Discipline and School-Based Literacy

School Discipline

School discipline is most often treated as a school safety issue. School safety is typically viewed from a psychological or juvenile justice perspective, which is based on the assumption that there is universal agreement as to what constitutes correct behavior. According to this perspective, (mis)behavior is an individual pathology. The problem is located in the student, not in institutional practices. Ways are sought to prevent and correct individual student misbehavior. Because school discipline is viewed as a school safety issue, its impact on student achievement is seen primarily to be maintaining order so that learning can take place. But there are times when punitive discipline practices are also called upon to maintain and reinforce dominant ideologies regarding teaching and learning, as well. Such is the case with prevalent perspectives on school-based literacy.

Perspectives on Literacy in Schools

The ideology underlying traditional school literacy practices also situates reading and writing abilities in the individual (Gee, 2008). It is assumed that texts can only be interpreted one way, and that there is universal agreement as to the correct way to speak and write. Key here is a belief in idealized speakers, readers, and writers who, in this country at least, are fluent in "Standard" English. Because of this perspective, certain types of texts and certain modes of textual production are privileged over others. Privileged texts are those texts against which all others are judged. I argue that what results can be conceptualized as a school-based textual economy. This textual economy is maintained by, on one hand, a system of evaluation and rewards (i.e., good grades for writing that conforms to the standards of highly valued texts) for texts that comply with school-based literacy norms and, on the other hand, punishment or the threat of punishment for students who produce texts that violate those norms. This reward-and-punishment approach is where prevailing ideologies regarding school discipline and school literacy intersect. If a form of writing violates school literacy norms, its production is proscribed. One way to curtail its production is to label it a form of misbehavior. Misbehavior warrants a consequence.

As further evidence supporting the idea that there is a textual economy in schools, Gilmore (1986) documented the fact that some student-produced texts do not count as literacy at all in the context of schools. In her research in a West Philadelphia elementary school, Gilmore found that the literacy aspects of some student writing are actually invisible to school officials. Although teachers reported that students do not write, "Observations of students in and out of school show[ed] that kids write all the time" (p. 158). Notes to friends are a case in point. Gilmore found that, alongside the official literacy practices of the school, there existed another set of literacy skills invisible to teachers that were "practiced within the domain of peer culture and play" (p. 156). She refers to these literacy practices that are outside the "institutionally recognized norms of literacy instruction" as *sub-rosa literac*y (p. 159).

A Different Perspective on School Discipline and School-Based Literacy

In order to challenge the practice of punishing student writing, educators must begin by problematizing prevailing perspectives on both school discipline and school-based literacy. Scholars who draw on sociocultural theory provide a perspective that contests dominant interpretations of unauthorized student writing in particular and (mis)behavior in general. From a sociocultural perspective, behavior is understood to have different meanings for different social groups. Mukhopadhyay (2007) points out that "most behaviors (or other symbols) have two parts: the behavior and the meaning culture has attached to it" (p. 88). The meaning attached to a particular behavior is arbitrary, changes from group to group, and changes over time. The idea that there is such a thing as "correct" behavior is a social construct. The behaviors that are codified in school discipline policies, therefore, reflect the norms and values of a particular social group—in this case the dominant group—which places students from marginalized groups at a disadvantage.

Sociocultural (and Critical) Perspectives on Literacy

In contrast to the traditional, "autonomous" approach to literacy (Collins & Blot, 2003) that underlies current school practices, those who take a sociocultural approach to literacy believe that literacy is acquired through social interaction. They recognize that there are a number of varieties of language and that none has any more inherent value than another. The value of a particular variety of language is derived from the status and power of its speakers. Those who view literacy through a sociocultural lens also believe that the meaning of a text cannot be separated from its context. Thus what Alexa wrote on her desk has no meaning in and of itself. Rather, it is given meaning by the participants in the particular context of the literacy event. In addition, texts can have multiple meanings. It is safe to assume that Alexa's writing had a different meaning for her than it did for her teacher, her school's administrators, and the police.

Specifying the types of student-produced texts that educators attempt to curtail is a necessary first step in disrupting the textual economy and the practice of punishing student writing in schools. In studying the examples of student texts that I collected, I drew on the work of Szwed (1981), who formulated a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, approach to the study of literacy. He identified five elements—text, context, function, participants, and motivation—that he believes are key to broadening educators' understanding of what counts, and what should count, as literacy. His framework helps to highlight the arbitrary nature of the designation of some types of texts as more valuable than others. In this article, the context is schools. The participants are students and educators. An analysis of text, function, and motivation in relation to potentially punishable student texts follows.

Texts that are punished. There are two broad categories of texts that are used and produced in schools: official and unofficial. From a historical perspective, schools are not always the primary site where socialization into literacy practices occurs. In the past and even today, homes and churches have also been sites where literacy socialization takes place. However, unlike homes and churches, schools are sites where, with the rise and spread of the common school movement, a form of literacy was established that was "acquired and expressed through officially approved texts" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 82).

Fig. 1. Example of unofficial student writing.

Official texts in schools are public texts such as books, tests, class notes, essays, and book reports. Official texts produced by students are solicited, evaluated, and rewarded. The value ascribed to them is, again, a result of the power of the social group that has designated them as such. In terms of unofficial texts, these are writings that are personal, unsolicited, and unrewarded. Examples include writing in textbooks, on backpacks, and graffiti (see Figure 1).
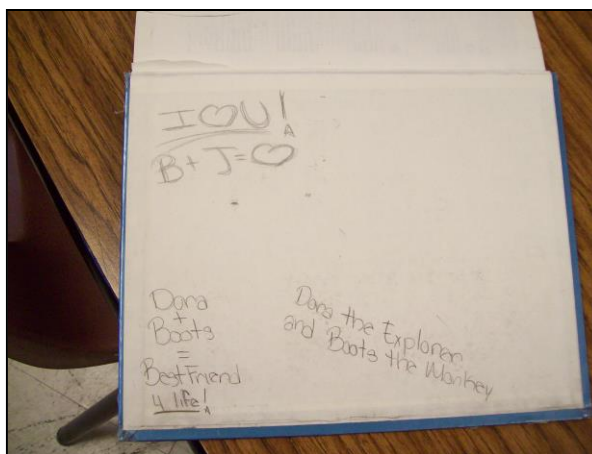
One might think that any official student-produced text is authorized and exempt from being a factor in a discipline event. That is not the case. Although these texts are usually highly valued school-based forms of writing, students may be punished because they violate school-based literacy norms. One example is when, if writing a report, a student includes text copied verbatim from another source without attributing that source. This is commonly referred to as plagiarism. Outside schools, plagiarism is not illegal unless it involves a copyright infringement. Rather, it is considered a moral offense. Yet one of the school board-approved consequences for plagiarizing in the school district where I worked at the time of this study was short-term out of school suspension.

In terms of unofficial student-produced writing, texts of this type frequently fall into the unauthorized category. Examples of potentially punishable unofficial texts, in addition to those already mentioned, include writing on walls, on bodies, and on clothes. These forms of writing are permissible in some contexts outside school but are restricted in schools, often because they are an inconvenience and/or a distraction. When students wrote on their clothes at the school where I worked as an assistant principal, they were sent to the office and not allowed back in class until they changed into writing-free clothing. If no one was home to bring them a change of clothing, they missed hours, if not a whole day, of class time. Text messaging may turn into a discipline event if, for instance, when asked, a student found texting refuses to give his or her cell phone to the teacher. This resistance is considered defiance, and defiant students are usually punished. In my school district, an 8th grade girl who had never been in trouble before was suspended out of school for five days for refusing to give her cell phone to her teacher.

Why text function matters. Returning to Szwed's (1981) framework and the literacy element of function, the same text may be proscribed sometimes but not others, depending on the use to which it is put. An example is notes. Note-taking is a valued academic skill that students are taught in school. Notes are intended as a study aide. But if a student uses them during a test when they are not allowed, the student may be given a zero, made to retake the test, or receive some other form of punishment.

Those who hold a traditional view of literacy ignore the fact that texts can function in multiple ways. Those who view literacy through a sociocultural lens, however, understand that texts can function in many ways, only one of which may be the author's intended purpose. Gee (2011) argues that there are seven different functions or tasks that language can accomplish. One of the tasks is enacting relationships. Perhaps that was Alexa's purpose in writing the message about her friends on her desk. Language is also used to enact particular identities. Many of the samples of student writing I photographed use what Paris (2010) refers to as resistant, or non-standard, orthography (see Figure 2). Paris argues that students write in this way to enact resistant or oppositional identities. The important

Fig. 2. Photograph of unauthorized student writing using nonstandard orthography.

point here is that when students engage in the production of unsolicited and unofficial texts, they have a reason for doing so. Educators should consider students' reasons and the meaning the text holds for them rather than immediately jump to the conclusion that this type of behavior constitutes an act of deviancy. To the contrary, based on her ethnographic study of unofficial literacy practices in a sixth grade classroom, Hubbard (1989) argues, "much learning is going on in this unofficial capacity that clearly exceeds adult expectations" (p. 306). This idea will be further explored in the implications section below.

Possible motives

Turning to the last of Szwed's (1981) elements of literacy, what of a student's motivation to commit a potentially punishable act of writing? One possibility is that students are simply unaware of school rules that prohibit a particular form of writing they have produced. Another possibility, for example in the case of plagiarism, is that the student has a novice or naïve understanding of what is meant by an official text and what constitutes the norms for its production (see Sidebar 1). Nilsson et. al. (2009) argue that

> exactly who can be regarded as a plagiarist is mediated by specific cultural ways of looking at text production. Concepts such as originality, uniqueness and authorship assume specific historic and cultural meanings and compete with other concepts, such as intertextuality, translation, and dialogism, as resources for classifying plagiarism. (p. 130)

In this same article, the authors argue that another motive for engaging in plagiarism is the institutional pressure to position oneself as academically competent. The desire to portray oneself as an accomplished scholar may override the concern for the risk of being caught plagiarizing. From a historical perspective, the concept of authorship and ownership of text is a cultural construct, and

Sidebar 1

Missed Opportunity

I once received a referral from a teacher that contained a laundry list of offenses one of her students had committed. The boxes on the referral form she checked off included "Lewd conduct/sexually inappropriate language or behavior" and "Other." Next to "Other" she had written "Plagiarism—See attached." To the referral form she had stapled a poetry assignment the student turned in as well as a copy of an almost identical (though longer) poem she printed from a blogger's website. On the front of the student's work she wrote, "0 points Plagiarized Poem." At the time that I received the referral, I gave little thought to how to constructively respond to the teacher's handling of this student's act of plagiarism. Looking back, I wish I had

- Asked the student if he understood what plagiarism is and what school-based consequences may result from it.
- Asked the teacher if she had ever talked to her students about the meaning and consequences of plagiarizing.
- Asked the teacher what her instructions were for the assignment (Were they clear? Had she adequately prepared her students for this assignment?).
- Asked the teacher to allow the student to redo the assignment for credit (partial credit at least).
- Begun a school wide discussion of how to teach about and respond to plagiarism.

the emergence of the "author function" brought with it new possibilities to both valorize and stigmatize texts. As Foucault (1984) noted:

> Once a system of ownership for texts came into being, once strict rules concerning author's rights, author-publisher relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters were enacted—at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century—the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature. (p. 108)

Many students would undoubtedly say that they write notes or text messages to friends at school because they are bored. That is one of the conclusions Hubbard (1989) came to in her study of unofficial literacy practices. Students may be aware of the potential for receiving negative consequences for engaging in these practices but, again, may feel that the risk is worth it. Paris (2010) also argues that students may produce unauthorized texts because of their need to acquire power and voice in a context where they have little of either. That motivation may have been behind one sample of unauthorized student writing I found written on the wall outside my office one day, which stated: "Fuck weed its stupid and just a plant that kills."

Collins and Blot (2003) write that literacy practices are both imposed and chosen, and there is research to support the idea that marginalized students may engage in non-compliant or unsanctioned behavior as a critique of inequitable conditions both within school and in society at large (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). But we can only speculate about students' motivations for producing potentially punishable texts unless we ask students themselves.

Significance of this Issue: The Discipline Gap

Anyone who has spent time in schools knows that students are not always punished for producing unauthorized texts, although the threat is always there. Whether they are punished or not depends on the response of teachers and administrators to the students that produced them. Discipline incidents are, in fact, a chain of events that begin with a student behavior that is perceived to be misbehavior, followed by a teacher response. If the teacher response includes a referral to administration, it is followed by an administrator response. There is variation and flexibility at each stage of the process. In addition, the reaction of teachers and administrators to perceived student misbehavior can create a feedback loop in that it may escalate an incident. This sequence appears to have been the case in the example where a student was suspended for refusing to give up her cell phone after being caught violating school rules regarding text messaging.

Teacher and administrator responses to perceived misbehavior are influenced by their perspectives on discipline in general, school discipline policy, and, in the case of the focus of this article, their literacy ideology. Many researchers also argue that teachers and administrators are influenced by the race and ethnicity of the social actors involved, including their own (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Why does this matter? Researchers have shown that there is a "discipline gap"; that students of color are disproportionately excluded from classrooms

(Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). This imbalance raises the question of whether Alexa's harsh treatment had something to do with the fact that she is Latina.

The "discipline gap" is not a recent phenomenon. In 1975, a Children's Defense Fund study found that the suspension rate for African American students was two to three times higher than that for European American students (Skiba, 2001). More than three decades later, this problem not only persists but has also worsened despite numerous research studies aimed at explaining and closing the gap (Losen & Skiba, 2010). One of the largest and most ambitious studies was conducted by Skiba (2010) in a Midwestern urban school district during the 1994-95 school year. In that study, Skiba and his colleagues analyzed school discipline records in nineteen middle schools. The study showed that the disproportionality in suspension rates for African American students persists even when socioeconomic status is considered. A key finding was that African American students are not referred more frequently than their European American peers for "unruly" behavior, but are referred more frequently for subjective reasons such as disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering.

In addition to Skiba's quantitative study, a number of qualitative studies have also focused on identifying reasons for the existence of the discipline gap (Akom, 2001; Brown, 2007; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Yang, 2009). In their study, Gregory and Mosely (2004) interviewed nineteen teachers in a diverse urban high school seeking to understand how teachers' beliefs about race impact their discipline practices. They found that, just as many teachers do not see the literacy aspects of unauthorized student writing, most of the teachers in the study "saw" neither the discipline gap nor race. Gregory and Mosely argue that the influence of race and culture should be explicitly addressed in discipline policies and practices. Similarly, Vavrus and Cole (2000) observed classrooms in a Midwestern urban high school seeking to understand the behaviors that lead to a discipline event. They found that students excluded from class most often were those that violated school norms for turn-taking and getting the teacher's attention. Students in this category were disproportionately Latin@ and African American.

Yang (2009) conducted a semi-autoethnographic study of the discipline gap in which he used videotapes of his own classroom, teaching journals, and student exit interviews to try to understand from which types of classrooms students are most likely to be excluded. He developed a typology of classroom configurations and identified "classroom X" classrooms as the type of classroom from which students are least likely to be excluded. Classroom X classrooms are those whose structure is disciplined and which have high student engagement.

In her study on the disproportionate suspension of African American and Latin@ students, Brown (2007) surveyed thirty-seven students in an alternative public high school in northeastern United States. The students had all been suspended or expelled from regular high schools. She found that the students perceived that suspensions were imposed without sufficient evidence of guilt. She also found that the loss of instructional time when suspensions occur is exacerbated by the length of time it takes to remove students from one school and then enroll them in an alternative school.

Akom (2001) combined quantitative and qualitative research methods in trying to understand the relation between academic engagement and the meanings and practices of discipline for African American youth. His position as teacher in a high school suspension classroom gave him access both to teacher referrals and the students who had been referred. He found that being placed in the discipline system deprives African American students of positive school experiences and reinforces misperceptions students from different backgrounds have about each other. He argues that what is needed is a focus on early interventions and resources to keep African American students out of the disciplinary system.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies, Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) have published a synthesis of research on the discipline gap. From their review of the research, they concluded that exclusion figures prominently as a school discipline strategy and that its use is on the rise. The use of exclusion has a disproportionate impact on students of color. The lost instructional time associated with suspensions contributes to the achievement gap, as well. The authors of this study also reported that, as mentioned above, schools are inconsistent in their application of discipline consequences. As they noted, "There is tremendous local flexibility in the types of infractions that move forward from the classroom to the office and in the types of consequences issued by administrators" (p. 63). This is the reason that students are not always punished for producing unauthorized texts.

Despite what some educators believe, discipline practices are never objective. Rather, they are subjective and influenced by the ideological perspectives of those in authority. Just like the criminal justice system, which school discipline policies are designed to mirror, the labeling of behaviors and consequences assigned to those behaviors are arbitrary, inconsistent, and dependent on the context where they take place. What's more, contrary to popular belief, suspended students have not always committed violent offenses. As Losen and Skiba point out (2010), "the majority of offenses for which students are suspended appear to be non-violent, less disruptive offenses" (p. 10). Sometimes these offenses even include writing on desks and text messaging.

Implications: Discipline, Don't Punish

This exploration of the circumstances in which a student may be punished for writing suggests that educators need to rethink how they view student writing. They must broaden their perspectives on what counts as literacy, and, as Hubbard (1989) recommends, consider the fact that learning takes place even when students engage in the production of unofficial texts. Although Hubbard's suggestion is not explored in this article, it deserves further attention since students' abilities to produce unofficial, unauthorized texts may be the foundation on which they construct their abilities to produce texts that conform to conventional and school-based literacy norms. Clay and Read (cited in Rueda, 1990) argue that, "children know a lot about literacy before they can write and read in an 'adult' conventional sense" (p. 406). Bissex and Ferreiro and Teberosky (cited in Rueda, 1990), also argue that children are "active developers of principles, which they use for writing before they have learned the conventional system of their language" (p. 406). When teachers recognize the writing principles students have developed through

engaging in unofficial literacy practices, they can use them as a bridge to the development of their ability to produce conventional, highly valued texts.

This exploration also suggests that students should be given more voice in and through their writing assignments. In addition, if educators view a student text as potentially problematic, they should seek and consider the student's perspective and the meaning the text has for him or her. They also, however, need to rethink the relation between school literacy and school discipline practices. The role of the latter is not just to maintain order. It also serves to reinforce current prescriptive perspectives on the former. I am not advocating that teachers ignore or condone such student-produced texts as graffiti, or the fliers found posted in my school's hallway one day during eighth grade lunch that read, "Hoe'sz Wanted! If interested go to dha bleachersz @ lunch! 8th gradersz only. Sign up now. Charge $1.00." But I am advocating that teachers and administrators seek ways to respond to the authors of these texts that do not silence, exclude, or alienate them from literacy or from school. Some certainly deserve a consequence. But none should be treated in a manner that causes them to give up on school or themselves. Schools should discipline students when their behavior causes harm to themselves or others in the school community—not punish them.

For specific guidance and ideas on how to respond to harmful student behavior, educators may find the literature on restorative discipline to be a valuable resource (see Sidebar 2) (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; cf. Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). A restorative perspective on school discipline recognizes the fact that "Punishment often has negative side effects and does little to teach self-discipline" (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 12). It is based on the idea that "Consequences should be evaluated based on whether they are reasonable, related to the offense, restorative, and respectful" (p. 28). One technique used in restorative approaches to discipline is circles in which everyone involved in, or affected by, a discipline incident discusses the impact it had on them and what can be done to heal and restore harmony to the school community. If this approach had been used with Alexa, the consequence for her (mis)behavior may have consisted of cleaning the writing off her desk, perhaps even cleaning all the desks in her classroom. She might also have been asked by her teacher, who was affected by what she did and what she thought needed to be done to make things right. Likewise, in the case of the student who was suspended for refusing to give her teacher her cell phone when she texted during class, one promising practice that could prevent such events from happening in the first place is to involve students in establishing guidelines for the use of cell phones in class at the beginning of the school year. Many students bring their cell phones to school these days. A lot of time and energy is wasted trying to enforce unenforceable cell phone rules.

Sidebar 2

Excerpt from *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools (*Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 18)

"Restorative discipline approaches can provide new and creative possibilities rather than simply offering cookie-cutter answers to situations which teachers and administrators experience every day. Restorative discipline requires flexibility and creativity. It requires thinking about the behaviors that rules are meant to regulate, more than the rules themselves, and being aware of the unintended consequences of rules. It means giving attention to how we learn to live and work together."

Conclusion

Transforming how teachers and administrators view and respond to unauthorized student writing is a first step in addressing and confronting the larger injustices meted out by current school discipline practices. Beyond that, educators also need to engage others in transforming those practices, particularly when they involve writing (see Sidebar 3). More importantly, however, it is time to problematize current thinking in regards to the *relationship* between discipline and achievement. In this article I have highlighted just one of the ways that they are interwoven in the literacy practices of students, teachers, and school administrators. The discipline and achievement gaps are not separate phenomena. They have always been, and will always be, inextricably linked.

Sidebar 3

Transforming Unjust School-Based Literacy Practices

- Review your school and district student codes of conduct. Advocate for removing any rules that regulate oral or written language. Treat their "inappropriate" use as teaching opportunities.
- Create a presentation for your colleagues and central office personnel that heightens their awareness of the harmful impact of punishing student writing.
- Ensure your students understand the meaning of plagiarism.
- Never use writing as punishment. Be sure that a form of writing is not listed as a consequence in your school or district student codes of conduct (examples are "behavior" essays and repeatedly writing sentences that begin with, "I will not. . . .").
- Have students document their use of written language and uses of written language in their community. Be sure to include all types and forms of writing including graffiti, leaflets, fliers, Internet websites, etc. Analyze the context, participants, and purpose for each type of writing.
- Conduct action research (with colleagues) on the chain of events that leads to classroom and school exclusion, particularly when literacy is a factor.

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