



“Goin’ for Broke”: Reaping the Rewards of Teaching Toward Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

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ABSTRACT

This article is inspired by the author’s keynote address delivered at the Central New York Reading Council Conference in Syracuse, New York, on February 6, 2010. The author calls for teachers to “go for broke”—to give their all—to ensure that the children they serve achieve academic success in their literacy classrooms. By capitalizing on the cultural and linguistic strengths that children bring to school and employing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, the author argues that teachers can create classroom spaces that make all children feel they belong and that provide opportunities for students to make strides in language and literacy learning.

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Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced...from within. So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” (“A Talk To Teachers,” James Baldwin, 1963/1985)²

I take a deep breath as I stand before a room filled with new and beginning teachers. Everyone’s eyes are on me. Deep down, as I prepare to talk about meeting the literacy demands of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student population, I anticipate that I will be met with some resistance. This nervous anticipation is cultivated by the echoes of voices of various K-12 teachers and administrators that I have met along the way on my journey as a student, a parent, a teacher, and a community activist in urban contexts in the United States: “These kids come to us with nothing”; “Speaking like that means that they aren’t intelligent”; “I can’t stand listening to the way they talk.” Sadly, in more recent times, I have heard these kinds of comments and observed teaching and classroom management behaviors from K-12 teaching professionals and leaders that ignore and silence the cultural orientations, values, and performance styles of linguistically and ethnically “different” students; that maintain low expectations; that blame the students and their families; and that ultimately attribute academic

² Delivered October 16, 1963, as “The Negro Child—His Self Image”; originally published in *The Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963.



failure to what students of color, what the economically disadvantaged, what English language learners, what students with disabilities, what “you fill in the blank” don’t have or can’t do.

As a teacher educator who works with both preservice and inservice teachers, I consider it my responsibility to unearth and address the tacit ideologies that persist around linguistic and cultural differences that teachers bring to the classroom experience and help them to be confident, effective teachers for all children. Teaching is more than just methods and strategies; it is also very much about the mindset that one brings to the profession. It is about the preconceived ideas that an individual holds about his or her students, their families, and their communities. I consider it my duty to remind teachers that our task must be to support the academic achievement of all students while at the same time capitalizing on and validating their cultural and linguistic identities and not devaluing or erasing them. We’ve lost too many students to cultural and linguistic terrorism (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999), where our words and our practices essentially ask them to repudiate who they are in order to become successful in schools and other dominant contexts.

So, when I stand on many occasions to deliver a talk with teachers, I channel my inner James Baldwin. In 1963, Baldwin delivered “A Talk to Teachers” and acknowledged up front that he himself was not a teacher and that he had never taught in schools. But, he felt it his duty, as a member of society and a citizen of the United States, to articulate his angst with the prevailing system of educating African American children. My task, like Baldwin’s, is to impress upon today’s audience of new and practicing teachers that there is a lot at stake. For too many, education is a matter of life or death (Haberma, 2004).

In this article, I recreate my “talk with teachers” and call for literacy educators to be prepared to “go for broke.” “Go for broke” is a gambling term meaning to **risk everything** to reap substantial reward (urbandictionary.com). When literacy educators commit to “go for broke”—that is, to do all that we can to ensure that our words and our practices support the educational needs of all children—we stand to make great strides in the educative experiences of those we serve. In the end, my hope is that my words will not just inspire teachers but impress upon them the urgency of creating classroom spaces where all of our children believe they belong and where they believe they have the right to participate and engage fully.

Beginnin’ With Where I’m From

When I begin my talk with teachers, I am nervous because, as always, I am not sure how the words that will come out of my mouth will be understood. As a Black woman scholar and teacher educator, I am usually one of the few persons of color in the room while the majority in the audience is predominantly White, middle class, monolingual, and female, reflecting the current teacher demographic (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Gomez, 1996; Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). In my introduction, I am explicit and upfront about how my own identity and background shape what I will present, how I think, and what I believe. I share visual images from my social and cultural upbringing; I talk about how I grew up as a Black child from a working class background in the 1970s; how I am a proud speaker of African American Language (Smitherman, 1999) and why I sometimes choose to drop my ‘g’s; how I identify as a member of the hip hop generation; and how I am a part of the revolution to improve the educative experiences of all children, and in particular those who have historically been underserved by the public education system in the United States. I do this because it is impossible for me to ignore the dynamic interplay of race, language, and class in this space—what it means for me, a racial and linguistic minority, to work with and present to those who are “different” from me. If students, like the teachers in the audience, are to learn from me, they



must know who I am and where I am from, a primary premise for multicultural education and practice (Banks, 1995).

I also do this to model a practice of teaching that is about building relationships and not establishing distance and difference. Instead of emphasizing cultural and linguistic mismatch and disconnect between teachers and students, we must aim to find ways to bridge connections between all of our heritages and experiences. Relationships should be reciprocal, so it is essential that every literacy educator share a part of his or her history and identity. In schools today, it is not uncommon for teachers to have students reflect on and report on their respective cultural and linguistic heritages. From multicultural fairs to cultural expos to the observances of ethnic holidays, we ask students to bring in cultural artifacts or to share stories from their family traditions. With these activities, we ask students to put their cultural and linguistic backgrounds on display, oftentimes positioning their background as aberrant or 'different' from the mainstream culture of Whiteness and monolingualism (Haddix, 2008). Rarely are teachers asked to do the same. Instead, such activities should be led by teachers' own interrogation and inquiry into their cultural and linguistic locations to think about what it means to be 'American' and who can claim this identity.

This transparency also means sharing our literacy interests and personal investments within and beyond the school walls. I self identify as a writer. I am a writer who writes for many purposes and who uses multiple discourses (see Gee, 1996). First and foremost, however, I view my practice as a writer as a political act; I write for social change and movement. I write to give voice to the collective experiences of those who came before me who were once silenced. To illustrate this point, I share my "Where I'm From" poem:

*...I'm from 3rd Street and Martin Luther King Drive
I'm from Black Cows, Charlie Chans, and Lemonheads
I'm from peach ice cream on the sidewalk at the Juneteenth Day Parade
I'm from 25 cent pop and lazy days in the shade
I'm from blue ribbons in the sky and flyin' high
I'm from beat street and white lines...*

I share this poem to show that it is important to elucidate an intimate part of my literate identity; to show my passion for writing; and to claim that I am also a member of this learning community. Too often we ask students to participate in reading and writing in school and expect that they do so out of school, yet I frequently hear literacy educators exclaim, "I'm not a writer" or "I don't like to write" or "I don't read unless it's for work." How can we expect our students to do something that we ourselves do not do? How can we expect them to foster a love for reading and writing when we lack such sentiments? Teachers are very much a part of the classroom of learners. When I teach, I learn who I am.

Checkin' Our Worldviews and Attitudes about Language

Whenever I have attended talks by Dr. Cornel West, African American studies scholar and philosopher, he usually declares to members of the audience that he hopes to say something that will "unhouse you, unsettle you, make you realize that everything you were taught to believe in rests on a pile of pudding." I co-opt this opening from Dr. West in my talks because I intend to say something that will challenge the members of my audience to question their assumptions and worldviews. Critical self-reflection, or the consideration of our own worldviews, is a first step to understanding that different epistemologies exist and that none of us has cornered the



market on rightness or truth. Being a critically reflexive practitioner means realizing that what we hold as "truths" are not necessarily truths for everyone else. Dr. West talks about how often times students' entrance into college is the first time that their beliefs are challenged. It is the first time when one realizes that all that their parents, communities, churches, and friends have taught them can be turned upside down and viewed from a completely different perspective. In my own experience teaching literacy from this praxis, I have witnessed moments where my own ideologies conflict with those of my students. There are moments when students unpack "truths" that are venomous and potentially harmful to others, and as the teacher, I have to decide when to allow multiple perspectives to co-exist and when to challenge perspectives that expose racism, classism, sexism, and other oppressive ideologies. This conflict is inevitable when you are encouraging students to be critically engaged in literacy events. Students are "in process" of becoming free, critical thinkers and we as teachers are also "in process", but we can leverage these conflicts for powerful teaching and learning outcomes for both teachers and students.

I rely on this critical self-reflection framework to consider the role of teachers' attitudes and ideologies toward language diversity in literacy instruction for a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Though attitudes toward linguistic diversity are socially constructed and notions of language superiority are arbitrarily determined (Gutierrez & Orellana, 2006; Wolfram & Christian, 1989), prejudice toward linguistic pluralism pervades the schooling process and impacts learning outcomes for students. Further, the language of schooling serves as a means for evaluating and differentiating students (Schleppegrell, 2004). It is a means for separating the haves from the have-nots, the "pulled-out" from the included, the sheltered from the general education, the advanced placement from the remedial, the college-admit from the high school dropout. Because educational research on student achievement and closing the achievement gap categorizes data on the basis of race and language, White, monolingual students are positioned as normative indicators of school performance (Hilliard III, 2003). In this way, any linguistic difference that deviates from this assumed norm is viewed as "deficient" and treated as a viable explanation for the academic failure of students of color and students who speak languages and dialects other than mainstream American English.

Historically, students of color and speakers of non-standard forms of English and other languages are framed and conceptualized in dominant paradigms of inferiority, cultural deprivation, and diversity (Souto-Manning, 2010). In educational research and practice, there remains an underlying ideology that all students need to assimilate to becoming fluent and frequent speakers of a standard form of English in order to succeed in this society. Such ideology suggests that assimilation happens at the expense of the student's native language and culture being devalued, erased, and eradicated. Further, the current context of standardized and standards-based educational reform presents a dissonant relationship with pluralist views of language use and linguistically rich classrooms (see Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

It is also important to note that the interplay of these ideologies is most often at play in the context of urban schools where the cultural and linguistic gap between teachers and administrators and the students and families that they serve is steadily widening (Morrell, 2007). Educational researchers continue to question how to best address the educational needs of an increasingly, linguistic and culturally diverse student population (Ball & Farr, 2003; Godley, et al., 2006), a concern magnified by the fact that the growing majority of culturally and linguistically diverse students are placed at risk of educational failure, and a dominant view is that languages and dialects other than mainstream American English are the main obstacles of educational achievement. Linguists, educationists, and researchers across academic disciplines



have worked to explain the disproportionate failure among linguistic minorities in schools, arguing against a conclusion that students' home language is the culprit (see Perry & Delpit, 1998; Zentella, 2005).

Deficit treatment of differences in students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom shows that negative and uninformed attitudes toward these differences by teachers can be counterproductive and even harm student performance (Schleppegrell, 2004; Wynne, 2002). Teachers' attitudes toward language difference can either support or block marginalized students' access to literacy. When teachers view languages other than mainstream American English as having lower status, this belief underscores the idea that languages are defined politically, not scientifically, and that standard languages are "dialects with an army and a navy."³ This is why it is imperative that transformation of teachers' attitudes about language diversity commences at the preservice level. Classroom talk between teachers and students is the major medium of instruction, and the power of these interactions is in the hands of teachers. So, more time, effort, and attention must be given to raising teachers' awareness about their assumptions and worldviews about language diversity. Teachers' attitudes and ambivalence toward different languages and dialects can impact curricular initiatives and school policy that have proven to support these students (see Brisk, Burgos, & Hamerla, 2004). Re-conceptualizing the goals of teacher learning can have positive consequences for students whose racial, linguistic, and ethnic identities have been relegated to lower status in our society.

Representin' Multiple Discourses and Languages

What we believe about language diversity and pluralism will inform our practice as literacy educators. When I hear teachers tell bilingual Spanish and English speakers, "no Spanish in here. English only," I hear English language dominance in that message and a declaration that Spanish does not belong in schools. If we believe in mainstream American English dominance, it will show in our every day talk and engagement with our students. This belief pervades our schools today and fails many children. However, when we recognize that, "always and forever, the standard variety will be indispensable to upward mobility, and always and forever, one of the main places children acquire comfort and fluency in the standard variety will be in school" (McWhorter, 2000) and that "the job of the school is to *add a new layer* to a child's speech repertoire, *not to undo* the one they already have" (McWhorter, 2000), we acknowledge the power of language and we become better equipped to support our students' acquisition and access to multiple languages and discourses.

Instead of treating language diversity as the cause of educational failure, educators, policymakers, and scholars alike must realign their attitudes concerning language use with the realities of the changing population and challenge normative methods that "subtract" students' language and culture (Ball & Farr, 2003; Valenzuela, 2002). Some children come to school with a linguistic advantage because the socialization contexts in which they have participated have prepared them well for the ways in which language is used in school tasks (Schleppegrell, 2004). Schleppegrell (2004) points out that many teachers are unprepared to make the linguistic expectations of schooling explicit to students and argues that schools need to be able to raise students' consciousness about the power of different linguistic choices in construing different kinds of meanings and realizing different social contexts. Delpit (1995) also advocates for explicitly teaching all students how to appropriate mainstream or dominant languages for

³ This concept is long part of **oral tradition** among sociolinguists. However, Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich is often credited with its origination (Wardhaugh, 2002).



strategic social, political, or economic advantage. By bringing the features of school language to the attention of students, teachers can help them understand the functionality of particular linguistic choices for reading and writing texts within and beyond the school context.

I'm Goin' for Broke, So Are You Gatekeepin' or Keepin' Dreams?

Despite public and scholarly debates about the validity and utility of nonstandard languages and dialects, it is critical that all children feel a sense of value and pride in their cultural and linguistic heritages. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a barrier to literacy achievement, teachers can leverage the linguistic styles and ways with words of their students to boost student learning in the literacy classroom. Teachers can capitalize on the cultural and linguistic strengths of their students to scaffold to instruction in other literacy practices. Valuing linguistic difference extends beyond merely providing instruction in dominant discourses but to nurturing multiple forms of linguistic and literate expression.

As literacy educators, we can either take the stance of a “gatekeeper” or “dreamkeeper” (Ladson-Billings, 1994) for our students’ access to and opportunities for success in literacy and language learning. When teachers draw on the combined linguistic resources of all members of the classroom community, they create more linguistically inclusive and academically successful learning environments for all students. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies validate students’ racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds; foreground language diversity as a resource to enrich learning experiences for students; and bridge the gap between language usage in the home culture and in the school culture. Being culturally relevant and responsive teachers (Gay, 2000) also means setting and maintaining high expectations for all students; taking interest in our students’ lives in and outside the classroom; listening to and hearing what our students have to say; observing what our students are doing; diversifying and differentiating instruction; and making learning relevant. When we fail to do this, we become the “gatekeepers” of dominant discourses and keep many students on the periphery of our schools, and by extension, the larger society.

Nearly 50 years after Baldwin’s “A Talk to Teachers,” the current state of education is facing “a dangerous time” (Baldwin, 1985). Many students show up to our schools every day, yet many remain underserved academically. Children come to us speaking many languages. Our task should not be to erase the cultural and linguistic knowledge that they bring but to add a new layer to it. How are we harmed or wronged when students use their languages to express their ideas or when trying to get their ideas out on paper? When teachers correct students’ use of their native tongues in their writing by saying that the usage is “wrong” or “incorrect,” the message is that who they are is “wrong” and “incorrect”.

So, I end this article like I end many of my talks with teachers, declaring that it is not the most efficient use of our time to focus on policing students’ home languages and cultures when our goal is to help them be confident and effective users of academic English in its oral and written forms. I proclaim that it is time for an education revolution. Our role as literacy educators is critical; we have an investment in ensuring the academic successes of all of our children. It is time to “go for broke” because the future of all of our children depends on it.

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