When Cultures Meet, What's a Teacher To Do? Highlighting the 'Cultural' in 'Literacy as a Socio-cultural Tool'

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ABSTRACT

Cultures determine identity in that they prescribe the "food, festivals, and fashion" of their members; for example, rap music, baggy pants and gestured dancing identify the hip hop culture (recognizable to both "members" and "non-members"). Cultural identities are created and maintained by "literacy" -- the ability to read and write the "texts" of a culture. Thus in this broad sense, literacy is a socio-cultural "tool," and mastering it means "success" within a culture. The purpose of this article is to explore the socio-cultural nature of literacy as it relates to identity both for teacher and student, and to examine the use of literacy as a tool for "success" in the culture of school. The article concludes by delineating four pedagogical choices: the "uni-cultural," the "uni-cultural *plus*," the "multi-cultural as motivator," and the "multi-cultural as curriculum." These are available to all teachers who stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures -- their own, the school's, the classroom's, and their students'.

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Not long ago I heard a commencement address wherein the speaker spent several minutes listing the multiple communities to which an individual belongs. He spoke of the usual race, ethnic, and gender communities, but also of "minority" cultures such as student, teacher, parent, public transit rider, and member of a bowling team. His point was that although every person is simultaneously a member of many communities and cultures, the key to "success" in any of those cultures is to "know where you are and who you are" at any given moment -- a phrase supporting the idea of self-identity as a resultant of cultural determinism ("*where* you are") and self-awareness ("*who* you are").

Cultures determine identity in that they prescribe the "food, festivals, and fashion" of their members; for example, rap music, baggy pants and gestured dancing identify the hip hop culture (recognizable to both "members" and "non-members"). Cultural identities are created and maintained by "literacy" -- the ability to read and write the "texts" of a culture. Thus in this broad sense, literacy is a socio-cultural "tool," and mastering of that tool means "success" within a culture. The purpose of this article is to examine and explore the socio-cultural nature of literacy as it relates to identity both for teacher and student, the use of literacy as a tool for "success" in the culture of school and public education, and the pedagogical choices available to all teachers who stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures -- their own, the school's, the classroom's, and their students'.

The Socio-cultural Nature of Literacy Related to Identity

Gaffney and Anderson (2000) conclude that the major theoretical changes in the field of reading have progressed from behaviorist to cognitive to socio-cultural. The behaviorist view sees reading as essentially "decoding" of the printed signs, and the purpose of reading instruction being to help learners "break the code" (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). The 1970s brought a major paradigm shift from behaviorism to cognitive science, from discovery of meaning to creation of meaning: the concept of schema (loosely defined as knowledge "structured from experience," Smith & Swinney, 1992) was "reinvented" and "text processing" flourished (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000). The emphasis was now on reader--text interactions (Leland et al., 1999), with the belief that reading involved a "stable set of intellectual processes" (Bloome, 1989) -- reading thus included the ability to comprehend the text so that the contents "made sense" or were meaningful to the reader.

The third view of reading, according to Gaffney and Anderson (2000), emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s when socio-linguistic and socio-cultural theorists began to draw on the earlier linguistic and social constructivist work of Vygotsky (1930; 1934) and to re-focus attention on "language in use" (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000) -- the idea that language and reading occurred in a social situation. In this model of reading as social practice, the reader recognizes the cultural embeddedness of both the text and herself.

As went reading , so goes literacy.

The emergence of this "social practice" model of reading meant the emergence of literacy also seen as a "social practice." This new view of literacy resulted in a movement labelled New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1999, 2000; Maybin, 2000). This "new literacy" movement spawned a paradigm shift; a conceptual framework developed for what Barton and Hamilton (2000) called "situated literacies." No longer did "literacy" mean just "reading and writing"; now it meant "reading and writing" as a "social practice" (Street, 2003), a practice occurring in a specific time, space and cultural context -- a specific social or cultural situation.

Conceptualizing literacy as a social practice means that literacy refers to "context-bound language practices" (Verhoeven & Durgunoglu, 1998). When viewed as context-based and situational, literacy becomes not the acquisition of a neutral set of cognitive skills, but a linguistic "tool" for use in specific contexts and situations -- the contexts of social and cultural situations (Street, 2003). Thus literacy becomes a "tool" for use by social groups and cultures to mediate their existence, growth, and identity. As a socio-cultural tool, literacy mediates the mental activity of both culture as a whole and individual group members (Homer, 2002). In other words, reading and writing become significant to and influence the thinking of the members of a social group or culture. However, at the same time, reading and writing remain individual cognitive abilities. Attempting to reconcile literacy's dual aspect of individualized competencies and interaction in social contexts, Homer (2002) characterizes a child as "an active constructor of knowledge who is, at the same time, embedded in a culture that transforms her development" (p.266) -- a culture that also selects and determines the "texts" and "literature" recognized as "valuable" or permitted and encouraged to be read within a culture.

A culture in which a child (or any language/literacy user) is embedded need not be thought of solely in terms of an ethnicity or race or religion. Some people, including the commencement speaker above, may refer to these "cultures" as social groups or as "communities." Gee (1991) prefers to call them "Discourses" with a capital "D":

> [a Discourse is] a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network." . . . Think of a Discourse as an "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize (Gee, 1991, p.3).

This metaphor of the identity "kit" carries the implication of construction and development *into* an identity: a "kit" must be assembled or appropriated to be of service. For example, the gingerbread house "kit" I purchased still required construction and effort on my part before I had a finished, "identifiable" gingerbread house on my kitchen counter. For the process of construction and development into a cultural identity, Heath (1984) uses the term "language socialization" to describe the way individuals become members of various communities. [Hereinafter for the sake of clarity and brevity, and setting aside anthropological and sociological distinctions to the contrary, I use the term "Discourse" as synonymous with "culture," "social group" and "community."]

Taking on the identity of and being associated with a Discourse means that a person can operate within a Discourse by accepting and conforming to the "values, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, ways of learning, and ways of expressing what we know" (Finn, 1999, p. 108). These "ways of" require a language of some sort. Thus "operating" within a Discourse includes using the language of that Discourse: receiving and producing the language, reading and writing the language -- being literate. The idea of "success" in a Discourse, then, is sometimes measured by the degree to which a person has "mastered" the language and literacy of that Discourse, has become "literate" within that given Discourse. For example, some cultures have special initiation rites or "rites of passage" for their children when they near the age of puberty or thereabouts. At that point, the children become "full members" (or adults) of the culture and Discourse -- gaining an identity by having shown mastery of the "literacy" of language, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and values of that Discourse. In another example, the culture of mainstream American education requires its members to display mastery, "full and effortless control" (Gee, 1991, p.8), of its Discourse literacy -- the academic literacy of public education, or mainstream "school literacy." This culture provides for 13 years of formal training (K-12), after which the child (non-adult) is deemed "educated" and undergoes a "commencement" into life as an "educated" adult person.

While "successful" mastery of the literacy of the mainstream school Discourse earns a child the identity of "educated," it is wise to keep in mind that this mainstream school Discourse is not the only Discourse to which a child belongs [I use the term "child" here to refer to any "non-adult" in the mainstream American culture, a person under the "legal age"]. Indeed, school culture is only one of many secondary Discourses in which a child develops. Generally, a new born child has little say in the matter of obtaining a primary Discourse ("we can't choose our family"); membership in many subsequent "secondary Discourses" (Gee, 1991) is also mandated, not optional nor voluntary. For example. compulsory education laws illustrate this point. However, a very key point to be made about Discourses and membership is that one person, child *or* adult, never exists in just one Discourse. The old adage of "you can choose your friends but not your family" aptly describes the difference between mandated and voluntary Discourses; it also illustrates the concept of multiple and simultaneous membership in Discourse communities. A person, whether child or adult or student or school teacher or anyone else, is never a member of just one Discourse. Everyone, students and teachers alike, resides in a myriad of Discourses simultaneously. As adults and professionals, teachers possess the psychological agility to leave, most often, their myriad of Discourse identities at the classroom door

and become, for the mandated time required, a prominent member of the education profession and upholder of the mainstream school Discourse. Children, on the other hand, by virtue of their developing psychological concepts about self and identity, are less able and experienced at selecting and adjusting their identities to match the socio-cultural situation of the classroom.

As a point of note, this matter of identity formation is not exclusive to the adolescent child, although development of identity and self-awareness are key components of the socio-cognitive developmental stage of "adolescence" (Kroger, 1989, 2003; Dusek & McIntyre, 2003). All children in the K-12 public school system are simultaneously members in multiple Discourse groups: from immediate family, extended family, ethnicity, race, religion, social peers, and economic class, to the hip hop culture of teens or the community of Sponge Bob Square Pants fans. All children have identities in various stages of development and formation and acceptance within these communities.

Specifically for this article, we can visualize two children (of any K-12 age) attending public education in the State of New York: both are simultaneously members of multiple cultures and users of multiple literacies. One is a member of a visible ethnic minority, and her ethnic literacies may perhaps be more easily discernible than the multiple, rap-music text-messaging literacies of the other, white majority student. Both arrive at their classroom doors. There at the entrance, they meet an academic-based school culture with a specific type of literacy as its primary tool for success.

Literacy as the Tool for "Success" in School Culture

I want to make it clear that by "school Discourse" I do not mean that school culture which dictates the formal and informal social structure of school -- where sixth graders rule the playground and juniors never date freshmen. Instead, I refer to the academic, scholarly side of the culture of mainstream public schools -- where curriculum and homework reign, and reading ability determines the "success" of mastering the cultural identity.

As Moats (1999) for the American Federation of Teachers reports, "reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends . . . Any child who doesn't learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life" (p.5). This statement implies some of the underlying assumptions within school Discourse about literacy as a tool for cultural mastery -- specifically that the extent to which a child learns to read school-based texts determines the extent of that child's knowledge acquisition and "learning," and that identity (or "labeling") as a member of the school community occurs "early" in a child's association with this Discourse. Moats' words also makes a clear statement about the perceived prominent role of membership in school Discourse in relation to membership and identity within other Discourses and cultures -- namely that "failure" to gain mastery and "succeed" in the secondary Discourse of school foretells "failure" in the primary Discourse of life. While I do fully support the idea of formal mainstream education's vital role in the social and economic lives and developing identities of all children, I do question the notion of "flourishing in life" being dependent upon mastery of school literacy. Following Gee's (2000) concepts of Discourse and of literacy as the social "capital" within a culture, I would say that to flourish in life, a person must have gained mastery of the literacies of those Discourses most significant to that person at any given time -- plus the ability to accommodate one's self to that significant culture by knowing "where you are and who you are" at any given moment.

Meanwhile, within the "moment" of formal, mainstream, public school education Discourse,

the fundamental, distinguishing literacy has become the ability to read and write in the rhetorical and logical style of the "academic essay." This essay-style of reading and writing requires students to think in an argumentative fashion: to identify the "main point" and supporting details of a paragraph, to identify the author's purpose, and to write paragraphs in a coherent main-idea-support format with explicit, logical transitions between paragraphs. To continue into post-secondary education, a student must prove capable of producing this academic essay; it has thus become the "vehicle through which all students are to demonstrate their [school] literacy" (Trupe, 1997, p.113). This component of academic Discourse has, since its inception in the eighteenth century, been the hallmark of the "educated" person (Finn, 1999). As such, the literacy of the academic essay has permeated the public education system to become part of its distinguishing literacy. In more general terms, Heath (1984) finds from her research that being "literate in today's formal education system means being able to talk and write about language, to explain and sequence implicit knowledge and rules of planning, and to speak and write for multiple functions in appropriate forms" (p.27). Mastery of this "school literacy" thus brings "success" in the academic culture of formal education.

In his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, Finn (1999) discusses some of the social issues surrounding access to "school literacy." One of the main issues is the relationship between home or primary Discourse (Gee, 1991) and school Discourse. Finn presents several examples of public school students whose home Discourse and language use are highly dissimilar to the school culture. Interestingly enough, his examples of dissimilar Discourses are not tied to the usual suspects of race or ethnicity; instead, Finn cites the home Discourses of economic classes. For instance, he presents the work of English Sociologist Basil Bernstein, who demonstrates how the home Discourse of the working class is very implicit in nature, in contrast with the more "mainstream" middle-class whose home Discourse in less implicit and more explicit -- and thus closer in nature to school Discourse (Finn, 1999, p.81-82).

Children from those home Discourses and cultures which are dissimilar to the more print-based, rhetorical and explicit school Discourse are what Gee (1991) calls "non-mainstream" (p.10). The now "classic" studies by Heath (1980; 1984) explored the different modes, functions, and uses of language and literacy within two distinct yet geographically close "non-mainstream" communities. Her results indicated that literacy has different meanings and functions for different socio-cultural and socio-economic communities. She also found a "positive correlation" between student high achievement rates in school and home discourses which were "similar" in mode of "language socialization" to the school discourse (the small "d" discourse of language use, which includes literacy abilities). Implications from this study were that the communication, language, and literacy "problems" of non-mainstream children struggling in mainstream school literacy may have their sources in the degree of difference between home discourse/Discourse and school discourse/Discourse. While the issue here concerns children from "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" home cultures, I submit that a larger issue involves those children (mainstream and non) active in and building identities from multiple Discourses (cultures, social groups, and communities). The degree to which those multiple Discourses differ from school Discourse also affects, I believe, the academic performance of those children. The degree of difference may also cause these children to view the classroom door as the entrance to a "foreign" culture. Children who are not readily able to accommodate themselves to this new culture at best find themselves struggling to survive, at worst give up trying to negotiate this foreign culture.

With literacy as the primary tool within this school culture, children who struggle with "reading" as defined in this school Discourse may develop negative self-concepts about themselves as

"readers" -- and as "learners" and individuals. Those "reading difficulties" that produce negative effects on self-concept occur mostly "in academic domains" (Meyer, 2001). For example, the child who struggles to read a non-picture chapter book or a Chemistry textbook may tell parents or teachers that he or she is a "poor reader," or loudly exclaim, "I hate reading." However, at the same time, he or she may flourish as a "good reader" of texts in other Discourses: PlayStation3 or mall shopping or Sunday School. When literacy is defined as a "socio-cultural tool," then the "texts" for reading are those "communicative artifacts" (Graddol, 1994) of that culture or Discourse -- and these artifacts are not always in the form of the printed word. As just one example, basketball players require a literacy which is the ability to "read" the zone-defense of the opposing team, or read a coach's playpad. As Moats' (1999) statement examined earlier implies, unfortunately or fortunately, the literacy and "reading" (of nearly exclusively a printed text) required within the mainstream school Discourse carries a greater impact on a person's life (and importance for that "life" in relation to the dominant mainstream society as whole) than does the "reading" required for any of these other Discourses.

Looking specifically at adolescents and their self-concepts, as readers *and* as persons, Colvin and Schlosser (1998) explain that their work

> demonstrates that in the course of the school day, middle school students do attend to academics; however, their primary focus is on the social context of school. Thus, adolescents are developing critical beliefs about themselves as learners at the same time they are constructing multiple dimensions of self, including their self-worth and importance as viewed through the lenses of others. Perhaps it is an artifact of development, but the merging of the personal and academic selves appears particularly critical for the middle school student and may portend a student's future academic success (p.273).

The work of Colvin and Schlosser thus indicates that it is not alone the "academic self" (partly defined by one's ability to read the required texts) that influences "future academic success," but rather the academic merged with the developing personal self-concept of the adolescent. Self-concept, self-worth, and the multiple dimensions of self all serve as constructs of identity. When Maria, the struggling adolescent reader in Colvin and Schlosser's (1998) case study, entered the school Discourse culture of the classroom, her positive, perceived personal identity of self merged with her negative, perceived academic identity of self. The result was negative:

> In Maria's case, her sense of self as a confident and able student assistant in the school office stands in stark contrast to the invisible person Maria became once she she assumed her role as a student (p.280).

Maria's example helps to raise the question of whether socio-cultural literacy and academic "success" are exclusive. Does reading success within school Discourse also mean the loss of non-school cultural identity? Or, just as the professional teacher leaves his or her other identities outside the classroom door when assuming the role of spokesperson for school Discourse, is a child also required simply to "leave outside" the classroom his or her other identities formed from membership in other Discourses?

So now we return to our two "visualized" children of any K-12 age, one a visible ethnic minority and one heavily entrenched in a techno-rap non-print popular culture. They are still standing there at the classroom door -- complete with their multiple Discourse literacies and identities -- peering

at the academic-based school culture. What happens next to the identities (and literacies) of these children depends on the pedagogical choices the classroom teacher makes.

Professional and Pedagogical Choices for Teachers

One large assumption in this article's argument is that the abilities, not only to determine one's identity and consequent responsibilities at any given moment simply by knowing "where" one is and whom one is required to be, but also to set aside other identities and fulfill the roles dictated by the culture and Discourse wherein one finds him or herself, are developmental abilities. That is, they develop as self-awareness and awareness of "others" increase (Dusek & McIntyre, 2003). As mature adults, certified teachers, I will assume, possess this ability to set aside other identities and allow the identity of their immediate Discourse to guide their linguistic and physical behaviors. Further, I also assume that as employees of the State of New York, public school teachers will seek to uphold and model the literacy and "educated" identity prescribed by the Discourse of State public education -- they will both choose to *and* be capable of choosing.

Children, on the other hand, are at various stages along this developmental continuum leading to the maturation of an "identity-choice" ability. They cannot always leave their myriad of Discourse identities and cultural memberships outside the classroom door on the shoe rack. Instead, they stand there at the door with all their identities and memberships in their arms.

The role of the teacher is to help these "doorway" students enter into the school culture and "succeed" in school -- where success means competence in reading the school Discourse to the degree of attaining "the curricular standards" (*Learning--ELA*, 1996, p.v). However, *how* the teacher performs that role depends upon his or her foundational beliefs about education and teaching and literacy and reading, and about the socio-cultural nature of literacy as a "tool."

These foundational beliefs, whether the teacher is consciously aware of them or not, influence the teacher's professional and pedagogical choices. Therefore the teacher who asks, as this article's title does, "what do I do now?" would be best advised to make those unconscious, implicit beliefs more explicit and conscious, before these doorway encounters occur. Gunning (2005) offers the strategy that "examining your practices should help you uncover your beliefs" (p. 8). Teachers, indeed everyone, can find their theories by their actions. Seeking and finding those theories, foundations, and beliefs develop teachers into more reflective practitioners. The more teachers then know about *why* they make certain choices, the more options and choices teachers discover available to them.

The more teachers know about the socio-cultural nature of literacy, the more choices they will see available to them when considering how to deal with the students' cultures and school Discourse culture, especially when the variance between them is significant. I propose that informed teachers can detect four choices available to them:

>"uni-cultural" choice:
ignoring all other cultures and literacies and teaching only the mainstream school culture and its literacy;

>"uni-cultural *plus*" choice:
ignoring all other cultures and literacies and teaching only the mainstream school culture and its literacy *plus* teaching a critical literacy that questions the mainstream culture;

>"multi-cultural as motivator" choice:
allowing non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the classroom as

motivators and scaffolds into the school-ordained curriculum of mainstream culture;

>"multi-cultural as curriculum" choice:

incorporating non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the school curriculum in order to develop meta-level cognitive and linguistics skills.

These choices reflect the teacher's perceptions of his or her own identity as a professional and as a public employee.

Because this socio-cultural aspect is a relatively "new" one in the evolving concept of literacy, the old metaphor of teacher as "gatekeeper" to the school knowledge still presents itself as a choice for teachers. Under this metaphor, the teacher ignores (or refuses entrance to) the cultures and Discourses the students bring to class; instead, the teacher exclusively promotes the mainstream school Discourse and its literacy. As a gatekeeper, the teacher functions much like a child safety-gate -- prohibiting promotion within the school system until the child is "ready" (possesses sufficient school literacy ability) to move into the next level of school without the possibility of "harm" caused from being in a situation for which the child is inadequately prepared and "unready." Such a uni-cultural stance should not be quickly dismissed as "narrow" or "insensitive" or "prejudicial." Consider for a moment the school district that desires all its elementary students to have an equal access to the literacy that offers school "success" and subsequent "success" in the dominant society of the country. In one case I know of, every student in that public elementary school follows the same reading program -- the intent being to provide all children with a literacy and literate identity that will give them equal footing in the labor market. Further, the New York State *Learning Standards for English Language Arts* (1996) are designed to "apply to all students" (p.v). The work of New York State certified teachers is, after all, to strive to have "all students" work towards "attaining the curricular standards" (p.v) of the State public education -- again, reaching standards indicative of possessing a literacy and literate identity that will give them equal footing in the labor market. Desiring all students to "succeed" in the mainstream culture is, I submit, quite fair-minded, sensitive, and caring.

While this uni-cultural approach may perhaps sound hegemonic to some, it also serves to highlight another possible teacher choice -- attainment of the school's uni-cultural literacy "plus." The "plus" refers to adding critical literacy to mainstream school literacy. Teachers may choose also to introduce students to a "critical" literacy, wherein students learn the reading and literacy skills not only "necessary for access to . . . the dominant culture group," but also for "disruption of" that group (Hinchman & Moje, 1998, p.118). In classrooms where teachers choose to add critical literacy to their curriculum, teachers still strive to assist students in attaining the State mandated English Language Arts Standards, but they also encourage their students to develop their sense of self-worth and "voice" -- as minds capable of and voices "allowed to" question the majority. In terms of identity, students in these classroom communities may see themselves and identify themselves as part of the dominant culture, by virtue of having acquired its literacy. At the same time, however, their acquiring of critical literacy provides students with the identity of "non-majority" -- removing one's self far enough outside of the dominant culture to critique and "disrupt" it. Unfortunately, this non-majority identity is difficult to picture because it is defined in negative terms of what it is *not*, rather than in positive terms of what it *is*.

In both of these uni-cultural choices, the teacher is ignoring or negating the students' own cultural affiliations and identities, the multiple Discourses which the child brings to the classroom door. The teacher is in effect replacing them with membership in a different (often "foreign") culture.

In the final two choices I discuss, the classroom teacher acknowledges the students' multiple cultures, their embedded literacy skills, and the identities developed within them.

At the primary school level, Marsh (1999, 2000) researched an intervention strategy wherein she incorporated the primary child's popular culture element of the *Teletubbies* television show into the early childhood language and literacy curriculum. Findings from her work with six and seven year olds "indicated that the incorporation of themes from popular culture into the curriculum motivated children whose interests are usually excluded from the curriculum" (Marsh, 2000, p.130). Thus Marsh met the students at the classroom door and allowed them to bring in their non-school Discourse of television popular culture, which she then employed as a tool for motivating the students into more "school Discourse" curriculum work -- the "multi-cultural as motivator" choice.

At the high school level, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) chose to use the students' non-school Discourses as "ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different worlds, while also helping these students develop academic skills" (p.88). Working in an urban multicultural high school, Morrell (2000) incorporated the teen popular culture elements of Hollywood films and rap music into his curriculum. He explains the reasoning behind his choice:

> What I have attempted to demonstrate is that students already possess many of the skills that we, as educators want to impart to them. However, by not allowing them to tap into their huge reservoirs of [non-school-attained] knowledge, we also prevent many from accessing these skills to navigate the traditional curriculum (Morrell, 2000, p.29).

The decision to begin student learning with what they already know from outside of the school Discourse classroom and then scaffold curriculum knowledge onto that non-school knowledge represents another example of the "multi-cultural as motivator" teacher professional and pedagogical choice.

The fourth category of teacher choices for what to do when school culture meets student multiple cultures at the classroom door is the "multi-cultural as curriculum" choice. This choice originates in the ideas of Gee (1991), who feels that "teaching and learning are connected with the development of meta-level cognitive and linguistic skills. They will work better if we explicitly realize this and build the realization into our curricula" (p.10). Thus teachers have a choice to build into the classroom curriculum an explicit meta-cognitive awareness of differences between the students' own Discourses and the school Discourse. An example of this procedure is the strategy of "code-switching." Essentially, code-switching is making students meta-cognitively aware of the linguistics of their own cultural discourse(s) (linguistic systems), then of the school discourse, and then teaching them both *when* it is appropriate to use each "code" and also *how* to switch between the two (or more) linguistic codes (Colvin, 2004). One result of teaching this meta-cognitive awareness is that students develop bi-cultural literacy skills; they may initially write a composition using the literacy of their own primary, home culture, and then "switch the codes" and re-write the material into the "acceptable" literacy of the school Discourse.

Wheeler and Swords (2004) examined code-switching and its explicit meta-cognitive/meta-linguistic awareness as a tool for transforming and unifying culturally diverse classrooms -- classrooms from the grade 3 level to high school and college levels. They found that code-switching created an academic environment that both validated the students' home language/literacy and simultaneously maintained school literacy as the classroom norm. This code-switching approach to literacy instruction

teaches students that their home language is not "wrong," nor are they "inferior" for using it (Nichols & Colon, 2000). Rather, the students learn that the literacies of their multiple Discourses are inappropriate for use in the formal settings of school Discourse such as the classroom or in written essays. These classrooms where teachers choose not just to acknowledge the cultures and resultant identities of their students, but also to incorporate those literacies and identities into their curriculum provide examples of where the "cultural" in "literacy as a socio-cultural tool" is highlighted for the benefit of all participants in the classroom community.

Standing in the Doorway

As all teachers stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures, the question does become, "what's a teacher to do?" While the answer may emerge from one of the four choices discussed herein, the actual choice reflects the individual teacher's perceptions of his or her own identity as a professional and as a public employee. From my own perception, the public school teacher is a "front line" promoter of school Discourse and educator in school literacy, with a cultural and "community" responsibility to help students "succeed" in the school Discourse through mastery of school literacy. I believe the first step for any teacher in this procedure of making a choice is recognizing that he or she does indeed have a choice. The teacher who has never previously thought about the existence of (or need for) such choices will find, through meta-analysis and reflection on past actions, that he or she has in fact been daily making such choices.

The second step in this choice-making procedure I see as identifying the issues spawned by the socio-cultural nature of literacy and learning more about their dimensions and aspects. The reader who has come this far has already done just that. Now is the time for conscious choice-making.

Teacher choices regarding the socio-cultural nature of literacy and the meeting of multiple literacies, cultures, and identities at the public school classroom door include the uni-cultural choice, which ignores the non-school Discourses and literacies of the students and promotes only the Standards-based school literacy of the "educated," the "uni-cultural plus" choice, which also ignores the non-school Discourses and literacies of the students but also promotes a non-majority questioning identity, the multi-cultural as motivator choice, which uses non-school literacies and cultural-identities in the classroom as motivators for school literacy, and the multi-cultural as curriculum choice, which incorporates non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the school curriculum through a meta-cognitive lens.

Perhaps a final step in this choice making procedure is an acknowledgement that these choices are not once-in-a-career decisions. Our two visualized children of multiple cultures with multiple literacies, standing at our classroom doors ready to meet our academic-based school culture and its specific type of literacy, may transfigure into a kaleidoscope of children each year -- perhaps even each month. As well, different school districts may impose choice restrictions on its teachers. However, what remains is a need for teachers to become more reflective on their own cultural and Discourse awareness. Since the choices teachers make reflect their perceptions of themselves and their own identities as professionals and as public employees, individual teachers should discover their own theories and perceptions through their own actions. Then through self-reflection and introspection, they may make decisions about the types of choices that best fit their professional identities of who they are when they are leading a public classroom -- to "know where you are and who you are" at any given moment.

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