

# Joy and the “Smart Kids”

## COMPETING WAYS OF BEING AND BELIEVING

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The language of schooling, while appearing neutral, facilitates Joy’s construction of an identity written through the violence of explicit and implicit colorblind languages.

In this article I share one child’s experience of ethnic, cultural, and academic border crossing (Anzuldua, 1987). I argue that it is useful for people in educational contexts to recognize individuals’ cultural border crossing experiences in order to move beyond popular notions of achievement. This article turns to personal and collective narratives of African American border crossing in an effort to attend to *colorblind discourse*, which is both simple and sophisticated, with which we as institutions, teachers, parents, researchers, and students are complicit when we communicate both with insiders and outsiders. For it is often through a perspective of colorblind discourse that notions of achievement are instantiated.

Like other tacit, imposing discourses surrounding the academic attainments of youths from non-dominant groups, a colorblind discourse invokes a democratic ideal while willfully imagining that *equity in opportunity* has successfully led to a system of schooling that allows people to reach their highest potential. Embedded within this landscape are discourses of colorblindness that (1) erase



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lived experiences and cultural knowledge of the oppressed to the benefit of White or Anglo-Caucasian individuals and institutions and (2) make invisible generative sources of resilience and resistance in these communities, in particular the practice of storytelling, positioning non-dominant communities as passive recipients of structured hegemony (Lee, 2009).

Colorblind discourses that underlie current efforts ironically maintain neutral conceptions of schooling while clinging to explicit and implicit languages and ideologies that allow the institution of schooling to evade critical examination, thereby, sustaining a complex landscape in which students, their families, and communities engage teachers and administrators in stances relative to the expectations that each has of the other.

### Methods: How to Read This Article

The seed of this article is Joy, whose story violates the code of colorblindness as those around her knowingly (and unknowingly) uphold it. In taking up the complicated issue of schooling and mainstream discourses surrounding it, I violate several scholarly practices, troubling “the scholarly preference for linearity and foundationalism” by way of critical storytelling (Thompson, 2003, p. 8). According to Ochs and Capps (2001), “linearity can be a great comfort to

narrators by offering a soothing logic and ordering of events” (p. 90). I rupture the linearity preferred by mainstream culture, instead embracing a more post-structuralist partial view. According to Britzman (1995), “Poststructuralist theories disrupt any desire for a seamless narrative, a cohesive identity, or a mimetic representation” (p. 232).

Arguably, this approach opens a window into ignored or alternative realities, scripts, and narratives. They reduce alienation for members of marginalized groups, offering opportunities for members of the majority group to meet them halfway (Delgado & Stephanic, 2012). Hence, journals and reviewers generally look for a seamless text in which each part either builds on a previous paragraph or follows a predictable path (as in the privileged APA introduction-method-results-discussion format) (Thompson, 2003). In order to disrupt status quo discourses, I have written this not as a seamless univocal narrative, but as a doubly-coded, multi-voiced, interwoven story (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000). In doing so, I deliberately circumvent the reification of the normative foundation for linearity and the silencing of the “subaltern” peoples through a traditional review of the literature (Spivak, 1988).

Narrative is one way through which individuals represent their understandings of social relations and the interplay that takes place between external actions and internal consciousness (Bruner, 1990). As an aspect of cultural communication in African-American communities, narrative is intimately tied to the *cultural-communal-psychological tool kit* of individuals, including Joy (Bruner, 1990; Swindler, 2001; Wertsch, 1985). The process of constructing narrative is an act of resistance to what Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell (1995) has termed *interest convergence*—“people believe what benefits them” (p. 22). Local narrative practices become a resource to both the researcher and the researched, to the extent that the individual resists, accedes to, seizes upon, or in some way makes use of the self-relevant messages embodied therein (Miller et al., 1990).

As a critically conscious narrative, “Joy and the Smart Kids” invokes literary conventions and storytelling. It challenges the social construction of identity, race, and power, eschewing the experiences of White

Americans as the normative standard, grounding its conceptual lens, instead, in the distinctive contextual experiences of people of color. This counter-narrative engages the conventions of oppositional scholarship in Critical Race Theory (CRT) through which individuals resist dominant discourses, while at the same time gives voice to racial injury (Crenshaw, 1988; Guinier L. & Torres, G., 2002; Harris, 1993).

Narrative theory holds that we each occupy a normative universe from which we are not easily dislodged (Bruner, 1990; Connelly, M.F. & Clandinin, J.D., 1990; Ochs & Capps, 2001). What follows is an effort to attend to the experience of adult and adolescent literacy through a lens of double-consciousness. This story runs counter to both the grand narrative of colorblindness, especially with respect to minority youth achievement, and the structures used to preserve and disseminate that narrative (Fecho, 2004). This article emphasizes that personal narrative is a source of resilience and an act of resistance, which often veils and illuminates the institutionalized language of schooling. Such storytelling, as is illustrated here, is just one way of engaging with an institution that purports to be colorblind.

### The Meeting: Brokering Complex Margins of Identity, Schooling, And Achievement

Nearing the end of spring, not too long ago, I requested a meeting with the elementary school principal, Mrs. Anderson, of my 4th grade daughter, Joy. My reason for calling the meeting was straightforward—to ensure that my daughter’s “family” and “cultural community” would not be perceived through a deficit lens. Absent this kind of intervention is an expectation that I would be read as not just a woman or parent, but a “Black woman” or “one of those parents” with all of the associations attached to my body. My expectation of being read this way is reinforced on a daily basis, and such a reading is not limited to teachers and administrators. Neither is it limited by race. I was recently reminded of this when a building custodian, a Latina, mistakenly identified me as *una trabajadora* (female worker) and attempted to hand me a mop and bucket as I waited in the corridor of the nearly deserted school building for my daughter to complete her afterschool tutoring session.

Experience has taught me that the symbols designating school language’s utility are inscribed onto bodies as well as pages, and are to be read like sovereign words on history’s stationary. Hence, I was *doubly*

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conscious of school language's representation/construction/pursuit of me as an African American woman, parent, and educator and that my body and its adornment would be read. Such awareness, according to Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 63), gave me a "transcendent position...my ability to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion—margins and mainstreams," and as Dubois (1939) suggests regarding the double-consciousness of African Americans, it afforded a rich dualistic regard for the full experience of schooling: hostile yet welcoming; rich yet wanting; virtuous yet defective. Thus, I prepared for my meeting accordingly—black business suit, *check*; fresh, curly Afro, *check*; articulation free of cadence and style (just to confuse 'em), *check*; and fully conscious of potential/formidable/inevitable scrutiny, *check*.

As an educator I wasn't a stranger to the *language of schooling*—a language both simple and sophisticated—that many schools devise to communicate with and differentiate between insiders and outsiders. It manifests even within the context of an institution that touts itself as dedicated to social justice. "Isn't she articulate?" my White, female university colleagues proclaimed to all of the members of the equity advisory committee on which I was serving. This was after I'd presented on the topic of underrepresented faculty mentoring. The aforementioned "compliment," while apparently neutral, when said in mixed company is a double-move, which simultaneously positions the White speaker as equity-minded, while also marking the "exceptionality" of the "articulate" speaker, thereby implying the inarticulateness of others. In other words, I was the exception for all to take note of. This condescending, yet patronizing statement did not go unnoticed by another African American attendee, who graciously apologized for our colleague's "neutrality." It's important to understand that the word *articulate* is encoded with the knowledge that border crossing is possible, but that challenging the system is not. Thus, "articulate" signifies the complex reality that border crossing demands of the Black or Brown body.

*Language*, in the sense of institutional border crossing, is a representational medium encoded with a formal attitude, perception, image, symbolic system, and intention through which the school and its creators/keepers wish to create, engage, and convey its meanings. It is alive, this language. And at times it is warming, unambiguous, lucid, calm, and temperate. At other times it is abstract, tedious, tense, and politely vicious. In *schooling* this language constructs

a complex landscape in which students, parents, and communities engage teachers and administrators in stances relative to the expectations that each has of the other. The *language of schooling* establishes meanings of who we are and are not. My acquaintance with it is not slight, but [assaultively] intimate, where at times it attempts to define and control me and I attempt to annihilate it (Hooks, 2003).

Arriving at the school, a stone's throw from our home in a mid-western suburb, I was warmly greeted by the office receptionist, a gray-haired woman with a palid countenance, and asked to wait as the principal finished up a meeting. I wasn't surprised to be met by a White woman considering that the majority of the school, both faculty and student body, is White. After a few moments, Mrs. Anderson, the principal, emerged from her office with an older Black man who I recognized as the custodian whom Joy had referred to as "nice" at one point during after-school pickup. Mrs. Anderson, a very tall, White blond, wearing a gray business suit and ruffled blouse, took a seat at the long conference table. Her appearance was professional and soft, her green eyes attentive, and her demeanor relaxed. She conveyed a sensitive and concerned air toward me as a parent. With clasped hands resting in her lap, she nodded and evoked an empathetic warmth as I shared with her my understanding that schooling in this affluent context would not be a neutral, apolitical experience for Joy, but rather that it would be necessarily complex, political, and layered, as it had been for my son just a few grades ahead.

A year before, in preparation for my family's relocation to our new community in Illinois, I had taken the liberty of researching potential school districts. I was attracted to the school's reputation and vision of fostering global awareness in all its students. When I put in a call to inquire about the application process for the gifted and talented program for my son, the director informed me over the phone that he should have no problem being admitted as she could "tell by the sound of" my voice that he comes from a good family.

Upon arrival on the first day of school, I escorted my children to the front office for check-in. When I introduced my son as having been admitted to the honors class, an alarmed administrative assistant looked up from her computer and promptly declared, "Well, that can't be." My son and I both assured her that there was no confusion and that he in fact was a student in that particular program. With a few clicks to her keyboard, she looked up from her screen and

with a cock of her head declared, “Well, what do you know!”

Therefore, a year later, I was in the office again, this time to alert Mrs. Anderson to my desire for an academic experience for Joy that would be challenging and include parent-teacher dialogue, parental input, and teacher collaboration. I spoke as a mother of my hopes and concerns for her child, not only within the context of the classroom, but also within the larger context of schooling. I also spoke with masked awareness that, as a cultural border-crosser, I was brokering the complex margins of race, class, and social relations for my child, and I ached knowing that in time she would face the challenges and experiences that I, as an African American female, have faced.

We spent an hour talking about Joy’s interests, her outgoing personality, and her displays of leadership and academic strengths in math and science. We discussed things that I might do at home to maintain her progress, and things that the school could do as well. In particular, we discussed opportunities for rigor that would further challenge Joy and extend her learning. I was alerted and took note of the district-wide placement exams that were administered for “academically talented students” in the fall term.

After mutually agreeing that Joy was indeed a candidate and that Mrs. Anderson would keep an eye on her, we said our good-byes and I was off, headed east to my job as a Language Arts instructor at a Chicago public high school, confident that I’d brokered the complex margins of schooling and achievement.

### Learning on the Blue Line: Crossing Borders of Race, Class and Social Relations

Back in my sophomore English classroom, I think about the irony of colorblind conceptions of space and time and of the social and cultural borders I traverse as an African American mother, teacher, scholar. This border crossing is most tangible on the east-west bound commuter rail, whose “blue-line” runs along the northern edge of the campus. I’ve found inspiration in this rail system, particularly its map posted on the platform, and how its intricate,

color-coded, and deliberate lines and directionality traverse this sprawling city’s borders of race, class, and social relations. As such, riders from all walks of life interface with diverse geography, people, and social phenomena, which are largely reflective of the section of the city in which the train is traveling. As the red-line train moves through each community, beginning in Ravenswood and moving along the “magnificent mile” through Bronze Ville heading south, or as the blue-line travels from Halsted Street through Lawndale and into historical Oak Park heading west, each community is a picturesque representation of the social world order (and disorder), harmony and disharmony. This social order is constructed through a series of tacit agreements and mediated by images, tales, and scripts. While riding these trains one can observe the disparate, physical condition of the trains, train stations, and commerce—kiosks, coffee stations, and newspaper stands. Thus, the commute is a subtle social commentary on the political and social economy of the city, moving through a complex, interwoven maze of social inequality, privileging, and cultural interaction. In all that is ordered and color-blind, one would assume that all the rail cars and stops along each route are equally resourced. After all, so much time and space separates my (our) commute from the days of Plessey vs. Ferguson, when a Black man challenged a railroad’s rule prohibiting him from riding in a car reserved for Whites. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) remind us that:

The railroad replied that it had set aside identical cars for Black passengers. Hence its practice did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court opinion agreed, establishing the principle of separate but equal that lasted until the Brown decision of 1954. (p. 103)

Decades later, riders, for their part, have the opportunity to read and interrogate the commuting experience, through a kind of border crossing, where people actively move across the socially, culturally, and politically constructed divides that separate cultural groups and discourse communities. Taking note of pending destinations, White men and women in business suits visibly exit the south-bound train, while Black and brown bodies sink into seats and opportunities deferred. Such an interpretation of behaviors and appearances is limited, however, as it masks the nuances that characterize human existence as complex and always open to multiple manifestations, multiple roles.

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In my role as a teacher, I strive to better understand and traverse such borders and social locations. My high school classroom became a site where day-to-day border crossing—police brutality, residential violence, and abuse—coincided with subject-matter learning. As Lee et al. (2002) point out, youths from marginalized minority groups face additional “mixed messages about appropriate belief systems and cultural displays—as they move across settings, and uneven and sometimes confusing responsibilities for peripheral participation in adult life activities” (p. 6). Researchers have documented how African American adolescents have assumed tasks that were once the responsibilities of their parents (Burton, Allison & Obeidallah, 1995; Ginwright, 2004; Lee, Beale-Spencer & Harpalini, 2004). The struggles of finding decent work, paying rent, and juggling child-care have undoubtedly placed greater challenges on youths in urban communities. For these students, who often assume adult-type roles at home (e.g., parents, economic providers, child-care providers) while at the same time being expected to assume docile, child-like roles within the social organization of the school, academic achievement is often delimited by the economic conditions of the communities in which they live (Ginwright, 2004; Lee, Spencer & Harpalini, 2004). These shifts are daily acts of border crossing. As a class we collectively cross borders through subject matter and make use of available tools of literacy and life problem-solving that transform the classroom into a community site for learning. Here students interrogate life’s challenges, which include tending to colorblind discourses instantiated within texts, drawing on forms of prior knowledge for the consideration of alternative perspectives. Interventions and educational research that do not reflect young people’s histories and their unique cultural niches often miss opportunities to influence generative change. Thus, any intervention whose goal is to increase life chances cannot ignore students’ perceptions of what is threatening (whether it is what and how they are being taught in school or their relationships with adults and peers) and what is supportive to their own development.

In the act of literary problem-solving, students carry out epistemological roles demanded by the subject matter within culturally familiar participation structures. Together they digest (even assume) multiple points of view in order to counter hegemonic dominant themes of word and world—skills that mimic and at times exceed those required in any

Language Arts classroom. As teacher-researcher, I attempt to understand how the complexities inherent in life problem-solving intersect in positive ways with their literate achievement, as well as teachers’ perceptions of individual, social, cultural, and institutional underpinnings that impact that achievement.

### The Smart Kids: Perils and Permeability of Inclusion and Exclusion

Fast-forward to the fall. School is in full swing in Joy’s suburban school district. The wind outside has picked up, and a cold chill is peeking from around the corner. Inside our home, however, we gather at the kitchen table for dinner where we begin our ritual of recounting and unpacking the day’s events. The structure of our conversation binds and displays the routine order of the day. In the process of unpacking we bid for time to talk, to hold one another’s attention, interest, and acceptance. Here at the table we elicit one another’s approval to begin unraveling the stories of our day. Ultimately these become shared, joint productions—whose content and function both shape our evening and inform days to come. Critical Race Theory (CRT) argues that such stories can name our experiences, our injury; once named, it can be combated. According to Delgado & Stephanic (2001), “Powerfully told narratives may begin a process of adjustment in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding listeners, readers of our common humanity” (p. 43).

This routine unpacking is space-making time, to be filled with our respective border crossing moments (and all other kinds of moments) at the table, to unpack and re-vision through a shared, multi-generational fund of knowledge as story. For her part, on this particular evening, Joy hesitantly announced that she’d spent the day “taking some tests.” Hesitancy is generally not part of my daughter’s personality, and its presence in her voice quickly alerted us to something out of the ordinary. Though we were not surprised to hear about tests in school, we were struck by the disheartened way in which Joy expressed this news. So we prodded, poked, and dug deeper. With a shrug she gazed into her plate of food and with a slow exhale declared matter-of-factly, “Well, it’s just me and the smart kids.” Within one sentence, Joy publicly questioned her place and deemed herself as separate from “the smart kids,” even if she didn’t know why. However, within the subtext of her



proclamation was a questioning search for validation of its merit. Joy is not questioning the validity of having an elite group of smart kids, but rather whether her inclusion in such a group is valid.

It was not so much the statement itself as it was the self-doubt and confusion embedded in it that permeated and silenced the room. Our silence was not the result of being stunned or indifferent, but rather alerted to a tension between an individual crossing borders between places in the hierarchy and the awareness that the hierarchy itself is not being challenged. For a moment we sat, my husband and I, watching in silence as our daughter moved the peas and carrots around her plate.

Joy's words were not foreign to me. As an elementary school student I'd spoken them myself, to myself, perhaps as a way of naming what no one had named for me—the academic landscape that I, too, liminally straddled. With contained anxiety, I managed to rise from the table, but instead remained still for what felt like an eternity, trying to reconcile my efforts with the reality that Joy now faced. I could no more make it come together in that moment than I could catch the steam rising from a teakettle with my bare hands, though it burned none-the-less.

I remember Sister Catherine, my White sixth grade Catholic school teacher, unenthusiastically saying “Yolanda, today you are going to move up to Group A.” Looking back on that experience, I realize that I could not have fully recognized the significance of what my teacher was saying, nor could I know that I was being put on a path in life where I would encounter few other African-Americans. Not much has changed. These experiences would bring me to my life's work: trying to understand the difficult and complex issues associated with literacy learning, achievement, and persistence among African Americans. From what I'd understood, Group A (as opposed to Group B) was a place for kids who looked and spoke nothing like me. The borders between these spaces were rigid, and my crossing them did not challenge the existence of what would later be called the “achievement gap,” but rather my crossing made me an instrument so that, like the townspeople to the

character Pecola Breedlove of Toni Morrison's the *Bluest Eye* (1970), my classmates and my teachers could clean their Whiteness on me:

We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. (p. 63)

I remember feeling fractured with this geographic shift and metaphysical crossing of borders, not being aware of what or how to make meaning of this new proposition. Today I am an adult cultural border crosser and can speak the necessary language and recognize when, where, and how to cross. As a child, however, I lacked this understanding, only aware that some part of me, and my posse of friends who were much like me, would not be coming along.

### Narratives at the Table: Cultural Socialization and Resiliency Through Discourse

At home when the time was right, I, like Joy, inserted a rupture into the family dialogue by relaying these feelings to my mother, grandmother, and aunts. Their response was to recognize the tension that I was experiencing and shift my orientation. Instead of dismissing my voice, they stitched the fragments together with cultural tools: stories, language, and words that ran counter to my insecurities. Such stories, according to Ochs & Capps (2002),

...Provide critical information about what children can expect to experience over the course of a lifetime....builds understandings of what it means to be a person and a member of the community; that is, a history of being in the world. As such...narrative activities socialize children into productive understandings and expectations. (p. 111)

These stories were not all neutral and smooth. Some had sharp, pointy edges that cut and left an indelible mark; others soothed and comforted. They were not meant to create a unified consciousness, but to reveal the complex nuances that united me with the elders, the ancestors, the cousins, and Joy. These stories were intended to leave traces of themselves that wouldn't soon be forgotten. The adults' knowledge of

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what I was experiencing at the time reassured and gave me something which CRT scholars call a “perspective advantage,” inherited and shared by those constructed by dominant culture as Other (Crenshaw, 1988; Guinier L. & Torres, G., 2002; Harris, 1993).

This advantage does not speak to the economic, social, and political disadvantage that many members of subordinated groups may experience; rather, it illuminates the way that not being positioned in the center allows for broader vision. Through narration of personal experiences and stories, adults provide tools to proceed in confidence, not from the narrow vision of moving from the margins to the center, seeming to bridge the illusive achievement gap, but to a wide angle and doubly conscious kind of knowing. A kind of knowing that entails an understanding of multiple perspectives, where self is seen as deeply interred in community and there is freedom from generalized, imposed landscapes of meaning and sense-making (West, 1992). Knowing IS joy! It is “the experience of pleasure in and through collective contexts” (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000, p. 249).

In my silent search for a means by which to reconcile the contradictions between expectation and experience, I realized that I could, in that moment, stitch the fragments together with Joy. These fragments depicted a schism between the expectations that my child’s experiences would be less jarring for her than they had been for me.

Feeling anxious, I probed for clarification.  
“What do you mean, Joy?” I asked.

“I mean I’m not one of the smart kids,” Joy replied, still pushing food around her plate.

“I don’t know, Joy. Maybe things aren’t the way you think they are. I’m pretty sure that there is another way of looking at this.” This sentiment in gesture and tone echoed that of my grandmother and mother who, with their words, transformed the kitchen table into a site of resistance, resilience, and sense-making.

“That’s right,” my husband added, “I can remember when I was your age....”

For the remainder of dinner, my husband and I shared stories with our children in an attempt to bolster their will and confidence. Personal stories of times we’d known when we felt alienated and the errors we’d made in viewing our differences as bad. We told of times when our differences were resisted or

unacknowledged by some attempts to be “nice.” In doing so, we attempted to buffer Joy’s reading of this new landscape, emphasizing how important it was that she not allow such feelings and micro-aggressions of difference to overwhelm her and work against her goals in the bigger picture. In our attempts to reconcile the language of school and the language of home, we emphasized how important it was to remember that “regardless where you are in the classroom or elsewhere, you’re never alone.”

As alerting as Joy’s statement was, nothing could have prepared me for what was to follow when I phoned her classroom teacher the next day. In much the same matter-of-fact way that Joy had announced that she was not one of the smart kids, the teacher replied, “It’s interesting how they can pick up on these things.” There was a momentary pause as, perhaps, we each examined the situation in much the same bewilderment, yet from drastically different points of analysis. “Yes...uhm well, thank you for your time,” I said, as quite honestly nothing else seemed appropriate. “No problem,” she replied before hanging up.

### Classroom Hierarchy

At its surface Joy’s story might reflect *one* perspective on *one* student’s struggle with difference, difference that is instantiated in academic identities. The unfortunate truth is that this story and its underpinnings are not new but increasingly “old.” During the past 50 years, scholars from multiple disciplines and perspectives have long identified the issues I have described. What warrants this current telling is how little we have moved forward. While the stories shared here open a window to multiple perspectives, my perspective and positionality regarding Joy’s experience is one of many, which for my purpose I have elected to ground in CRT.

Within the subtext of Joy’s story, issues of practice, achievement, perceptions, identities, and classroom assessment are illuminated. Layered within that subtext is the complex issue of educational practice—specifically, the ways in which classroom practices and organizational structures continue to obfuscate a hierarchy of achievement and competence while bellying calls for change. Somewhere within the context of school Joy picks up on particular discourses that shape how she understands herself within the classroom hierarchy (in effect, where she stands). The language of schooling, while appearing neutral, facilitates her construction of an identity written through the violence of explicit and implicit colorblind

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

As a member of a teaching community, you can:

- Seek to understand the ways in which members of particular communities develop with and through the kinds of routine, problem-solving strategies that characterize theirs as a community of practice.
- Provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse, culturally rich texts that incorporate linguistic features, such as African American English, in texts—in conjunction with classroom discourse that includes aspects of African American English.
- Extend beyond a consideration of literacy as skill to consider literacy as multiple and situated within sociocultural practices, discourse as connected to culturally situated notions of power and power relations, and texts as functioning to represent certain ideologies.
- Encourage students to engage in ways that make use of culturally familiar norms while grappling with difficult text.

languages. In the classroom the teacher, as expert, knowingly and unknowingly, positions students in multiple ways vis a vis her interactions (with students and their caregivers) and pedagogical practice. These practices get taken up, read, and interpreted by all students in particular ways, at times reinforcing a hierarchical notion of learning and what constitutes knowledge to be learned. Consequently, Joy's acknowledgement of an imposed identity as a learner is manifested through classroom practices, affecting her and her classmates' ideas of "belonging" that transcend that particular moment into other contexts (Ochs & Capps, 2004).

### Border Crossing: Drawing From Cultural Repertoires of Knowledge and Practice

The persistence of the normative discourse around non-dominant youths and schooling has led to impoverished representations of what it means to know and to perceive forms of achievement, though such representations are continually viewed as normative. As a result, argues Lee (2009), "educational policies and practices do not seek to leverage the full range of repertoires available to all human beings as they

navigate what is entailed in learning new things, including learning the disciplines of the academy" (p. 66). Therefore, not only do we need to account for the full ecologies of peoples' lives, we must also account for the fact that vulnerability is endemic to being human—for everyone, not just those facing domination. A fundamental task of life-course development, including all the tasks associated with learning in schools, is to manage vulnerability in ways that facilitate what we perceive to be positive outcomes across the life course. The nature of the challenges and triumphs we face and the resources available to us to respond to those challenges will vary according to the cultural and ecological contexts in which we live (Lee, 2009). As educators, we have opportunity to "open the window unto ignored or alternative realities...bridging the gaps in imagination, conception" and curriculum through living narrative (Delgado & Stephanic, 2001 p. 67). In the classroom we can draw from narrative texts of the everyday as scaffolds for reasoning about complex problems in literature that also prompt discussions about colorblindness.

It is important to note that Joy's narrative does not end at the dinner table. Neither does it resolve itself neatly with uncomplicated and comfortable reconciliation between good will and experience. There are more stories, many of which she may or may not unpack along the way. What is most important, however, is not how the story ends, but rather that for far too many students marked by regional linguistic variations as well as socio-economic and cultural differences who may have been situated like Joy, but who may not have access to the navigational tools that she does, that narrative doesn't make it to the dinner table at all. For this and many other reasons, it is important that teachers become aware of the issues and take charge of their understandings of not just what students perceive, but how they read the world and how such readings impact their learning and school achievement. It is not so much that I am able to deliver superior strategies for negotiating the trouble of the "achievement gap." Border crossing is one of many avenues for resisting the status quo. Other families in other households also participate in storytelling across the table and come to different strategies, sometimes consciously, strategically refusing to cross borders that they don't think will benefit them. When we, as educators, buy into colorblind discourses, we tacitly reify narratives about achievement. If we are to



improve the educational outcomes for all students, it is not enough that we continue to ignore what it is students take from the table and bring to school.

#### Note

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