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Precious' Story: Learning to Use Language and Literacy for Her Own Purposes

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In this reflective essay, we explore key life experiences of one African American teacher-- (the first author of this paper)--who has taught kindergarten, fifth grade, and is presently a 9th grade English teacher in the high school from which she graduated. We couch the first author's story in the professional literature to analyze and illustrate what happened in her life when her teachers worked effectively with her to help her learn to use language and literacy for her own purposes. The overall story about the first author's memories of her most powerful school experiences serves as a vehicle for sharing ideas that teachers can implement in their own classrooms to foster the language and literacy learning of children.

Keywords: Literacy, Diversity, African American Vernacular English, Language Register, Effective Instruction

I was economically poor and I came from a family where, before me, the goal of most of the women in my family was to have children. I lived in Section 8 housing, and my mother was on welfare. My mother, an unwed teen who served time in jail for drug convictions, still suffers from these addictions. You get the picture; I was a child of poverty who could easily have become a high school dropout statistic. Instead I am a practicing teacher with a Master's Degree in Literacy and am beginning a doctoral program in educational administration. Our purpose in sharing my story is to identify key aspects of my school life experiences that contributed to my academic success. Through examples from my life, I hope that you can hear the voices and thoughts of my teachers who...took the responsibility to create meaningful and interesting ways to connect me with learning. As a teacher I try every day to support my students in many of the ways in which I was supported. By following the lead of exemplary teachers from my own educational experiences, you, too, may be able to identify ways to successfully work with your students from non-dominant backgrounds. (Interview with Precious Jackson, June 2006)

Currently, almost 90% of the teachers teaching in American classrooms are white monolingual women (Au, 2006; Kambutu & Thompson, 2005). Increasingly, however, the students who inhabit American classrooms are children from non-dominant backgrounds (Gutierrez, 2008)¹. While differences between the racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of children and their teachers is not itself a problem, it is problematic that children from non-dominant backgrounds are not typically as successful in U.S. classrooms as their white, English-speaking peers (He & Cooper, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). One explanation for why this difference matters is that some white educators hold a deficit view of children from non-dominant backgrounds without even being consciously aware of their views (Enciso, 2007; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

In this reflective essay, we explore key life experiences of one African American teacher--Precious Jackson (the first author of this paper)--who has taught kindergarten, fifth grade, and is presently a 9th grade English teacher in the high school from which she graduated—in conjunction with professional literature to illustrate what happened in Precious's life when her teachers worked effectively with her to help her learn to use language and literacy for her own purposes. The four authors of this reflective essay are educators in public schools and universities, colleagues, and friends. Precious is African American. Julie, Cindy, and Diane are white, monolingual women and teachers. We developed this reflective essay in the following manner. First, we met several times and audio taped our conversations about Precious's school learning experiences. Then, we had our audio taped conversations professionally transcribed. We collaboratively wrote our essay after reading the transcripts of our conversations and reviewing related professional literature. Selected excerpts from our conversations (presented as italics in this paper) comprise the overall story about Precious' memories of her most powerful school experiences.

¹ Drawing on the work of Gutierrez (2008), children from non-dominant backgrounds refers to children who are not white, middle- or upper class children, and who do not speak standard versions of English as a first language.

Our essay is structured as follows: First, we share background information about us as authors and colleagues. Second, we present excerpts of Precious' most powerful school learning experiences in the form of a series of quotes from our conversations together. As we present excerpts of Precious' talk about her school experiences, we analyze her experiences in light of language-related scholarship as well as studies pertaining to dialect and language variation. Then, we discuss implications of Precious' story for literacy teachers and learners.

Setting the Context: Our Backgrounds and Experiences

In addition to being colleagues and friends, we--the four authors of this paper--are all deeply interested in issues of literacy and diversity in our teaching and research. Precious, who has taught at both the elementary and high school levels, is currently working on her doctorate in education while simultaneously teaching high school English. One of Precious' primary interests as a teacher and scholar is effective literacy instruction for African American children. Cindy, a teacher educator and former elementary teacher for nine years, focuses much of her work on issues of linguistic and cultural diversity. Diane, also a former elementary teacher, currently teaches English classes at an inner city high school while also working as a teacher educator. A central focus of Diane's work is exploring effective literacy instruction for urban students from non-dominant backgrounds. Julie, a teacher educator and former elementary teacher for 14 years, explores literacy teaching and learning through a critical race theory lens.

Conversations with Precious: Precious' Reflections on her Most Powerful School Experiences

In this section, we share four excerpts from our overall conversations with Precious. Together, these excerpts comprise a snapshot of Precious' memories of some of her most powerful school learning experiences. The first two focus on Precious' memories of how some of her most memorable teachers viewed her as a learner². The remaining excerpts focus on the manner in which some of Precious' most memorable teachers viewed her language (i.e., African American Language, AAL). In the first excerpt, Precious reminisces that during first grade she was always late to school, if not absent, because her mother did not get up early enough to take her to school. After making many unsuccessful, not returned calls to her home, rather than scolding Precious and saying or implying negatives about her home, Precious' teacher, instead made Precious believe that the school day held less value if she were not there.

EXCERPT 1: Precious reflecting about her 1st grade teacher.

My first grade teacher never acted mad at me for not coming to school. She just helped me at lunch with what I had missed the day before and she always told me how much she missed me when I didn't come to school. I think she knew that I had a delinquent mother, whom I loved very much, but she never acted like anything was different at my house. One day she brought me an alarm clock and taught me how to set it. Since I knew my mom well, I began asking her at night to fix my hair for the next day and to help me get my clothes ready. I did this as soon as I got home from school because my mom was available early in the evenings. Even though I always knew my mom loved me, my home

² Please note that all of the teachers Precious discusses in this manuscript are white teachers.

had lots of noise and confusion. My first grade classroom was happy and welcoming. It was a place where I wanted to be because my teacher made me feel very wanted.”

What we can learn from Precious’ first grade teacher is that, as teachers, we must try to build a bridge between the worlds (home and school) in which each child resides (Au, 2006; Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010). While we are doing so, we cannot waste one second of the child’s school time. We have no time to dwell negatively on reasons why parents may not be responding to us as teachers³. Instead, we must do everything in our power to make each child feel valued and to make each child want to come to school. As Precious’ comment below illustrates, she had more than one teacher like her first grade teacher.

EXCERPT 2: Precious reflecting about her 7th grade Teacher.

When I reflect on my seventh grade teacher, it was almost like it was just the two of us in the classroom. I know that’s not true, but that’s how I remember my relationship with her. That year, one of my uncles passed away shortly after I got into her class, and that’s really what triggered me into my silent mode. I became really isolated. Because I had never really dealt with my own father’s death, losing my uncle was very serious for me. And it was also around that time that I was taking on a huge burden of trying to raise my little brothers and dealing with everything that was going on at home. When my uncle passed, my aunt slipped into a huge depression and...I felt this urgency to make my aunt feel better. I felt the need to take care of my aunt, too. I was very close to this aunt; she helped to raise me, and I called her mom...I took a week off of school...and stayed home with her all day every day...(Nobody in my family told me it was wrong for me not to go to school. School was never a priority in my household...).

When I finally went back to school, my English teacher pulled me aside and asked what had been going on....I just broke down and cried and told her everything that was going on and about my dad and my uncle. That was the first connection we made. Then she recommended me to a support group... and that was another way for us to bond... I felt like I had a relationship with her that none of the other students had...I felt really, really connected to her....Everything that she said to me, any advice she gave me, I really took it heart, and I never wanted to disappoint her. I always wanted to make her proud of me and proud of the work that I did. She taught me to journal my feelings and thoughts. She read these whenever I asked. She would make notes in them and offer suggestions. I wanted her to read my writing more and more. She encouraged me to write my feelings into poems. She shared lots of poetry with me. She thought I could really write; with her I found my voice and believed that I could write something others might enjoy reading.

Like her first grade teacher, Precious’ seventh grade teacher made it clear that she valued Precious; Precious’ thoughts and life mattered. Also like her first grade teacher, Precious’ seventh grade teacher did not judge her and then dismiss her; rather, her seventh grade teacher accepted her exactly as she was and did everything in her power to help Precious be successful at school (Santa Ana, 2004). Each of these teachers created culturally responsive learning

³ We do believe that teachers should strive to work positively and productively in partnership with parents; however, when parents opt not to work in partnership with us, as teachers, we still have the professional responsibility to make every instructional second of every day with our students count.

experiences; as a result Precious connected with these teachers and school (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010). Precious' teachers cared about her; in turn, Precious cared about what her teachers thought of her, and Precious' academic work reflected this concern. Various studies point to similar positive results when teachers value and strive to understand their students as individuals (e.g., Jones, 2006; Bryan, 2004, Fox, 2005).

Not only did Precious' most memorable teachers value her, they valued her primary language (i.e., African American Language, AAL). Reflecting on her literacy instruction in her fourth grade classroom, Precious stated the following:

EXCERPT 3: My fourth grade teacher... told my classmates and me that at home we spoke "cool" and that at school we could speak our home language and also "school talk" that sounded kind of like our books. She told us that as she shared the school talk with us, we could think how we'd say it at both school and home. That's how she learned to speak like us, and we'd learn how to speak like her. It seemed fun to us, and now I realize that she taught us to value our language and how to grow it. She never said anything about African American Language. She never said anything about language registers or code switching. None of that came until I went to college. But it all made sense when I went to college. I realized that back in 4th grade, I learned this...And she did that for me. She...gave us all an opportunity to just talk and write and it felt good, and I just kept writing and talking after that--realizing which form of language was my school talk and which form of language was my home talk. I'm extremely grateful to her for that."

As illustrated by Precious' comments, her fourth grade teacher helped her and her peers to realize that there may be differences between home and school varieties of English (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). It is especially important that Precious' fourth grade teacher never described Precious' home language of AAL as deficit or lacking. On the contrary, Precious' fourth grade teacher sought to learn AAL much like she was teaching her students to learn the academic English used at school.

Language and literacy scholarship points to the value of Precious' fourth grade teacher's beliefs and practices. First, the language varieties that individuals speak are intimately tied to their identities (Vriend Van Duinen & Wilson, 2008). When teachers do not value and honor students' language varieties, students see their teachers as not valuing them (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010). Second, when learning about languages, cultures, and identities is a two-way street (i.e., teachers learn about students' languages, cultures, and identities and vice versa), student learning is maximized in the following ways: Students are more open to sharing about their lives and experiences at school, teaching practices become more inclusive, and in-school literacy tasks became more congruent with out of school literacy-related practices (Cahill & Collard, 2003). Third, all speakers of English speak a variety, or varieties, of English; there is no such thing as one standard form of English that all "normal" English speakers write and speak (Wolfram, & Schilling-Estes, 2006). Moreover, the varieties of English that have more

cache in a society--like the U.S.—are highly ideological, infused with issues of power and privilege, and determined arbitrarily by those in power (Bourdieu, 2000; Gee, 2008).

The work of Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) illustrated this third point (i.e., that there is no such thing as one “standard” form of English). First, notions of “worth” and “value” with respect to language varieties are social constructions; they are choices that groups make about their “versions” of language and the “versions” of language used by different groups. A second central point follows closely from the first; those in power in social groups *assign* “value” and “worth” to varieties of language. Perhaps nowhere has this second point been made more prevalent than in the research done pertaining to African American Language--AAL (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Perry & Delpit, 1996). Students suffer when white educators do not understand and appreciate the value and complexity of AAL (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010). Unfortunately, the general public, and many educators, have had a history of misunderstanding AAL and the cognitive abilities of children who speak AAL (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). Linguists (e.g., Labov, 1972) have long informed us that AAL is a viable and rule-governed symbol system. But, unstudied perceptions and beliefs rooted in ignorance and prejudice have been difficult to dispel in education and at the societal level (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2008; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009).

When Diane (the third author of this paper) asked Precious to elaborate on what teachers could do to enact more inclusive language and literacy practices in the classroom, Precious offered a personal opinion, and then she shared more of the instructional specifics used by her fourth grade teacher:

*EXCERPT 4: We [as teachers] don't have to correct students every single time they say something [that does not reflect an academic, middle-class version of English] because if we do, that might be the last time we hear them talk...So, just let them talk. And then once they're open about talking, you can say, "Hey, guess what? What you're saying is great...You say **that** at home. **This** is how we say it here in the classroom." Here's an example of how my fourth grade teacher worked with my classmates and me: [In my fourth grade classroom when I'd write some of my poetry... Instead of writing, "I want to," I would write, "I wanna", "W-A- N- N- A", "I wanna." Which is basically a word that I had made up but I thought it was a real word because that's how I heard people speak and that's how I had learned to speak...My teacher would say, "What you're saying isn't wrong. Now, let's write it the way we might see it in one of our books." She did this so easily and patiently that it finally clicked in our heads that there were ways... to write and there were ways to...talk, and that **it all depended on where we were and our audience**. My classmates and I got it. This exposure to academic English through reading and writing was the first stage. So my talking still stayed the same but my writing grew first; I was more aware of my writing. I think this happened for each of us because it was between our teacher and us. Since all of my school friends spoke AAL it was harder for us to expand our oral language. I knew how to do it but I didn't have a reason to do it except when we role-played different characters in class and when we engaged in school talk in the*

classroom. Realizing the need for this classroom practice I provide many opportunities for this to occur in my classroom.

Precious had the good fortune of being exposed to many excellent teachers who, because of their beliefs that every child is valuable and can learn, found ways to bridge her home and school literacies and language varieties. They also demonstrated through their actions that they valued Precious and her language and culture while simultaneously teaching Precious and her classmates varieties of academic English that promoted school success. As a result, Precious is a school success. Teachers like Precious' most memorable teachers must become the models for the preparation of future teachers.

Discussion

Through the eyes of Precious we have seen what can happen when teachers help children to develop an inclination and ability to use language and literacy for their own purposes. Precious' story illustrates that children come to school with funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) that include their language and literacy practices and sociocultural experiences. In order for children to experience success at school, their experiences at school must build from this base fund of knowledge (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010; Freire & Macedo, 1987). School experiences, language, practices, and people become a new fund of knowledge. For school to be a positive learning experience for children, it is essential that we, as educators, examine our assumptions about the sociocultural practices of students who do not share our linguistic, cultural, racial, and/or family backgrounds. If we find that our knowledge bases are insufficient to promote meaningful learning for each of our children, we must learn to design the appropriate next steps in our professional development; we, as educators, must continue to learn so that we can promote the leaning of all of our children.

In essence, what we witnessed through Precious' descriptions of her most salient school learning experiences, is an additive approach towards schooling (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2008; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). An additive approach towards schooling "is about equalizing opportunity...In this world, students do not have to choose between...[their native languages, language varieties, and cultures and being American], they can be both. This pluralistic model of schooling builds on students' bicultural experiences—which *all* minority youth bring with them to school—to make them conversant, respectful, and fluent in as many dialects and languages as they can master. The perfect starting point is what they possess (or are on the verge of possessing)" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 269).

In addition to valuing and honoring the language and cultural backgrounds that children bring to school, an additive approach to education has three additional fundamental characteristics (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). First, educators who enact an additive approach to education make sure that educational experiences are meaningful in children's lives. For example, when Precious' teacher taught her to use writing as a tool to sort through difficult life experiences, her teacher was using an additive approach to schooling—she was making school practices meaningful in Precious' life. Second, additive schooling is about building and maintaining community—both within the classroom and between home and school.

When Precious' teachers enacted classroom practices to honor the languages, language varieties, and cultural backgrounds that Precious and her classmates brought to the classroom, they engaged in additive schooling practices. Finally, additive schooling is about setting high expectations for all children in the classroom and then providing the academic support and encouragement for children to achieve those high expectations. For example, even though Precious missed a lot of school in first grade, her teacher did not condemn her or her mother; rather, she provided Precious with the extra help she needed to be successful in school.

As we've seen through Precious' recollections of the actions of her teachers, if our students don't feel comfortable talking the way they know how and acting the way they know how, we cannot see the beauty of their languages and cultures. In turn, we cannot help them to see meaningful ways that their home languages and cultures can be built upon at school. We must recognize and value the foundational bases that our students bring to our classrooms. In order to meet state and federal mandates without marginalizing our students and their families, we must believe in the inherent value of each student. These positive beliefs will provide the impetus for setting students on learning trajectories that will enable them to soar academically (Edwards, McMillon, Turner, & Lee, 2010; Dewey, 1916).

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