Talking Back at School: Using the Literacy Classroom as a Site for Resistance to the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Recognition of Students Labeled “At-Risk”

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Abstract
Teaching writing to students of high need in an urban school is simultaneously pedagogical, curricular, and political. Students labeled “at-risk” for school failure often have lowered expectations placed upon them from without that impact how they feel within. Compounding this problem of perception is the real issue of heightened surveillance on these students, including the disturbing trend of involving the police when students break the rules of the school; in addition, their own history of juvenile incarceration often exacerbates their school failure. This article addresses these issues in an urban context, as well as provides insight into literacy teaching that assists students in the acquisition of knowledge, literacy, and expression.

Keywords
school-to-prison pipeline, critical literacy, cultural responsiveness, funds of knowledge, language

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Introduction

The current debate in educational policy and politics situates the societal problems of poverty and achievement solely on schools in this era of accountability. Teachers, tenure, and unions are blamed for the achievement gap; politicians and educational consultants advocate for and sell one-size-fits-all solutions that ignore historical discrimination, economic disparity, and educational tracking, and insist that if teachers only work harder, then the achievement gap will close (Darling Hammond, 2010). Educational researchers examining the entire picture understand that there are no easy solutions to what really are opportunity gaps, easily predicted by zip code and presaging lowered academic expectations and future rates of incarceration by neighborhood and by attendance at underfunded and underserved urban schools (Carter & Welner, 2013; Milner & Lomotey, 2014). Although we need macro and systemic solutions to closing the achievement gap, which is highly correlated with the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012; Carter & Welner, 2013), this article addresses what one teacher in one school did to assist students struggling with high rates of juvenile incarceration and disconnection from school, and highlights specific effective literacy practices for the urban classroom.

The students in this study attended an alternative school because they were removed from their traditional schools for behavior issues, for example, multiple suspensions, or for spending time in juvenile “lock-up” facilities per district policy. To compound the challenges of student behavior issues, many students attending the alternative school were faced with learning challenges, largely because they had academic gaps (large areas of missed instruction)
because of absences, and/or because their previous school experiences had taught them not to value school. For example, 23% of students were Below Basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Grade 8 Reading Assessment; 29% were deemed proficient. The alternative school provided a smaller school environment: class sizes of 20 maximum; experimental and engaging pedagogies, depending upon the teacher; and increased academic freedom for teachers for the purposes of maximizing student learning and preparing students to return to their traditional high school. Most of the students had already been introduced to the prison pipeline by virtue of their experiences with arrest, incarceration, and relationships with parole officers; parole officers and court workers would often visit the school to conduct surprise drug tests and other check-ins on their “clients,” our students.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline contributes to the atmosphere of increased surveillance of schools including police presence in schools, zero-tolerance policies, physical restraint tactics, and automatic consequence policies, resulting in suspensions from school (Alexander, 2012; Tate, Hamilton, Jones, Robertson, Macrander, Schultz, & Thorne-Wallington, 2014). The phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline leads to more students being introduced to the criminal justice system, and, ultimately, more juveniles being incarcerated (Heitzeg, 2009). In many cases, schools have exposed students to the judicial system at an early age and have created a footpath toward failure (Freeman, 2007).

Administrative decisions have become part of the school-to-prison-pipeline where virtually every person who finds their way to prison has a suspension on their school record (Freeman, 2007). Subject to disproportionate numbers of behavior referrals, students of color are more negatively impacted by these policies than their White counterparts (Alexander, 2012; Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Tate et al., 2014). Juveniles of color are perceived differently by the justice system than their White counterparts; prosecutors tend to attribute White criminal behavior to external factors, such as family problems, whereas criminal behavior exhibited by youth of color is often attributed to internal factors such as personality flaws and disrespect (Alexander, 2012; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Tate et al., 2014). Overuse of suspension and expulsion impacts student success and leads to increased arrests and imprisonment, higher dropout rates, placement in alternative schools, and greater chance of continued aggressive behavior (Freeman, 2007). These detrimental effects are often the result of zero-tolerance policies and harsh punishments by school authorities.
Disparate School Disciplinary Practices

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2012), African American students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled. Although they make up only 18% of the overall student population, African American students make up 46% of those students suspended more than one time. One in 4 African American students is suspended at least once compared with 1 in 11 White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2012). New data show inequitable discipline practices enacted upon minority children beginning in preschool (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Students with disabilities and those labeled as “at-risk” for school failure make up approximately 32% of incarcerated youth (Elias, 2012).

There is a connection between nondominant status and potential incarceration (Alexander, 2012) as well as academic challenges and potential incarceration (Williamson, Mercurio, & Walker, 2013); the unbridged gulf between home and school literacies plays a large part in these connections. Part of the problem may be the fact that despite the increasing diversity of our student population, the vast majority of the K-12 teaching force is White (84%; Feistritzer, 2011); hegemonic teacher training programs, or programs that do not provide culturally responsive instruction, exacerbate this problem (Milner, 2013b). Colorblind ideologies, coupled with the absence of analysis of White hegemony and the social, linguistic, and behavioral standards and norms implied by this are examples. My mission as practitioner and scholar is to investigate and ultimately bridge the divide between home and school literacies to create conditions that will enable students labeled at-risk, many of whom are also nondominant students, to find school success and extricate themselves from the prison pipeline of which they are vulnerable.

Dominant School Cultures That Lead to Practices of Coercion and Control

Literacy, as defined by Freire (1970), is the ability to read the world and pervades every aspect of schooling. Unfortunately, some teachers are unaware that their goal, teaching students standard literacy practices through Standard English, may be at odds with their students’ identities. Schools enable the dominant culture or ideology (Macedo, 2006); some students learn that what they know (and, it could be argued, who they are) is not valued, that their language is wrong. Thus, failing at school and dropping out come as no surprise. Schools become “institutions for indoctrination, for imposing obedience, for blocking the possibility of independent thought, and they play an
institutional role in a system of control and coercion” (Chomsky, 1988, as cited in Barsamian, 1992, p. 672). The system of schooling is designed to maintain the status quo and the dominant culture.

When school failure is the only way to preserve cultural and/or linguistic identities, for some students, the choice is simple—Having to make this “choice” is most prevalent for students of color. According to Salazar (2013), students of color have been compelled for generations to divest themselves of their linguistic, cultural, and familial resources to succeed in U.S. public schools. . . . When students of color experience academic difficulties, their struggles are often attributed to their culture, language, and home environment. (pp. 121-122)

When students strip themselves of their respective cultures to achieve academic success, many decide their group or community identification is worth more than identifying with a school that does not value them for who they are and what they know (Delpit, 2009). For some students, such decisions are unconscious or intuitive; for others, they represent active resistance (Kohl, 1994). Such active resistance is often anathema to the majority White middle-class norms held by many teachers who may not understand the implications of such choices and thus mislabel them as disrespect, or as behavioral problems (Goff et al., 2014; Howard, 2013; Kohl, 1994). These decisions, whether unconscious or not, are frequently attributed to the “deficiencies” of students’ cultures—Some teachers blame nondominant heritages on academic failure (Rodriguez, 2013).

Seen as more than just disrespect, some educators interpret resistance to hegemonic school norms as serious disciplinary trouble (Macedo, 2006), which may set students on a trajectory ending in incarceration. The number of incarcerated persons has increased 10 times over the past 43 years, from 250,000 in 1970 to 2.5 million (Drucker, 2011), and teens are not exempt from these increases. The school, the prison, and other institutions serve to promote and reinforce bodily utility and control: “discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138).

Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary practices provides a framework for what many students face today. Foucault’s (1979) metaphoric use of Bentham’s perfect prison, or the Panopticon, which encircles a tower containing a watchman—each prisoner alone, but entirely visible from the tower—creates within the prisoner “a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). This image is relevant to students at risk entering the prison system; in essence, each person is his or her own watchman, or jailer, for disciplinary practices
affect the mind as well as the body. Constant surveillance of students within schools functions as an oppressive educational practice and condition by reinforcing the prison of the mind, that of low expectations and negative self-fulfilling prophecies (Kozol, 2005; Pane, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2014; Weis & Fine, 2005).

These oppressive forces are compounded when students’ voices and discursive forms are devalued within the school; students can become lost in lower-tracked classes and set up for lowered expectations in terms of language and literacy (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). Foucault (1979) reminds us how similar schools are in appearance and practice to prisons. Students of color are often segregated into apartheid schools, where poverty, lack of resources, violence, and health problems are the norm (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2004). Here, students are viewed as criminals or potential criminals; their lack of academic success is then blamed on them, their culture, or their families, as opposed to a system stacked against them. As Alexander (2012) states, “If the prison label imposed on them can be blamed on their culture, poor work ethic, or even their families, then society is absolved of responsibility to do anything about their condition” (p. 248). The school-to-prison pipeline is a vicious cycle, but it is the relationship between the educator and the learner that functions as the bridge out of such an oppressive system. This article raises questions about the link between literacy and incarceration and provides strategies to open other pathways for teachers working with students already trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

The theoretical framework that informs this analysis is best described as an intersection between CRP, Funds of Knowledge (FoK), and critical literacy. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), CRP involves academic achievement, socio-political consciousness, and cultural competence. Because CRP seeks, through education, to identify, problematize, and ultimately transform institutions and society with the goal of ending all forms of oppression, culturally responsive teachers must possess not only the will to end oppression but also the knowledge to inform their choices and actions (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Howard (2013) defines “responsiveness” as dealing with “. . . our capacity as teachers to know and connect with the actual lived experience, personhood, and learning modalities of the students who are in our classroom” (p. 131). Thus, culturally responsive educators take the time necessary to research the experiences, individuality, and learning styles of all of their students to better
reach/teach them by meeting them where they live (Goldenberg, 2014). CRP is a lens allowing for the interrogation of social, educational, and political issues by prioritizing participant voices (Chapman, 2007). In addition, as Milner (2013a) argues, CRP promotes a way of thinking as well as a means of practice where teachers incorporate their students’ ethnic and racial back-grounds into the curriculum (Griner & Stewart, 2012).

**FoK**

Rodriguez (2013) defines FoK as an accumulation of historically developed cultural truths, stores of knowledge, and skills that promote the functioning, development, and well-being of individuals and households. Our respective view of the world is based on our store of prior knowledge manifested by cultural events, experiences, and activities, labeled as FoK (Mintzes & Wanderse, 1997; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Tapping into students’ prior cultural knowledge can help to establish dynamic mental models that network to the learners’ existing schema, adding meaning to the new knowledge for the learner (Griner & Stewart, 2012; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). During instruction, this knowledge should be used strategically, encouraged, and applied systematically (Rueda, Monzó, & Higareda, 2004). According to Cohen (2004), when students are involved in writing original pieces that reflect their experiences, they will be more secure about writing: “Inquiry does not occur on demand or when teachers are forced to pursue someone else’s topic or question. They need time to find the questions that really matter in their lives” (p. 54). Dewey (1902) advocated for a child-centered approach to writing and discussed the importance of the use of personal perspective in writing. Both are important; both are necessary. Bakhtinian theory suggests that language results from participation in particular contexts and communities (Bakhtin, 1981). Teachers can provide opportunities for students to evolve through prior knowledge and experiences (Driscoll, 1994).

This framework reveals inherently CRP and dispels the widely held belief that low-income and nondominant students do not possess the home knowledge that leads to academic or school success (DaSilva Iddings, Combs, & Moll, 2014). FoK is a revolt against the deficit model of education that funnels nondominant students into special education or alternative programs with heightened disciplinary structures (Griner & Stewart, 2012; Milner, 2013c). It encourages questioning of hegemonic teaching and learning traditions in favor of co-creating curriculum and pedagogy utilizing home languages and knowledge by creating “new ways of engaging proactively with critical, voiced involvement at every stage of teaching and learning” (Rodriguez, 2013, p. 108). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), teachers must study their students to
decide what and how to teach. Students and teachers should co-construct knowledge by using out-of-school literacies or home knowledge that can be connected to in-school instruction (Milner, 2013a).

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy seeks to dismantle the hierarchy of sign systems, that is, to “de-privilege” Standard English (Delpit, 2009). Critical literacy relates directly to CRP and FoK in that it seeks to investigate and validate marginalized student voices and advocates for the validation of these voices within schools. According to Delpit (1988), nonmainstream students must be “let in on the secret” and be given access to the “power code.” Critical literacy seeks to explain how language and literacy (re)produce subjectivities and subject positions. Students can also engage in such practices when they consider multiple meanings and constructions of identities and text enabling students to become aware of dominant language ideologies, dialect variation, and their own code-switching (Godley & Minnici, 2008).

Code switching is a practice of altering linguistic practices in particular contexts. According to Nilep (2006), “This contextualization may relate to local discourse practices, such as turn selection or various forms of bracketing, or it may make relevant information beyond the current exchange, including knowledge of society and diverse identities” (p. 1). Making code-switching or code-meshing (combining vernacular styles with Standard English) an accepted practice in the classroom serves to validate students’ home languages and prepares them for hegemonic environments by providing a supportive and affirmative environment in which to build literacy skills. According to White, “Instead of viewing our K-12 students’ respective language usage as deficits that we should squelch, we could value these unique discursive forms, use them for code-switching purposes, and thus better induce students to add Standard English” to their repertoire (p. 44). As teachers, we can impart to students that there are a number of varieties of English, none inherently better than another, while educating them about the societal privileging of Standard form, in a manner that honors home languages and native spaces. According to Moje (1999),

> With such relationships and tools in place, students might be better able to use their voices, their literacies, and their experiences to become aware of how they are situated in the world outside school and to take action that will serve their various communities in that world. (p. 326)

> Literacy can empower when people are encouraged to question the world around them with the goal of advancing social justice (Freire, 1970). Students
can be encouraged to utilize critical consciousness, which may help them navigate the heightened surveillance in their lives—disproportionately poised upon communities of color. If students are provided with the opportunities to practice literacy in their home languages as well as in standardized English, they will develop what Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) refer to as “linguistic versatility” (p. 87). As critical literacy implores, knowledge consumption is not enough. Students must have the opportunity to be critical of their curriculum, to deconstruct and reconstruct it (Freire, 1985), and take an active part in developing it. In essence, students become co-creators of knowledge through the problem-posing method of local struggles and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

The Problem

In the United States, the high school graduation rate is below 70%, the achievement gap has remained relatively stagnant since 1988, and socioeconomic factors greatly affect student outcomes (Carter & Welner, 2013). The United States spends more money on incarcerating people than on educating the young, particularly in poor areas. In 2010-2011, the total expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools in the United States amounted to US$632 billion, or US$12,608 per pupil (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) compared with US$75 billion federal, state, and local governments spent on corrections, or US$31,286 per inmate (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). It costs taxpayers US$18,678, on average, which constitutes more money to incarcerate a young person than to educate him or her. Between 2006 and 2007, approximately 1 in 10 male high school dropouts was incarcerated (Sum, Khatriwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009), and 40% of prison and jail inmates lack a high school diploma or GED (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). It is not surprising that the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world, comprising 25% of the world’s prison population (Darling Hammond, 2010). Instead of grooming nondominant students for the next academic step, we are preparing a significant number of them to enter the prison system.

What Kohl (1994) calls “cultural mismatch,” or the gaps between students and teachers in terms of their racial, cultural, ethnic, social, and linguistic identities, readily affects student disconnection from school (p. 7). Students who speak nonstandard forms of English may feel that their language is devalued in school and are more inclined to dropout, losing confidence in schools that make them feel devalued (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). According to Salazar (2013), a “humanizing pedagogy” is additive, as opposed to focusing on deficits; it utilizes students’ prior knowledge and connects it to new learning thereby legitimizing students’ home languages and
cultures (p. 124). Humanizing pedagogies view students as experts. The teachers’ role is to impart insider knowledge that is necessary to succeed in the academic world.

Cultural mismatches stemming from language variation between students and teachers contribute to misunderstanding (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). For example, differences in intonation when asking questions, responding to questions, and in every day interactions, may be viewed as a lack of interest and enthusiasm, disrespect, or even lack of ability, and account for the larger percentages of students of color receiving more behavioral referrals and referrals for special education services from White teachers than their White counterparts (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). Schools with the highest populations of minority students refer more students for special education services; this mislabeling affects African American children twice as much as White children (Griner & Stewart, 2012; Smitherman, 2006).

Teacher perceptions can do much to perpetuate negative self-fulfilling prophecies in the classroom (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). As Howard (2013) argues,

> teacher perceptions tend to have a negative effect on Black males more than any other group. . . . they are often viewed as having characteristics more consistent with academic disengagement (lazy, nonthinkers, hostile in class, discipline problems) than showing behavioral congruence with academic success. (p. 68)

Black males tend to be victims of “racial microaggressions” (Howard, 2013) such as low expectations, deficit thinking, heightened surveillance, and stiffer discipline penalties. In fact, a recent study by Goff et al. (2014) examined why Black minors are 18 times more likely to be charged and sentenced as adults than their White counterparts; one of the reasons for this differential result lies in the dehumanization of Black children. Such dehumanization is based in part on White perceptions of Black children as being older (thus more culpable) than they actually are and being deemed less worthy of the “privilege of innocence,” which results in “violent inequalities” (p. 14).

The assertion of cultural identity in speech is a salient issue for many students that some hegemonic teachers are unaware of; this lack of (multi) cultural understanding and awareness may lead to the silencing of some and the mislabeling of others. Some educators rate African American English speaking students as less intelligent, confident, and successful (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Smitherman, 2006). Such misperceptions can lead to differential expectations in behavior, prejudice, and less tolerance for perceived misbehavior. Thus, students who speak in nonstandard English may be predisposed to
receive more behavior referrals and suspensions, as well as more referrals for special education services such as speech pathology referrals.

**Method**

The question that drives this analysis is as follows: Can I effectively communicate the pedagogical strategies that have worked well for my students, many of whom were resistant learners, nondominant students, and nonstandard speakers, by delving into their writing and my own recollections of critical classroom events? This analysis stems from an examination of 15 years of student artifacts from the student-produced literary magazines of which I was the sponsor during my 15 years working at the alternative school, as well as my own classroom reflections on effective practice. I kept a journal of my classroom practice over these 15 years. I would write in this journal when what I perceived to be a critical event transpired in my classroom, such as student engagement with a particular literacy strategy, a personal success with a resistant student, a teaching epiphany on my part, and so on. My primary resources were the literary magazines, many of which were recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), *Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines*, and my personal reflections (journal).

My process of data analysis involved transcribing my classroom reflections, my journal entries, into a Microsoft Word document. I used this document as a working analysis tool through which I grouped textual excerpts by commonalities. I used critical event analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007) to create a distinguishable narrative. A critical event can be unplanned and significantly impacts one’s professional practice; critical classroom events also inherently encourage reflection because they can be transformational for both student and teacher (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Critical events are not always positive but are striking because they elicit emotion within the classroom. I ultimately grouped data into categories based upon the salient points that resulted from critical events in the classroom. I then crosschecked data falling within each critical event category using constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Examining examples from 14 years of student writing published in the school’s literary magazine, I sought to analyze this rich history of artifact for patterns in student writing: topically, stylistically, and, most importantly, in terms of cultural representations of home languages, “out-of-school” literacies, and nondominant language practices. In conjunction with this analysis, I compared my critical event analysis journal work to glean culturally responsive practices that I have learned throughout my years in this school.
community to share best practices for students who are simultaneously disengaged from school and trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline.

**The Alternative School—Participants**

The school described in this study was an alternative high school in the midwest. The students in this school were labeled 100% at risk. The population consisted of students removed from traditional high schools because of behavior and attendance issues. The school had a soft cap population of 80 students. The most common reason for attendance was conflict with other students (both physical and nonphysical).

The school serving as the research site for this study, and the district in which it is a part, was a predominantly White institution (historically the majority of students and teachers were White). In recent years, as the district became more diverse, the alternative high school’s level of diversity increased faster than the rate of the district, which raises the red flag of why a disproportionate number of African American students were being referred to the alternative high school. In 2012, the African American student population at the alternative school was almost 50%, despite the fact that African Americans made up only 12% of the overall student population district-wide. In addition, minority enrollment in the school is 55% (majority African American), while the state average is 33%. Teaching and expectations of teachers for learners stemmed from White middle-class norms. There was no district-wide commitment to multicultural education or to learning of the cultures of nondominant students. Students of color were expected to assimilate to these White middle-class standards of speech and behavior.

Students carrying the “at-risk” label typically have lower expectations placed upon them from without, which impact how they feel within. The real issue of heightened surveillance on these students, including their own history of juvenile incarceration, often exacerbates academic failure. Although the school where I taught has a high incidence of student incarceration, my school is not alone. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (n.d.), although school violence dropped between 1999 and 2002, the rate of school-based arrests increased (para. 12). In Michigan (the location of this research site), African American students are disproportionately affected by disciplinary practices in schools that tend to criminalize students (ACLU of Michigan, 2009). Likewise, in the district where I worked for 17 years, 15 of those at the alternative high school, a disproportionate number of African American students were referred to the alternative school than were represented in general district demographics.
Methodological Limitations

The limitations of this methodology involve my positionality as both teacher and researcher. I lay no claim to objectivity; this limitation is acknowledged and was ever-present in my mind throughout this project from conception to completion. To contain my own biases, I utilized strong reflexivity, which involves the recognition, examination, and understanding of how our subject positions, locations, and beliefs impact what we choose to study, why, how, and so on (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 17), and continual member checking with the participants, both past and present students, to ensure that my analysis of data was in line with student perceptions of what had transpired in the classroom. Practicing reflexivity throughout this research involved acknowledging the ways in which “our own agendas” impact our research at all points, including analysis and interpretation (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 17).

Findings

My students did not typically desire to please teachers or adults in general, which may have contributed to their referral to the alternative school. However, this desire to displease went beyond typical teenage angst. My students were angry for a variety of reasons, but often, this rage was not expressed articulately, or in writing at all. Many students found that they could express themselves in writing. Working on the literary magazine involved writing and submitting poetry and prose pieces for publication; encouraging other students to do the same and working with them to this end; typing, proofreading, editing; creating a cover and gathering art and photography for inclusion in the magazine; and developing a theme for the yearly issue. Much of this work occurred during the school day, but some of it occurred after school. The students who chose to take on this extra work and responsibility often felt “in charge”: The students became the experts. This literary experience led to the ultimate expression of the source of some of their anger: the realization of their own alienation from school based upon their nondominant statuses.

Theme 1: Resistance to Hegemonic Norms

The student example below provides a glimpse into the lives of students who do not share the cultural and linguistic White norms of some of their peers:

I am like the heat in the
Summer I make your block
Urban Education

Hot in south west we say
Squalay when we see cops
I love the color black cause
At night you can’t see me
I am the person everyone
Looks at I am the person
Who you envy (Antoine)

Antoine’s poem notes the part of the city where he is from, “south west.” He displays a sense of pride in his knowledge of something not shared by his White peers. Antoine expresses a body of knowledge, a fund of knowledge, in which he is expert. Although Antoine invokes the term Squalay to indicate the need to scatter because police are on the way, or to drop whatever you are doing because police are in sight or en route, presupposing that the speaker may be engaging in some illegal activity, there is an explicit resistance to stereotypes in the poem: an expression of identity that resists being labeled as “less,” for he is to be envied for who he is.

Kenneth also expresses a sense of pride is the aesthetics of his culture, and in a location that would be “surprising” to his White peers and to his White teachers.

My city is a surprise to your face
You don’t know what to expect every day
My city bring style to your eyes
Yea we know how to dress (Kenneth)

This sense of surprise for the reader of the above poem is also one that challenges stereotypes. This excerpt and critical event analysis reveal that Kenneth defies the stereotypes perpetuated in the classroom conversations of his White peers about the surrounding urban environment in the school community. He resists the hegemonic norms by talking back in writing, and implicitly suggesting, “you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The themes illustrated in these examples underscore pride in home communities, power, influence, and resistance, including the rejection of negative stereotypes about the communities that are the subjects of these excerpts. CRP and critical literacy both necessitate that teachers promote student
engagement with their own identities, home languages, and areas of expertise, to become co-creators of classroom knowledge, in essence to reveal their own FoK.

The triumphant and transcendent poem “Miss Barbie,” written by an ELL (English language learner) student, represents a boundary crossing in many ways: It not only displays a resistance to traditional social scripts for women and to the imposition of White standards of beauty on women of color but also implicitly transgresses hegemonic cultural and linguistic norms. It indicts not only the imposition of White norms on bodies but also the objectification of women in general.

Miss Barbie
With your perfect shape
Blue eyes
And the pow pow pow that I’m supposed to have to be
Considered a lady,
A worthwhile girl
Well listen up you plastic prostitute:
I don’t think I have to wiggle and giggle to get a guy’s attention
And I don’t think I have to be skinny to win a guy’s affection.
I don’t think I have to be a blonde to turn a guy on.
Besides, your arms don’t even bend and your makeup don’t come off!
People might think you’re cute.
People might think you’re sweet
But at least I don’t come that cheap
$29.95 please.
You don’t wear my face and you don’t have my taste.
You’re supposed to be the ideal woman?
With a pink car and a matching husband?
Girl, everybody knows you’re fake.
I hope you get left out in the sun and your plastic 38 double Ds
Melt to the dashboard of your perky car, and Ken tools
Around the corner in a Tonka truck with Betsy Wetsy in the
Front seat and doesn’t even stop to help
. . . or beep. (Sorinthea)

The above poem problematized the White, skinny, blonde-haired, blue-eyed standard of beauty, which pushes women who do not fit this standard, particularly women of color, to the invisible margins. Sorinthea demands that her audience not only see her but also hear her: She is demanding her value, through her bodily appearance and expression, and through her voice. Her voice both explicitly and implicitly challenges the hegemonic norms around her. “Miss Barbie” is a prime example of the disconnection between the language of students and the language of schools, especially experienced by students of color, which can be a major cause of what educators deem student failure (Kohl, 1994). Olson (2002), a developmental psychologist, also notes that differences in achievement may be based on divisions between school and home cultures.

**Theme 2: Student Responses to Nontraditional Pedagogies**

Teaching should be about finding what works best for one’s students. Sometimes, this involves differentiation, students learning at their own pace, trial and error, and continued rewrites. CRP, FoK, and critical literacy are not just theories, they are also practices. To engage in them, a teacher must live what she believes. Many of my students came into my English classroom never having been expected to write a paper. Many had been tracked in low-level classes, with low expectations placed upon them. Many engaged in behaviors, behaviors perceived to be disruptive to school or violent behaviors that prevented them from staying in school or from being expected to achieve at all; sometimes being quiet was enough for their teachers. I realized that their “acting-out” may have been a mask for them to protect themselves from the judgment of their peers and teachers finding out exactly what they did not know in terms of their academic knowledge, for it is safer to act cool than to look stupid. And that was the school experience for many of my students. My students entered the alternative school with various levels of experience “doing literacy”; thus, literacy practices were risky for them. Because of this, I started my students with low-risk writing projects, such as acrostic poems and haiku. Students would write, and rewrite, multiple times for both accuracy and depth. This was not an easy process; much encouragement, cajoling, persuasion, and even disagreement and argument were often necessary to get some students to complete, or even attempt, their work.
My process involved students working at their own pace. There was no scripted curriculum that students had to complete by a certain date per se. The students were at different points in their literacy progression, and, as stated previously, most had serious gaps in their educations. In one class, for example, I had students ranging from 2nd-grade reading levels to post-12th-grade reading levels. Thus, I had to be creative with my pedagogy, challenging those for whom literacy came relatively easy without disrespecting those students who were struggling. Students within the same classroom would often be working on different projects, sharing with one another, some demanding help, from me and from their peers. It was constructive chaos. A teacher has to be flexible to be comfortable in this environment. I required key assessments to be completed throughout the semester to demonstrate growth, but students were able to revise these assessments for mastery. The students who were more engaged through their work on the literary magazine were given heightened expectations and additional, weekly, deadlines. These differential expectations could be considered unfair by some students, so additional expectations had to be broached with considerable personal power and finesse. I had to convince students that as they progressed in their educations, more was expected, not less. Usually, this was quite successful. To underscore the success of this approach, the literary magazines that were produced over my 15-year tenure were recognized by NCTE for excellency in literacy magazines. This small urban alternative school, with less than 100 students, was often ranked on par with private Country Day schools and large suburban schools within wealthy school districts.

The following sentiments were attached to my critical events journal, and represented student reflections upon classroom practice. As my students indicated,

I like this class because it involves working on your own pace rather than having to fight to get things done. This class is showing me so much that I never knew about writing. I never thought that I would be able to write all the papers that I have written in here. (David)

I engaged in a lot of individualized direct instruction in the writing process. I would work one-on-one with students explaining to them exactly what to change in a paper and how, until they mastered the form. This made them comfortable with writing.

This class has really transformed since the beginning. Everyone is involved and actually like what we are doing. I love this class. It taught me a lot. (Devonta)
In my own education, I have had teachers who perpetuated the myth that writing is a mystery that requires a secret code to unlock. This style of “knowledge hoarding,” as I refer to it, flies in the face of culturally responsive practices and critical literacy.

Systems of tracking are perpetuated by the practice of knowledge hoarding, as in “this student couldn’t possibly ever master this material.” But I do not believe this. I believed that all of my students could be academically successful. I am not sure whether they experienced that sense of belief from their previous teachers. When they saw their success with writing, many saw the light at the end of the tunnel; they used their tools to unlock the mysteries of their other subjects.

Mastering reading was a big piece of this puzzle. Because most of my students were resistant readers, I used writing to get them to read. For example, when asking them to practice a particular type of poem or genre of writing, I would have them read examples of this type of writing, often within their individual areas of interest. When such scaffolded and individualized pedagogies are used, students can translate the skills they gain to their other classes:

I was able to be as creative as I could have been. Overall this was the best year that I have ever had in high school. (Juan)

I like to write things that push my mind to be colorful. All my work is to my best of ability and I have put much time in to this class. So last semester I have been doing well in all classes. I like school a lot now and am working all day long. (James)

For many of my students, as the above excerpts illustrate, literacy successes transferred to their other classes and to many students’ overall attitudes toward themselves as learners and toward their ideas about school. Because students experienced academic success in their English class, some realized that they could in fact “do school” without giving up a part of themselves. For some, this sense of success translated to their other academic classes. The utilization of nontraditional, nonthreatening and humanizing, pedagogies gave my students the confidence with academics that they were denied in their previous school experiences for whatever reason: because they were nondominant students possessing languages other than Standard English, because they were deemed as “discipline problems,” and because they were tracked into Apartheid classes and schools that ran upon the vicious circle of low expectations and deficit models when assessing said students.
Theme 3: The Co-Construction of Knowledge

As stated previously, critical literacy necessitates the co-construction of knowledge between teacher and student. I found student willingness to “do school” much more with those students who chose to engage in the writing, editing, and publication of the literary magazine. These students were not the most academically inclined at their previous schools, but given the opportunity and the encouragement, they rose to the occasion and became experts:

I am the editor of the magazine. I enjoy working at my own pace, and whatever gets done depends on how hard I work. It gives us freedom to write whatever we like and it gives the students more responsibility to work on their own and meet the deadlines by the end of the week. Since we started to write the magazine I stay on task much more than I used to day to day, my grades have improved, and I now enjoy writing much more. (Mario)

Doing a literary magazine was a fun way of “doing literacy.” I am really enjoying seeing how creative I am. I never knew it. It brings out students that never knew they could write a poem or even a good story. The magazine is cool. (Tinanah)

Many of my students, because of the identities they possessed, were unaccustomed to being pushed by their teachers. But, as the above excerpts reveal, my students, when given responsibility and held to high expectations, rose to the occasion.

In general, literacy work should be considered a dynamic struggle—sites of disagreement and discomfort. However, this is largely not the case in many urban schools, let alone alternative schools, where students are often thought to be beyond reach, already in the pipeline to prison. Students must be involved in the co-construction of knowledge, which involves social activism, in addition to reading, writing, and viewing the world. Teachers who have not been trained in critical literacy practices, and/or who are a part of the hegemonic majority and have not questioned issues of power and authority and their impact on literacy and students, may not feel they are doing anything wrong when they perceive home languages to be deficient, and deem them as subordinate, something to be disciplined, corrected, altered. In fact, this type of disciplinary knowledge, a “pedagogy of telling” (Sizer, 1984), deems knowledge as a direct transfer from teacher to student, with no exchange, no interplay, no struggle for common ground, no joint knowledge construction.

Part of this co-construction of knowledge involves academic freedom of the part of the students. Essentially, this process is about freedom: the
freedom of students to express themselves in ways that honor their home knowledge and/or heritage, and the freedom to gain skill in literacy in ways that are safe, by writing themselves:

Her heart is a guitar, strummed by too many hands for just one song

Her time is a candle slowly burning itself out

Her skin is an unmarked canvas, wishing to be painted

Her voice is a needle, pricking certain ones with things he should’ve said. (Krista)

I actually am enjoying the freedom of work in this class right now. I also enjoy being able to work on different types of literature with the knowledge of my freedom of topics and genres. The only downfall is an obvious one; it’s a lot of work! (Sarah)

I like this class because it is more freedom than all my other classes; it gives me a chance to work at my pace and enjoy what I am doing. Writing takes time, especially stories and poems. (Janell)

Although seemingly disparate, the above examples are similar in that they either implicitly or explicitly illustrate the power of freedom of thought and expression in the classroom. Students need freedom to be who they are so that they can become who they are meant to be, without giving up a piece of themselves to gain academic success. In general, the students who continued to attend the alternative school and who participated in the publication of the literary magazine succeeded in their respective educations. There may be a variety of reasons for this connection: Students who were not historically engaged in school found something to be a part of, academic success in one class gave them a sense of confidence that they could succeed in their other classes, and individualized learning allowed students to focus on the gaps of missed literacy instruction they possessed.

Most of these students, the editors, the authors, and the artists stayed and graduated. It is difficult to provide an exact percentage of those students who graduated in the traditional 4 years; most did not. Many students “aged out” of the alternative program and had to continue their educations in the adult education program, which was in the same building. Some students persevered and received their high school diplomas or GEDs through the adult education program. Some students, after maintaining academic success and freedom from suspensions, returned to the traditional high school, and thus became a number in someone else’s database. We did attempt to keep track of
all of our students, where they went, when they graduated. From what we can gather, the graduation rate is similar to that of the larger district, which is 69%, but lower than the state average, which is 82%.

**Discussion and Conclusion: Teaching for Linguistic Justice**

Language is ever evolving and constantly mediated by various social forces; we use it to meet our many needs as humans: social, cultural, intellectual. However, the concept of “what schools aren’t” is resonant for many of our students. Some students are asked to leave their identities—their cultures and their languages—at the school door, which is an alienating factor and is a barrier to learning. As Cooper and Holzman (1988) explain, school is “the negation of the home (and of the street), its values the negation of their values, its skills hopelessly beside the point in a different—more pressing—context” (p. 165). Although my students came to school with literacy gaps, deficit or remedial or “back to basics” instruction was and is not the answer. These students felt disrespected in such programs and courses, for they knew how to communicate effectively. They became disillusioned with literacy instruction because they were not taught through a model that valued their modes of thinking, speaking, and communicating, or that respected their life experiences.

Working with students to develop new literacy competencies, while supporting the language students bring to school, is where we need to go (Delpit, 2009). The key to building student confidence with standard forms of literacy is by valuing their chosen linguistic forms, whether they represent nontraditional dialects, informal English, African American Language, or nonstandard oral and written forms of expression. Students’ cultures should be reflected in the literature chosen for the class, and teachers should seek literature reflecting a variety of diverse perspectives. We must, as Elkins and Luke (1999) suggest, not expect all of our students to be fully literate in Standard English when they arrive at our high schools, but, instead, all teachers of all subjects must work with students and with their home cultures and languages to develop collaborative literacy practices that engage students in critical literacy.

Project-based literacy pedagogies, such as the creation and publication of a literary magazine, is one strategy that engages marginalized students where students can work together on questions/problems of interest to them, including addressing real-world problems, knowledge production/creation, working in conjunction with teachers, and using technology. Another strategy is to begin classes with poetry and personal narrative, which reflect not only the students’ personal experiences and feelings but also their home languages. Students must be encouraged to write in dialect or slang (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011;
Smitherman, 2006) and use free-form stream-of-consciousness writing, often in the form of journals, to get comfortable with writing in general.

Some English teachers are guilty of serving as “language police,” or defining English as a rigid, fixed, immutable system that does not recognize or value voices that do not conform to “Standard.” For example, to view the African American Language convention of the Habitual Be as erroneous as opposed to viewing it as a valid grammatical and linguistic form is to be guilty of nonculturally responsive literacy practice. Instead of finding a common language, or coming to an understanding based upon mutual respect, some teachers feel that their classrooms are all-or-nothing spaces when it comes to language and literacy. However, students will learn more in an environment where their language, in essence their essence, is valued. Students are also less likely to resist teachers when their pedagogies accord with their personal cultural and linguistic traditions/identities (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Rather than attempting to “fix” our students, we must instead investigate how they use literacy and make connections that do not privilege one student over another. Hinchman and Moje (1998) pose the question, “How are academic literacy practices complicit with hegemonic practice, that is, how do these practices allow for the domination—albeit nonviolent—of some groups?” (p. 124). Their answer? Teachers must leave the classroom and meet students where they live, for we have much to learn as well. To address and remedy oppressive school practices, we must experience and learn of our students’ literacy practices; although it is important that all students learn of and navigate a multitude of diverse discourses, the fact remains that students whose home literacy practices match their in-school literacy practices experience an easier time (Hinchman & Moje, 1998).

Language is symbolic in a dualistic way—not only in the structuralist sense of the signifier and the signified but also in that only certain systems of signifiers are considered to be acceptable in certain contexts; in essence, there is a privileging of sign systems. Teachers often push for and privilege Standard usage, which not only hierarchizes discursive styles but also disincentivizes nontraditional usage in the classroom. According to McCrary, “Students should be given the opportunity to express meanings in a language that is representational of their linguistic knowledge and complexity” (p. 74). According to White (2011), ignoring students’ discursive styles in the classroom setting will only further alienate them from the English curricula we are trying to teach. That being said, the English teacher must utilize and build upon existing knowledge and push her or his students to cross boundaries while respecting the places from where they come.

Literacy teaching is a process, one of high expectations, and continual self-reflection on the part of both teachers and students. English teachers
must continually retool their pedagogy and curriculum to ensure cultural responsiveness in meeting the needs of all of their students. They must also be critical of language hierarchies and standardized literacies in terms of content and process. Connections must be made between prior knowledge, or what is known, and new knowledge and information, which can put these two cultures at odds, but these two cultures should not be at odds. Students tend be more successful in school if they are encouraged to “write themselves,” or write of their own experiences in their chosen styles and languages. Through this, a common ground can be found between student and school. According to White (2011), “We can . . . use students’ native ways with words . . . as starting points from which to teach them how to use Standard English” (p. 44), or the language of traditional academic success. When we value student experience and voice, students can build upon what they know with confidence and intact identities (Gay, 2000; Williamson et al., 2013).

As Hinchman and Moje (1998) state,

We do need to draw on students’ experiences, but we must also walk with students beyond the reaches of our worlds, help them learn to talk back to texts of their experience . . . and encourage them to challenge assumptions tacit in the discourses and practices around them. (p. 123)

Perhaps more importantly, as teachers for social justice or critical literacy proponents, we must make other teachers aware of the perhaps unconscious privileging of Standard English and of the notion that teachers cannot effectively teach their students if they do not understand them and where they come from (Hinchman & Moje, 1998).

Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) ask the question,

How many times have you taken off points for students who leave off –s on third-person singular verb forms or plural nouns? How many points do you think such students lose over the course of their academic career? Is it possible that students could lose enough points on the basis of these linguistic differences that they would make bad grades in school and on standardized tests? (p. 94)

How many of these unanswered or uninvestigated questions contribute to the mis-education of our students? How much does mis-education contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline? These are questions we, as educators, must ask ourselves and work to address. And, specifically as English teachers, we must continually retool our curriculum and instructional practices to ensure cultural responsiveness. We must also be critical of the privileging of Standard English and be open to home languages and nondominant forms of literacy and expression. These factors have implications for teacher education.
programs, for to reach all students, according to Howard and Milner (2014),
teachers must master three domains: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical
content knowledge, and racial and cultural knowledge.

As I reflect on my 15 years in the alternative school, I must state that my
students were brilliant, although many in a nontraditional way. Many of them
were brilliant at maintaining the distraction, or at what Kohl (1994) calls not-
learning: “... the conscious decision not to learn something that you could
learn. ... [because] learning what others wanted you to learn can sometimes
destroy you” (p. xiii, 1). Many of my former students had been ghettoized in
the alternative school either because they masked their insecurities about
learning with behaviors deemed disruptive or they intentionally “not-learned”
because the culture of the classroom or school somehow threatened their
home language, culture, identity. As Kohl explains,

Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable
challenges to her or his personal and family, loyalties, integrity, and identity. In
such situations there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To
agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a
major loss of self. (1994, p. 6)

The responsibility to minimize linguistic separations, and the resulting loss of
self, rests with teachers; if we do not uphold this responsibility, we will alien-
ate some students from school and thus from education in general.

Freedom in the classroom is not typically what students labeled “at-risk”
receive, but this type of education is diametrically opposed to the school-to-
prison pipeline, the discipline-and-punish deficit model of education that we
are seeing with increasing frequency. It is crucial for educators to treat stu-
dents as free individuals, not as if they are already incarcerated. Educators
must provide students with the freedom and the opportunity to take charge of
their own learning by using their own voices and telling their own stories. If
not, others will be telling their stories and explaining their lives through sta-
tistics: those of poverty, unemployment, and incarceration rates, in essence,
the numbers of despair.

As Freire (1970) informs us, education should be the “practice of free-
dom” (p. 87). As educators, we must prepare our students for freedom, to
assist them in developing the ability to pursue their own individual paths to
happiness and self-actualization. We can do this by not imprisoning our stu-
dents in the language of the Other, a literary Panopticon, but by valuing their
voices and together pursuing new paths to new literacies, where nondominant
students can gain access to the power code. If we do not, the school-to-prison
pipeline may become their prison reality.
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Notes
1. This article is authored by two researchers analyzing the data from the lead author’s classroom. For this reason, the majority of the article is presented in first-person narration.
2. We use the term *nondominant student* to refer to students of color, in this study, persons primarily of African American and Latina/o ancestry (descriptors that have political dimensions not discussed in this study), who also practice nonstandard English language usage.
3. In the lead author’s final year at the alternative school, no literary magazine was completed.

References


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