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Respecting Students' Cultural Literacies

Recognizing students' out-of-school literacies helps create inclusive environments and meaningful educational experiences.

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Several years ago, I was sitting with Ben, a 1st grader whom experts had identified as having trouble learning to read. We were looking at a page in a book showing a field of flowers, and Ben was concentrating on reading the words beneath the picture. "The flowers are . . ." He paused, trying to figure out the last word. Then his face lit up as he read, "Bloomingdale's!"

Ben's miscue taught me that he was aware of the relationships between letter combinations and sounds. He related words he already knew to words in the book that looked and sounded similar. Because of this awareness, and despite expert evaluations to the contrary, I believed that Ben would learn to read with his peers. But I also realized that *all* students use their out-of-school literacy to make meaning of school texts. Our awareness and understanding of this process can be the first step toward building bridges between school and out-of-school literacies so that we can reach and teach all of our students more effectively.

Looking at Local Literacies

I learned about local and vernacular literacies in graduate school when, for a class assignment, I created a scrapbook documenting the literacy events and practices of the orthodox Jewish community in my town. I began collecting evidence of a literacy that I had probably always seen but never actually noticed before.

I observed signs in restaurants and grocery stores that proclaimed their "kashrut" status—evidence that the establishments observed Jewish dietary laws. I noticed storefronts that served as bulletin boards for the Jewish community's announcements. In my own mail, I began noticing this community's invitations to events, lessons, and lectures, as well as its requests for donations to Jewish institutions. In synagogues, Hebrew schools, and private homes, I noticed myriad culture-specific books and other printed material. I witnessed people reading sacred texts, reciting prayers, and conducting rituals associated with these texts.

After several weeks of collecting and documenting, I realized that I had "discovered" a local literacy that I had not previously considered in my work as a teacher. The local literacy of the orthodox Jews in my town was something that not everyone in the community shared. It was central to the identity of some members of the community, yet had little to do with anything taught in our public schools.

Although orthodox Jewish children usually went to private schools where the teaching was more congruent with their lives and identities, some of my public school students

did come from orthodox Jewish families. I wondered what happens to students who come from cultural backgrounds whose local and vernacular literacies differ from mainstream, dominant-culture, school literacies. How do we make a respectful space for them within our classroom literacy dynamics? How can we create teaching and learning environments inclusive of all of our students, echoing the multitude of voices of the different communities from which they come?

The Multiple and Social Aspects of Literacy

Throughout my many years of teaching, I always considered literacy a "school thing," having to do with reading and writing or having knowledge of a certain subject. I thought literacy was a quantifiable behavior that one learned in school, something that teachers could see, test, and measure. I began suspecting my mistake as I met the students sent to me for help during my first years as an elementary school special education teacher. The students' teachers and the system had identified them as less intelligent, less able to learn the curriculum in the regular classroom, and in danger of failure.

Many children I saw, however, despite the negative labeling, were wonderful learners—creative, smart, and highly knowledgeable about out-of-school topics. What set them apart from other children was not an inability to learn, but the fact that they had background literacies that were different from those taught and accepted in our classrooms. It was the system that was unable to address the differences between students' out-of-school literacies and classroom discourse.

My 3rd grade student Tammy was a typical example. She was a bright child; her listening comprehension was strong, her writing was excellent, and she could often remember the tune and complete lyrics of a song after hearing it only once. But Tammy could not decode well, could not remember her math facts, and tended to disappear into herself for stretches of time. She also mumbled to herself and hummed. Her mode of learning was different from what her teachers and school expected, so they ignored her potential, excluded her from the regular class community, and placed her in a self-contained class, thereby stunting her literacy development.

As I read and learned more about literacy, I discovered that literacy is about knowledge in general, knowledge that informs the ways in which we make meaning from texts and understand the world around us. An important aspect of literacy is its multiplicity. There is not one Literacy, but many different literacies that represent groups in our society and topics in our culture. There is family literacy, bureaucratic literacy, musical literacy, teen literacy, computer literacy, religious literacy, literacy of protest, and literacy of healing—to name a few.

Literacy is also social and personal. The way in which each of us understands texts and language is grounded in our cultural, social, and historical backgrounds. We teachers have our own literacies, just as each child brings to our classrooms different knowledge, a different way of understanding the world, and different literacies. What happens to all of the diverse local and vernacular literacies that are part of our

identities—like those of the orthodox Jewish children—if they differ from the school's? We usually expect everyone to leave their differences outside the school's doors.

Robert Lake (Medicine Grizzlybear) describes such a situation in a touching article written as an appeal to the kindergarten teacher of his 5-year-old son, Wind-Wolf. This teacher had known the child for only a few months and had already labeled him "a slow learner." Lake writes,

> He is probably what you would consider a typical Indian kid. . . . His aunts and grandaunts taught him to count and know his numbers while they sorted materials for making abstract designs in native baskets. He learned his basic numbers by helping his father sort and count the rocks to be used in the sweat lodge—seven rocks for a medicine sweat, say, or 13 for the summer solstice ceremony. . . . If you ask him how many months there are in a year, he will probably tell you 13. He will respond this way not because he does not know how to count properly, but because he has been taught that there are 13 full moons in a year. . . . He can probably count more than 40 different kinds of birds and tell you and his peers what kind of bird each is, where it lives, the seasons in which it appears and how it is used in a sacred ceremony. (1990, p. 49)

When a child from a different cultural background, so full of wonderful local and vernacular knowledge, is required to join our school system and learn our ways, we tend to ignore his local literacy and ways of knowing the world. We expect him to step across an abyss, directly onto the paths of *our* literacies and into *our* ways of knowing. Obviously, to make this happen without casualties, we must construct some bridges—bridges for us to walk across and carefully lead the students over, into the world of our school literacies.

How Do We Build the Bridges?

We can create the bridges by opening our minds and the doors of our classrooms to local and vernacular literacies and using them as building blocks on which to construct our teaching.

For example, Maryann Nuckolls brings local and vernacular literacies into the classroom, highlighting the children's personal histories and acknowledging their importance:

> Family literacy is risky stuff. You have to be willing to risk exposing your own literacies to children in order to encourage them to explore the literacies of their own family and community. You have to be willing to rethink the whole idea of what children can do with their own literacies. You have to be willing to help children and their families rethink these same issues. (1997, p. 182)

When she shared her own home literacy (bills, menus, scraps of print), her students wanted to do the same. She sent them home to gather printed materials from their lives and families, and the class constructed its learning on the basis of these

materials.

> Day after day, the pieces of print drift into class. In searching for the story in their print, [the students] talk to their families about what to bring and what it means. Then they tell their stories to the class. (1997, p. 183)

Patricia Hilliard believes that teaching is a reciprocal process of teachers learning from students as they learn from us. She writes,

> I find that much of what we claim we want to teach kids they already know in some form. I want to know what they know so we can make some natural and relevant connections to their lives. My children know about things like community politics and police brutality. I can't feed them a steady diet of cute little animal stories and happy middle-class kids. Their experiences have to be part of our curriculum, too. (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 53–54)

Lisa Delpit describes the work of Amanda Branscombe, who taught Shakespeare to her African American students:

> She sometimes has her middle school students listen to rap songs in order to develop a rule base for their creation. The students would teach her their newly constructed "rules for writing rap" and she would in turn use this knowledge as a base to begin a discussion on the rules Shakespeare used to construct his plays, or the rules poets used to develop their sonnets. (1995, p. 67)

The openness to and acceptance of differences, both in theory and in action, is the basis for creating a just and inclusive classroom. "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible," wrote bell hooks (1994, p. 41). By bringing local and vernacular literacies into the classroom, we can validate the voices of all of our students. Building bridges between home and school literacies ensures a meaningful educational experience for all students.

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