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Language, culture, and  
teaching: Critical  
perspectives for a  
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## BEGINNINGS

### Language, Literacy, and Culture: Intersections and Implications

It has only been in the past several years that scholars have begun to connect the issues of language, literacy, and culture in any substantive way. Prior to this time, they were considered to exist largely separate from one another. As a result, educators usually thought about culture, for example, as distinct from language and from reading and writing except in the most superficial of ways; or as English as a Second Language (ESL) divorced from the influence of native culture on learning; or as the contentious debate about phonics and whole language as somehow separate from students' identities. These dichotomies have largely disappeared in the past 20 years. It is now evident that language, literacy, and culture are linked in numerous ways and that all teachers—whether they teach preschool art or high school math—need to become knowledgeable in how they affect students' schooling.

Even more crucial to our purposes in this textbook, until recently, critical perspectives were almost entirely missing from treatments of reading, writing, language acquisition and use, and an in-depth understanding of race, culture, and ethnicity. If broached at all, differences were "celebrated," typically in shallow ways such as diversity dinners and the commemoration of a select few African American and other heroes and through "ethnic" holiday fairs. But discussions of stratification and inequality were largely absent until recently in most teacher education courses. Despite their invisibility, questions about equity and social justice are at the core of education. As such, education is always a political undertaking.

The fact that education is not a neutral endeavor scares many people because it challenges cherished notions that education is based solely on equality and fair play. Power and privilege, and how they are implicated in language, culture, and learning, also typically have been invisible in school discourse. This situation is changing as the connections among language, literacy, and culture are becoming <sup>more</sup> firmly established and as

inequality and the lack of access to an equal education faced by many students is becoming more evident.

In this chapter, I describe the links among language, literacy, and culture beginning with my own story and concluding with some central tenets of sociocultural theory: agency, experience, identity/hybridity, context, and community. As you read this chapter, think about how your own understanding of language, literacy, and culture has shifted over the years, and how you have changed your ideas about teaching as a result.

### INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CULTURE: INTERSECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS\*

Given my background and early life experiences, I should not be here today talking with you about literacy and learning. According to the traditional educational literature, my home and family situation could not prepare me adequately for academic success. My mother did not graduate from high school, and my father never made it past fourth grade. They came to the United States as immigrants from Puerto Rico and they quietly took their place in the lower paid and lower status of society. In my family, we never had bedtime stories, much less books. At home, we didn't have a permanent place to study, nor did we have a desk with sufficient light and adequate ventilation, as teachers suggested. We didn't have many toys and I never got the piano lessons I wanted desperately from the age of five. As a family, we didn't go to museums or other places that would give us the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) it was thought we needed to succeed in school. We spoke Spanish at home, even though teachers pleaded with my parents to stop doing so. And when we learned English, my sister and I spoke a nonstandard, urban Black and Puerto Rican version of English: we said *arr't* instead of *arr't* and *mimes* instead of *mine*, and no matter how often our teachers corrected us, we persisted in saying these things. In a word, because of our social class, ethnicity, native language, and discourse practices, we were the epitome of what are now described as "children at risk," young people who were described when we were coming up as "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," and even "problem" students.

I was fortunate that I had a family that, although unable to help me with homework, would make sure that it got done; a family who used "Education, Sonia, education!" as a mantra. But they kept right on speaking Spanish (even when my sister and I switched to English), they still didn't buy books for our home, and they never read us bedtime stories. My parents, just like all parents, were brimming with skills and talents: They were becoming bilingual, they told us many stories, riddles, tongue-twisters,

\*This material is based on a keynote address given at the National Reading Conference in December, 2000.

and jokes; when my father, 20 years after coming to this country, bought a *bottega*, a small Caribbean grocery store, I was awed by the sight of him adding up a column of figures in seconds, without a calculator or even a pencil. My mother embroidered beautiful and intricate patterns on handkerchiefs, blouses, and tablecloths, a trade practiced by many poor women in Puerto Rico to stock the shelves of Lord and Taylor's and Saks' Fifth Avenue in New York. These skills, however, were never called on by my teachers; my parents were thought of as culturally deprived and disadvantaged, another segment of the urban poor with no discernible competencies.

Sometime in my early adolescence, we bought a small house in a lower middle-class neighborhood and I was able to attend a good junior high and an excellent high school. I didn't particularly like that high school—it was too competitive and impersonal and I felt invisible there—but in retrospect I realize that my sister and I got the education we needed to prepare us for college, a dream beyond the wildest imagination of my parents, most of my cousins, and the friends from our previous neighborhood. My new address made a profound difference in the education that I was able to get. I eventually dropped the *arr't* and the *mimes*, and I hid the fact that I spoke Spanish.

I begin with my own story, not because I believe that autobiography is sacrosanct, or that it holds the answer to all educational problems. My story is not unique and I don't want to single myself out as an exception, in the way that Richard Rodriguez (1982) ended up doing, intentionally or not, in his painful autobiography *Hunger for Memory*. I use my story because it underscores the fact that young people of all backgrounds can learn and that they need not be compelled, as Rodriguez was, to abandon their family and home language in the process for the benefits of an education and a higher status in society. In many ways, I am like any of the millions of young people in our classrooms and schools who come to school eager (although perhaps not, in the current jargon, "ready") to learn, but who end up as the waste products of an educational system that does not understand the gifts they bring to their education. They are the reason that I speak with you today about language, literacy, and culture, and the implications that new ways of thinking about them have for these children.

Language, literacy, and culture have not always been linked, either conceptually or programmatically. But this is changing, as numerous schools and colleges of education around the country are beginning to reflect a growing awareness of their intersections, and of the promise they hold for rethinking teaching and learning. My own reconceptualized program at the University of Massachusetts, now called Language, Literacy, and Culture, mirrors this trend.<sup>1</sup> I believe the tendency to link these issues is giving us a richer picture of learning, especially for students whose identi-

<sup>1</sup>I wish to acknowledge my colleagues in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Doctoral Research Area, School of Education at the Univ. of Mass., Amherst.

ties—particularly those related to language, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status—have traditionally had a low status in our society. One result of this reconceptualization is that more education programs are reflecting and promoting a sociocultural perspective in language and literacy, that is, a perspective firmly rooted in an anthropological understanding of culture; a view of learning as socially constructed and mutually negotiated; an understanding of how students from diverse segments of society—due to differential access, and cultural and linguistic differences—experience schooling; and a commitment to social justice. I know that multiple and conflicting ideas exist about these theoretical perspectives, but I believe some basic tenets of sociocultural theory can serve as a platform for discussion. I explore a number of these tenets, illustrating them with examples from my research and using the stories and experiences of young people in U.S. schools.

The language of sociocultural theory includes terms such as *discourse*, *hegemony*, *power*, *social practice*, *identity*, *hybridity*, and even the very word *literacy*. Today, these terms have become commonplace, but if we were to do a review of the literature of some 20 years ago or less, we would probably be hard pressed to find them, at least as currently used. What does this mean? How has our awareness and internalization of these terms and everything they imply changed how we look at teaching and learning? Let's look at literacy itself. It is generally accepted that certain family and home conditions promote literacy, including an abundant supply of books and other reading material, consistent conversations between adults and children about the books they read, and other such conditions (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). I have no doubt that this is true in many cases, and I made certain that my husband and I did these things with our own children. I am sure we made their lives easier as a result. But what of the children for whom these conditions are not present, but who nevertheless grow up literate (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988)? Should children be doomed to educational failure because their parents did not live in the right neighborhood, were not privileged enough to be formally educated, or did not take their children to museums or plays? Should they be disqualified from learning because they did not have books at home?

## TENETS OF SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

I began with my story to situate myself not just personally, but socially and politically, a primary premise of sociocultural theory. Given traditional theories, the only way to understand my educational success was to use tra-

Willet, Judith Solsken, Masha Rudman, Catherine Luna, and Theresa Austin. Working with them to conceptualize and develop our program. The past 3 years has had a profound influence on my thinking about these issues.

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ditional metaphors: I had "pulled myself up by my bootstraps;" I had "melted;" I had joined the "mainstream." But I want to suggest that these traditional metaphors are as unsatisfactory as they are incomplete because they place individuals at the center, isolated from the social, cultural, historical, and political context in which they live. Traditional theories explain my experience, and those of others who do not fit the conventional pattern, as springing primarily if not solely from our personal psychological processes. Sociocultural theory, on the other hand, gives us different lenses with which to view learning, and different metaphors for describing it. This is significant because how one views learning leads to dramatically different curricular decisions, pedagogical approaches, expectations of learning, relationships among students, teachers and families, and indeed, educational outcomes.

Sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives are first and foremost based on the assumption that social relationships and political realities are at the heart of teaching and learning. That is, learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers. In what follows, I propose five interrelated concepts that undergird sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives. These concepts are the basis of my own work, and they help me make sense of my experience and the experiences of countless youngsters that challenge traditional deficit views of learning. The concepts are also highly consistent with a critical multicultural perspective, that is, one that is broader than superficial additions to content or "holidays and heroes" approaches.

I focus on five concepts: *agency/co-constructed learning*; *experience*; *identity/hybridity*; *context/situatedness/positionality*; and *community*. Needless to say, each of these words holds many meanings, but I use them here to locate some fundamental principles of sociocultural and sociopolitical theory. In addition, the terms are both deeply connected and overlapping. I separate them here for matters of convenience, not because I see them as fundamentally independent concepts.

## Agency

In many classrooms and schools, learning continues to be thought of as transmission rather than as *agency*, or mutual discovery by students and teachers. At the crudest level, learning is thought to be the reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge, or what Michael Apple (1991) has called "official knowledge." These are the dominant attitudes and behaviors that society deems basic to functioning. The most extreme manifestation of this theory of learning is what Paulo Freire (1970) called "banking education," that is, the simple depositing of knowledge into students who are thought to be empty receptacles. In an elegant rejection of the banking concept of education, Freire instead defined the act of study as con-

structed by active agents. According to Freire (1985), "To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them" (p. 4).

Although learning as the reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge is repudiated by teachers and theorists alike, it continues to exist in many schools and classrooms. It is the very foundation of such ideas as "teacher-proof curriculum," the need to "cover the material" in a given subject, and the endless lists of skills and competencies "that every student should know" (Hirsch, 1987). This contradiction was evident even near the beginning of the 20th century when John Dewey (1916) asked:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of "telling" and being told but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. (p. 38)

Why does this continue to happen? One reason is probably the doubt among the public that teachers and students have the ability to construct meaningful and important knowledge. Likewise, in low-income schools with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, very little agency exists on the part of either students or teachers. In such schools, teachers learn that their primary responsibility is to "teach the basics" because students are thought to have neither the innate ability nor the experiential background of more privileged students. In the case of students for whom English is a second language, the assumption that they must master English before they can think and reason may prevail.

Let me share some examples of agency, or lack of it, from the words of students of diverse backgrounds who a number of colleagues<sup>2</sup> and I interviewed for my first book (Nieto, 1992, 2000). We found that students' views largely echoed those of educational researchers who have found that teaching methods in most classrooms, especially those in secondary schools and even more so in secondary schools attended by poor students of all backgrounds, vary little from traditional "chalk and talk" methods; that textbooks are the dominant teaching materials used; that routine and rote learning are generally favored over creativity and critical thinking; and that teacher-centered transmission models still prevail (Cummins, 1994; Goodlad, 1984). Students in my study (Nieto, 2000) had more to say about pedagogy than about anything else, and they were especially critical of teachers who provided only passive learning environments for students. Linda Howard, who was just graduating as the valedictorian of her class in an urban high school, is a case in point. Although now at the top of her

<sup>2</sup>I am very grateful to those who assisted me with the interviews and gave me suggestions for crafting the case studies: Paula Elliott, Flavée Font, Maya Gillingham, Beatriz McCombie Zapatero, Mac Lee Morante, Carol Shea, Diane Sweet, and Carlie Tarakov.

class, Linda had failed seventh and eighth grade twice, for a variety of reasons, both academic and medical. She had this to say about pedagogy:

Because I know there were plenty of classes where I lost complete interest. But those were all because the teachers just, "Open the books to this page." They never made up problems out of their head. Everything came out of the book. You didn't ask questions. If you asked them questions, then the answer was "in the book." And if you asked the question and the answer *wasn't* in the book, then you shouldn't have asked that question! (pp. 55-56)

Rich Miller, a young man who planned to attend pharmacy school after graduation, described a "normal teacher" as one who "gets up, gives you a lecture, or there's teachers that just pass out the work, you do the work, pass it in, get a grade, good-bye!" (p. 66).

The students were especially critical of teachers who relied on textbooks and blackboards. Avi Abramson, a young man who had attended Jewish day schools and was now in a public high school, had some difficulty adjusting to the differences in pedagogy. He believed that some teachers did better because they taught from the point of view of the students: "They don't just come out and say, 'All right, do this, blah, blah, blah. . . They're not so *one-tone voice*'" (p. 116). Yolanda Piedra, a Mexican student, said that her English teacher "just does the things and sits down" (p. 221). Another student mentioned that some teachers "just teach the stuff. 'Here, write a couple of things on the board, see, that's how you do it. Go ahead, page 25'" (p. 166).

These students didn't just criticize, however; they also gave examples of teachers who promoted their active learning. Hoang Vinh, in his junior year of high school, spoke with feeling about teachers who allowed him to speak Vietnamese with other students in class. He also loved working in groups, contrary to conventional wisdom about Asian students' preference for individual work (demonstrating the dangers of generalizing about fixed cultural traits). Vinh particularly appreciated the teacher who asked students to discuss important issues, rather than focus only on learning what he called "the word's *meaning*" (p. 143) by writing and memorizing lists of words. Students also offered thoughtful suggestions to teachers to make their classrooms more engaging places. One student recommended that teachers involve more students actively: "More like making the whole class be involved, not making only the two smartest people up here do the whole work for the whole class" (p. 125).

Teaching becomes much more complex when learning is based on the idea that all students have the ability to think and reason. Sociocultural and sociopolitical theories emphasize that learning is not simply a question of transmitting knowledge, but rather of working with students so that they can reflect, theorize, and create knowledge. Given this theory of agency, "*Banking education*" (Freire, 1970) makes little sense. Instead, the focus is on

reflective questions invites students to consider different options, to question taken-for-granted truths, and to delve more deeply into problems.

### Experience

That learning needs to build on experience is a taken-for-granted maxim, based on the idea that it is an innately human endeavor accessible to all people. But somehow this principle is often ignored when it comes to young people who have not had the *kinds* of experiences that are thought to prepare them for academic success, particularly those students who have not been raised within "the culture of power" (Delpit, 1988), or who have not explicitly learned the rules of the game for academic success. The experiences of these students—usually young people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those raised in poverty—tend to be quite different from the experiences of more economically and socially advantaged students, and these differences become evident when they go to school.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) described how different forms of cultural capital help maintain economic privilege, even if these forms of capital are not themselves strictly related to economy. Cultural capital is evident in such intangibles as values, tastes, and behaviors and through cultural identities such as language, dialect, and ethnicity. Some signs of cultural capital have more social worth, although not necessarily more intrinsic worth, than others. If this is true, then youngsters from some communities are placed at a disadvantage relative to their peers simply because of their experiences and identities. Understanding this reality means that power relations are a fundamental, although largely unspoken, aspect of school life.

We also need to consider the impact of teachers' attitudes concerning the cultural capital that their students *do* bring to school, and teachers' subsequent behaviors relative to this cultural capital. Sociocultural theories help to foreground these concerns. For example, a 1971 article by Annie Stein cited a New York City study in which kindergarten teachers were asked to list in order of their importance the things a child should learn in order to prepare for first grade. In schools with large Puerto Rican and Black student populations, socialization goals were predominant, but in mostly White schools, educational goals were invariably first. "In fact," according to Stein, "in a list of six or seven goals, several teachers in the minority-group kindergartners forgot to mention any educational goals at all" (p. 167). This is an insidious kind of tracking, where educational ends for some students were sacrificed for social aims. The effects of this early tracking were already evident in kindergarten.

All children come to school as thinkers and learners, aptitudes usually recognized as important building blocks for further learning. But there seems to be a curious refusal on the part of many educators to accept as valid the *kinds* of knowledge and experiences with which some students come to school. For instance, speaking languages other than English

pecially those languages with low status, is often thought of by teachers as a potential detriment rather than a benefit to learning. Likewise, although traveling to Europe to ski is generally considered culturally enriching, the same is not true of traveling to North Carolina, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic to visit relatives. The reason that these kinds of experiences are evaluated differently by teachers, and in fact in the general society, has more to do with their cultural capital than with their educational potential or intrinsic worth.

The reluctance or inability to accept and build on students' experiences is poignantly described by Mary Ginley, a teacher in Massachusetts who taught in a small city with a large Puerto Rican student population. A gifted teacher, Mary also knew that "being nice is not enough," an idea she elaborated on in a journal she kept for a class she took with me:

Every child needs to feel welcome, to feel comfortable. School is a foreign land to most kids (where else in the world would you spend time cycling answers and filling in the blanks?), but the more distant a child's culture and language are from the culture and language of school, the more at risk that child is. A warm, friendly, helpful teacher is nice but it isn't enough. We have plenty of warm friendly teachers who tell the kids nicely to forget their Spanish and ask mommy and daddy to speak to them in English at home; who give them easier tasks so they won't feel badly when the work becomes difficult; who never learn about what life is like at home or what they eat or what music they like or what stories they have been told or what their history is. Instead, we smile and give them a hug and tell them to eat our food and listen to our stories and dance to our music. We teach them to read with our words and wonder why it's so hard for them. We ask them to sit quietly and we'll tell them what's important and what they must know to "get ready for the next grade." And we never ask them who they are and where they want to go. (Nieto, 1999, pp. 85-86)

A case in point is Hoang Vinh, the Vietnamese student I mentioned previously. Vinh was literate in Vietnamese and he made certain that his younger siblings spoke it exclusively at home and they all wrote to their parents in Vietnam weekly. He was a good student, but he was also struggling to learn English, something that his teachers didn't always understand. He described how some teachers described his native language as "funny," and even laughed at it. But as he explained, "[T]o keep reading and writing Vietnamese] is very important. . . . So, I like to learn English, but I like to learn my language too" (Nieto, 2000, p. 178). Even more fundamental for Vinh was that teachers try to understand their students' experiences and culture. He explained: "[My teachers] understand some things, just not all Vietnamese culture. Like they just understand some things *outside*. . . . But they cannot understand something inside our hearts" (p. 178). Vinh's words are a good reminder that when students' skills and knowledge are dismissed as inappropriate for the

schools lose a golden opportunity to build on their students' lives in the service of their learning.

### Identity/Hybridity

How students benefit from schooling or not is influenced by many things including the particular individual personalities of students and the values of the cultural context in which they have been raised. Traditional theories, however, privilege individual differences above all other circumstances. As a result, it is primarily through tests and other measures of students' individual abilities that their intelligence is determined. Sociocultural theory goes beyond this limited perspective to include other issues such as students' cultural identities. But culture should not be thought of in this context as unproblematic. Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope, and Diana Slade (1989) remind us that

we are not simply bearers of cultures, languages, and histories, with a duty to reproduce them. We are the products of linguistic-cultural circumstances, actors with a capacity to resynthesize what we have been socialized into and to solve new and emerging problems of existence. We are not duty-bound to conserve ancestral characteristics which are not structurally useful. We are both socially determined and creators of human futures. (p. 18)

Culture is complex and intricate; it cannot be reduced to holidays, foods, or dances, although these are of course elements of culture. Everyone has a culture because all people participate in the world through social and political relationships informed by history as well as by race, ethnicity, language, social class, sexual orientation, gender, and other circumstances related to identity and experience.

If culture is thought of in a sentimental way then it becomes little more than a yearning for a past that never existed, or an idealized, sanitized version of what exists in reality. The result may be an unadulterated, essentialized "culture on a pedestal" that bears little resemblance to the messy and contradictory culture of real life. The problem of viewing some aspects of culture as indispensable attributes that must be shared by all people within a particular group springs from a romanticized and uncritical understanding of culture.

Let me share an example of this with you: Last year, I received an e-mail message with the subject heading "You Know You're Puerto Rican When. . ." The message was meant to be humorous, and it included a long list of experiences and characteristics that presumably describe what it means to be Puerto Rican in the United States (e.g., being chased by your mother with a *chancleta*, or slipper in hand; always having a dinner that consists of rice and beans and some kind of meat; having a grandmother who thinks Vick's Vapor Rub is the miracle cure for everything). I laughed at many of these things (and I shared a good number of these experiences when I was growing up in New York City), but it

ing to read the list because it felt like a litmus test for *puertorriqueñidad* (Puerto Ricanness). If you could prove that you had these particular experiences, you could claim to be authentic; otherwise, you could not. By putting them to paper, the author was making it clear that these experiences defined the very essence of being Puerto Rican.

Reading the list made me reflect on my own daughters, born and raised in the United States by highly educated middle-class parents. My daughters would likely not pass the Puerto Rican litmus test: Their dinner was just as likely to consist of take-out Chinese or pizza as of rice and beans; they barely knew what Vick's Vapor Rub was; and I don't remember ever chasing them with *chancleta* in hand. But both of them identify as Puerto Rican, and they speak Spanish to varying degrees and enjoy rice and beans as much as the next Puerto Rican. But they also eat salmon and frog's legs and pizza and Thai food. The e-mail message I received made it seem as if there was only one way to be Puerto Rican. The result of this kind of thinking is that we are left with just two alternatives: either complete adherence to one definition of identity, or total and unequivocal assimilation. We are, in the words of Anthony Appiah (1994), replacing "one kind of tyranny with another" (p. 163).

My daughters' identities are complicated. They live in a highly diverse society in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and other differences, and they enjoy the privileges they have received as a result of their parents' social-class position in society. The point of this story is to emphasize that culture does not exist in a vacuum but rather is situated in particular historical, social, political, and economic conditions, another major tenet of sociocultural theory. That is, culture needs to be understood as dynamic; multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by social, economic, and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical (Nieto, 1999). Steven Arvizu's (1994) wonderful description of culture as a *verb* rather than a *noun* captures the essence of culture beautifully. That is, culture is dynamic, active, changing, always on the move. Even within their native contexts, cultures are always changing as a result of political, social, and other modifications in the immediate environment. When people with different backgrounds come in contact with one another, such change is to be expected even more.

Let me once again use the example of Linda Howard, one of the young women we interviewed for *Affirming Diversity* (2000). As I mentioned, Linda was a talented young woman who was graduating as valedictorian of her class. But the issue of identity was a complicated one for her. Being biracial, she identified as "Black American and White American," and she said,

I don't always fit in—unless I'm in a mixed group . . . because if I'm in a group of people who are all one race, then they seem to look at me as being the other race . . . whereas if I'm in a group (full of racially mixed) people, my race doesn't seem to matter to everybody else. . . . Then I don't feel like I'm standing out . . . It's hard. I look at history and I feel

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some of my ancestors did to some of my other ancestors. Unless you're mixed, you don't know what it's like to be mixed (pp. 51-52).

The tension of Linda's identity was not simply a personal problem, however. It was evident throughout her schooling, and especially when she reached secondary school. She found that teachers jumped to conclusions about her identity, assuming she was Latina or even Chinese, and identifying her as such on forms without even asking her.

Linda won a scholarship to a highly regarded university. When discussing her future, she exclaimed proudly, "I've got it all laid out. I've got a 4-year scholarship to one of the best schools in New England. All I've gotta do is go there and make the grade." Linda's future seemed hopeful, overflowing with possibilities, but she didn't quite "make the grade." When Paula Elliott, who interviewed Linda the first time, spoke with her again 10 years later, she found out that Linda dropped out of college after just a few months, and she never returned. Over dinner, Linda described her experience at the university in this way: "I felt like a pea on a big pile of rice." Using a sociocultural lens, we can see that identity is not simply a personal issue, but that it is deeply embedded in institutional life. Had there been a way to validate her hybridity, perhaps Linda might have graduated. She certainly had the intellectual training and resources; what she didn't have was the support for her identity to ease the way.

In some ways, we can think of culture as having both surface and deep structure, to borrow a concept from linguistics (Chomsky, 1965). For instance, in the interviews of students of diverse backgrounds that I mentioned previously (Nieto, 2000), we were initially surprised by the seeming homogeneity of the youth culture they manifested. Regardless of racial, ethnic, linguistic background, or time in the United States—but usually intimately connected to a shared urban culture and social class—the youths often expressed strikingly similar tastes in music, food, clothes, television viewing habits, and so on. When I probed more deeply, however, I also found evidence of deeply held values from their ethnic heritage. For instance, Marisol, a Puerto Rican high school student, loved hip hop and rap music, pizza, and lasagna. She never mentioned Puerto Rican food, and Puerto Rican music to her was just the "old-fashioned" and boring music her parents listened to. But in her everyday interactions with parents and siblings, and in the answers she gave to my interview questions, she reflected deep aspects of Puerto Rican culture such as respect for elders, a profound kinship with and devotion to family, and a desire to uphold important traditions such as staying with family rather than going out with friends on important holidays. Just as there is no such thing as a "pure race," there is likewise no "pure culture." That is, cultures influence one another, and even minority cultures and those with less status have an impact on majority cultures, sometimes in dramatic ways.

Power is deeply implicated in notions of culture and language (Fairclough, 1984). Indeed, what are often presented as cultural

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differences are above all differences in power. Put another way, cultural conflict is sometimes little more than political conflict. Let me give you another example concerning the link between culture and context based on an experience I had that took me by surprise even as a young adult. As you probably know, rice is a primary Puerto Rican staple. There is a saying in Spanish that demonstrates how common it is: "*Puertorriqueños somos como el arroz blanco: estamos por todas partes*" (Puerto Ricans are like white rice: we are everywhere), an adage that says as much about rice as it does about the diaspora of the Puerto Rican people, almost half of whom live outside the island. As a rule, Puerto Ricans eat short-grained rice, but I have always preferred long-grained rice. Some Puerto Ricans have made me feel practically like a cultural traitor when I admitted it. I remember my surprise when a fellow academic, a renowned Puerto Rican historian, explained the real reason behind the preference for short-grained rice. This preference did not grow out of the blue, nor does any particular quality of the rice make it innately better. On the contrary, the predilection for short-grained rice was influenced by the historical context of Puerto Ricans as a colonized people.

It seems that, near the beginning of the 20th century when Puerto Rico was first taken over by the United States as spoils of the Spanish-American War, there was a surplus of short-grained rice in the United States. Colonies have frequently been the destination for unwanted or surplus goods from the metropolis, so Puerto Rico became the dumping ground for short-grained rice, which had lower status than long-grained rice in the United States. After this, of course, the preference for short-grained rice became part of the culture. As is true of all cultural values, however, this particular taste was influenced by history, economics, and power. This example was a good lesson to me that culture is not something inherent, but often arbitrary and negotiated.

Hybridity complicates the idea of cultural identity. It means that culture is always heterogeneous and complex; it also implies that assimilation or cultural preservation are not the only alternatives. Ariel Dorfman's (1998) autobiography *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* eloquently describes the turmoil he experienced as a child in developing his identity, first in New York City and later in Chile: "I instinctively chose to refuse the multiple, complex, in-between person I would someday become, this man who is shared by two equal languages and who has come to believe that to tolerate differences and indeed embody them personally and collectively might be our only salvation as a species" (p. 42). As an adult, he reflected on the demand to be "culturally pure" that he experienced in the United States as a graduate student:

Sitting at my typewriter in Berkeley, California, that day, precariously balanced between Spanish and English, for the first time perhaps fully aware of how extraordinarily bicultural I was, I did not have the

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the

emotional or ideological space, probably not even the vocabulary—to answer that I was a hybrid, part Yankee, part Chilean, a pinch of Jew, a mestizo in search of a center, I was unable to look directly in the face the divergent mystery of who I was, the abyss of being bilingual and binational, at a time when everything demanded that we be unequivocal and immaculate. (p. 22)

The idea of hybridity, and of culture as implicated with power and privilege, complicate culturally responsive pedagogy. Rather than simply an incorporation of the cultural practices of students' families in the curriculum, or a replication of stereotypical ideas about "learning styles," culturally responsive pedagogy in the broadest sense is a political project that is, according to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) about "questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society" (p. 128). Culturally responsive pedagogy is not simply about instilling pride in one's identity or boosting self-esteem. It is also about context and positionality, to which I now turn.

### Context/Situatedness/Positionality

When culture is thought of as if it were context-free, we fragment people's lives, in the words of Frederick Erickson (1990), "as we freeze them outside time, outside a world of struggle in concrete history" (p. 34). Context is also about *situatedness* and *positionality*, reminding us that culture is not simply the rituals, foods, and holidays of specific groups of people, but also the social markers that differentiate that group from others. It is once again the recognition that questions of power are at the very heart of learning. This view of culture also implies that differences in ethnicity, language, social class, and gender need not, in and of themselves, be barriers to learning. Instead, it is how these differences are viewed in society that can make the difference in whether and to what extent young people learn.

Judith Solisken's (1993) definition of *literacy* as the "negotiation of one's orientation toward written language and thus one's position within multiple relations of power and status" (p. 6) brings up a number of questions that have traditionally been neglected in discussions of reading and writing, questions such as: How do students learn to use language in a way that both acknowledges the context in which they find themselves, and challenges the rules of that context? How do young people learn to negotiate the chasm that exists between their home languages and cultures and those of school? Let me share with you another example from Linda Howard. What helped Linda go from a struggling student in junior high to valedictorian of her class several years later? There are probably many answers to this question, but one ingredient that made a tremendous difference was Mr. Benson, her favorite teacher that made a tremendous difference, and Linda talked about some of the things she had learned from Mr. Benson about *positionality and context*:

I've enjoyed all my English teachers at Jefferson. But Mr. Benson, my English Honors teacher, he just threw me for a whirl! 'Cause Mr. Benson, he says, I can go into Harvard and converse with those people, and I can go out in the street and rap with y'all. It's that type of thing, I love it. I try and be like that myself. I have my street talk. I get out in the street and I say "ain't" this and "ain't" that and "your momma" or "wha's up?" But I get somewhere where I know the people aren't familiar with that language or aren't accepting that language, and I will talk properly. . . . I walk into a place and I listen to how people are talking, and it just automatically comes to me. (Nieto, 2000, p. 56)

Linda's statement is an example of the tremendous intelligence needed by young people whose Discourses (Gee, 1990) are not endorsed by schools, and who need to negotiate these differences on their own. Linda's words are also a graphic illustration of James Baldwin's (1997) characterization of language as "a political instrument, means, and proof of power" (p. 16). In the case of African American discourse, Baldwin suggested—as Linda learned through her own experience—"It is not the Black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience" (p. 16). As David Corson (1993) reminds us, ". . . education can routinely repress, dominate, and disempower language users whose practices differ from the norms that it establishes" (p. 7).

What does this mean for teachers? Situations such as Linda Howard's suggest that, in the words of Sharon Nelson-Barber and Elise Trumbull Estrin (1995), "We are faced with essential epistemological questions such as, what counts as important knowledge or knowing?" (p. 178). These questions are at the core of sociocultural theory, and they are neither neutral nor innocent. They are rarely addressed openly in school, although they should be. As Ira Shor (1992) said, "A curriculum that avoids questioning school and society is not, as is commonly supposed, politically neutral. It cuts off the students' development as critical thinkers about their world" (p. 12).

Sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives have been especially consequential because they have shattered the perception that teaching and learning are neutral processes uncontaminated by the idiosyncrasies of particular contexts. Whether and to what extent teachers realize the influence social and political context have on learning can alter how they perceive their students and, consequently, what and how they teach them. A good example of positionality is the status of bilingual education. Bilingualism is only viewed as a problem and a deficit in a context where speakers of a particular language are held in low esteem or seen as a threat to national unity. This is the case of bilingual education in the United States, and especially for children who speak Spanish. That is, there is nothing inherently negative about the project of becoming bilingual (many wealthy parents pay dearly for the privilege), but rather it is the identities of the students, and the status of the language variety they speak, that make

education problematic. This was clearly explained by Lizette Román, a bilingual teacher whose journal entry for one of my classes reads as follows:

Unfortunately, most bilingual programs exist because they are mandated by law, not because they are perceived as a necessity by many school systems. The main problem that we bilingual teachers face every day is the misconception that mainstream teachers, principals, and even entire school systems have about bilingual education. . . . As a consequence, in many school districts bilingual education is doubly disadvantaged, first because it is seen as remedial and, second, because little attention is paid to it. Many mainstream teachers and administrators see bilingual education as a remediation program and do not validate what bilingual teachers do in their classrooms even when what they are teaching is part of the same curriculum. . . . The majority think that there must be something wrong with these children who cannot perform well in English. As soon as the children transfer out of the bilingual program, these teachers believe that *this* is the moment when the learning of these children starts. The perception of the majority distorts the importance and the purpose of bilingual education. It extends to bilingual children and their parents. Bilingual children and their parents sense that their language places them in a program where they are perceived to be inferior to the rest of the children. What isolates children in the bilingual program is not the way the program is conducted, but the perceptions the majority has about people who speak a language different from the mainstream. (Nieto, 1999, pp. 87–88)

Lizette's reflections suggest that if teachers believe that intelligence and learning are somehow divorced from context, then they will conclude that the political and economic realities of their students' lives—including their school environments—have nothing to do with learning. In short, teachers can delude themselves by believing that they and the schools in which they work inhabit an "ideology-free zone" in which dominant attitudes and values play no role in learning. When students are asked to give up their identities for an elusive goal that they may never reach because of the negative context in which they learn, students may be quite correct in rejecting the trade.

### Community

How we define and describe *community* is of central significance in sociocultural theory. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) research in the first decades of the 20th century was a catalyst for the viewpoint that learning is above all a social practice. Vygotsky suggested that development and learning are firmly rooted in—and influenced by—society and culture. Accepting this idea means that it is no longer possible to separate learning from the context in which it takes place, nor from an understanding of how culture and *Society influence and are influenced by learning.*

Vygotsky and others who have advanced the sociocultural foundation of cognition (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981) have provided us with a framework for understanding how schools can either encourage or discourage the development of learning communities. Because schools organize themselves in specific ways, they are more or less comfortable and inviting for students of particular backgrounds. Most schools closely reflect the traditional image of the intelligent, academically prepared young person, and consequently, these are the young people who tend to feel most comfortable in school settings. But institutional environments are never neutral; they are always based on particular views of human development, of what is worth knowing, and of what it means to be educated. When young people enter schools, they are entering institutions that have already made some fundamental decisions about such matters, and in the process, some of these children may be left out through no fault of their own. The ability to create community, so important in sociocultural theory, is lost.

Maria Botelho, a doctoral student of mine and a former early childhood teacher and librarian, remembers very clearly what it was like to be in school as a young immigrant student in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After viewing a short video on bilingual education in one of my classes, she felt almost as if she had stepped back in time. The video highlights a number of students, one of them Carla, a young Portuguese student in a bilingual class in Cambridge. Maria reflected on her reactions to the video in the journal she kept for my class:

I viewed the video "Quality Bilingual Education" twice. I wept both times. The Portuguese-speaking girl, Carla, attended kindergarten in a school that is less than a block from where my parents live in Cambridge; it was too close to home, so to speak. Like Carla, I entered the Cambridge Public Schools speaking only Portuguese. Unlike Carla, I was placed in a mainstream first-grade class. I still remember my teacher bringing over a piece of paper with some writing on it (a worksheet) and crayons. I fell asleep. There I learned quietly about her world, and my world was left with my coat, outside the classroom door. (Nieto, 1999, p. 110)

Sociocultural theories are a radical departure from conventional viewpoints that posit learning as largely unaffected by context. Traditional viewpoints often consider that children such as Maria who do not speak English have low intelligence. As a result, such children are automatically barred from entering a community of learners. A Vygotskian perspective provides a more hopeful framework for thinking about learning because if learning can be influenced by social mediation, then conditions can be created in schools that can help most students learn. These conditions can result in what Carmen Mercado (1998) described as the "fashioning of new texts—texts of our collective voices" (p. 92) that emerge as a result of *organizing a learning environment in which literacy is fostered*

flecting. Particularly significant in this regard is the idea of the *zone of proximal development* or ZPD (Vygotksy, 1978). But the ZPD is not simply an *individual* space, but a *social* one. Thus, according to Henry Trueba (1989), if we accept Vygotksy's theory of ZPD, then failure to learn cannot be defined as *individual* failure but rather as *systemic* failure, that is, as the failure of the social system to provide the learner with an opportunity for successful social interactions.

In order to change academic failure to success, appropriate social and instructional interventions need to occur. For teachers, this means that they need to first acknowledge students' differences and then act as a bridge between their students' differences and the culture of the dominant society. The metaphor of a bridge is an appropriate one for teachers who want to be effective with students of diverse backgrounds. This is a lesson I learned from Diane Sweet, a former student who had been an engineer until she fell in love with teaching ESL at the plant where she worked and decided to become a teacher. Diane was well aware of the benefits of bridges, and she applied the metaphor to teaching: A bridge provides access to a different shore without closing off the possibility of returning home; a bridge is built on solid ground but soars toward the heavens; a bridge connects two places that might otherwise never be able to meet. The best thing about bridges is that they do not need to be burned once they are used; on the contrary, they become more valuable with use because they help visitors from both sides become adjusted to different contexts. This is, however, a far cry from how diverse languages and cultures tend to be viewed in schools: the conventional wisdom is that, if native languages and cultures are used at all, it should be only until one learns the *important* language and culture, and then they should be discarded or burned. It is definitely a one-way street with no turning back.

The metaphor of the bridge suggests a different stance: You can have two homes, and the bridge can help you cross the difficult and conflict-laden spaces between them. Teachers who take seriously their responsibility for working with students of diverse backgrounds become bridges, or what Estéban Díaz and his colleagues (1992) called *sociocultural mediators*. That is, they accept and validate the cultural symbols used by all their students, not just by those from majority backgrounds. In sociocultural theory, learning and achievement are not merely cognitive processes, but complex issues that need to be understood in the development of community.

Three of my colleagues provide a hopeful example of using students' experiences and identities as a basis for creating community. Jo-Anne Wil-son Keenan, a teacher researcher, working with Judith Solisken and Jerri Willett, professors at the University of Massachusetts, developed a collaborative action research project in a school in Springfield, Massachusetts, with a very diverse student body. The project—based on the premise that parents and other family members of children from widely diverse back-  
grounds have a lot to offer schools to enhance their children's learning—

was distinct from others in which parents are simply invited to speak about their culture and to share food. Instead, their research focused on demonstrating how parents, through visits that highlight their daily lives, talents, and skills, can promote student learning by transforming the curriculum. But engaging in this kind of project is not always easy. The researchers pointed out that collaborating with families "requires that we confront our own fears of difference and open our classrooms to discussions of topics that may raise tensions among the values of different individuals, groups, and institutions" (p. 64). Through inspiring stories based on in-depth analysis of the families' visits, Wilson Keenan, Solisken, and Willett (1999) described how they attempted to build reciprocal relationships with parents. They concluded:

Both the extent and the quality of participation by the parents belies the common perception that low-income and minority parents are unable or unwilling to collaborate with the school. Even more important, our study documents the wide range of knowledge, skills, and teaching capabilities that parents are already sharing with their children at home and that are available to enrich the education of their own and other children in school. (p. 64)

The important work of Luis Moll, Norma González, and their colleagues (1997) is another well-known example of research that builds on family knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

No theory can provide all the answers to the persistent problems of education because these problems are not just about teaching and learning, but about a society's ideology. But sociocultural theories give us different insights into these problems. Although we need to accept the inconclusiveness of what we know, we also need to find new and more empowering ways of addressing these concerns. Maxine Greene (1994), in a discussion of postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, literary criticism, and other sociocultural theories, discussed both the possibilities and the limits they have. She wrote: "The point is to open a number of fresh perspectives on epistemology in its connection with educational research" (p. 426). But she added, "no universalized or totalized viewing, even of a revised sort . . ." (p. 426) is possible.

Nevertheless, despite this inconclusiveness, we know enough to know that teachers need to respect students' identities and they need to learn about their students if they are to be effective with them. This means understanding the students we teach, and building relationships with them. Ron Morris, a young man attending an alternative school in Boston, described the disappointing relationships he had with teachers before attending the alternative school where he now found himself, a school that finally allowed him to have the relationship he craved. He said:

When a teacher becomes a teacher, she acts like a teacher instead of a person. She takes her title as now she's mechanical, somebody just running it. Teachers shouldn't deal with students like we're machines. You're a person. I'm a person. We come to school and we all act like people. (Nieto, 2000, p. 265)

Ron reminds us that we do not have all the answers, and indeed, that some of the answers we have are clearly wrong. Ray McDermott (1977), in an early ethnography, described this fact beautifully: "We are all embedded in our own procedures, which make us both very smart in one situation and blind and stupid in the next" (p. 202). More recently, Herbert Kohl (1995) suggested that students' failure to learn is not always caused by a lack of intelligence, motivation, or self-esteem. On the contrary, he maintained that "to agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self" (p. 6), or what Carol Locust (1988) called "wounding the spirit" (p. 315).

Much has been written in the past few years about teachers' reluctance to broach issues of difference, both among themselves and with their students (Fine, 1992; Jervis, 1996; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1994; Solomon, 1995; Tatum, 1997). This is especially true of racism, which is most often addressed in schools as if it were a personality problem. But prejudice and discrimination are not just personality traits or psychological phenomena; they are also manifestations of economic, political, and social power. The institutional definition of racism is not always easy for teachers to accept because it goes against deeply held theories of equality and justice in our nation. Bias as an institutional system implies that some people and groups benefit and others lose. Whites, whether they want to or not, benefit in a racist society; males benefit in a sexist society. Discrimination always helps somebody—those with the most power—which explains why racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination continue to exist. Having a different language to speak about differences in privilege and power is the first step in acquiring the courage to make changes.

Finally, sociocultural and sociopolitical concepts give us a way to confront what Henry Giroux (1992) called our nation's "retreat from democracy" (p. 4). Paulo Freire (1998), writing a series of letters to teachers, focused on this problem:

When inexperienced middle-class teachers take teaching positions in peripheral areas of the city, class-specific tastes, values, language, discourse, syntax, semantics, everything about the students may seem contradictory to the point of being shocking and frightening. It is necessary, however, that teachers understand that the students' syntax; their manners, tastes, and ways of addressing teachers and colleagues; and the rules governing their fighting and playing among themselves are all part of their *cultural identity*, which never lacks an element of class. All that has to be accepted. Only as learners recognize themselves democratically and see that their right to say

"I be" is respected will they become able to learn the dominant grammatical reasons why they should say "I am." (p. 49)

All students are individuals as well as members of particular groups whose identities are either disdained or respected in society. When we understand this, then my own story and those of countless others, can be understood not simply as someone "pulling herself up by her bootstraps," or "melting," or joining "the mainstream," but as a story that the concepts I've spoken about today—*agency/co-constructed learning; experience; identity/hybridity; context/situatedness/positionality*; and *community*—can begin to explain. When language, literacy, and culture are approached in these ways, we have a more hopeful way of addressing teaching and learning for all students.

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## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. How have language, literacy, and culture affected your life and your experiences as a student and teacher? Write another introduction to this chapter by beginning with your own story. How is it different from mine? What implications might there be for teaching and learning? Would they be different?
2. How do you think that language, literacy, and culture affect your students' lives? What if you wrote the beginning of the chapter from the perspective of one of your students? What might you learn about them in the process?
3. Have you usually accepted the traditional metaphors I mention in the chapter ("pulling yourself up by your bootstraps;" "melting;" "joining the mainstream")? Can you think of other metaphors that might be more appropriate to describe the situations of the students you teach?
4. Look back on the examples I've used when describing the five tenets of sociocultural and sociopolitical theory. As you can see, they all proceed from my own experience. What examples might you use to illustrate these concepts from your experience? from the experiences of your students? What is the danger of using just one's own reality to reach conclusions about teaching and learning?
5. Give some illustrations of *hybrid culture* from your experience as a teacher of students of diverse backgrounds. (My assumption in asking this question is that *all* teachers work with students of diverse backgrounds because diversity encompasses many things, including race/ethnicity, gender, social class, native language, sexual orientation, family configuration, and so on.)

## ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

1. For a serious semester-long project, develop a classroom-based curriculum that includes in a central way the major tenets of sociocultural and sociopolitical theory as described in the chapter. Include the topic, goals, grade level/subject matter, several activities, resources, and evaluation. Clearly explain how each of the tenets is included in the curriculum.

2. Work with a colleague or group of colleagues (in this course or in your school). Think about ways to address students' experiences and backgrounds in your classroom. Be specific, referring to actual materials, family and community resources, and classroom projects.

### COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVITIES AND ADVOCACY

Are language, literacy, and culture significant issues in the community in which you teach? To find out, engage your students in research about their cultural and literacy practices. Depending on their age, experience, and grade level, you can ask them to:

- interview family members about their language use;
- do a survey of community language resources by finding out how many languages are used in everyday interactions;
- visit a community preschool to see how literacy is promoted; and
- do a study of the community's policies concerning language and culture (e.g., Is there an "English-Only" policy in place? Are cultural festivals encouraged? Does the public library promote multicultural literature? Literature in languages other than English? etc.).

### SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND STUDY

Appiah, K. Anthony (1994). Multicultural societies and social reproduction. In Amy Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism* (pp. 149–163). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The author highlights some major problems with multiculturalism, including a focus on large categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, that are far removed from the individual.

Egan-Robertson, Ann & Bloome, David (1998). *Students as researchers of culture and language in their own communities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

In this edited text, various educators write compelling accounts of how students' research of language and culture in their communities has empowered them not only in terms of their literacy, but also in terms of their understanding of the world. This is an excellent resource for teachers who want to do similar research with their students.

Nieto, Sonia (1999). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Using excerpts from journals kept in graduate courses, this text explores how teachers' reflections on course content, reading, and activities provide the framework for a deeper understanding of the effect of culture and language on students' education.

Reyes, Maria de la Luz (1992). Challenging venerable assumptions: Literacy instruction for linguistically different students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(4), 427–446.

In this thought-provoking article, Reyes challenges widely accepted progressive notions about teaching students of limited English proficiency and she critiques current implementations of process instruction that may have the tendency to ignore culturally and linguistically supportive adaptations for these students.