6

Race, Literacy, and Power

Learning from Children about Educational Justice

Thus far, this book has described the language and identity practices of a group of children who ultimately attempted to participate in schooling on their own terms. A major part of this process involved transforming the raciolinguistic ideologies of deficit that presented them with impossible choices with respect to achieving in school. Race was an unavoidable social fact defining their existence in the world and for this reason, it figured centrally as an organizing principle of their identity models.

In the last phase of my fieldwork, I tried to practice critical pedagogy with the students to see if it made a noticeable difference in their schooling experiences, specifically in the way that they recognized themselves as legitimate producers of meaning and practice. Critical pedagogy is a theory of educational practice that places primacy on both teachers and students unlearning the structures, practices, and curriculum of normative schooling. As someone who was interested in helping students unlearn the oppressive ideas they encountered at school and in after school about language and literacy, I focused my efforts on developing activities centered on the topics of language variation and change. I drew from studies and lessons grounded in critical sociolinguistics, with the goal of getting students to see language change and variation as natural and desirable and also to recognize oppressive language ideologies for what they were. Ultimately, I wanted my students to have more tools at their disposal to interrupt language pedagogies of oppression, such as ones grounded in deficit-based language ideologies (Blackburn 2005; Godley & Minnici 2008). In proceeding with this project, I had the full endorsement of the organization's founders, parents, and local community members who heard about the activities I did from the students. The students, for their part, enjoyed some of what I had designed, but did not always finish lessons or carry them forward.

As I explain in this chapter, I believe that my efforts to do critical pedagogy partially failed. I, like other educators, was under enormous pressure to make sure

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AN: 2745321 ; Jennifer B. Delfino.; Speaking of Race : Language, Identity, and Schooling Among African American Children
Account: s8944763.main.eds

that students could pass their standardized tests in reading and writing. At the same time, I did not realize the ways in which critical pedagogical concepts such as "empowerment" and "critical reflection" continue to sponsor oppressive teaching practices (Ellsworth 1989). Moreover, I was not attuned to the ways in which students already brought a critical *translingual sensibility* to their learning, defined as the application of metalinguistic reflection and a critical bending of monoglossic language ideologies (Seltzer 2017). While I believed that the students were already engaging in critical thinking, I continued to work from the deficit-based position that students needed a "bridge" to academic language and literacy skills. I argue that my experience doing critical pedagogy in the after school program is evidence of how liberal and progressive teaching, while making well-intended efforts to help students overcome structural inequality can simply become a new conduit for historically colonizing processes, such as speaking for the Other (Spivak 1988; Ellsworth 1989). This chapter critically interrogates the critical pedagogy I practiced with the after school students and, consistent with the raciolinguistic perspective I hope to offer in this book, suggests that educators must recognize the ways in which students are already engaged in the work of racial transformation and social justice.

WHAT IS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND WHAT SHOULD IT BE?

Critical pedagogy is widely understood to have originated from the work of Paolo Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). According to Freire, critical pedagogy aims to help practitioners move away from a teaching model in which the teacher deposits knowledge into the metaphorical empty bank of the students' mind. Rather, teachers must learn to recognize the ways in which they learn from students and conversely, students must learn to recognize how they are legitimate producers of knowledge.

Critical pedagogy has wide theoretical and practical applications. While many theorize it broadly as a way of teaching in general (Cochran-Lytle & Smith 2008; Gee 2012), some scholars use it to help young children name and navigate social injustice (Vasquez 2002), help minoritized communities act against oppression (Luke 1999; Janks 2003), or to develop culturally relevant pedagogies for students of color attending urban schools (Ladson-Billings 1994; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell 2008). Consistent with a raciolinguistic perspective, a growing number of researcher-practitioners see critical pedagogy's role as interrogating the continued workings of white supremacy in educational settings (Ladson-Billings 1994; Emdin 2016; Alim & Paris 2017). This means investigating how educators center whiteness in their teaching despite their efforts to help students value and use their cultural and linguistic practices in the classroom.

Critical pedagogues working from the perspective of *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Alim & Paris 2017) and a raciolinguistic perspective note that pluralist approaches, which aim to create a space for students to value their "home languages" nevertheless sponsor assimilatory models of schooling. This means that educators

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often believe that while racially minoritized students' languages are of value, they also believe that these students lack the cultural and linguistic tools they need to participate in the "mainstream" and achieve success. Studies of bi- and multilingual classrooms disclose that even the most well-intentioned liberal and progressive educators hear and see racially minoritized students as needing to acquire "standard" or "academic" language (Flores & Rosa 2015; Alim & Paris 2017; Love 2018; Flores 2020). Furthermore, as Ellsworth (1989) notes from her own experiences teaching as a college professor, that many critical pedagogues adopt a "posture of invisibility" to define social justice in the service of a progressive agenda that they believe is best for everyone, but in fact center in white ("Western") values and models of personhood. Thus, despite the fact that many critical pedagogues believe in creating space to value students' linguistic and cultural practices, their underlying assumption is that white middle-class views, values, and interests are best equipped to help them do so.

Pluralist approaches in critical pedagogy also presume that students' linguistic and cultural practices do not include anything related to what is taught in school and in the so-called mainstream. As a result, these students are often asked to master academic language or Standard English while also performing "authentic" selves that are rooted in whites' stereotypical ideas about raciolinguistic difference (Guerra 2016; Chaparro 2019; Rosa 2019). Often, the core assumption is that the authentic linguistic identity for bilingual or multilingual students is their "home language," that linguistic forms or discourse styles typically considered standard, academic, or "mainstream" are somehow absent from what they do and say in their everyday lives, and that they need to be taught how to use these forms and styles. It should be obvious by this point that such neutralized terms for what students "need" or "lack" center whiteness.

As I argue in the introduction, monoglossic language ideologies that draw strict boundaries between "standard" and "non-standard" languages conceptualize racially minoritized people's languages as deficient in line with nationalist ideologies of belonging to the nation-state. The preceding chapters of this book have shown that the after school students' linguistic and cultural practices are inherently fluid, hybrid, and, importantly, aligned to the goals of schooling. This chapter documents my reflections on practicing critical pedagogy with the after school students and my realization that I had unwittingly sponsored the pitfalls and traps I have just described earlier. In the process, I revisited their writing and art projects and learned that their translingual sensibilities were much more sophisticated than I had realized at the time. In concluding this chapter, I discuss further why a raciolinguistic and translingual perspective is essential to helping students of color navigate and disrupt racism

Practicing Critical Pedagogy: A Lesson about Math

Finding an effective critical pedagogy to practice with the after school students was the goal from the time I first began my volunteer work and later, teaching and research, with Urban Pathways. During my fieldwork, I briefly halted the critical pedagogy I had been doing with the students to collect data. As I explain in the introduction, I had planned to reintroduce it in the last phase of research to see if it

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would make a noticeable difference in how the students interacted in the after school space. I introduced the lessons I planned to do to Victor, the students' parents, and other after school staff as well as the rationale for doing them. Generally, everyone was supportive of my project, but many expressed the view that critical pedagogy should be reserved for times when students were not doing their homework or more "traditional" modes of learning. After all, what was the point of teaching critical thinking if students could not read basic letters and sounds? That is to say, most staff felt that critical pedagogy was ultimately not as effective in helping students learn how to read or in preparing them for high-stakes standardized tests because they considered critical thinking to be a higher-level skill that could not be developed before more rote styles of learning.

Doing critical pedagogy with the students was therefore not considered a priority in the after school space. And when it was supported, it often got folded back into deficit perspectives, such as "giving" students critical thinking skills that they were presumed to lack. Victor, the founder and executive director of Urban Pathways, was extremely supportive of my efforts and often proposed his own ideas to me for what he thought would benefit students. But in discussing his ideas, I quickly learned that Victor believed students needed to be given the conceptual tools and lessons to think critically. For instance, he once asked me to design a math curriculum to help students learn how to budget money. The math lesson was certainly relevant in terms of core skill, but the life lesson was useless for the kind of sharp poverty the students and their families lived in: they had nothing to put aside. Moreover, as I often witnessed, students already had a sense of needing to save, to keep their more expensive items like shoes and winter coats clean for future use by someone else if not themselves, and to only take what they needed and nothing more.

The following story illustrates further that children have critical thinking skills (which they may or may not learn from adults but then use them for their own purposes), that they use them to navigate their particular life circumstances, and that they are often misrecognized as needing to gain those skills from adults (Vasquez 2002). During one trip to the local Giant grocery store, Alisha noticed a value deal for a bigger packet of Hostess snacks and told the group that we should buy the bigger size rather than two of the smaller ones, proudly noting that we would save a small sum of our snack budget. But her older brother Joseph disagreed: he had looked at the fine print on the shelf label and figured out the cost by weight in his head. He explained to Alisha that the value price was a trick and that we should buy two of the smaller packets as originally planned. While they argued, I did the math in my head and realized that Joseph had been right. I was astounded: Joseph had been in a remedial math class at school since I had known him, and we often spent at least the whole hour of homework time doing multiple line addition and subtraction problems. But he had exactly the kind of critical math skills he needed to calculate costs on a severely limited amount of money.

A *culturally relevant* or *culturally sustaining* pedagogy recognizes that teachers need to recognize the assets racially minoritized students bring to the classroom and use them to develop lessons that address and help them act with more agency given their lived experiences (Ladson-Billings 1994; Alim & Paris 2017). Had I followed

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Victor's suggestion on the math lesson, I would have been teaching a mistargeted lesson that might have made the students feel irresponsible and at fault for being poor. Working from a critical pedagogical perspective instead would mean first taking note of students' math skills, where they got them from and why, and developing appropriate lessons, such as cost calculations at the grocery store. Scaffolded lessons could have included helping students recognize how and why grocery stores try to convince people that they are buying deals when they are really not and if this is common across different store chains or even neighborhoods. Perhaps building even further into a learning unit, I could have helped students further investigate predatorial corporate practices in urban neighborhoods and coauthor a report or petition. For anyone who doubts that such a lesson is possible with children, note that Vasquez (2002) and her kindergarten class wrote stories about animal injustice, authored a petition, and wrote a letter to McDonald's asking them to change gender-biased Happy Meal toys in the space of a school year.

Lamentably, I did not have enough time to develop such a math unit given my other teaching activities for the year. But I do hope anyone reading this chapter finds a good lesson idea, if not pedagogical perspective, to start with. Even though in the case of math I recognized the application of a deficit perspective to the students, I myself unwittingly practiced deficit thinking in my critical language pedagogy with the after school students during the last phase of my fieldwork. Moreover, my own language ideology at the time, which was grounded in a monoglossic view of languages and discourse styles, prevented me from fully seeing the translingual and transcultural sensibilities that students brought to their writing and art projects. As an institutionalized listening subject, there are a few other shortcomings that happened in my critical language pedagogy. The section to follow describes what I did, my reflections, and analyzes students' work in the interest of showing that students are creating a (potential) critical pedagogy even in the absence of teacher guidance or cueing.

TRANSLINGUAL SENSIBILITIES AND THE AUTHENTIC SELF: DISRUPTING MONOGLOSSIC LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AND RACIALIZED NOTIONS OF DIFFERENCE

As I described in chapter 2, most of the students anchored their notions of identity and style in hip hop. For this reason, I decided to theme my critical learning pedagogy around hip-hop as other educators working with urban youth have done (Alim 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell 2008). Using prior work on critical language pedagogy (Blackburn 2005; Godley & Minnici 2008), my goal was to teach students about language variation and change, help them identify and critique oppressive language ideologies, and help them produce a hip-hop final project that showed evidenced of their learning key concepts in sociolinguistics. I used video clips and websites from the PBS series *Do You Speak American?* as well as political speeches from different Black politicians, such as Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama, to have students engage in critical discussions about what it

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means to code-switch and why people do it. My plan was to scaffold those lessons into a hip-hop project that would show students' knowledge of baseline concepts such as code-switching and grammar, and to shift them away from prescriptive language ideologies.

Unfortunately, the activity did not go as planned. From the time I began the unit, students showed signs of boredom and impatience. Though we used forms of technology that they were interested in, which included computers and my audio recording device, students resisted watching the video clips and filling out the worksheets. I believe that this is because I had routinized an everyday activity the students practiced for pleasure and made it work. While hip-hop was something they listened to and practiced for fun in their everyday lives, they did not want to necessarily recruit it into their academic learning activities.

In reflecting on this project, I believe I made a mistake by deciding how I thought students should be culturally validated without their input and without having drawn from the other interests they had expressed to me in terms of their language and identity practices. As I described in chapter 2, the students had multiple kinds of linguistic styles and music genres they enjoyed working with to style their identities. Thus, their ideas about what it means to be Black drew from, but were not centered in, hip-hop exclusively.

Reflecting even further, I was working from a monoglossic perspective to think about what it meant for the students to code-switch: while slang and proper were ideologically distinct and bounded languages for me and even for the students, this did not match the reality of how they manipulated and blended codes in their everyday lives. As prior chapters have shown, translanguaging practices were just as common as styleshifting from slang to proper and vice versa.

Thus, the students were probably bored because I was trying to teach them something they already knew intimately: the power of speaking in particular ways in different settings. From my monoglossic perspective, I assumed that the preadolescent students were finding their way toward more adeptly shifting between AAL and "standard" English, and I also assumed that they needed help in feeling empowered to speak AAL in an academic setting. Thus, I imagined students' "authentic selves" to be grounded in vernacular and expressive styles of AAL and any engagement with "standard" English to be a performance of assimilation. I presumed that validating AAL as a language using the tools of sociolinguistics would give them "an identity and political position from which to act as agents of social change" (Ellsworth 1989). In reality, their translanguaging practices already evidenced their attempts to do so (Guerra 2016; Seltzer 2017; Flores 2020).

In my sincere attempt to help students "feel empowered," I overdetermined their raciolinguistic subjectivity and fell into a liberal/progressive pitfall: seeing my students as wholly different, linguistically and culturally, from anything white and mainstream. In other words, my idea of what it meant for students to be Black in a school-based setting was terribly stereotypical, and this could have been avoided by first allowing students to identify what they found interesting about language and how they used it and working from a learning agenda that they defined.

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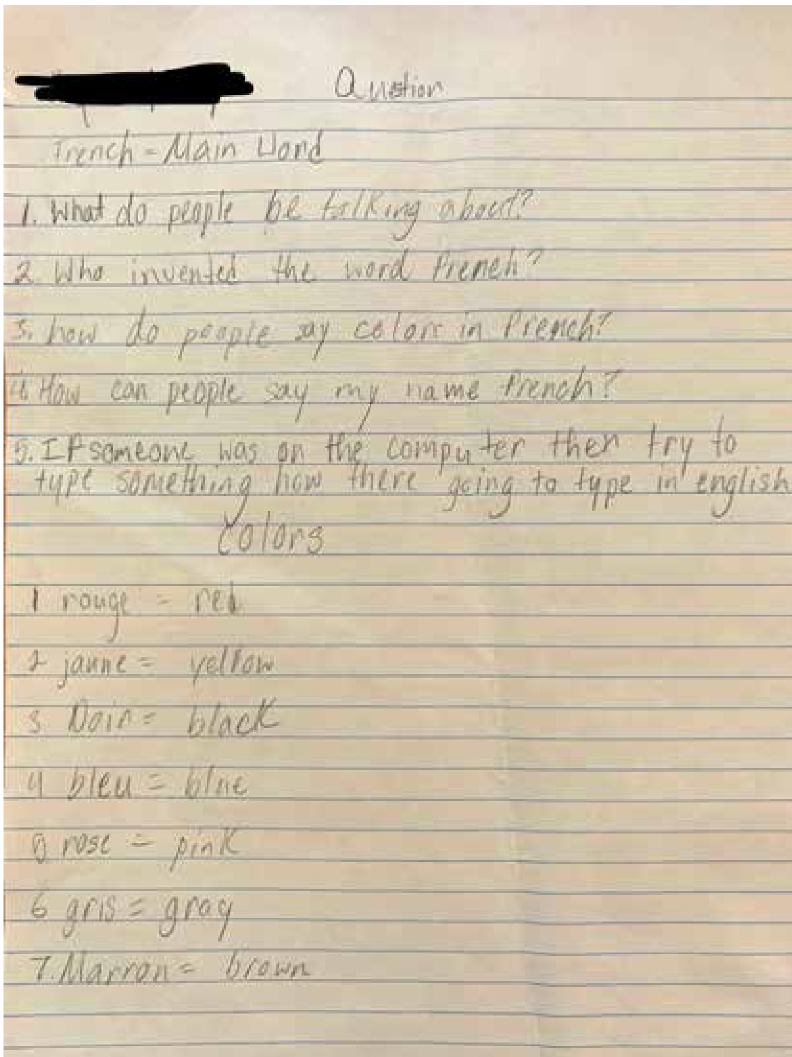
A few weeks into the unsuccessful hip-hop project, I did finally think to ask the students what interested them about language. I found that their interests went beyond their own particular lived experiences to encompass a more globally minded curiosity about other languages and societies. Denise and Marcus, both twelve-years old, wrote learning logs about Spanish and French, two languages they told me they were interested in learning to speak. After researching the languages on the activity center computers, they each produced a log that documents their particular interests with regard to each language (figures 6.1 and 6.2):



Question

French = Main Word

1. What do people be talking about?
2. Who invented the word French?
3. how do people say colors in French?
4. How can people say my name French?
5. If someone was on the computer then try to type something how there going to type in english.

Colors

1 rouge = red
2 jaune = yellow
3. Noir = black
4 bleu = blue
5 rose = pink
6 gris = gray
7. Marron = brown

Figure 6.1 Learning Logs for French and Spanish.

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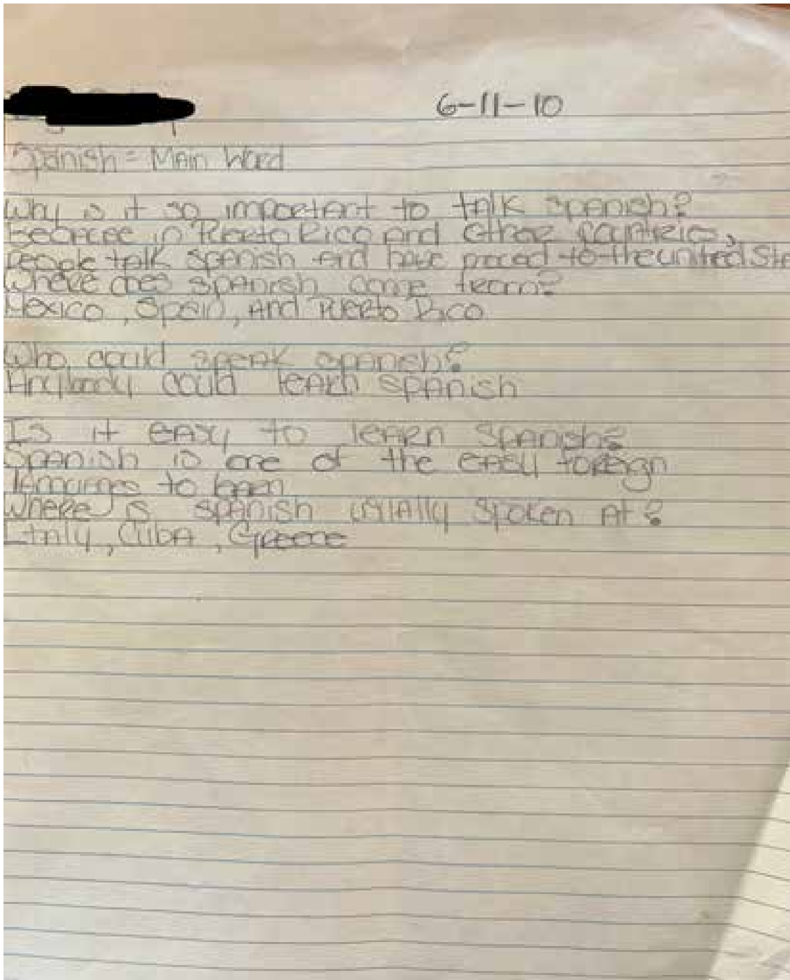

6-11-10

Spanish = Main Word

Why is it so important to talk Spanish?
Because in Puerto Rico and other countries,
people talk Spanish and have proced to the United St[illegible]
Where does Spanish come from?
Mexico, Spain, and Puerto Rico

Who could speak Spanish?
Anybody could learn Spanish

Is it easy to learn Spanish?
Spanish is one of the easy foreign
languages to learn
Where is Spanish usually spoken at?
Italy, Cuba, Greece

Figure 6.2 Learning Logs for French and Spanish.

While Marcus shows a general interest in the linguistic structures of French, Denise's curiosity about Spanish extends to wanting to be able to communicate with Spanish speakers who come to the United States. In her work figure 6.2, she promotes a pluralist view of language learning that de-centers the hegemonic "English-Only" and bilingual language ideologies governing public and educational spaces (Lippi-Green 2012; Rosa & Flores 2015). Thus, against the normative view that Spanish speakers need to acquire English in order to become American, Denise proposes instead that English speakers should learn Spanish to accommodate the people who "proceed" here. Her language sensibility, which promotes two-way language learning and the more general idea of multiethnic inclusion, goes against the grain of what typically happens in bilingual and two-way immersion programs: the centering of standard English acquisition and the reapplication of deficit perspectives to racialized Spanish speakers (Chaparro 2019).[1]

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I do not mean to suggest that there is something wrong with drawing upon school-normative literacy practices. But my example of failure has taught me that a successful critical pedagogy recognizes the translingual and transcultural sensibilities of students and centers them in teaching, even when these sensibilities conflict with the educator's notions of difference and empowerment.

It bears mentioning that my position as an institutionalized listening subject was constrained not just by ideology, but also by the circumstances and contexts in which I was asked to produce "measurable results" for students' language and literacy learning. I had to show evidence that students were prepared for the standardized, high-stakes they took at school in order for the after school program to continue to receive federal and local sources of funding. I was afraid that if I did not use traditional learning formats, that no one would take seriously my efforts or those of the students. I was therefore more concerned with assimilating their cultural interests into these methods rather than drawing from what they already were doing and letting them self-direct more independently within learning activities. It is no accident that my failure happened because I fell into the trap of being more concerned with how the hip-hop project would be institutionally evaluated than how it would benefit the students. As Campano (2007) and Ladson-Billings (2017) have shown, prioritizing student learning tends to produce results regardless of the particular standards put in place that measure what counts as learning in the first place. In the following section, my analysis of students' writing and art projects from a language architecture perspective (Flores 2020).

WHAT SCIENTISTS AND POLITICIANS DO: STUDENTS CONSTRUCTING DISCURSIVE POWER

In addition to critical pedagogy, students participated in science, art, and other informal learning activities. After school learning activities that were not centered on homework help or other projects students brought from school included subjects such as science and politics. Urban Pathways' staff was highly attuned to the fact that instruction at school was increasingly restricted to the subjects of reading and math in order to "teach to the test" and so we, with the help and encouragement of Caleb, Victor's son who taught third-grade science at a DCPS school, developed science activities for the students. In the spring of 2011, Urban Pathways also hired a Howard University graduate student, Keegan, to start a voluntary science program at the community center. The idea was that through hands-on science lessons, students would develop skills in observation, logic, and empirical methods while also building literacy skills in the form of written and oral reporting on their topics or experiments. We believed it would not only increase their exposure to multiple forms of knowledge, but also allow them to engage in experimentation and experiential learning.

One student-generated theme that emerged in activities themed around learning about science and politics was a concern for using both to study injustice and to use positions of expertise and power to act against inequality. As I mentioned in chapter 2, one of the science activities that I led was called, "What Does a Scientist Look Like?" As I show in that chapter, the activity revealed students' transracial

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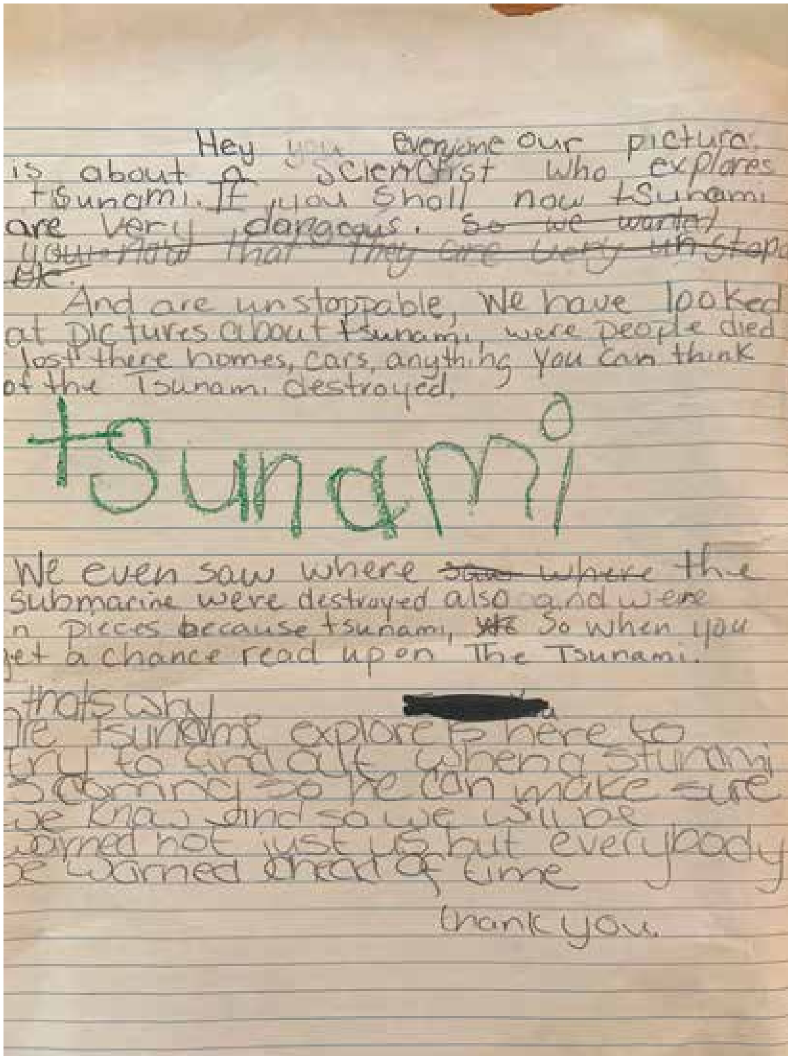
models of power and authority. Science activities also showed evidence of students' keen awareness of science's applications toward educating the public about social justice issues, as the following examples show. For example, a major world disaster that a group of fourth-grade students expressed concern about was the 2010 Haiti earthquake. They not only drew a scientist who was ameliorating the destruction caused by the tsunami that followed the earthquake, but they also decided to author a written report on the topic, shown in figure 6.3. Following figure 6.3, I have reproduced the report in typeface, following all original text and formatting as closely as possible so that readers can follow my analysis (line numbers are mine):



Hey you Everyone our picture
is about a scientist who explores
tsunami. If you shall now tsunami
are very dangous. So we wanted
you now that they are very unstopa
ble.
And are unstoppable, We have looked
at pictures about tsunami, were people died
lost there homes, cars, anything you can think
of the Tsunami destroyed.
tsunami
We even saw where the where the
submarine were destroyed also and were
n pieces because tsunami, So when you
get a chance read up on The Tsunami.
thats why
the tsunami explore is here to
try to find aut when a stunami
is coming so he can make sure
we know and so we will be
warned not just us but everybody
be warned ahead of time
thank you.

Figure 6.3 Tsunami.

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1. Hey ~~you~~ everyone our picture is about a scienctist who explores tsunami. If you shall now
2. tsunami are very dangerous. ~~So we wanted you now that they are very unstopable~~.
3. And are unstoppable, we have looked at pictures about tsunami, were people died lost
4. there homes, cars, anything you can think of the Tsunami destroyed.
5. tsunami
6. We even saw where ~~saw where~~ the submarine were destroyed also and were in pieces
7. because tsunami, ~~We~~ So when you get a chance read upon The Tsunami.
8. That's why ←(Thank You)
9. Are tsunami explore is here to try to find out when a tsunami is coming so he can make
10. sure we know and so we will be warned not just us but everybody be warned ahead of
11. time.
12. thank you.

[1]This is the text that lay underneath the bolded-out strip.

To many readers, this text as reproduced signals the need for students to learn and use "academic language." However, a *language architecture perspective,* which recognizes how students manipulate language to accomplish a specific purpose (Flores 2020), shows that students are already oriented to the need to convince their audience of the importance of studying tsunamis by using an effective discourse style. But rather than use a monologic strategy, such as sticking to an informational style, the students actually drew on multiple styles of expression in order to argue their point. First, the students were aware that they needed to legitimate their knowledge, expertise, and arguments by detailing their observations. After a friendly greeting, the students begin with a thesis statement, arguing that tsunamis are very dangerous (line 2). To support this claim, the report explains that the scientists studied pictures of the tsunami's aftermath and noted the loss of human lives and property that the disaster engendered (line 3–4). Following is more evidence of what the scientist observed, an appeal for others to research tsunamis, and a concluding argument about its importance: to try and warn others ahead of time, presumably so that people can prepare in advance to mitigate the disaster's effects. Thus, the informational arc of the report follows a school-typical style of scientific reporting: thesis statement, evidence, conclusion, and future directions.

The authors of the report also appear to have attempted a friendly and accessible informational tone, perhaps to draw readers in and build sympathy for the people who had been affected by the disaster. The first line of the text, "Hey ~~you~~ everyone," is corrected for formality and politeness, perhaps to mitigate the

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pointed aggressiveness implied in the initial construction, "Hey you." Since the report had multiple authors, it is likely that this correction and the ones that follow are a result of students acting as co-authors. A general attempt at politeness, and also humility, is further suggested in the reports closing, in which the authors thank readers. The students, then, draw on evidential statements, evidence, and logic to construct a credible argument, but also recognize the necessity of relating to a general public by balancing this form of authoritative discourse with friendly address terms and politeness. Finally, some of the corrections in the text convey an awareness of school-based prescriptive norms that govern spelling and grammar. The students, then, drew on multiple discourse styles to create a legitimate science report with a logical structure and accessible tone, whose credibility they know rely on academic writing conventions. As evidenced in their creative use of language, the students are aware that one needs to be both knowledgeable and approachable in convincing people to pay attention to important information and to act for the greater good.

In this example, the authors of "Tsunami" are quite literally acting as language architects. As Flores explains:

> Like a building architect, language architects are not free to simply do whateverthey want. If this were the case, buildings would be unsafe and communicative efforts would fail. yet, beyond some broad general parameters both must adhere to in order to successfully complete their tasks, there is a great deal of decision-making that both make that reflect their own unique vision and voice. (2020, p. 25)

A language architecture perspective, then, allows us to see students as already engaged in the kinds of language work teachers and school institutions are asking them to do. Flores notes further, "From this perspective . . . [Common Core and other] state standards are not demanding mastery over academic language, but rather are calling for students to be language architects who are able to manipulate language for specific purposes" (2020, p. 25). The lesson for educators here is to look beyond what is normally considered writing errors or failures and to realize that students are in fact displaying their knowledge of how to use language to achieve a particular purpose.

One of the common themes in students' language architecture practices was the blending and mixing of informal and formal styles of writing. This is evident in Delonte's "Mayor Election" essay and in a creative project Matt designed and called, "If I Were President of the United States," in which students were asked to draw and write about what they would do in that role. To explain, at the time of my fieldwork, there were two major events that had shaped students' interest and involvement in politics and what it could do: the 2008 election of President Barack Obama and the upcoming 2010 mayoral election, the latter of which followed the locally debated merits of what turned out to be Adrian Fenty's first and only term as city mayor. As I described in chapter 1, Mayor Fenty had been widely perceived among the city's African American communities to be pro-gentrification in ways that benefited whites and which did not

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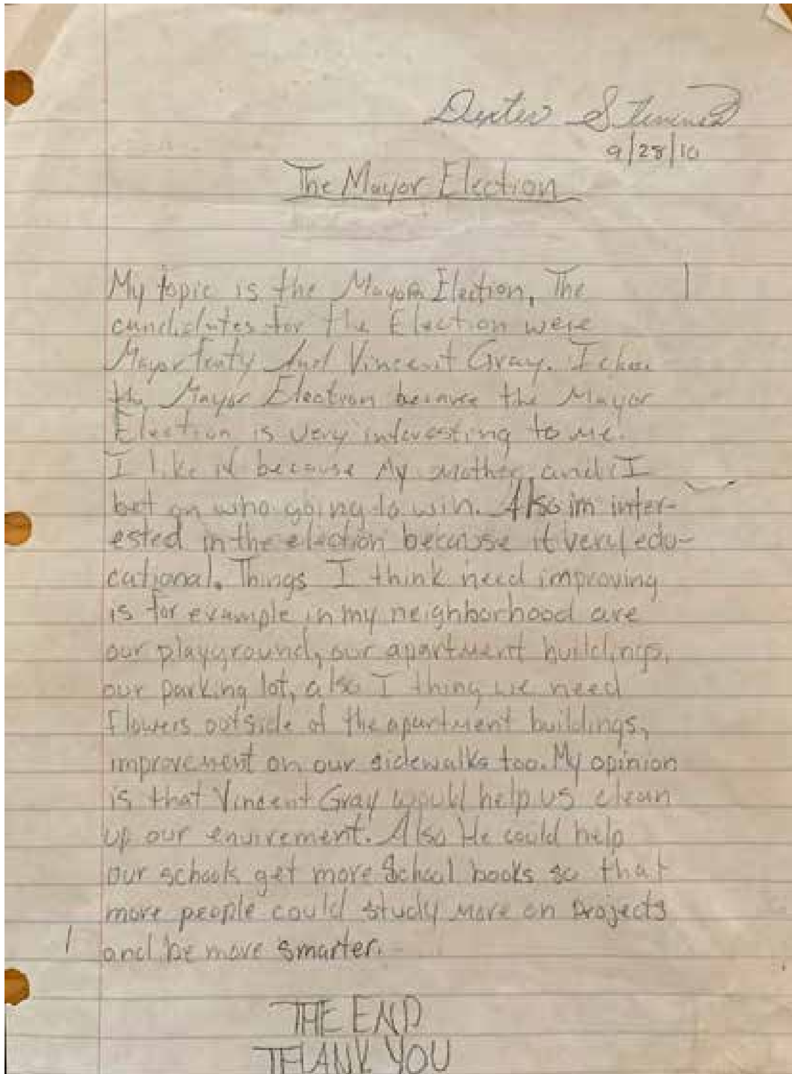
serve their interests (see also Prince 2014). During the time of the 2010 election, Vincent Gray, a Ward 7 resident, was perceived to be the mayoral candidate who would promote the interests, perspectives, and concerns of African Americans, especially those who lived in Southeast and other Black-majority neighborhoods.[2] Ten year-old Delonte Reed wrote a personal essay about why he would vote for Vincent Gray, noting that he had placed a bet with his mother about who would win the "Mayor Election":


[illegible]
9/28/10

The Mayor Election

My topic is the Mayor Election, The candidates for the Election were Mayor Fenty And Vincent Gray. I chose the Mayor Election because the Mayor Election is very interesting to me. I like it because My mother and I bet on who going to win. Also im interested in the election because it very educational. Things I think need improving is for example in my neighborhood are our playground, our apartment buildings, our parking lot, also I thing we need Flowers outside of the apartment buildings, improvement on our sidewalks too. My opinion is that Vincent Gray would help us clean up our envirement. Also He could help our school get more School books so that more people could study more on projects and be more smarter.

THE END
THANK YOU

Figure 6.4 The Mayor Election.

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Delonte Reed
9/28/10

The Mayor Election

My topic is the Mayor Election. The candidates for the Election were Mayor Fenty and Vincent Gray. I chose the Mayor Election because the Mayor Election is very interesting to me. I like it because my mother and I bet on who going to win. Also I'm interested in the election because it very educational. Things I think I need improving is for example in my neighborhood are our playground, our apartment buildings, improvement on our sidewalks too. My opinion is that Vincent Gray would help us clean up our envirement. Also He could help our schools get more School books so that more people could study more on projects and be more smarter.

THE END
THANK YOU

Delonte's essay reflects wider discourses about why communities in Southeast preferred Gray as a candidate: many believed he would focus on improving the conditions of local neighborhoods and schools for the people who already lived and went to school in them. Delonte's essay indicates a keen awareness of how poverty affects quality of living and educational opportunities, and he conceptualizes the mayorship as a position of power that should be used to help fix structural neglect caused by impoverishment. The essay, then, construes the mayor as a person who is and who should be empowered to act against structural forms of inequality, with a focus on education. The writing style itself is relatively formal, and reflects that of a traditional essay: it names the topic, why the topic is important, and gives the key information needed to support his position. Like the writers of "Tsunami," Delonte also includes a closing, which thanks readers: "THE END/THANK YOU."

The after school students, like most children, were aware that language is a powerful form of discursive expression in society and constructed their essays accordingly (cf. Vasquez 2002). Given the way that they were socialized by parents, teachers, and other adults who participated in forms of raciolinguistic socialization that included policing, the students had learned that politeness was an integral component of "proper" speech and thus to being heard, especially by people in positions of power. This may explain why the essay writers in figures 6.3 and 6.4 elected to greet or thank their readers for their attention to their pieces. The greetings also indicate a position of deference or perhaps humility with respect to their arguments, which challenges the normative social conceptualization of arguments as "like war" (Lakoff & Johnson 1988). Thus, while recognizing the importance of a traditional writing structure and attention to orthographic and grammatical "correctness," the students also modify Western rhetorical style by explicitly drawing attention to the dialogical nature of

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meaning and perspective, leaving open the friendly possibility for response. In the process, they created their own rhetorical style.

In the creative activity called, “If I Were President of the United States,” several students produced a dual written and illustrated creative project that listed what they would do in that role. Figures 6.5, 6.6, and 6.7 show samples of their work, and it is followed by a reprinting of the text to help readers see what it says:

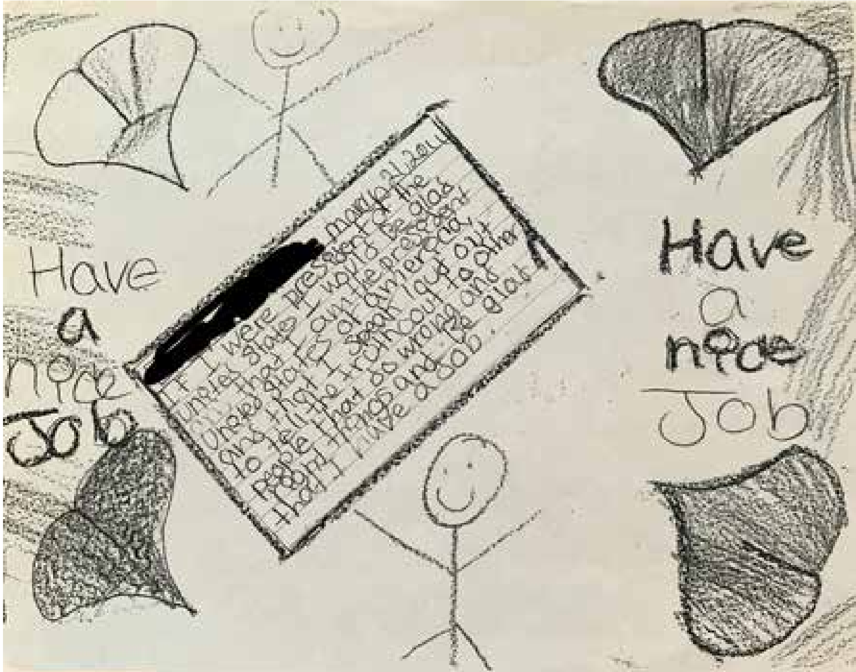

Figure 6.5 If I Were President of the United States.

Janice: If I were president of the United States I would be glad am that I am the president United States of America, ~~and~~ that I speak loud out to tell the truth to other people that do wrong and right things and Be glad that I have a job (bracketing each side: Have a nice Job).

Denise: If I were president I would give all the homeless people a house and I would bann people from having guns or any other weapons.

Keri: If I were the president I would fire all of the police Because I don’t lik police Because some are crooked Because they don’t like people and they lock people for no reason (I love mom).

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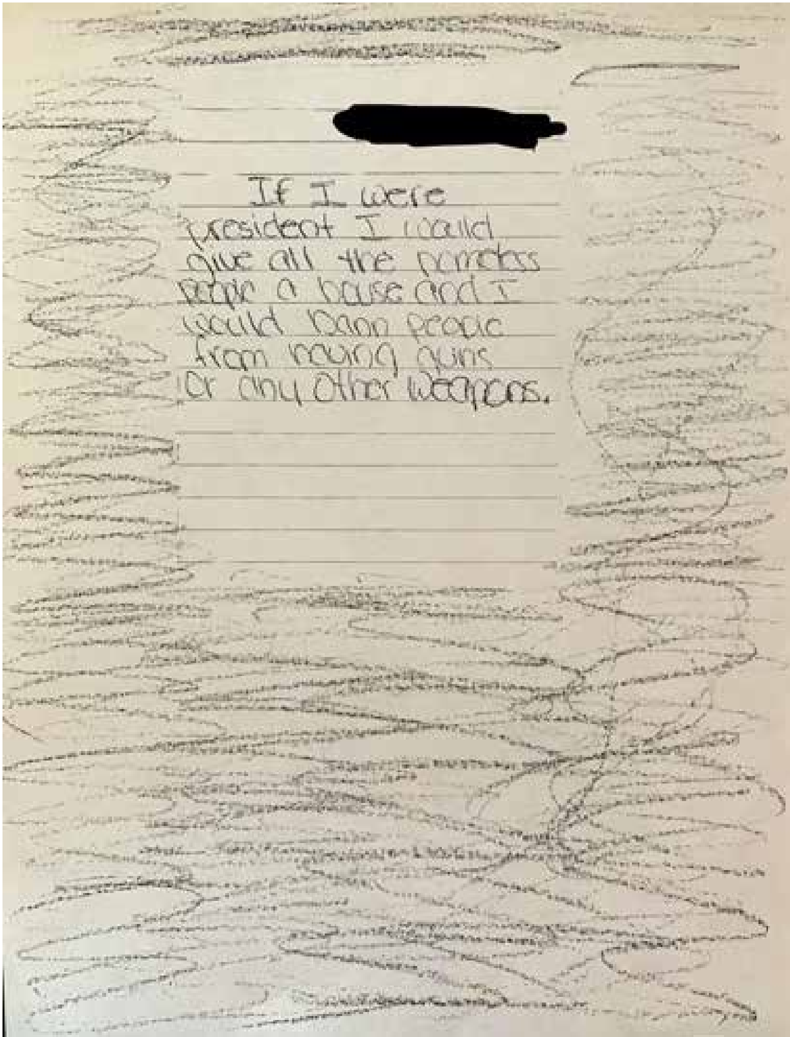

Figure 6.6 If I Were President of the United States.

Janice, Denise, and Keri's entries are reflections on their particular lived experiences and the forms of knowledge they gained. This means they each drew from social "Discourses," which included family/home and school interactions, their consumption of popular culture and mass media, and local neighborhood conversations as well as social/political activism to produce their own individual "discourses" about what the president of the United States could and should do. As Gee explains, "Each of us is a member of many [social] Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These discourses need not,

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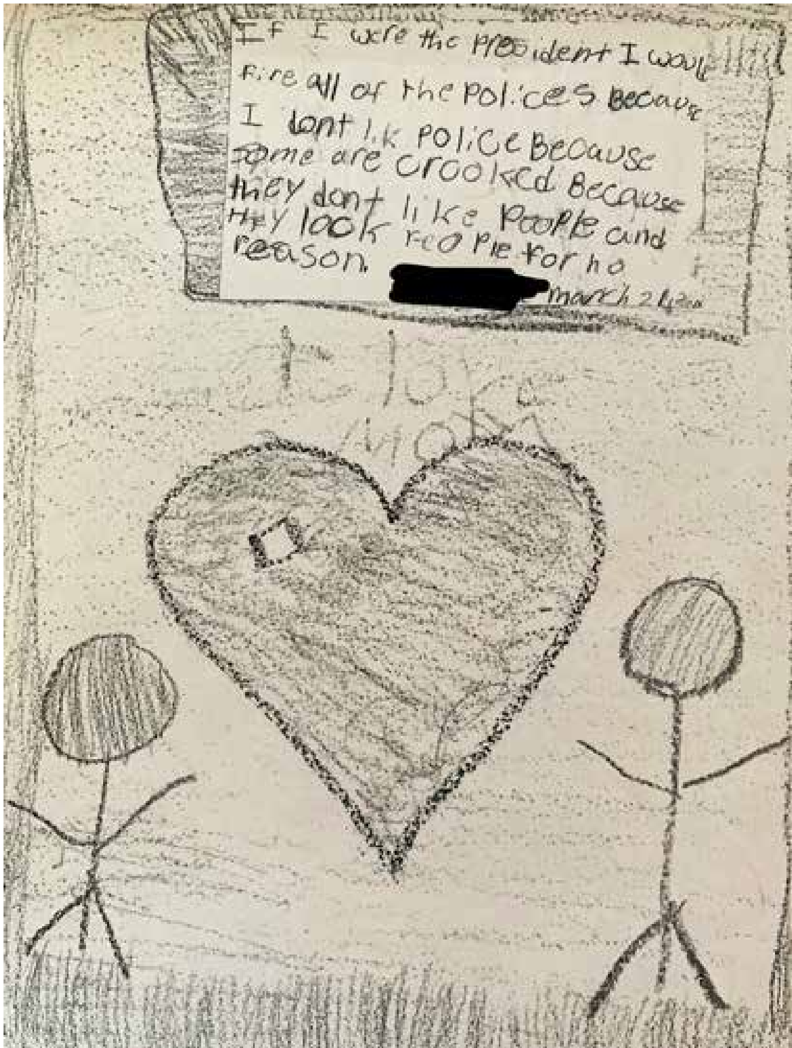

Figure 6.7 If I Were President of the United States.

and often do not, represent consistent and compatible values" (2012, p. 4). This is true within and across individuals who are socialized in a particular community. In this activity, each of the girls articulates the common view that the job of the president of the United States is to help create the conditions for social justice. For Janice, this means being able to use her voice to "speak loud out to tell the truth to other people that do wrong and right things." For Denise, it means eradicating homelessness and for eight-year-old Keri,[3] it means abolishing the police state.

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While all of these particular issues affected the students and the communities to which they belonged in common, each of them had a particular personal importance for each individual student.

I want to note further that the girls' focus on the president as a social justice figure and their concern for the general welfare of society is both telling and poignant: generally, the students were interested in making connections between what they saw and experienced and using it to reinterpret what could be made better for "people" or the "world" rather than for themselves, their families, or their communities. At the time, I conceptualized critical pedagogy as an intellectual exercise that would help the students interpret and change their own particular social realities. But in the process, I was excluding the possibility of helping them connect their experiences to those of others. In terms of learning, social justice, and educational possibilities, this is an incredibly limiting frame. I only realized this in closely examining the work my students had produced years later. As it turns out, they were already doing a key component of critical pedagogy: repositioning themselves as more than just the sum of their personal experiences. In connecting their personal senses of injustice to the wider issues and structures that shaped them in their written work and art projects, the students were imagining themselves as citizens of a more broadly conceived global society. They used language architectures and social Discourses that would allow them to be heard while still being rooted in their own realities. Even without explicit teacher guidance, students were repositioning themselves outside of received identity models and discourses to act as empowered global citizens.

DISCUSSION

In reflecting on the "president" activity and others, I have learned that the after school students often cultivated their critical thinking and literacy apart from the explicit teaching or guidance of adults, and that they often had better ideas than we did about the major issues that we discussed. Imagine bilingual and language immersion programs that truly develop a pluralistic learning frame or a science report on tsunamis that reach beyond specialized experts to include the general public. I believe that students' translingual sensibilities were developed with these kinds of changes in mind, and I believe that their ideas and ways of using language could have incredible applications for structural change.

Yet unfortunately, deficit ideologies are actually applied in the education and schooling of children, which operates from an adult-centered perspective. Children are often thought of as innocent, neutral beings who need to be taught what social justice is from the perspective that they have not yet developed a sense of care or concern for others (Vasquez 2002; see Berman 2019 for cross-cultural perspective). Heath (1983) and Vasquez (2002) show that children are critical thinkers in ways that are not institutionally seen or sponsored. Heath's (1983) research is especially

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important for showing how in the early years, African American children develop the critical thinking skills that are recognized and valued later rather than earlier on in the schooling process. Such skills include analogical reasoning, metaphorical comparison and contrast, and the recognition of contrasting or multiple perspectives among audiences or addressees, all gained through an emphasis on storytelling. Thus, in early childhood, working-class African American children learn what is typically considered a more advanced skill but are not oriented to the rote practices that are recognized as evidence of literacy in early grades. What African American students do bring to the classroom is subsumed under deficit discourses, all with normative and often culturally irrelevant framings of what words and experiences are necessary for intellectual and social growth (see Labov & Baker 2010 for similar critique).

Students' identities are constantly changing as they engage in learning. This is a promising perspective for educators who seek to help students reposition themselves in school-based settings as producers of knowledge and social justice. This means rather than seeking to change students, educators should often step back and recognize the processes by which students are changing on their own in order to support their further growth. Often, as the previous chapters demonstrate, the ways in which students take from the school environment and engage with or reframe normative ideas or practices go unnoticed. As a result, hybrid practices are viewed from a school-normative perspective as errors in learning rather than as different ways of "taking in" what they are exposed to (Heath 1983).

It bears mentioning that deficit ideologies tend to follow students of color up through the high school years, especially for students attending schools in urban minority-majority schools (Emdin 2016; Rosa 2019). Private schools with predominantly white students, on the other hand, freely sponsor progressive or alternative models of education that are rooted in critical pedagogy, even at early ages, and they do not have to demonstrate proficiency on national standardized tests. This bifurcation of educational models suggests that racially minoritized students, especially those who are from poor urban neighborhoods, are literally being punished for not following the same literacy and language trajectories of white middle-class and wealthy students.

Looking back at the students' work has been an important exercise for me not just in learning, but in hope too, as I realize how much the after school students were producing their own ideas about race, social justice, and the power of language and literacy even in the absence of support from the structures and institutions shaping their socialization and learning. I hope seeing their work as I have since seen, it also provides learning and hope for the readers of this book as well.

To summarize this chapter, there are three lessons I took away from my experiences teaching and researching with the after school students. First, students come to the classroom as critical thinkers with their own ideas about learning and social justice. It is important for educators to learn what those are and sponsor them, and to let students help design activities and lessons. Second, promoting rigid, essentialized

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notions of difference, racial, cultural, or otherwise, does not serve students or honor their efforts to engage in learning. Even with the tools of expert observation and analysis is often easy to assume that there is a mismatch or clash in the classroom between the so-called "dominant" and "minority" cultures (Heath 1983; Phillips 2009). Here, I am speaking specifically to well-intentioned liberals and progressives who may or may not be aware that there is a tendency to reinforce difference by positioning oneself as a "(white) savior," or a white person who saves "brown people from other brown people" (Spivak 1988). It is essential for teachers to be able to identify and support how students make school-based language and literacy practices their own, even if the ways in which they do so appear do not appear to benefit them on the surface. Third and finally, assuming that it is an educator's job to teach students what oppression is and how to act against it reproduces deficit ideologies. A key part of a critical pedagogical perspective involves stepping back and letting students articulate their own positionality and learning interests in the classroom rather than defining those for them. Educators, in other words, should seek to co-construct learning and critical consciousness with students rather than impose it upon them.

An important part of the interpretive frame I have selected for this chapter is to reverse the dominant gaze: I am not simply looking at students' knowledge as assets, I am looking at the work it their knowledge can do in disrupting normative and hegemonic literacy practices and relations of learning (cf. Alim & Paris 2017). Many readers might still find themselves taking up a deficit perspective even by chuckling at the spelling errors and grammatical incorrectness in the students' writing. This infantilizing frame does their work a great disservice by neglecting all of the ways in which children can potentially contribute to wider conversations about race, literacy, social justice, and power. As I have tried to show with analysis, students construct their own translingual and transcultural discourses that evidence not just passive learning, but the active production and transformation of race, language, and social meaning. In this way, I hope to expand on theoretical notions of children's learning, socialization, and agency, a discussion which I expand upon in the conclusion to follow.

NOTES

1. Chaparro's study shows that not all Spanish speakers are racialized as Other and that raciolinguistic socialization is dependent on perceptions of race (i.e., phenotype) and social class.

2. Based on polling information, *The Washington Post* reported that Gray's "approval" was heavily contingent on disapproval of Fenty rather than actual support for Gray (Stewart & Cohen 2010).

3. I did not originally design the study to include children younger than nine years old. Keri asked if she could participate in my study since she was turning nine that year, and I told her no, because I knew that if I had said yes, the rest of the eight-year-olds (and then

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the seven-year-olds, and then the six-year-olds) would petition me to participate in the study, and I would lose my age-specific focus for the research (and also hurt a lot of feelings by not categorically excluding the children based on age). But Keri was more likely to hang out with her older sister, Alisha, Janice, and Mary, than she was with children in her designated age group of five to eight years old, so I selectively include her talk and work in this book.

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