Positioning Theory as Lens to Explore Teachers’ Beliefs about Literacy and Culture

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THE NECESSITY FOR LITERACY TEACHERS TO EXPLORE CULTURE

Using the work of Davies and Harré (1990) and their colleagues (e.g., Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), we explore the learning of teachers in a literacy masters course. We are interested in how participants’ views of teaching and learning pertain to issues of cultural, racial, economic, and linguistic diversity that surfaced in book clubs where participants read multicultural autobiography, teacher ethnography, and research. We address the research questions: What positions do participants take up in regard to literacy and cultural issues such as race, class, and language use? What do these positions reveal about participants’ learning?

As is often noted in research regarding teachers, the typical teacher in the U.S., especially in elementary schools, is White, monolingual, and of middle class background whereas elementary students are increasingly diverse in cultural and linguistic heritage and socio-economic class (August & Hakuta, 1997). Despite the attempts to introduce a proliferation of multicultural approaches into teaching, many teachers hold tightly to the belief that colorblindness is the best approach in teaching children (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1995; King, 1991). In holding to the creed of colorblindness, teachers feel that they are treating all children equally; they may be proud that they “see no color” in their classrooms, and treat difference as something to be mitigated in order to achieve a level playing field (McVee, 2003; Paley, 1979).

Because most teachers identify with the dominant Euro-American culture in the U.S., they have not typically experienced race or language as constructs that position them in opposition to the mainstream. These teachers, like many of the rest of us, have internalized the linguistic and cultural practices of mainstream U.S. society where differences are defined in opposition to White, middle class, English speaking Americans. As part of a mainstream discourse community, teachers are typically taught to avoid openly drawing attention to difference, even as our speech may be marked to indicate such differences. For example, deeply embedded linguistic cues draw attention to race in our discourse, but these markers tend to remain transparent, unless someone or something makes them visible (van Dijk, 1993).

In a similar way culture too is transparent. In discussions of cultural, linguistic, economic, and ethnic diversity, it is common for teachers to state, “I have no culture” (Florio-Ruane, 2001; McIntyre, 1997). For many teachers, culture is associated with holidays or festivals, or culture is experienced when traveling to other countries or socializing with other races or with people who do not speak English. Consider how this view of culture contrasts with anthropologist
Michelle Rosaldo’s description of culture:

[C]ultural patterns—social facts—provide the template for all human action, growth, and understanding. Culture so construed is, furthermore, a matter less of artifacts and propositions, rules, schematic programs, or beliefs, than associative chains and images that tell what can be reasonably linked up with what; we come to know it through collective stories that suggest the nature of coherence, probability and sense within the actor’s world. (M. Rosaldo, in Bruner, 1986, p. 66)

Such descriptions of culture are far more complex than traditional Orientalist perspectives that objectify people and places—views of culture that most teachers, and the general public, typically hold. Clifford argued that “Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually—as objects, theaters, texts—it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 12). Although Clifford wrote these words with ethnography in mind, they are equally applicable to teacher education and research about teachers’ understandings of culture. Clifford urged ethnographers away from the “visual paradigm” and toward the “discursive” (p. 12). The visual paradigm has held sway in educational circles as well, as is evidenced by the positioning of minority culture as object in holidays and festivals—both visible manifestations of culture.

With recent debates about bilingual education, affirmative action, mandates for research-based reading programs, and other top-down reforms, perhaps no other disciplinary arena is so contested as literacy. Although teachers often see themselves as apolitical, teaching and literacy instruction are political endeavors imbued with cultural beliefs, ideals, and values with implications for identity. As such, “Literacy acquisition, particularly reading instruction, holds implications for cultural transmission, that is, for how knowledge is transferred, reproduced, and transformed” (Roth in Ferdman, 1990, p. 288). The ways in which knowledge is transferred, reproduced, and transformed are inseparable from the discourses of power that govern what counts as knowledge and how it is constructed. It is, therefore, critical that researchers investigate how teachers understand and position themselves in regard to literacy and culture.

POSITIONING THEORY

Developed within the framework of discursive psychology, positioning theory requires close analysis of the sociolinguistic cues that participants use to position themselves, their listeners, and others. Davies and Harré write:

Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (1990, p. 46)

Sociolinguistic analyses based on positioning theory can provide greater insight into what teachers talk about and how. Additionally, such analyses can reveal how teacher discourse positions and instantiates self and other in relation to culture.
As Bruner (1986) observed, the reality evoked or expressed by particular language is contingent upon a person’s discourse: “Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or ‘reality’” (p. 132). The reality of teachers, in this case their perceptions of culture as related to literacy instruction, is revealed in the positions they take up in their discourse. Positioning theory thus provides a framework for analyzing teacher discourse, that is, the “saying [writing]—doing—being—valuing—believing combinations” (Gee, 1989, p. 6) produced by teachers’ written and discussion-based responses to teacher ethnography, research, and multicultural literature.

**METHOD**

*Context, Participants, Data Sources*

As an instance of practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), the first author acted as teacher educator and researcher in this study of a master’s literacy course titled, Language, Literacy, and Culture. There were three main objectives in the course: (a) to broadly examine the social and cultural dimensions of literacy in a multi-ethnic society, (b) to examine participants’ individual and collective understandings of literacy and literacy instruction and how these perspectives are culturally situated, and (c) to critically explore and examine how personal perspectives can act to reproduce or challenge societal and educational inequities, particularly those related to literacy and language.

To meet these objectives, participants read seven texts across the semester (see Appendix A). Participants also read numerous other practitioner- and research–related readings (see Appendix B for a partial listing). Following the Book Club model as adapted for use in teacher education (Florio-Ruane, 2001), participants engaged in large group teacher-supported discussion and small group peer-led discussions (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) of the seven texts and of various other readings. Additionally, participants completed written assignments (e.g., book logs, reflective papers, personal narratives, and a final project). These assignments comprise the data set for the study. In addition, small and large group discussions were audio taped and transcribed with the help of research assistants. The course instructor and a research assistant took field notes during class meetings. In this paper, we foreground analysis of the participants’ written work.

Participants included 18 pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in master’s programs at a university in the northeast and were representative of the national teaching cohort in that they were predominantly Euro-American, female, and monolingual. As explained below, this paper focuses on three individual cases.

*Data Analysis*

In preliminary analysis we read field notes and transcripts of book club discussions and constructed profiles of participants and their learning. To narrow our research focus and to process the large volume of transcripts and written documents, we chose Bridget, Eve, and Karen as focal participants. They were chosen for four reasons. As monolingual women of
middle class, EuroAmerican backgrounds, they were representative of the U.S. teacher cohort. They had a range of teaching experiences and situations: Bridget had taught in an urban school for several years; Karen, a newly certified teacher, was substitute teaching; and Eve, a special education teacher, worked in a non-traditional setting. All seemed highly engaged in the course, and preliminary analyses indicated substantive changes in their beliefs about literacy and culture. It should be noted that the views and positions of all participants are of great interest to us, and future analyses will explore the learning of all students, including those who did not seem vested in the course. After identifying the three focal cases, we began analysis of positioning in earnest.

Although some notable exceptions exist (e.g., Evans, 1996), few literacy researchers have used Harré’s work on positioning as a primary tool in interpreting data. In adapting positioning theory for use in exploring teachers’ talk and writing, we found it necessary to expand and adapt previously identified positions (see Table 1) in order to highlight the issues relevant to our

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Positioning</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intertextual</td>
<td>A participant references her own experience, experiences of a narrative author or character, non-narrative authors or students they wrote about, or a group member’s experience. Intertextual Positioning refers to connections, both specific and highly interwoven, and those less well developed and less well connected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role-Based</td>
<td>Refers to the roles people take up within a moral order (i.e., as a teacher or parent). A participant references her own role (e.g., as parent, as teacher, as daughter) and uses this role as one way to position herself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Other</td>
<td>All positioning involves positioning of both self and other. More interesting is how a person positions herself in relation to others.</td>
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<td>Static</td>
<td>Occurs when an individual expresses beliefs that serve to reify a particular position that is articulated and adhered to over time. Static Positioning must involve repeated expression of a particular idea, belief, or theme. It may have either a negative outcome (e.g., a student reifies a position already developed in relation to racial issues and refuses to explore it another way) or a positive outcome (e.g., a student explores issues of teaching methodology in almost every reading, but ultimately uses this to add to her knowledge).</td>
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<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Much positioning is tacit; people position themselves and others and are not conscious or intentional about it. (Intentional positioning refers to a person who intends to position another, for example, through lying or teasing.)</td>
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Note: * Indicates categories of positioning created during our analysis.

Harré and colleagues use the term “moral positioning” to refer to the moral roles taken up in discourse (e.g., a teacher, a student) and to imply the obligations affiliated with those positions. We find the term moral to be highly problematic given its connotation. We acknowledge that Davies and Harré (1990) and others have clearly stated that positioning theory was developed, in part, as an alternative to role and that they may disagree with our re-labeling of this term.
research questions. We have used Harré and van Langenhove’s (1991) definition of Tacit Positioning, and we have adapted Role-based Positioning from their work. Most relevant to the data presented in this article is Self-Other Positioning. Harré and van Langenhove note that all utterances involve positioning of self and other; therefore, exploring participants’ positionings of self and other required further delineation of this category. Using an inductive process, we examined participants’ written artifacts to identify patterns, and ultimately, to arrive at four new types of self-other positioning—Self As Other, Self In Other, Self Opposed to Other, and Self Aligned With Other (see Table 1). We also identified two additional categories of positioning—Intertextual Positioning and Static Positioning (also described in Table 1).

To refine our analysis and apply positioning codes in a systematic manner, we next examined focal participants’ writing by dividing each artifact into idea units. Typically, idea units were paragraphs. Sometimes more than one idea unit was found per paragraph, and in some informal writing there were no paragraph breaks. We then coded each idea unit for varieties of positioning and continued to refine our categories and recode data as necessary. Several varieties of positioning could be identified within each idea unit. In coding for Intertextual Positioning we also tallied which authors/texts participants referred to and indicated the degree to which these texts were interwoven in participants’ writing. A “low” rating, for example, indicated peripheral references rather than in-depth synthesis and analysis across texts. Static Positioning, which involves repeatedly addressing an idea over time, could not be coded at the level of the idea unit but was established by looking across each participant’s data.

In addition to coding for positions, we coded idea units for content in three areas: culture, literacy, and teaching and learning. Each content area had 6-7 subcategories that allowed us to specify the topics being addressed. For example, if a participant discussed how literacy teachers must attend to cultural and racial issues in their literacy teaching, the unit could be coded for literacy/culture and literacy/race. After coding participants’ writing, we reread transcripts for additional examples of positioning. To guard against bias, we also looked for negative case examples in the transcript data and triangulated across data sources.

FINDINGS:

POSITIONING IN THE CASES OF EVE, KAREN, AND BRIDGET

Eve: Shifting Toward Multiple Perspectives

Eve’s background. During the course, Eve was a master’s student in her mid-twenties. She was a recent graduate of a state college with a degree in special education. She worked for a private company that offered transitional skills classes to high school-aged special education students. She grew up in New York City where she attended a private Catholic high school.

Self Opposed to Other/Self Aligned with Other Positioning. We were interested in how Eve’s discursive practices—both oral and written—indicated the positions she took up with relation to self and other. Interestingly, she often identified these changes in her position in her writing as she progressed through the course. In most cases, the new positions she adopted reflected positive movement toward more open-mindedness and tolerance. For example in a book log for Dreamkeepers (Ladson-Billings, 1994), Eve wrote:
One theme that I found most evident throughout the book was the idea of family and community. The effective teachers in this book were actively involved in their students’ lives outside of the classroom which allowed them to be successful within the classroom. Not only is this idea of family important for schooling but I believe it is also a strength of the Black community. Before reading this book, I had never understood the requirement for [inner-]city schoolteachers to live in the city. I had always seen this policy as a roadblock to having effective teachers in the city.

Here, Eve adopted what we have labeled Self-Opposed to Other Positioning. As a teacher, she positioned herself in opposition to the predominantly Black inner-city community and district that has put a residence requirement in place. However, Eve disclosed in the same book log that the Ladson-Billings’ book—along with other readings from the course—caused her to rethink her former position and to re-position herself in regard to residence requirement. She said,

I now think the purposes [of a residence requirement] are many. First of all, the effective teachers in this book [Dreamkeepers] understood that their responsibility not only entailed educating the individual but also preparing the individual to be a productive member of a community. . . . Students are more likely to perceive themselves and their community as valuable if they see their teachers wanting to stay in the community. Secondly, the teachers are embodying active community members.

Identifying Eve’s positions—positions that she explored through reading, talking, and writing—enabled us to track the changes she was making in her beliefs about the ties between family, schooling, and literacy. Her argument in favor of teachers maintaining close connections with school communities culminated in her weaving together the views of three authors (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Michie, 1999; and Moje, 2000). Eve concluded, “By living in the community, teachers are already aware of the context from which their students come. They can draw upon this background knowledge to help them develop meaningful [literacy] activities which address their goals.” This stands in sharp contrast to her original view that residence requirements were merely a “roadblock.” While Eve shifted from Self Opposed to Other toward Self Aligned With Other Positioning, thus revealing a change in her beliefs, the shift alone was less significant than the reflexive act of deep reflection and complex exploration that accompanied the change. Eve’s reflexive stance was exemplified in her interweaving of multiple texts. We labeled this interweaving of texts, Intertextual Positioning. (For a complete definition, see Table 1.)

Intertextual Positioning. Across her book logs, including the one cited above, Eve often created analyses by connecting ideas from the various texts and interweaving these ideas from multiple sources in complex ways. Eve was skilled in this type of positioning. She routinely referenced at least three or four texts, and sometimes discussed as many as six to eight authors. In most cases, as seen above, she included her own ideas and thinking in her intertextual analysis and synthesis, and as a result the level of intertextual references was typically rated “high.” Textual references were not cursory or fleeting glimpses to show her instructor or discussion group that she had gone through the motions of looking at various texts. Instead, Eve used texts to synthesize and analyze important ideas. Her use of texts in this manner ultimately
led her toward more complex thinking and toward a more sophisticated understanding of issues. By examining literature in this way, Eve not only talked about her ideas on an increasingly conceptual level, but she also began to articulate new understandings of literacy as a result of her language use, that is, as a result of the oral and written reflection in which she engaged. Eve wrote, “My beliefs of literacy have been greatly enhanced through the explorations of my literacy journal, interviews [about the meaning of literacy with friends and colleagues], and observations of social interactions.” Eve supported this assertion by analyzing her experiences and observations with the help of multiple references to texts read in the course. Ultimately, she cited these intertextual explorations as evidence of a “transformation” in her literacy learning and of her growing awareness of the relationship between culture and literacy.

In later book logs, Eve continued to explore this relationship through Intertextual Positioning, as is exemplified in her writing about Luis Rodriguez’s *Always Running*:

> In reading this passage [in Rodriguez] I thought back to the readings of McKay and Gee who refer to literacy more as the use of language in all aspects of life. Therefore, although Rodriguez does not claim to be literate in either Spanish or English, he is indeed literate, as literacy has been redefined to mean more than reading and writing. Moje (2000) claim that “literacy plays an important role in the development of adolescents’ individual and social identities” (p. 33). This has been supported by my reading of *Always Running* as Rodriguez looks to Chicano literature to develop a social awareness of his culture and uses writing to express his newly formed beliefs.

In addition to informing her understandings of literacy, Eve’s reading, writing, reflections, and discussions helped her explore issues of culture and schooling in her life. In class discussion and in her book log, Eve showed how she had begun to question her former beliefs about culture, especially as it related to her high school experience. She wrote:

> In reading *The Dreamkeepers*, I found myself wondering if my high school experience that I found so diverse was really that wonderful or diverse at all. . . . I wondered if I valued it and thought it was a positive experience because all the faculty were White and because the curriculum reflected my culture.

Here, course readings led Eve to reinterpret an important part of the narrative that she had constructed about her life. That she was actively seeking re-interpretation of her high school experience—or at least the part that dealt with cultural understandings—was underscored by a project she included in her reflection. She e-mailed “girlfriends from high school who were from diverse backgrounds” and asked them about their perceptions of how they were treated and whether or not they remembered any cultural hierarchy at their high school. Eve was seeking assistance in her efforts to reinterpret her high school experiences and make connections to what she was learning about culturally relevant pedagogy.

*What we can learn from Eve.* Examining Eve’s learning by uncovering positions grounded in discourse led us to identify significant growth in Eve’s understanding of culture and literacy. Specifically, Eve’s shifts from Self Opposed to Other to Self Aligned With Other Positioning indicated a growing ability to see things from others’ perspectives and to broaden her definition of literacy. In interesting ways, Eve also engaged in positions that facilitated deep reflection that led her to revise her beliefs. This could be seen in her sophisticated use of
Intertextual Positioning when she shifted her thinking about the residence requirement and when she made important linkages between culture, literacy, and community as she explored the experiences of Luis Rodriguez.

Karen—Striving for Self-improvement through Constant Reflection.

Karen’s background. Karen was raised and educated in a Euro-American, middle class suburb. She had obtained her initial teaching certification but had not yet found a permanent teaching position. While completing coursework for her Master’s degree, Karen was gaining teaching experience by substitute teaching in short and long-term substitute positions.

Self Aligned With Other/Self Opposed to Other Positioning. In Karen’s writing and talk, she often followed the pattern of considering one of her experiences after having stepped away from it for some length of time. She would revisit the experience and see it anew. Another such instance of Karen’s reflection occurred in her first revision of a series of self-authored narratives where she described being warned not to park near a school in which she would be teaching. Oh yeah, the advice was: “Don’t park near the school, the store, or any of the houses. They will break into your car.” It isn’t until now that I realize the stereotype involved in that statement. Who does they refer to? The Blacks? The Puerto Ricans? Or just the poor in general? I now know that the they that they were talking about were just the people that we were sent to educate. The they was the family, friends, and community of my new students. What message am I sending if I show fear on the first day? (emphasis in the original)

As noted previously all statements involve self-other positioning, even if this is implied and not directly stated. As Karen narrated her story, it was clear that Karen, as a White suburban resident, was implicitly aligned with the White, suburban residents who gave her this advice. The story positioned Karen and her friends and family in opposition to the school and the community it served—a high poverty, inner-city population of Black and Puerto Rican families. In reflecting upon this advice and the positions implicit in it, Karen chose to align herself with the students and the community of her new teaching placement, as demonstrated when she asked: “It isn’t until now that I realize the stereotype involved in that statement. Who does they refer to? The Blacks? The Puerto Ricans? Or just the poor in general?”

When these events occurred, Karen was not bothered by the advice, and she was not aware of her condescending stance, although she did write about being fearful of teaching in this particular school. As Karen revisited the events, she realized that her fears and condescension were wrought by stereotypes and prejudice implicit in White middle class discourse. As a way of showing the reader the prejudices she held, she wrote, “I reassure myself by thinking things like: ‘How fussy can they be? I’m probably better than most of the teachers that they have.’” In earlier versions of this story Karen had not italicized the pronoun “they.” But in this version, Karen used italics to make the word “they” obvious so that in the end, her writing and realizations stand as testimony to her own learning and progress. It is critical to note that Karen could have simply changed or deleted the pronouns to make her writing more politically correct. Instead, Karen acknowledged her use of the pronouns and called attention to her thinking to demonstrate how her beliefs had changed. In the end, she shifted her position to
align herself with the other—the school community.

*Tacit Positioning and force of an utterance.* Karen always remained conscious of her learning and thoughtful about how she would use information from course readings and discussions in her own prospective classroom. Her talk, as well as her writing and stories she told, always showed this sense of reflectivity as she questioned and analyzed her own responses to various classroom situations. The first notable instance of Karen’s reflection came early in the semester in her written response to Vivian Paley’s *White Teacher* (2000). In this book club log Karen included a narrative depicting one of her own experiences:

One child came up to me and said that today was a celebration. I asked what he was celebrating and he told me that his [mother’s] anniversary was today. I was pleased with his excitement until he told me it was her anniversary for being clean from drugs. I said, “Oh nice,” and ended the conversation. I now realize that I sent a message that it should be kept [quiet] and avoided. Yet I know at least [part] of the class had been exposed to family members with drug addictions.

What is most interesting was not the way Karen positioned herself in the story, but the way that Karen later reflected on her own positioning. Karen’s initial positioning of herself in relation to the student was *tacit*; that is, positioning that was not done consciously or intentionally. Additionally, in her analysis Karen made clear that she understood both the perlocutionary and illocutionary force of her utterance and the ways that the force of the utterance positioned the child. The illocutionary force of the utterance “Oh, nice,” was to communicate that Karen was pleased that the boy’s mother is celebrating this anniversary. However, since Karen’s intention was to end this conversation that had put her in an awkward situation as a teacher, the perlocutionary force of “Oh, nice,” was to make the student go away rather than to ensure that his good news was valued and celebrated in his classroom. Upon reflection, Karen realized that she “sent a message” to this student that celebrating an anniversary of being clean from drugs should “be kept quiet and avoided.” Karen implied to the student that what he was sharing had no relevance in the classroom. Karen’s later reflection demonstrated that the student’s personal experiences were relevant and appropriate for sharing with others. Here, she mirrored Paley’s stance in *White Teacher*, as Paley talked about how her own discomfort with issues led her to silence some children in her classroom.

*Role-based Positioning.* In the previous excerpts and in most of Karen’s writing in general, Karen wrote from the position of the teacher rather than as a student in a graduate course. She demonstrated what we refer to as Role-based Positioning (see Table 1). Whereas other students in the course, even those who were full-time teachers with permanent classrooms, wrote mostly in the role of student, Karen wrote most often in the role of teacher. In the role of teacher, she consistently explored teaching methods, issues, and concepts in a highly reflective manner. That is, she used her position as teacher not to defend her current beliefs and practices or to project what she could do someday but to analyze critically what she was reading and discussing and to consider how she could apply it. For example, she constructed a sophisticated chart of where she identified culturally relevant teaching strategies and quotations from Paley’s *White Teacher* and then reflected on these strategies in relation to
her own teaching.

What we can learn from Karen. The preceding examples typify Karen’s usual response to the literature read in the course in that she repeatedly asked: How can all of this make me a better teacher? As with Eve, Karen used particular types of positioning to assist in reflection. In ways similar to Eve, Karen practiced Self Opposed to Other and Self Aligned with Other Positioning throughout her writing in attempts to understand others’ perspectives and to identify and explore her own prejudices. Karen was unusual, however, in how she identified once tacit beliefs and gave them voice. Her exploration of what we label Tacit Positioning allowed her to consider how she could send implicit messages about what was valued in her classroom through her discourse—as was the case when she dismissed the student’s celebratory news of his mother’s drug-free anniversary.

Karen consistently positioned herself in a way that was conducive to improving her own teaching by regularly revisiting her experiences and consciously reflecting on them. Her awareness of her own progress and potential to grow as a teacher indicated that she positioned herself **statically**; that is her position was always the same even as she considered very different experiences and situations. While static forms of positioning may hastily be viewed as negative to learning experiences, Karen shows that this is not always the case. Her habitual Static Positioning allowed conscious awareness of her learning and reflection on her past experiences and was a major facilitator of her learning in the course, clearly tied to her Role-based Positioning as a reflective teacher. Through this positioning, Karen was able to come to many realizations about herself and about teaching, noticing especially the way she positioned students through her own language and considering how these realizations would make her a better teacher. As Karen said, “Reflection is not always a glamorous thing. However…it is through this painful reflection that we improve.”

**Bridget: Collegial Mentor and Advocate for African American Children**

Like Eve and Karen, Bridget was in her mid-twenties at the time of the study. Although she had been raised in a predominantly White suburb, she had been teaching for three years at an urban, inner-city school labeled “at-risk” and located in a high-poverty area. All of the students and most teachers in the school were African American.

Self In Other Positioning. In response to reading Delpit’s article “The Silenced Dialogue” Bridget wrote:

Unfortunately, Delpit is accurate in her explanation of the “culture of power.” Many times, the White culture claims to be all knowing about the Black culture. As a result they are not willing to listen to the experience of Black people. Part of this problem lies in the fact that the Black culture, in regards to education is seen as inferior. We must move past this. . . . The White cultures are the ones who are, many times, behaving ignorantly. They are not willing to learn from others. More successful Black Americans need to be showcased, not necessarily famous people. Then, possibly other cultures will begin to get away from the school of thought that Black people are not capable of succeeding in school.

What is telling in this excerpt is Bridget’s use of the pronoun “they.” Because issues
around race are so deeply sedimented in our talk, discourse often reveals positions of which speakers are unaware (van Dijk, 1993). Often times White teachers who profess an affiliation with the Black community will still refer to the Black community or students in depersonalized ways through the use of abstract pronouns as in “I thought there might be some of them [African American] students in my classroom.” Although subtle, these moves still indicate a balkanization along racial lines within U.S. society (McVee, 1999). Unlike some teachers who responded to Ladson-Billings work defensively or as outsiders projecting what they might do if they were White teachers working with African American students, Bridget saw herself in the writing of Ladson-Billings. She wrote, “The White cultures are the ones who are, many times, behaving ignorantly. They are not willing to learn from others.”

**Self As Other Positioning.** Bridget also practiced Self As Other Positioning. In her response to *Holler If You Hear Me*, she wrote a response in first person as if she were Reggie, a young Black man. She wrote about his feelings of being isolated and misunderstood. This type of positioning where a White teacher actually steps directly into the shoes of another is particularly rare (McVee, 1999), and it demonstrated Bridget’s ability to empathize with her Black students and the students that Ladson-Billings and Michie wrote about.

Her empathetic stance was particularly relevant to Bridget’s beliefs about literacy instruction and the relationship between language and power. Responding to Delpit she wrote: “I teach my Black students to understand the codes of power. . . . Just as Delpit suggests. They must be encouraged to understand the value of the code they already possess as well as to understand the power realities in this country.” Bridget’s attention to power was one of the things that distinguished her from Eve and Karen and from other teachers responding to multicultural texts (McVee, 1999). Given the resistance of White teachers to exploring issues of race and culture, it is not surprising that power, which under-girds distinctions made about race and culture, is also difficult to surface. In the excerpt above Bridget referred to the codes of power her students must learn and to the political power realities in the U.S. context. However, she was also one of few teachers in the course who wrote about the power she had as a teacher.

**Role-based Positioning: Teacher as advocate, teacher as collegial mentor.** Bridget also wrote about the codes of power and language when responding to Ladson-Billings’ *Dreamkeepers*, noting that often there was little connection between the formal English her students encountered in school and the English they used outside. She again argued in favor of valuing the ways that students speak and write in their community and at the same time of teaching them the linguistic power codes. This argument reflected Bridget’s belief that as a teacher, she must act as an advocate on behalf of her students. In so doing, Bridget practiced Role-based Positioning.

Bridget understood that her role as advocate for her students meant valuing them as individuals and helping them acquire the linguistic and cultural power codes necessary for academic success within her own classroom setting, but she also carried her advocacy into the course. To help other teachers think about what it means to teach Black children labeled “at risk,” Bridget positioned herself in her writing and in discussions as a collegial mentor to participants in her book discussion group and to other course participants. For example, in response to *Dreamkeepers* Bridget generated a list of highly reflective, thought provoking
questions typical of questions a teacher educator might ask of her students. She also shared stories about her teaching experience and her growing awareness of how her students were “bilingual.” Bridget also took up the role of collegial mentor when discussions seemed to veer off track. During one discussion, participants began to swap stories about the bad teaching of inner-city teachers. After several of these stories, Bridget quietly stepped into the conversation and steered other discussants toward a more appropriate and more productive topic.

Although Bridget was very vocal about her advocacy on behalf of Black children and her support for public city schools in her district, she was able to maintain an excellent rapport with her peers in the course. Additionally, because she had shared the story of how she had gotten the job in her current school, how difficult it had been, and how she had managed to thrive in that environment, her peers knew that she had struggled in her teaching but stayed the course. Like Eve and Karen, Bridget was a reflective practitioner, but she tied her own reflection to her sense of advocacy. She reflected on teaching in an inner-city school by stating that if her classmates were ever to find themselves in a similar situation that she hoped that they would say:

“Hey, I can do this, that Bridget girl from my class did it.” Most of all, I want people to realize that teaching Black children is an incredibly rewarding and interesting career. Too many people are afraid of what they don’t know. Challenging ourselves to discover the unknown opens up a world of opportunity. I am very thankful that I am teaching at my school. It has changed the way I am, and how I perceive culture in what I believe to be an extremely positive way. I recall feeling the same way some of my fellow students feel, afraid of a culture that was different.

In reflecting on her experiences, Bridget was intentional about her desire to influence others. Near the end of the semester, she wrote: “I discovered that, though I take pride in my accomplishments as an inner-city teacher, my work is not even close to being done. True leaders, like Mr. Michie not only make changes in their own lives, but also aspire to challenge others to question their unsuccessful philosophies . . . [in order to] consider making the necessary changes to be a more compassionate and effective teacher.”

Bridget was able to put her beliefs into action in her final project of the semester when she interviewed her building principal, several teachers, parents, and students for their input into a character education plan. Bridget felt that even initiating these conversations led “people [to] want to try and prove themselves to be positive forces in African American education.” She noted that after initiating these conversations three parents asked how they could become more involved and for several weeks the teachers continued to talk with Bridget about ideas they had raised in their interviews. In her final project, she was explicit about her advocacy, “I have an extreme interest in improving the education of African American students.”

*What we can learn from Bridget.* Unlike Eve and Karen, Bridget had already spent a great deal of time teaching in an inner-city school at the time of the study. While Bridget appeared to easily internalize course concepts because of her teaching environment and her positioning in relation to her students and their community, Bridget’s writing made clear her growing awareness of her advocacy on behalf of her students and within her own professional
community. Whereas the learning of Karen and Eve could be measured by how much their views changed over the semester, Bridget’s views did not change as much as they matured and deepened. The maturation of Bridget’s beliefs could be seen in the ways that Bridget positioned herself as teacher/advocate and collegial mentor (Role-based Positioning). This maturation was also exemplified in the ways Bridget saw herself in the writings of scholars like Ladson-Billings and Delpit (Self In Other Positioning) and her attempt to imagine herself as Reggie, a young Black man (Self As Other Positioning). The positions that Bridget took up are critical in part because she is a White teacher. As such, she has the potential to speak personally and through this research to other White teachers about issues of language, race, culture, and power.

**DISCUSSION**

Teacher educators know that providing opportunities for their students to engage in reflection does not come easily. In the context of this course, students were provided with opportunities to read engaging and meaningful texts that challenged their thinking. In addition, students were required to write a range of reflective responses including personal narrative, book logs, and academic reflections across both narrative and non-narrative texts. For some students this approach—using a variety of texts and providing ample opportunity for discussion and reflection—opened up new spaces representative of what Gutiérrez and colleagues refer to as the “third space”—“a new theoretical and pedagogical space in which learning takes precedence over teaching; instruction is consciously local, contingent, situated” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997, p. 372). We assert that it was in the discursive positions articulated through reading, writing, and discussing that meaningful learning and exploration of literacy and culture occurred for Bridget, Karen, and Eve. Such learning required thoughtful reflection, lots of hard work, and an emotional investment. Through their willingness to engage in the hard work of reflecting on challenging and sometimes uncomfortable “hot-lava” topics (Glazier, 2003) in relation to conceptions of literacy and literate practices, all three participants explored what it meant to be an effective and responsible teacher for all children.

One of the limitations of the current study is that our analysis has focused on students who were highly engaged in the course. Not all students appeared to learn as much as Eve, Karen, and Bridget. In fact, there were several students who showed little growth across the semester. These students also practiced Self Aligned with Other Positioning or Self Opposed to Other Positioning, but they seldom used these types of positioning to explore what it might feel like to be the “other.” In contrast to the reflexive self-examination present in the discursive positions of Eve, Bridget, and Karen, less engaged participants often practiced Self-Other Positioning in a neutral manner. For example, they would often complete an assignment by indicating superficial agreement with an author. Additionally, while less engaged participants also practiced Intertextual Positioning and occasionally referenced high numbers of texts, they did not develop the intricate analysis and synthesis demonstrated by our focal participants. This is an area we will explore in future research.

In conclusion, those who teach teachers know that it is challenging to prepare literacy
teachers for our increasingly diverse society. The authors of this work as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers have found the metaphor of positioning to be a useful tool in exploring literacy teachers’ learning in relation to issues such as race, class, and language. Identifying positions that emerged from the data gives us a useful tool to explore what types of discursive positions are associated with deeper reflection. These types of positionings and the examples provided through the hard work of Eve, Bridget, and Karen provide models of discursive practice for us to share with our colleagues and students. The varieties of positionings identified in this study provide a vocabulary and analytical tool for assisting students in exploring their own positions as they learn about literacy and culture. They also provide researchers with a beneficial lens to frame discussions of learning and reflection around issues of culture and literacy.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Multicultural Autobiography and Teacher Ethnography in Order Read

APPENDIX B

Partial Listing of Conceptual, Research-based, and Practitioner Readings