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***“Real Ways of Talking” and School Talking:
One Appalachian Student’s Perception of
Teacher Discourse During Writing Conferences***

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A barrier to school literacy is created when teachers fail to build upon the familiar language of students. These research findings indicate that when students perceive that nonstandard ways of talking are not as highly valued by the school as Standard English is valued, they deliberately fail to produce written products that match their teacher’s expectations.

You know what I don't like about school? I don't like it that they don't like who I am! I can talk all that proper talk and I can write a story like she [teacher] tells us to do. But my granny don't use that [school talk] and that ain't me neither. Zane Bailey, 4th grade

Home and School Language Links

As articulated by Zane Bailey, language is inextricably bound to one's identity. Language is not only a tool for communication, but is also the carrier of cultural values and attitudes, as well as oral and written literacy traditions (Garcia, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Members of different races, social classes and cultures may distinguish themselves from one another by the type of language they use. Much discussion about regional dialect differences in American English is qualified in terms of social status considerations. For example, when speaking of Appalachian English features, such as *hit* for *it* or *a-hunting and a-fishing*, one must carefully consider that these features are used at different rates or may not even be used by different social groups in Appalachia. Rural Appalachian language features are often associated with the *a*-prefix as in *She was a-cooking dinner*, or the *h* in *hits raining outside* (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

The various social meanings associated with ethnic and regional varieties of American English often force speakers to choose between fitting in and speaking correctly. Appalachian English is associated with a rural and stigmatized vernacular, and at the same time with an individual's native roots. These individuals are faced with the dilemma of choosing between group solidarity and being stigmatized by the mainstream culture. For example, native speakers of an Appalachian vernacular dialect who have moved away may feel constrained to shift to some degree back to the native dialect when visiting their home. Failure to use the vernacular of family may be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of the family and the inability to fit in (Fasold, 1996; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Many of these students deliberately choose to maintain the language, traditions, social behaviors, and culture of their home (Tatum, 1997; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

Spoken language is the format in which much teaching occurs, and students demonstrate to teachers much of what they have learned. Previous research has focused on language differences among children and teachers from various ethnic and socioeconomic classes across the United States (Cazden, 1988; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1996). Much research has noted that a primary barrier to school literacy learning is created when teachers fail to build upon the familiar interactional styles and everyday uses of the languages of students (Au, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). This highlights the profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process in American educational systems concerning the potential discontinuity between the culture of the school and the home (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Formal education requires one to think, learn, talk, read and write in prescribed ways. Literacy education is designed to influence and mold an individual's cultural identity (Boykin, 1994; Flippo, Hetzel, Gribouski, & Armstrong, 1997; Gay, 2000).

Individuals who are highly affiliated with a strong cultural identity find that the cultures of schools are not always completely synchronized with their personal oral and written literacy experiences. Many of these students from diverse backgrounds are doomed to failure due to the fact that educators focus on what ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically different students can not do and do not have (Au, 1993; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Gay, 2000). Unfortunately for these diverse student populations, academic achievement is more often associated with being middle-class and White. For many African American students, doing well in school becomes identified as trying to be White (Tatum, 1997). Fordham (1993, 1996) and Goto (1997) explain that a number of students with high academic potential intentionally sabotage or camouflage their intellectual abilities to avoid alienation from the friends or family members who have not been as successful in school.

In addition, these students run the risk of being marginalized as they attempt to incorporate selected aspects of their home culture with those of the dominant culture. To friends and family they appear to have rejected the ways of family, yet they are unable to find full acceptance in

the dominant culture. Some of these students may assimilate into the dominant culture as much as possible and distance themselves from their cultural group. Other students may withdraw by emphasizing their own culture and avoiding contact with or the use of dominant group practices (Tatum, 1997).

Rural and urban Appalachians have been called the "invisible minority" in much the same way that Asian Americans are seen as the "model minority" (Purcell-Gates, 1995). This term reflects both the general lack of knowledge about them as well as their culture beyond the geographic area in which they reside. The fact that Appalachians are overwhelmingly White and not recognized as a culturally diverse population in a political climate that equates diversity with "people of color" contributes to their invisible status. As a group, rural and urban Appalachian folk suffer from the ills of poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment. They are frequently discriminated against because of cultural differences between the mountain subculture and the mainstream culture. Mannerisms, customs, and in particular, speech patterns and language use mark these differences. One characteristic of unassimilated Appalachians is their retention of characteristic language patterns and word usage. Children from low-income rural or urban Appalachian areas achieve at significantly lower levels than their non-Appalachian peers in the classroom. Frequently, the school literacy practices, as well as the sound and structure of oral language used in the classroom, are unfamiliar to these Appalachian learners (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Inside or outside of school, learning occurs in a cultural context. Embedded in this context are subtle and invisible expectations regarding the manner in which individuals are expected to use language and how he or she is to go about learning. To succeed in school, learners must be academically knowledgeable in the culturally appropriate ways of participating in instructional conversations and displaying academic knowledge. Schools must respond to the unique needs of culturally diverse students more effectively than they have done in the past. Creative and authentic solutions to the difficulties experienced by students of diversity are complex and urgently needed in American

classrooms (Au, 1993; Delpit, 1995, 1988; Garcia, 2002; Gay, 2000; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Philips, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Weis, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the nature of the teacher-student conferencing discourse while focusing primarily on the student’s perception of the teacher’s discourse during writing conferences. The fourth-grade student was native to this Appalachian community and identified as a struggling reader and writer. School administrators, colleagues, parents, and professors at a regional university considered the teacher a high implementer of effective reading and writing instruction and conferencing practices.

I gathered the data through a variety of qualitative measures, including observation, interviewing, and gathering of student artifacts (e.g., writing samples). I spent approximately two hundred and eighty hours over a period of sixty days from August through January observing in the classroom. Classroom observations occurred four to five consecutive days each week. The observations focused on teacher and student discourse during writing conferences. I conducted interviews to gather information in the participants’ own words. Pseudonyms are used for all subjects involved in the study, the school, and the location of the school.

Study Participants

Ms. Neel, the teacher participating in the study, was beginning her twelfth year of teaching in an elementary school. She had taught in elementary schools in Texas, Pennsylvania, and for the last four years in Appalachia, Kentucky. This year marked the beginning of her seventh year teaching fourth-grade since beginning her career. Colleagues, school administrators, parents, and university professors highly respect Ms. Neel as an exemplary educator. Without exception, everyone considered her the best writing teacher in this rural Appalachian school district.

This body of research investigates the nature and impact of the teacher discourse with one particular target student named Zane Bailey.

Zane and his family are indigenous to the rural mountain community of Appalachia. Based on my personal interviews with Zane coupled with sixty days of classroom observations, he obviously disliked school, writing tasks, and most teachers. Furthermore, as a rule, he was not actively engaged in classroom instruction or typical school reading and writing learning experiences. He considered school a "...boring place and it don't do nothin' for you when you go home."

Although Zane appeared to struggle with reading and writing tasks, during casual conversations with classmates and the teacher he often shared detailed stories in his rich Appalachian dialect, using colloquial phrases when describing his life experiences with family and friends. Over the six month observation period, various teachers, school staff, and administrators commented that Zane was slow and a "typical unmotivated learner." However, Ms. Neel valued Zane's thinking and believed him a very capable learner. She frequently expressed her desire to further identify and build upon his areas of interest in writing tasks and actively engage him in discussions during writing conferences.

Findings

Zane Bailey: "I don't really like school but I like Ms. Neel."

Nine-year-old Zane Bailey speaks with a loud and pronounced Appalachian dialect. Zane, a European-American child, lives with his grandmother who is also a native of Appalachia. When speaking of his family Zane explains:

My mom lived here and I was born here. All my aunts, uncles, cousins and everybody in my family lives here. I got a lot of family here in this place cause we're all from here. But I have no clue about where my dad was from or anything like that about him.

Zane very openly shares that he does not like school. According to him, "school is boring and they make you do all this stuff that you don't never do no wheres else." As far as schools go he believes that Appalachia Elementary School is a "pretty good school."

His reasons for describing Appalachia as a good school are that the faculty and administrators keep students safe; they provide food for students and give them time to play during physical education and recess.

Learning how to write stories and letters seems like a waste of time to Zane. He does not enjoy participating in individual or group writing tasks. He believes:

People shouldn't have invented all that writing stuff. You should just be able to grab a piece of paper, write down what you want somebody to know, put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and put it in the mailbox and forget it. I don't think you need to go through all those steps of writing that stuff. Just rewrite it if it's not neat enough or something.

Zane believes that Ms. Neel is a good teacher "as far as good teachers go." He describes her as being patient, nice, fun and as having a funny laugh. He quickly points out that Ms. Neel cares about students in her classroom and in the school. The reason he thinks she is a good teacher is because:

...whenever I don't understand something she tells me what it means. Like if I don't understand what a word means then she'll tell me another definition that helps me. She's real good at talking to you about your work, like your writing or stories, and she helps you work out your ideas but she don't tell you how you have to do it. If you're gonna have to do writing anyway then she is a good teacher to have cause at least you get to use your own ideas. She don't ever tell you your ideas are bad or make you feel dumb. I guess she's a good teacher to have even if you don't have to do writing. So I guess I'd say that if you're gonna have to go to school anyway then Ms. Neel is a good teacher to have.

According to Zane his learning experiences at school are for the most part unimportant and not useful in his life outside of school. He says:

See I don't think I'll ever use all this stuff they teach us at this school. I can do work like my granny and she don't use all this writing stuff we do in here to do her job.

Zane does not like school and he fails to see the relevance of school learning to his everyday life. In spite of his negative feelings about school, he expresses positive feelings and respect for Ms. Neel. According to Zane, "Ms. Neel is a good teacher because she cares about you."

Ms. Neel's discourse practices with Zane

Ms. Neel uses a variety of questions and comments that intentionally invite Zane to share his ideas and experiences as they relate to his writing. The teacher's discourse is designed to assist Zane in developing a writing topic with supporting details and to assist him in separating multiple steps of the writing process into "manageable pieces." Ms. Neel speaks to Zane in a manner that is private and affirming of Zane's efforts and ideas. Teacher questions and comments throughout the conference reflect Ms. Neel's attempts to assist Zane in choosing a writing topic, developing a story line, and providing additional details in the story.

[Ms. Neel (T) is asking Zane (Z) questions to help him develop arguments for a letter persuading his grandmother to join the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)].

- T: All right, now in your second paragraph what are you trying to do?
Z: Uh, persuade her to join the PTO.
T: You've already given her your reasons [in the first paragraph]. What are you trying to do with those reasons now?
Z: State 'em.
T: Restate them and explain. Okay?
Z: Yeah.
T: So, can you give her a topic sentence?
Z: Yeah, you might say you don't have time.

- T: All right. Now you've also listed that she could join because she doesn't have to dress formally to go to the meetings and it only costs two dollars to join. You have to explain those reasons too.
- Z: Okay.
- T: So, how are you going to do that?
- Z: Tell her what I mean. Say it!
- T: Tell her that! Exactly! Grandma, let me tell you what I mean! That is a topic sentence. Then you need to explain what you mean. What do you mean that you don't have time to go to the PTO meetings? Remember Zane, those PTO meetings are once a month usually at seven o'clock. She's home by seven o'clock isn't she?
- Z: Sometimes she is home by six. She usually goes right in and fixes supper and does the dishes. She don't like no help with dishes or cooking cause I ask her.

Ms. Neel uses intentionally inviting discourse by asking Zane questions that provide opportunities for him to share about his family and experiences at home. Ms. Neel seeks to build upon Zane's areas of interest when helping him select writing topics.

Teacher attitudes toward Zane

According to Ms. Neel, "Zane could be one of my best writers, but he is not willing to put out the effort." However, Ms. Neel predicts, "if I could find a topic that he is really on fire about, I think he would enjoy writing. So far I haven't been able to help him discover that burning topic or questions that will motivate him to write. He is a good kid, although I admit that it is very challenging and sometimes even frustrating working with him." It deeply concerns Ms. Neel that she has been unable to help Zane make more progress as a writer. She feels a sense of responsibility for children in her classroom like Zane. On another occasion Ms. Neel stated, "I really believe that Zane enjoys learning. I keep trying to find new ways that pique his interest in learning. I'm still learning how to reach him. I know he is a very capable student."

Ms. Neel expressed appreciation for the dialect and language used by Zane in his oral and written narratives. In one instance, in a letter to his grandmother, Zane wrote "...I will clean up the bottom so you can come to the PTO meeting at school." When Ms. Neel asked him the meaning of "clean up the bottom," Zane explained that this was the flat ground behind his house. Ms. Neel smiled with understanding and stated that she would call this the backyard if she were writing her grandparents. Zane nodded his head and continued writing. Ms. Neel explained, "I think it is important for my students to have the freedom to use colloquial words or phrases in their writing. I suppose that many of the expressions I use are colloquial and odd to some people. I just encourage them [the students] to think about their audience, and whether or not the language or phrases are appropriate for the intended audience. The challenge I face is teaching kids like Zane to use standard English and words in their writing for more formal pieces of writing they are expected to complete in fourth-grade. In Zane's case, I feel awful when I have to lower his score on a piece of writing because he didn't use the expected language." Ms. Neel values the differences in language use and dialect she noted between herself and Zane, although she struggled to reconcile the conflict this created when evaluating Zane's formal pieces of writing.

An example of the results of IRE (Initiating, Responding, Evaluating) teacher discourse with Zane

Zane perceives the IRE discourse as disinviting. IRE involves the teacher initiating, the student responding, and the teacher evaluating during a writing conference (Cazden, 1988). Zane views this as the teacher trying to transmit her own meaning system into his writing. As a result he responds with "yes, no, maybe, okay or yeah" whether or not he is focusing on the task or understands the suggestions offered by the teacher.

[Ms. Neel (T) is talking with Zane (Z) about his feature article on lizards].

- T: What do you want to find out specifically?
Z: How they [lizards] live.
T: Exactly! You want to find out about how lizards live?
Z: Yeah
T: Good! Are you looking specifically at lizards in Kentucky?
Z: Yeah
T: Yes, since you are talking about Kentucky's Commonwealth. Okay, where do you think lizards live?
Z: Uh, well, uh, maybe.
[The conference continues...]

In this conference Ms. Neel probes Zane's thinking in an attempt to understand the question he is trying to answer in his feature article. However, during IRE teacher discourse Zane does not engage in the conversation anymore than necessary. He produces very little written work following the conference. Zane's behavior featured in this vignette is typical of numerous writing conferences where the teacher uses an IRE discourse.

Over the course of six months, Ms. Neel gradually shifted away from an IRE style discourse pattern during writing conferences to asking open-ended questions that generated discussion about the content of the piece of writing. She acknowledged in several interviews that Zane did not respond favorably to her “discussion and questioning style in writing conferences.” As a result, Ms. Neel explained that she had decided to “...try new discussion and questioning techniques” when conferencing with Zane, since “what I have been doing so far doesn't seem to be working with him.” While Zane did not produce the written narratives that Ms. Neel desired, he did engage in oral discourse during the conferences by telling detailed and lengthy stories about his family and life experiences. Many times, Ms. Neel listened patiently and encouraged Zane to consider how he might use relevant events or supporting details in his oral storytelling to develop a current piece of writing.

Differences in storytelling structures

Ms. Neel expected Zane to produce topic-centered narratives, a single topic narrative focusing on one event that is sequentially organized, even though he preferred reading, telling, and writing episodic narratives. Within the community of Appalachia, children and adults produce rich oral and written episodic narratives in their daily conversations and during writing events. These episodic narratives contain a series of implicitly associated anecdotes with shifting scenes, characters, time periods, and organizational structures (Cazden, 1988).

Zane consciously decided to use "real talk" rather than "school talk." He enjoyed sharing episodic-centered narratives during oral class discussions, teacher student conferences, and personal interviews. He expressed great pride in being a member of his family and in the language that directly connects him to his grandmother. According to Zane, "I don't talk as country as my granny, but I sure don't talk like school since that ain't real talking. I can do it [use school language] but that ain't who I am." Throughout the academic year Zane did not change or adjust his oral or written language practices to match the teacher's oral and written expectations of his work. As a result, in assigned writing tasks Zane continually produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing reflecting his deliberate rejection of this expected school standard. Zane held very strong opinions concerning the way teachers speak. Zane explains:

You see my grandma thinks that I talk country. Cause like I was with some people and we was out in the country and everything and we talked like country talk. She said I stayed there too long visiting. Well, my grandma she don't talk like country. She just talks like old people. That means she's always talking about back when she was a kid. But my grandma don't talk like Ms. Neel. ...She [Ms. Neel] talks real formal like the school and sometimes she uses those words that ain't easy to know. ...Most of the kids in this school don't talk the same [as the teachers] cause we don't talk school talk. I mean everybody has their own way of talking. ...What I don't like about school is that you have to do everything so proper. At home you don't have to talk proper. You just talk like yourself. It's mainly the teachers and the principal that expect me to talk different at school than I really talk. She [the

teacher] always wants us to speak proper and I mean all the time. But I will say this, when Ms. Neel corrects me for saying "ain't" she does it in a good way. You learn it, but you don't feel bad or dumb. I know not to use "ain't," but I don't really talk that way so I forget a lot at school and say it. School talk is proper talk and it ain't a real way of talking. ...I don't really talk as country as my granny, but I sure don't talk like school since that ain't real talking. I can do it [use school language/standard English] but that ain't who I am.

Zane indicated that he had made a decision not to change or adjust his oral or written language practices to match the teacher's oral and written language expectations for his work. As a result, in assigned writing tasks by the teacher, Zane continually produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing reflecting his deliberate rejection of this expected school standard. On the other hand, anyone who listens to his oral stories, conversations, or reads his unedited stories recognizes his ability to produce very descriptive and lengthy episodic narratives. Instead of providing writing tasks linked to Zane's native use of language when telling stories, Ms. Neel unintentionally silenced his voice by only soliciting a style of writing that disconnected him from real life. Allowing Zane to write about his experiences in the same manner that he talked would have validated his use of language as well as his style of writing. As a result, Zane made the conscious choice not to comply with the teacher's oral and written language expectations at school. He consistently made decisions not to actively engage in classroom instruction, teacher-student conferences, and writing tasks when expected to comply with school writing styles. When completing writing assignments he consistently produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing.

Issues of power in the classroom

There is a striking power struggle in the classroom between Zane and Ms. Neel. Zane wanted to maintain control over his use of oral and written language in the classroom. Ms. Neel wanted him to comply with the oral and written language expectations of the school. In some writing activities, she allowed Zane to use colloquial phrases and nonstandard

variations of language in his writing (e.g., "bottom" for flat land). In addition, she allowed him to share his oral and written episodic stories written in his private journal. However, Zane sensed that the teacher valued Standard English and topic-centered narratives over nonstandard variations of English and episodic-narratives. Therefore, Zane refused to comply with the oral and written literate expectations of the school. From Zane's perspective, compliance with the school's language expectations violated who he was and devalued the language and literacy traditions in his home. This power struggle is played out in Zane's off-task work habits that forced Ms. Neel to consistently monitor his progress toward completing a final written product. In addition, Zane's lack of compliance in producing detailed topic-centered written products that met the teacher's expectations indicated his decision not to use the language of the school. Regardless of the consequences, Zane insisted on using language that was "real" and natural to him. He maintained his identity by speaking and writing in his native dialect, he continued using colloquial phrases, and produced episodic story structures. Many children like Zane find they must choose between their own unique language patterns and that of the school in order to be successful in public school classrooms. The unique and rich language features of these students are often erased by well meaning educators, state assessment systems, and national policy makers.

Zane's belief that school talk was not a "real way of talking" expresses the perspective of many members of subordinate groups who are ethnically, culturally and/or linguistically diverse. He refused to assimilate into the dominant culture by using unfamiliar oral and written language structures characteristic of the culture of the school. Just as many African American students refuse to "act White" (Tatum, 1997); Zane is representative of Appalachian students who refuse to act like those who are part of the dominant mainstream culture. Zane deliberately sabotages and camouflages his intellectual abilities to avoid being alienated from his family. When required to choose between the oral and written language expectations of the school and the language practices of his home, he chooses the familiar language of his grandmother. As a result, when speaking and writing Zane emphasizes the language structures of his home, and avoids oral and written language practices characteristic of the dominant culture. Zane did not waver in his

determination to use language in ways that seemed appropriate to him, even if it meant being unsuccessful in school. On the other hand, Ms. Neel continued to offer support, scaffolding, and structure, designed to assist Zane in completing topic-centered written narratives. Needless to say, she remained frustrated with Zane, and he remained distant and irritated with Ms. Neel.

Conclusion

The belief that teachers, rather than students, need fixing (Gay, 1983) sounds harsh, but it challenges educators to re-examine previously held convictions concerning attitudes toward marginalized and diverse students. Gay (1983, 2000) explains that we are not dealing with culturally deprived children, but with culturally deprived schools. Therefore, the task is not to revise, amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere, policies, practices, and operations that make up the culture of the school. "To continue to define the difficulty as inherent in the raw materials, the children, is plainly to blame the victim and to acquiesce in the continuation of educational inequity in America" (Gay, 1983, p.561). Many excellent teachers may find themselves unintentionally responding to students in ways that violate the child's home culture and language. As demonstrated, teacher discourse can impact student achievement and motivation. However, it is important to acknowledge that educational systems and curriculum experts advising teachers, who do not understand or address these issues, also contribute to the discontinuity existing between the home and the school. For example, when educational assessment practices and policies solicit only one style of writing from students, the voices of many young diverse students are silenced. Students like Zane Bailey resist the attempts of well meaning teachers who provide instruction that is aligned with assessment practices that do not value nor are reflective of the language practices of the student. The current trend to standardize the curriculum at the national level diminishes opportunities for students to receive instruction that values and builds upon student differences such as the non-mainstream oral and written literacy practices of diverse learners. In particular, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which ignores issues of dialect and diverse oral language patterns as well as the

challenges rural schools face, ultimately seems to erase children like Zane from public school discussions.

Schools should respect and celebrate local culture while also providing students with educational experiences that give them options when they graduate, one of which may be to return to their communities and teach the succeeding generations. Obviously, Appalachian students who do not learn how to use oral and written Standard English grow up with limited options inside and outside of their communities. Many of these individuals will be forced to work in menial, low-wage jobs because they cannot or choose not to use the language of the mainstream culture. Therefore, children like Zane must assimilate into the mainstream culture linguistically in order to be successful in school. Such requirements continue to disenfranchise these children while their language and identity alienates them from school settings. In the interest of students who are marginalized in classrooms, it is time to reevaluate school structures, policies, and assessment accountability measures that value only one way of speaking, writing, and demonstrating knowledge.

If educators are to reverse the achievement trends of students like Zane, we must understand our own cultural orientations while learning about the ethnic identity and cultural socialization that comprise students' individuality. Curriculum content, teaching strategies, and oral and written literacy practices must be filtered through students' cultural lenses of reference in order to make content personally meaningful. For example, some Appalachian students like Zane Bailey will experience a connection between their personal language use and school writing tasks when teachers provide meaningful writing opportunities and explicit instruction in constructing episodic-narratives. Students' interest and achievement will increase when their familiar language structures are validated and valued by the school. In this way, teachers, administrators, and evaluators deliberately create cultural continuity in educating culturally diverse students. As a result, fewer students may feel the need to camouflage or sabotage their academic achievement to avoid compromising their cultural, ethnic, or personal language integrity and identity.

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