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Killing the Spirit: Doublespeak and Double Jeopardy in a Classroom of Scholars

**by Olga M. Welch and
Carolyn R. Hodges**

“One of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is trying to communicate across individual differences, trying to make sure that what we say to someone is interpreted the way we intended. This becomes even more difficult when we attempt to communicate across social differences, gender, race, or class lines, or any situation of unequal power.”¹ We have conducted a nine-year longitudinal study of the relationship between pre-college enrichment experiences and the development of academic ethos (scholar identity) in educationally disadvantaged African-American adolescents. The study, Project EXCEL, examines how each participant constructs a definition of “scholar” and how, or if, that definition affects achievement in a university-sponsored enrichment program in reading, writing, and foreign language study. Student participants enter the program as sophomores and exit at the conclusion of their senior year.

For the first six years, the project operated during the summer months of June and July, with high school teachers using objectives and texts found in first- and second-year college courses in English, German, and French. In 1994, the program moved into a local high school, Augustana High School, as part of the regular college preparatory curriculum with a cohort of thirteen African-American sophomore students. Central to all the goals in EXCEL is the development of academic ethos (scholar identity), in which the meaning of “scholar” for each participant is constructed from perspectives and attitudes derived from academic study. To facilitate this process, the project’s academic program concentrates on building the students’ self-confidence and images of themselves as scholars—not as templates, but instead as individually derived academic “selves.” The analyses of data from the first five years of the project, including interviews with EXCEL participants, their parents, and their teachers, in the regular classroom and in EXCEL, suggest that some EXCEL students develop academic ethos (scholar identity) while others do not.

This article presents findings from a part of the Project EXCEL study, the ethnographic examination of one political aspect of schooling for African-American students documented by researchers such as Jacqueline Irvine, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Sonia Nieto.² Here we

examine the dual messages about achievement conveyed to students through their experiences as individuals and as a group in their twelfth grade EXCEL English and German classes at Augustana High School.

Two research questions focused the study:

1. How do the EXCEL students in the English and foreign language classes come to understand and respond to academic expectations?
2. With respect to achievement and scholarship, how is the terrain of expectations negotiated?

Because of the nature of the research questions, we decided to emphasize events and exchanges occurring in the English and foreign language classrooms and the meanings derived from these exchanges for the students and teacher. Parent interviews, grades, writing samples, test scores, and school records, which are part of the larger study data, were not primary sources. Greater emphasis was placed on observations of the students in English and foreign language classes and interviews with the EXCEL students and the classroom teachers. Equivalent classroom data on non-EXCEL students were also collected to test the validity of emerging categories and themes. The data were then analyzed deductively to verify the patterns and establish the categories reported in the findings.

The findings presented herein suggest that EXCEL students develop their identities based on each individual’s emerging understanding of what it means to be a “scholar.” The data suggest that EXCEL students construct and reconstruct their identities based on how they interpret the meaning, expectations, and motivations related to academic achievement. What occurs between the teacher and students is influenced by what occurs outside of the classroom in the school, the local area, and the larger community. Classroom observations suggest two themes. Theme one: in the English and foreign language classes, these constructions center on differing and sometimes conflicting messages, both direct and indirect, related to achievement and scholarship. Theme two: the duality of these messages, in turn, result in negotiated students’ behaviors and experiences in the classroom.

Conflicting Messages Related to Achievement and Scholarship

From September to December 1996, Project EXCEL students participated in a twelfth grade Advanced Placement English class, which met from 8:30–10:00 a.m. during the first period in the first semester of block scheduling. Interactions on achievement between the twelfth grade AP English teacher and the EXCEL students centered on the tensions and different perspectives each held about course content and course expectations. The teacher, referred to here as Mr. Jones, was a middle-aged European American and had grown up in the area. He received his undergraduate degree at the local university and majored in communications. He had been at Augustana for eight years. Student interviews and observation data confirm the themes identified earlier,

themes that in the English class emerged in the form of three messages related to achievement and scholarship: a) produce at the high level expected of AP students; b) realize individual potential; and c) prepare for college. Each message occurred within the context of discussions on course content and expectations. Mr. Jones underscored these messages by requiring work to be turned in on time and providing feedback, ranging from playful joking to sarcastic comments on the students' written and oral work. At times, the oral feedback was so pointed that students responded with absolute silence, including addressing comments sotto voce to each other or disengaging (e.g., looking out of the window or placing heads down on the desk). This occurred most often during the lessons on Conrad's book, *The Heart of Darkness*.

Throughout class time, Mr. Jones related scenarios, personal stories, and analogies related to the reading assignments. The analogies conveyed messages of determinism and the "chain of being" which contained subtle references to the connection between "success" and the unwillingness of "some groups in society" to "work hard." These messages were often followed by compliments on the students' writing or admonitions about the importance of proving themselves scholastically. The juxtaposition of these messages underscored their duality, and as evidenced in student interview data, the messages were not misunderstood. Comments from students during their reading of *The Heart of Darkness* suggested that they wanted to analyze the allusions to skin color in the novel, something the teacher repeatedly refused to acknowledge or explore. Mr. Jones told the students that their concentration on skin color as a theme was misplaced. Despite this assertion, Mr. Jones assigned an essay about Kurtz's African mistress and fiancée, asking them to concentrate on the symbolism of darkness (e.g., the absence of light) in the story and in the relationship. The students' dissenting comments on this symbolism were dismissed as "missing the point." Another assignment centered on the significance of "black hats" and "white hats" and its relationship to a character's evil nature. When one student objected, asserting her resentment of the assignment as focusing too much on color, Mr. Jones asserted that it was not about skin color.

Throughout the discussion of the book, the differing perspectives of the students on the book and their perceptions of it as racist remained unacknowledged, even as they were urged to behave as Advanced Placement students, preparing themselves for college and seeking help from Mr. Jones if they experienced problems. Within these messages of support for the students' scholarship and achievement were also parallel messages that contained negative references to blackness. It is the duality of these messages that resulted in negotiated terrains of expectations and the tensions between Mr. Jones and the students regarding course content and course expectations.

Although agreeing to observations of his class, Mr. Jones declined to be interviewed. He was invited by the

observer to review the field notes and to offer his own perspective on the lessons, but indicated that he was not interested in continuing the practice after the first month. Therefore, the instructor's standpoint on achievement is unknown.

Negotiated Terrains of Expectation Regarding Achievement and Scholarship

In the German class, the teacher, referred to here as Mr. Smith, a young European American who received a master's degree in German at the local university, placed emphasis on individual student needs. Because the class was small (eight in the fall; seven in the spring), he often was able to provide a great deal of attention to each student. In interviews he stressed the importance of doing this in an atmosphere which starkly contrasted with the more reserved and easily managed (from a behavioral perspective) college classes he previously taught.

Through the use of a variety of games, written exercises which focused on student interests, and activities requiring small group work, he did get the students to attend to the task at hand and stay involved. The relaxed atmosphere sometimes had the effect of causing students to digress from their tasks and lapse into discussions about personal experiences at home and elsewhere outside of class, yet data from student profiles based on interviews reveal that Mr. Smith seemed able to motivate them in a way that the previous German teacher had not.

Although Mr. Smith frequently had to force them to return to their task, he often did so with seemingly minimal effort. Because of their trust in him and his expressed confidence in their abilities, he was able to lure and then completely engage them in the assignment at hand. Thus, when they first started reading a sixteenth-century story that ended with a joke, they were very skeptical and declared that it was *doof* [stupid, dumb]. After they gradually became used to the dialogue and comprehended enough to speculate on the turn of events, the students became excited about acting it out as a skit in the annual state-wide competition. When they read together in class, the teacher further reinforced familiar vocabulary by using it to teach/explain—in the target language—words which they had not yet learned. The students responded well to this, although it was not incorporated often enough to encourage them to answer and ask questions in German. Again, while the teacher consistently praised them for how much they had learned in German and for their talents as language students, he, in some cases, stopped short of forcing them to the next higher step.

The students were reminded—and seemed to recognize—that they had considerable talent, and the German teacher made it clear that he was very much committed to meeting their individual needs. In his interactions with them, he was consistent about his high expectations and the students, as a result, were motivated to excel. They continued to do so in the face of experiences in other classes which offered negative

messages and conflicting discourses. In one example, two female students commented on the attitude of the teacher in the AP English class, who was aware that they were studying German.

Student A: "You know, he only knows one word in German — *schwarz* [black]. He asks me every time what *schwarz* means."

Student B: "You know he told us that Black means evil."

Successful Negotiation of Student Expectations

The German instructor's success in covering a great deal of material and with keeping the EXCEL students excited about learning German rested heavily on his ability to negotiate the terrains of expectation, that is, to devise strategies of interaction which guide students toward taking responsibility—individually and as a group—for their progress in class. By making frequent use of a game he devised and called "Jeopardy," for instance, the atmosphere encouraged students to self-correct, rather than simply waiting for him to answer. Students assisted each other in mastering various concepts. They volunteered freely during the games and commented frankly about who had or had not completed the work necessary to comprehend the activity or complete an assignment in class. Because the teacher instilled confidence in their ability to master various concepts and to compete successfully against students in schools with much older, larger, and well-established German programs, the students in turn, raised their expectations of themselves and became more vigorous participants in the learning process.

Teacher Standpoint on Achievement and Scholarship

Mr. Smith's firm and supportive insistence that his students take responsibility for their failures and their successes in the class sent a direct message about his high expectations of them as scholars. He chastised them for not having studied for a quiz but always reassured them that they were capable of performing well on any given test. He implicitly conveyed his expectations for achievement by giving them challenging assignments and by refusing to yield to protestations regarding tests and homework.

Conclusion

The data from this phase of Project EXCEL underscore the need to continue research on the dynamics of social and cultural relations, as well as on the representations of self that exist in school settings. Furthermore, the data argue that the impact of such dynamics on the

construction of a scholar identity may be a central component of academic achievement. Finally, by focusing on the intersection of conflict/duality and standpoint in English and foreign language classrooms, this phase of the Project EXCEL study offers additional support for the kind of cross-curricula dialogues called for by researchers in both education and foreign languages.³ As Ellis Cose reminds us:

There are many graveyards for intellectual dreams in black and brown America, places where no one needs read *The Bell Curve* to understand how little is expected of him or her, places where achievement is considered unnatural and discouragement lurks at every turn—often in the guise of sympathetic condescension from educators who, certain that most of their pupils will never be scholars, don't dare to challenge the Fates....Many Black and brown children are still being told that academic accomplishment is so much beyond them that there is no real purpose in trying. They are receiving that message not only from the schools, but, in many cases, from virtually everyone around them. The very atmosphere, in large parts of America, is polluted with notions of intellectual inferiority.⁴

Notes

¹Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 135.

²Jacqueline Jordan Irving, *Black Students and School Failure: Policies, Practices, and Prescriptions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). Sonia Nieto, "Lessons from Students on Creating a Chance to Dream," *Harvard Educational Review* 64.4 (1994), 392-426.

³Lisa Delpit's work on cultural conflict in the classroom raises issues about cultural knowledge and politics as they relate to education reform. These questions are echoed by foreign languages educators, such as Jeffrey Peck in "Toward a Cultural Hermeneutics of the 'Foreign' Language Classroom: Notes for a Critical and Political Pedagogy," *Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin* 23.3 (1992), 11-17 and by Christine Brown, who emphasizes the cross-disciplinary nature of the language learning process in "Foreign Language Education and the Education-Reform Movement: Opportunity or Threat?" *ADFL Bulletin* 26.3 (1995), 18-25.

⁴Ellis Cose, *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 51-52.

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