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Articles

The Precarious Nature of Social Class-Sensitivity in Literacy: A Social, Autobiographic, and Pedagogical Project

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ABSTRACT

Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1947/1964) phenomenological notion of the *threads of intentionality* that tie subject and object together meaningfully and Pierre Bourdieu's (1986, 2000; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992) reflexive sociology and constructs of *habitus, field, capital,* and *nomos*, we theorize social class-sensitivity in literacy education as a social, autobiographic, and pedagogical project; a recognition of the powerful unnamed context of middle-class normality; and an illumination of the precarious ways in which working-class and poor students are positioned in schools.

We assume that although issues related to race, gender, and sexuality intersect in complex ways with class, social class issues in classroom pedagogy are too often ignored and undertheorized. Therefore, there is a need to spend concerted time considering social class specifically.

We close by asking pedagogues to think seriously about the reality that working-class and poor students enter classrooms each day saturated in precariousness; to not label students and families as the problem; and to be the ones to take responsibility for alleviating the precarious positions in which working-class and poor students and families live while in educational institutions.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL CLASS-SENSITIVITY IN LITERACY

There has been a transnational "generalising" (spelled with an *s* in the Queen's English) across borders, often uncritical, often as part of aid and development programs, and often with little close analysis of its cultural and social effects. In a

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field that is concerned about the dangers of generalising across states, school systems, and student cohorts without the vaunted gold standard of evidence, there has been little hesitation in transporting curriculum; pedagogy; models of the principalship, school governance, and reform; assessment and evaluation, models of child development and learning and . . . marketisation and privatisation—to other countries. (Luke, 2011, p. 369)

We take seriously Luke's call for those in the field of education to question and disrupt practices of "transporting" curriculum and pedagogy across various kinds of borders in response to educational markets and with the expectation of increased standardization and efficiency. Instead, Luke argues for critical examinations of how curriculum is enacted in particular contexts—and for how important it is to continually locate these enactments in the contexts in which the enactments are born, imagined, and framed. At the same time, we also anticipate that the particular curricular enactments we argue for here are the sort of enactments that are not only profoundly located in context, but also have the potential for a different sort of border crossing; not in the name of expansion, growth, and so on, but in the name of resonance and possibility. In other words, even though the particulars of how social class takes shape in societies, schools, classrooms, and pedagogies differ tremendously across context, we assume that social class matters everywhere.

So we begin with our context—the United States—where social class continues to be the best predictor of educational engagement and achievement over other indicators including race, ethnicity, and gender (Berliner, 2005; Rothstein, 2004; Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). In the state of Georgia, this disparity plays out statewide as 75% of students not passing high-stakes state standardized tests in third, fifth, and eighth grades are from low-income families (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). For us, these startling numbers point to the precarious positioning of working-class and poor children in educational institutions. Not only are these kinds of numbers used to pathologize low income students, their assumed academic potential, the schools they attend, and the teachers who teach them, positioning them precariously in dominant discourses circulating in society, but these numbers also point to the possibility that this is about more than tests and test taking. Many researchers (Anyon, 1980; Bernstein, 1971; Campano, 2007; Dutro, 2009, 2010; Finn, 1999; Hicks, 2002, 2005; Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Rose, 1989; Van Galen, 2000, 2004; Willis, 1977) have written convincingly about the persistent perception of working-class and poor students as deviant and deficient—as in need of remediation and intervention. There is sufficient evidence that working-class and poor students are living their school lives in the dangerous waters of middle-classed institutions, constantly negotiating the precarious nature of a context where they do not *fit,* where they must work to *belong,* where they experience the push and pull of wanting to please a teacher and peers and not always

knowing how to do so or if doing so would be betraying someone—or something—else in their lives.

If working-class and poor students are going to be better served in schools that have become such high-stakes environments, teachers must be better prepared to enact pedagogies informed by knowledge about social class, economic disparity, and the moment-to-moment ways these phenomena are enacted in classroom practice. And although issues related to race, gender, and sexuality intersect in complex ways with class, social class issues in classroom pedagogy are too often ignored and undertheorized. Therefore, there is a need to spend some concerted time considering social class specifically, and in turn carefully articulating and theorizing social class–sensitive literacy pedagogies. It is also important to note that although we ground what follows in the field of literacy education, we see this grounding as merely a starting point for further applications and implementations in all content areas and across school and district policies (Jones & Vagle, under review).

THEORETICAL FRAMING AND ANALYSIS

We structured our theoretical analysis of social class in the following manner. First, we articulated what we see as two consistent commitments in critical literacy teacher education—disrupting hierarchy and thinking reflexively about context and positionality as they take shape in texts, broadly conceived as print, verbal interactions, and multimedia sources such as film and Web sites. Second, we used French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1947/1964) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 2000; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992) to theorize these commitments through a social class–sensitive sensibility.

In particular, we used Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of the *threads of intentionality* that tie subject and object together meaningfully and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and constructs of habitus, field, capital, and nomos. For Merleau-Ponty, subjects and objects do not exist as separate entities. Rather they are always already connected through the intentional (meaning) threads that can never be severed and constantly run through relationships as one lives through the world. Thus, if one wants future literacy teachers to locate how they are precariously positioned in relation to their students, one must remain cognizant that teachers, students, and their pedagogies are connected intentionally (meaningfully) with one another in and over time through such positionings. At the same time, Bourdieu would ask teachers to not only consider their intentional relationships with students and their pedagogies, but also how those relations are classed and embodied in habitus, perceived and recognized as valuable capital within a field, and aligned or not with the "nomos"—or unspoken rules and expectations—of the institution.

Finally, we reflected on our experiences conducting a series of workshops and institutes with practicing and future teachers. These workshops entitled “The Other Side of Poverty” were designed to broaden the typical school-based conversation on “poverty” to a conversation of “social class” that includes critique of social, economic, and political practices and policies that routinely benefit some groups of people and disadvantage others. Within this broader conversation, we engage educators in considering their personal experiences of social class and how those were influenced by broader contexts; how social class hierarchies operate and can be disrupted in school settings; the ways social class is perceived in moment-to-moment interactions; the integration of working-class perspectives across the curriculum; and which school policies might be exacerbating financial struggles families face and/or perpetuating classism—the stratification of people based on their material resources and the discrimination against those who have access to fewer resources.

This three-part analysis led us to the following interrelated theoretical assertions.

Assertion #1: Class-Sensitivity Is a Social, Autobiographic, and Pedagogical Project

As we discuss throughout the main body of this article the theorizing, design, enactment, and reflexivity of social class–sensitive teaching is, at once, a broad social project, an intimate autobiographical project, and a minute-to-minute, day-by-day pedagogical project. Social class saturates our lives in classrooms and outside of school and we assume that it is impossible to acquire a class-sensitive sensibility in the classroom without actively working on one’s perceptivity outside the classroom.

An imperative part of acquiring a more critical perceptivity around issues of social class is to engage in autobiographical work. Talking about, writing about, performing, or expressing in some way moments when social class struggle is palpable, such as those explored in our personal writing later in this article, is a necessary piece of the larger project of class-sensitive pedagogies. Autobiographical work, however, must be recognized as situated in the larger social, economic, and political contexts as well as in the moment-to-moment interactions of our daily lives. The work of combating classism is not *only* about interrogating one’s own lived experiences, then, but it also requires the careful consideration of larger societal issues that make social class differences, disparities, and value judgments about someone’s worth as a human even possible. Our lived experiences as social classed beings are framed by larger (grand) narratives about social class. These broader narratives tend to paint an “obvious” picture of success and satisfaction as residing in the presumed comfort and happiness of the middle- and upper-class and for more

modest or economically strained lives to be seen as deficit and in need of saving, redemption, and pity.

Assertion #2: Middle-Class Normality Is a Powerful Unnamed Context

Middle-class normality in schools—or what Bourdieu would call the "nomos" of scholastic reason and schooling institutions—is so powerful and pervasive that it is challenging to get a hold of social class issues. For example, teachers and students have been theorized as cultural beings thanks in large part to the ongoing work of culturally relevant pedagogues (e.g., Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers and students engaged in pedagogical interactions have rarely, however, been theorized as *socially classed beings* (see Brantlinger, 2007; Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2006b; Van Galen, 2008 for exceptions). This work needs to be done, as the pedagogies we forward in this article actively and persistently turn an eye back to how social class runs through systems, institutions, and relations—all of which require a critical examination of framings, perceptions, and assumptions.

Some of the education-based efforts aimed at alleviating the negative effects of poverty in schooling have located the problem in children and families themselves rather than in the perpetual construction of middle-classness as normal and the institutional nomos that immediately defines what is acceptable or appropriate. Spending time trying to fix individual children and families, however, has taken attention and resources away from educating educators *about* social class, poverty, and the embedded nature of class and classism in literacy pedagogies and materials that others are trying to do (e.g., Berliner, 2005; Dutro, 2009, 2010; Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2008; Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

For example, tens of thousands of educators across the United States have been "trained" to use the instructional strategies promoted by Dr. Ruby Payne's (1998) book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, a book that promotes practices in schools grounded in classism and deficit discourses of working-class and poor children and families (e.g., Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008a, 2008b; Sato & Lensmire, 2009). For instance, Sato and Lensmire (2009) list some of the deficit-oriented assumptions and stereotypes Payne advocates, suggesting that Payne's framework for understanding poverty positions those in poverty as problems in relation to an untroubled middle-class norm. Sato and Lensmire write that according to Payne, students in poverty do things such as "argue loudly with the teacher; make angry responses; make inappropriate or vulgar comments; . . . always have their hands on someone else; talk incessantly because 'poverty is very participatory' " (p. 366).

Bourdieu might argue that the cultivation of middle-classed ways of using language and interacting in a school setting are the unnamed "norms" prompting Payne's attention to what she perceives as different and "partici-

patory." The unexamined power of middle-class normality and how it operates to position children and families as distinguished or deviant might be acknowledged as a naive silence in not only Payne's work but also in the majority of educational texts and contexts. A more troubling aspect of Payne's work, however, lies in the drawing from stereotypical caricatures of the social imagination and her disrespectful and insulting treatment of her fictionalized poor and working-class characters she constructs as case studies from which teachers are to learn about children living in poverty. One such fictional character created by Payne in a case study is "Juan's" "white-trash mother"—an insult filled with similar hatred and disgust as the N-word. So it is not only that middle-class normality carries weight in Payne's treatment of what should or should not happen in schools, but also a deep sense of classism and hatred toward poor people themselves seeps into the text. And while Payne's book is not specifically stated to be an approach to *literacy education*, her text has everything to do with literacy education in its focus on maintaining and privileging middle-class normality through language practices and ideology.

Assertion #3: Working-Class and Poor Children Are Positioned Precariously in Schools

Although one might assume there is a shared understanding of the word precarious (i.e., that it is commonsensical or part of the *doxa*, as Bourdieu might say), the multiple denotations of precarious illuminate the complexities we attempt to engage as we consider how precariousness is lived in classed relations. From Merriam-Webster, precarious is defined in a number of ways—all germane to the social class-sensitivity we imagine:

1: depending on the will or pleasure of another;
2: dependent on *uncertain* premises: *dubious* <*precarious* generalizations;
3*a*: dependent on chance circumstances, unknown conditions, or uncertain developments; *b*: characterized by a lack of *security* or *stability* that threatens with *danger*. (Merriam-Webster, 2010)

With regard to issues of social class and classroom interactions, it is not difficult to imagine each dimension of this definition being lived by and among people—and at times simultaneously. For instance, one might imagine a classroom interchange in which the teacher opens the first day of school with the writing prompt, "Where did you go on your summer vacation?" At first blush this seems like a fairly innocuous question that is intended to serve as one of the get-to-know-you activities that often take place during the first week of school. However, a deeper look at the potential precarious positionings at play may shed a different light.

For some students, a summer vacation might mean "going" home, to the park, to the public pool, to visit a relative in prison, to the neighbor's for a

picnic, helping with the family farm, finding odd jobs to earn money, secretly crossing a national border to reunite with family members until school begins again, and so on. For other students it might mean going to the beach for a week or two, flying across country to see extended family, or traveling abroad for entertainment and "educational" purposes with the nuclear family. As students look around the room they may begin to feel that they are positioned *precariously*—their response depends on the *pleasures of another* (the teacher wants to know) rather than their own pleasure, or on an *uncertain,* unstated expectation (from the teacher and other students) of what constitutes a valuable summertime experience. If working-class and poor students quickly read their surroundings, they could feel *a lack of security or stability* in their own pleasures and their pleasurable summers may not feel so pleasurable any longer. Their responses become imbued with these dimensions of the precarious. In this way, working-class and poor students are always already experiencing precariousness in middle-classed institutions—literacy classrooms. Teachers, on the other hand, may not be having the same precarious experiences as their students, and also, then, may not be able to recognize the precarious (uncertain, unknown, unstable, dangerous) realities and potentials their pedagogies hold.

Putting These Assertions to Work

Throughout the remainder of the article, we put these three theoretical assertions to work through the lenses of class-sensitivity as simultaneously a broad social project, an intimate autobiographic project, and a minute-to-minute and day-by-day pedagogic project. We begin the unpacking of the precarious work of living and learning in social class–saturated spaces, through stories—first by telling a story with explanatory power of how and why a common senseness comes to thrive in a field (such as literacy education) and *in and through* the bodies who populate the field (such as literacy educators and researchers). This first story serves to illustrate how social class-sensitivity is framed by broad social matters within fields of study. Then we turn to ourselves and the importance of pausing in and over time to look back and forth between our histories and our presents—our constructed and framed perceptions of growing up working class (Mark, first author) and working poor (Stephanie, second author) and finding ourselves in the middle-classed academy, an institution steeped in norms, values, and practices that are simultaneously mysterious and obvious. We find it useful to frame our autobiographies—always already *classed*—through the precarious positionings with which we are faced in our daily lives and in the work of higher education. We then consider the precarious nature of social class as it is experienced minute-to-minute, day-by-day in literacy classroom pedagogy.

CLASS-SENSITIVITY AS A BROAD SOCIAL PROJECT: ONE EXAMPLE

What is it to theorize an interaction in space and time mediated by official literacy tools used in the classroom? How can we come to theorize the movements and language one human (here, the teacher) engages when she is "teaching literacy" if we assume that *every literacy tool and interaction* is classed at the deepest level and has material consequences on the human subjects in the interaction?

Bourdieu offers one way of theorizing practice in the field of literacy education through his critique of scholastic reason and the acquisition of a particular habitus by players in the game of scholastic reason—a reason produced from a particular social class-sensitivity. Bourdieu (2000) argues that

> being caught up in the game, in the *illusion*—scientific, literary, philosophical or other—means taking seriously . . . stakes which, arising from the logic of the game itself, establish its "seriousness," even if they may escape or appear "disinterested" or "gratuitous" to those who are sometimes called "lay people" or those who are engaged in other fields. . . . (p. 11)

The "logic of the game" of literacy education is negotiated in local contexts from discourses circulating in the broader field of literacy education and in the larger society that frequently point to a monolithic universal child subject who is classless. For example, the decision of a local elementary school to require teachers to use a phonics workbook program for 45 minutes of each day followed by a 45-minute reading of an assigned story in a literature textbook marks the local creation of the "game" of literacy education in that school. The logic of the game is drawn from discourses that may be circulating in universities and in the federal government such as the widespread phenomenon of people being "caught up in the game" of the five essential research-based reading components (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) that both establishes the seriousness of the game itself while subjecting the human subjects the game is supposed to benefit as nonexistent. It is reasonable to believe that prior to the National Reading Panel's report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) there were literacy educators and researchers who *would not have* defined their commitment to literacy education through these five essential components. However, the redefinition of the rules of the game as presented by the National Reading Panel report created a sociopolitical *space* in literacy education where it was now *commonsensical* to assume that the five most important components for reading education were those set forth by the National Reading Panel.

Following the federal valorization of the National Reading Panel's report and the linking of federal funds (e.g., Reading First) to the imple-

mentation of the five essential components, the discourse of the five components began circulating in local school and district spaces as well as in the broader field of university researchers and the federal government. Schools and districts might have taken up this discourse of the five essential components in ways to earn federal funding, to better meet the needs of children in reading by using "research-based" reading research, or for other reasons. Regardless of the original intent of the use of the discourse in local spaces, over time the players in the game of literacy education (teachers, literacy coaches, curriculum supervisors, administrators, professional development providers, textbook publishers, teacher educators, literacy researchers, etc.) engage the discourse in ways that move farther and farther away from original intent. In other words, the discourse becomes embedded in the common sense of the field—or game—and in 2012 it is likely that many players in the game of literacy education employ the importance of the five essential components without ever having heard about the National Reading Panel report.

Bourdieu theorizes that the specific logic of a field, such as that briefly outlined in the particular context of the National Reading Panel report and the five essential components of reading instruction, converts one's habitus in ways that are largely imperceptible and unnoticed by players in the game. The conversion of the original habitus into one that "fits" comfortably within the rules of the game (literacy education here) *is required for entry into the game in the first place.* Therefore, if one's habitus isn't already in line with the rules of the specific game of literacy education in a local context, Bourdieu (2000) argues that the conversion will take place "insensibly, in other words, gradually, progressively and imperceptibly" (p. 11). In this way, the "field" of literacy education becomes part of the habitus of the players in the game. Once the habitus shifts, it works to reproduce the rules of the game because they are now *common sense.* In other words, once a habitus has acquired the rules of the five essential components of reading instruction, anything outside of this commonsensical notion of how reading *must be taught* is perceived as foreign, outside the field and outside the comfort of the habitus, and beyond possibility given the taken-for-granted assumptions that the logic of the field and the confirmation of the habitus generated and generates. This is the practical practice-oriented underpinning of Bourdieu's claim that the habitus is both a "structured" and "structuring" thing—that the habitus is *structured through* the taken-for-granted assumptions of the field, and also actively works to *structure* the field from the same taken-for-granted assumptions that now belong to the habitus.

Perhaps an even deeper and commonsensical assumption held in the field of literacy education that originated long before the National Reading Panel report is that higher levels of schooled literacy will lead to upward mobility for working-class and poor students. And that upward mobility is always desired and positive. As will be evident in our autobiographical

stories shared next, the deeply held assumption that upward mobility is always positive in the field of literacy and in the habituses propelling the field forward will be challenged.

CLASS-SENSITIVITY AS AN INTIMATE AUTOBIOGRAPHIC PROJECT

While we share only one short piece of writing for each of us here, we have volumes of stories as middle-class academics who began life in working-class or poor families and our past and present experiences of the precarious nature of class.

Mark's Story

Throughout my life, writing about myself has most often come through jokes, in intense discussions, and in facilitated settings designed for such talk. The most intimate portrayals were most often short, not requiring much elaboration—as the working-class storytelling I was exposed to as a child was most often terse. The strongest underlying emotional meanings were most often avoided and suppressed; in fact, most stories ended with "anyhow. . . ." So, what I write now is a stretch. It is a middle-classed elaboration of something that pokes at the bone marrow of my family of origin—a working-class bunch of highly emotional folks not knowing how to live with their emotions, let alone express them to anyone else.

I feel most at home in my work. I desire it. It has never served as merely a means to an end.

I turn to it when I am lonely. I run to it when I am scared.

I remember doing this from a very early age. Always running to my work.

Even when the work was play, it contained an intensity—a teeth-gritting, furrow-browed focus. It felt necessary to live through my work this way.

It felt urgent, like something really bad would happen if the work wasn't sweated over. If blisters did not form, break, and callous.

I still fall into this. *Why?*

When I let go, detach, and enjoy I start to feel anxious.

Scared once again. The work should hurt—at least a bit.

There *should* be struggle.

I simultaneously resist and long for this struggle.

I long for those moments when I would work in the woods or out in a field with my dad. The work hurt but was exhilarating.

I long for the work of the football field. A painful reminder of my body being pounded, of aching.

I resist the memories of going to a private, liberal arts college in the fall of 1990 thinking I was like everyone else there—

Struggling to make ends meet, on federally subsidized Pell grants, Stafford loans, scholarships . . . I learned quickly that I was quite different in this context.

I was alone when reading a letter from the finance office that first January, giving me 30 days to pay my outstanding balance from fall semester or not get credit for fall and have to withdraw the present semester.

I don't miss this struggle, yet I am most comfortable in it

I am no longer in this sort of struggle, yet I seek it out.

I dig, I scratch.

To hold both a resistance and a longing for something at the same time can be read as a site of precariousness—a lack of security and perhaps a threat of danger. What happens though in this tension (ambivalence) between resistance and longing? Is it a productive, generative space? Or a destructive, stressful space? Often it is the latter for me. It is lived as a distraction, as a compulsive questioning, an anxiety. This particular precarious space lingers, sometimes beckons and other times subsides. But it never leaves me, at least not for long. Recognizing it now, as I get serious about doing this work around social class and class-sensitive pedagogies, is awkward. It feels awkward to elaborate on aspects of my life that were not lived elaborately—they were lived simply, straightforwardly. Now, I realize the simple is not so simple. It is rather complicated and nuanced—in this middle-class space. I feel like screaming at one moment and carefully packaging my delivery the next. I fantasize about pushing boundaries and fitting in. I feel odd in some contexts and comfortable in others. I feel clumsy, but hopeful.

Stephanie's Story

Darkness blankets me with worries, regrets, and tears as I wonder how I am *here* and everyone I love is *there*. Conversations ring in my ears and I desperately want to turn them off, to breathe deeply, to sigh, to fall asleep.

But that is impossible tonight.

Tonight I pay a price for economic stability, for being able to pay my electric bill, for having gas money. My family thanks me in the conversations. They tell me how proud they are. They tell me to stop working so hard. They tell me they love me and miss me. They tell me they're okay—really—to stop worrying, that they won't go hungry.

"Go hungry!" I yell, "I don't want you to just not *go hungry*!"

That's when despair sets in and I force my feet to the floor, my body out of bed, and my fingers to the keyboard.

The voices in my ears are muffled now, barely audible through my uneven breathing and the occasional sob. But pushing the keys helps.

It pushes out the sadness and desperation.

It pushes out the emptiness.

It pushes me closer to sleep without ever getting closer to a solution, some kind of reconciliation, some kind of compromise, some kind of resolution, some kind of understanding how I can get paid for writing about social justice work and have no idea how to make the world a more just place for my very own family.

Sleep comes, but not before I have laid down a few pages of words that I might use in an academic paper to prove to the world that upward mobility has a price I don't know how to pay.

An academic paper that will buy me more time in the academy.

An academic paper that will distract me from the worries, regrets, and tears long enough to let the darkness blanket me with rest.

I am constantly positioned precariously between a middle-class academic world where I work and live and raise a child, and the world everyone else in my family inhabits—a world of economic uncertainty, a dangerous world of chance circumstances where both positive and negative events unfold in ways that are often unpredictable—just as the chance circumstances that led me to a middle-class existence were unforeseeable, unplanned, unpredictable, and dangerous. Diane Reay (2004), a feminist sociologist both using and extending Bourdieu, theorizes the practical ways in which emotional well-being is sacrificed for academic success. I live this sacrifice in material ways, even when I sometimes feel whole and emotionally healthy and generally happy. I have given up too much to belong in this world, and at the same time I want to belong in this world. This impossible, dangerous positioning leaves me situated in the field of middle-classness and academia as someone who is constantly aware and critical of the common senseness that *others* in the field have taken on as a part of their habitus while reluctantly admitting that I, too, have been shaped into something different that is both foreign and familiar.

Comfortable and irritating.

Stories about social class matter. As evident in our personal stories of social class, there can be an ongoing precarious tension for working-class professors as we try to maneuver the middle-classed academy—a tension that has no stable resolution. Rather, the precarious tension becomes a way of being, a default position that one occupies. Although our (and others') stories should not be used to essentialize lived experience, they do often frame how we move through our work as pedagogues.

So, what are we and others to do with our social class stories? We have found that engaging in this sort of autobiographical work, at the very least, allows literacy teachers to gain some perspective on how their own experiences influence their teaching practice. And in some cases, this social class storying becomes woven into the fabric of their practice.

CLASS-SENSITIVITY AS A MINUTE-TO-MINUTE AND DAY-BY-DAY PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

In this section we offer three concrete examples of ways in which social class operates in pedagogical practices. Tending to social class and acquiring a more anti-classist sensibility in teaching can disrupt the transporting of curriculum and pedagogy across class borders with unspecified middle-class normality lurking at every turn. Class-sensitivity and anti-classist teaching enacted in particular contexts can produce openings, potential border crossings where class isn't used to stigmatize or stereotype or privilege or disadvantage.

Recognizing Classed Positionings in Texts

Expanding the Range of Texts Available for Children's Reading. Bourdieu (2000) argues that social class, and the acquired social practices within classed contexts, is fundamental to how individuals and groups of people get positioned as valuable or not in different social spaces—or fields. Deciding what is recognized as valuable capital in the literacy classroom is often determined through the literacy pedagogue's social classed position (and history) as well as the nomos of an academic field such as a literacy classroom. The pedagogical practice of recognizing the precariousness of classed positionings points to a literacy pedagogue's critical perceptivity of the classed nature of Bourdieu's nomos, capital, and habitus, as well as a critical perceptivity of the classed nature of texts and other mediating tools used in literacy classrooms.

For instance, in preparation for one of our workshops we had to make some difficult decisions about what to include, due to a condensed time frame of 2 hours (rather than our more typical half-day or full-day formats). We decided that it would be good to at least have two or three children's literature books on each table to give teachers a chance to skim through them throughout the workshop. During the workshop, skimming did, indeed, take place. However, it became abundantly clear the literature became an important mediating tool for the teachers at their tables as well. We noticed some teachers feverishly reading and writing down notes about the literature. When given a few concerted minutes to spend some time with the books, participating teachers were deeply engaged. At one table, a teacher read a picture book aloud to the others at her table. At another table, teachers entered into a discussion of how this literature might be used in their classrooms. And at yet another table, one of us was asked to talk through the list of children's books we had included in our workbook. Without question, the most engaged, meaningful discussions of social class took place around this literature.

Although these observations, at first glance, might not seem particularly compelling, the power of literature cannot be overstated. Most children's

literature in school libraries, in classrooms, and on suggested reading lists assume middle-class norms, values, problems, successes, failures, and so on (Jones, 2008). When asked to make "connections" with these books, some students can immediately relate to the dominant storyline, while others find themselves precariously confused—wondering what is happening in the story and wondering even more why other students seem to effortlessly make sense of the text or produce a fictionalized connection to perform as the good student (Jones & Clarke, 2007).

At this workshop, the books the teachers had in their hands told stories typically left out of classrooms or even considered taboo—stories of children growing up homeless or skipping school to work with sheet metal. Sometimes the texts produced children as struggling and at other times content—similar to the complex ways most people live their lives. Some of the teachers were perplexed by what they were reading, while others found connections to their own childhoods. What if working-class and poor students could see some version of themselves in the literature they read? What if middle-class and affluent students had a chance to "disconnect" with texts? And what if all students had the opportunity to engage with the multifarious connections and disconnections at play as they perceive complex productions of social classed lives in literature and media?

One of the primary problems, though, is that students from working-class and poor families are routinely positioned precariously by texts, teachers, and formal assessments that idealize middle-class ways of living and being, and they are often aware of at least *some* feeling of uncertainty or danger in their engagement. But a class-sensitive literacy pedagogue is also always positioned precariously as she or he challenges the class-privileged nomos—or unspoken but expected and privileged behaviors and linguistic practices—of the classroom and school. The precarious positioning for the middle-class teacher, then, as well as the working-class or poor student, is shrouded in danger—both wondering how to please another, how to show value to the other, certain of only the uncertainty of their situations. All positionings, then, are precarious and bound up in social-classed ways of being, knowing, and perceiving.

Recognizing such classed positionings becomes even more important when all players—teachers and students—are positioned precariously, as remaining stuck in wondering and uncertainty about how to respond to one another most likely will lead to avoidance and inaction (Vagle, 2011). And, again, sometimes the best first step for all involved is to read and critique texts (in this case a film) as always already potentially riddled with social-class precariousness.

Learning to Read All Texts as Classed Narratives. During one of our institutes, we used the film *Akeelah and the Bee* (Fishburne & Atchison, 2006)—a presumably "feel good" movie in which a girl (Akeelah) from a "bad part" of Los Angeles is able to "escape"—to engage teachers in the sort of

recognition and social critique of classed positionings we desired. In the film, Akeelah's character is used to depict a bright African American middle schooler, who, despite growing up in an impoverished, predominantly African American part of the city, is able to use her gift for spelling to "spell" her way out of challenging conditions and into the National Spelling Bee competition. Along the way, the audience is introduced to a benevolent White middle school principal; a depressed African American English professor (played by Fishburne) from University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) who begrudgingly agrees to tutor Akeelah; Akeelah's single-parent household, with a gangbanging older brother, and an older sister with baby on her hip; and suburban schools with resources to support their White, Hispanic, and Asian spellers.

Institute participants appeared puzzled when asked to consider what classist (and racist) stereotypes were being reinscribed by the choices the filmmakers made about how to represent Akeelah's neighborhood and school. It was difficult, at first, for them to see something problematic in a text produced specifically to invoke a "good" feeling from viewers who get to experience the upwardly mobile climb of a young marginalized girl. The storyline of rising up amidst challenging circumstances represents an unspoken rule about middle-class normality—that the goal is to advance, that advancing requires hard work, and that everyone ought to desire to do so and experience such upward mobility in positive, uplifting ways. The complex, precarious positionings were difficult for participants to recognize. We needed to slow the film down, look at streets and walls and doors and yards. We had to listen carefully to language. We had to wonder aloud why the professor from UCLA called Akeelah's talk *ghetto* and his language proper. Participants then began to be able to speak a bit about what is often (and supposed to be) unspoken in the film and in their own schools and classrooms.

We had to talk about positionings. This word alone was difficult to conceptualize. For many, the notion of "being positioned" did not make much sense. It was, however, a bit more clear when particular moments of precariousness became the focus. When Akeelah's and the professor's wills or pleasures differed, the precariousness was more visible. What had once only been a taken-for-granted assumption, or nomos, shaping the field of language and literacy now started to become precarious sites for interrogation.

Locating and Disrupting Classed Hierarchies

Stories of Precarious Classed Interactions. It might be perceived that locating hierarchies in classrooms is a rather commonsensical project. That is, critical pedagogues might be quick to point out inequities with regard to, for example, race and gender. However, locating how class runs through relations, across race and gender lines can be less obvious. Although critical

literacy scholars such as Fecho and Botzakis (2007) point directly to the broader commitment to flatten hierarchies, we argue that locating classed hierarchies is a precarious endeavor that requires persistent work on the part of the class-sensitive literacy pedagogue. In other words, it is dangerous to assume that classed hierarchies are transparent. It requires that the class-sensitive literacy pedagogue, as Merleau-Ponty would ask, *tightens and slackens her or his threads of intentionality*. Meaning that one would actively question all the possible ways in which class might be framing her or his own seeing, and asking one's students to do the same. This sort of questioning can be particularly precarious as future literacy teachers—often from middle-class backgrounds or having acquired a middle-class habitus to "fit" the nomos of teacher education or teaching in a school—have difficulty recognizing the seemingly "natural" ways they see the world and how their seeing calcifies their place in the classed hierarchy. Disrupting classed hierarchies, then, not only requires future literacy teachers to demonstrate ways of being disruptive, but also to always already turn this disruptive lens on their own pedagogies.

In one of our workshops, for example, a participating teacher returned from a lunch when teachers were asked to engage in a "class-focused reading" of the place where they ate. She reported, "I think I had classist thoughts while I was there," in line at the local grocery store when she was waiting to order hot chicken and side items.

She continued the story, detailing her assumptions about class hierarchies when witnessing a woman in a custodial uniform ordering "two chicken strips" for lunch. Our participant "felt sorry" for the woman, presuming that she only had enough money to buy two chicken strips. She immediately, however, interrogated herself and her assumptions that a lack of resources dictated the woman's lunch selection rather than a lack of hunger or preference for smaller portions.

This participant guided us through her assumption that she (the participant) was positioned higher on the social class hierarchy than the woman in front of her. This self-positioning afforded the teacher to make judgments about the woman and even construct sympathy for the woman and guilt about her own lunch order.

Ending her story, this participant shared an epiphany she experienced during the class-focused reading: That her perceptions of her own location on the class hierarchy has framed how she interprets people and their practices around her, and that these perceptions have been cultivated through a class-normative understanding of the world. Her interrogation of presumed class hierarchies and the assumed corresponding hierarchies of happiness and freedom demonstrated the push and pull of disruption we advocate for here. This push-and-pull type of work represents a consistent effort to tighten and slacken the threads of intentionality. Merleau-Ponty says that when we go through the everydayness of our lives, our intentional relations with the world are rather straightforward and not very reflective.

At these moments the connective (meaning) tissue is tight. When tight, we are not aware of much meaning—we merely live through these moments. However, when we actively and persistently question and disrupt our lived experiences we are slackening these threads and allowing for new insights and possibilities. The slackening of the threads of intentionality provides space for questioning the source of acquisition of one's habitus, challenging whether one is satisfied with his or her habitus in specific social spaces, and working toward building new habits of thought, intentionalities, and perhaps an ongoing conscientious project of the conversion of a habitus that does not calcify toward the common sense of any particular field, but rather toward a class-sensitive perceptivity and reflexivity in all fields of practice (the grocery store, the literacy classroom, the teacher education classroom).

Perceiving Class in Moment-to-Moment Interactions and Language Practices. Another commonsense assumption in critical literacy work is the importance of context. In a social class–sensitive literacy classroom, the issue is not whether context is important; rather, it is the challenge of being constantly attuned to the innumerable contextual factors always already at play. As soon as the literacy pedagogue acknowledges context, he or she cannot turn back—and in not turning back he or she must embrace the unexpected and unanticipated. The class-sensitive literacy pedagogue must pay particular attention to assumptions of middle-class normality and institutional nomos that, again, are not easy to see and to the ongoing way one's social class–sensitive perceptivity moves and shifts in and over time. In his work (Vagle, 2009) on teacher perceptivity, Vagle draws on Merleau-Ponty's (1947/1964) notion of perceptivity as a *blending of perspectival views* to capture the ongoing, never-ending realities of perception. In this way, perceptions are always partial, messy—and we add here—precariously classed. Therefore, for future literacy teachers to continually develop social class–sensitive perceptivity, we argue that they must learn to be profoundly attuned to the moment-to-moment literacy interactions they have with their students.

In another of our summer workshops designed to help educators be more attuned to social class issues, students participated in a series of activities designed to help them *see what frames their seeing* (Lather, 1993). Throughout this particular workshop students started to catch themselves in the midst of judging students and their families—saying things like, “Oh, that must be one of my frames” or “I think I am framing this.” Although beginning to see how our perceptions are framed was an important part of the course, it was equally important to remind ourselves that it is not possible to live “framelessly.” This was particularly perplexing for participating teachers, for as soon as they started to think they “understood” what they thought they were to do (i.e., get rid of their frames), they were being told it was impossible to do so. Through perplexing learning situations like

this, we were able to point to particular ways to examine moments during instruction.

For example, we asked teachers to think about how they respond when their students talk and write about their lives. In particular, we asked them to think about their responses when students from working-class and poor backgrounds share stories that don't seem to be as exciting as the stories they hear from their middle-class and affluent students. We talked through the fact that although it is inevitable (again, we don't live framelessly) that we will perceive some experiences as glamorous and others as ordinary or even perhaps underwhelming, it is critical for the social class–sensitive literacy pedagogue to try to be equally excited and interested in all of the experiences that are brought to the classroom. This moment-to-moment type of social class–sensitive perceptivity is a challenging, yet important, aspect of one's teaching.

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on how perception is constituted as a blending of perspectival views suggests that perceptions are always shifting and changing, moment to moment. We add that views of teachers are inevitably framed by what Bourdieu would call the habitus, field, and institutional nomos. So, when some students first began to realize that their viewpoints are in fact framed by unexamined assumptions or judgments they were left feeling uncomfortable—guilty in some cases. We discussed a number of moments in which, in retrospect, they wished they would have acted differently. Other times, students wondered how they could "get rid of" their frames. Again, the goal was not to rid ourselves of frames, but to reframe these moments in a less classist and more social class–sensitive manner, moment to moment.

To reframe one's perceptions and work to shift one's habitus toward social class-sensitivity means practicing making some statements instead of others when interacting with and talking about working-class and poor children and their families. We created lists of statements we ask literacy pedagogues to "try not to think/say" and other statements we ask them to "try to think/say." For instance, social class–sensitive pedagogues try *not* to think/say "These parents just don't care" and instead *try* to think/say "Many of my students' families are busy and may be under stresses I can't understand. I need to make sure they know that I care and that I can be supportive of their child and them." We also ask teachers to think about what they perceive to be normal or expected and try *not* to think/say "These kids are just lazy. They won't even read when I give them independent reading time" and instead *try* to think/say "My students don't seem interested in reading what I have available for them. I need to ask them what they would like to read and do everything I can to get those materials in my classroom."

Reframing perceptions requires thoughtful, consistent examination of how we see and respond to what we see and feel about our students, their experiences, and our own social classed frames of what we define as

normal. If our frames or assumptions of normality are narrow and not recognized as saturated with classed expectations, we will inevitably have difficulty not seeing working-class and poor students as limited or deficient.

THEORIZING THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF SOCIAL CLASS-SENSITIVITY

When Luke (2011) stressed that generalizing "within" borders requires indisputable proof while exporting ideas, policies, and practices was often accepted, he signaled some very important considerations relative to social class-sensitivity. For one, he signaled that one must pay attention to what is happening in the local social and political contexts before adopting ideas from elsewhere. This aligns with our point about social class-sensitivity being a broad social project. We do not want what we have suggested throughout this article to be seen as something that can be picked up and "implemented" without precious consideration of what is taking place and what is at stake in the particular pedagogical context.

A second point Luke signals is that generalizing within and across geographic borders is not all that desirable. With regard to social class-sensitivity, we most certainly concur. Just as we value the focus on the broad social influences and implications of social class, so do we value the particularized autobiographical experiences and manifestations of social class on the lives of all people. We are not interested in generalizing personal experiences or have them put together as composite accounts. Rather, we are interested in situating the particular stories so that they can animate how social class runs through lives and relations.

A final way we read Luke's admonition of generalizing is that generalizations will never be able to capture the dynamic minute-to-minute, day-by-day ways in which pedagogy is lived in classrooms. Class-sensitive frames and perceptions are always shifting and changing in and through ever-changing contexts. There is no way to pin down or rid ourselves of our frames in any final way—we can only remain committed to continually reframing how we perceive.

Given that social class still serves as the best indicator of educational engagement and achievement, it is important to foreground class issues and continually remind ourselves how class is deeply embedded in our positionings and our practices—both as humans walking through classed societies and as educational workers in classed institutions. Social class–sensitive literacy pedagogies are necessary as they focus specifically on such embeddings, and aim to provide future literacy teachers with well-theorized ways to make sense of such precarious work. We want pedagogues to think seriously about the reality that working-class and poor students enter class-

rooms each day saturated in precariousness. We want pedagogues to not label students and families as the problem. They are not something to be fixed; nor are they responsible for the inequitable practices and policies that produce the location of "poor" that must be filled by some, and they are not responsible for fixing the precarious positions in which they live while in educational institutions.

As pedagogues we must slow down and ask some really hard questions about what we see and don't see; what social-classed frames obscure our abilities to see and feel the precarious ways in which working-class and poor students are positioned in our classrooms; and the ways in which we constantly work on ourselves as we try to disrupt class-biased perceptions, practices, and policies that inform the literacy work we do with students every day. The time couldn't be more open to or more important for discussing, debating, deconstructing, and reconsidering issues of social class in the United States and across the global community. With the global economic crises producing the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movements across the United States and the globe, and daily talk of economic inequity on the radio and television, practicing and future teachers and educational researchers are primed to tend to class-sensitivity and to cultivate a sensibility aimed at anti-classism in literacy education, schools, and beyond.

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