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## Language with an Attitude: White Girls Performing Class

*This ethnographic study explores the inextricably linked notions of language and identity for White girls living in a high-poverty neighborhood in the U.S. and describes the hybrid languages and identities they learn through negotiating their talk at home and school.*

*Children's ties to a heritage and thus to an identity, whatever it may be, are brought about through the heart and mind, and language is the building block of both.*

—Norma Gonzalez (2001, p. 71)

### I Was So Mad!

I was feeling upset  
Because I was mad!  
I was stomping my  
    Feet on the floor!  
I was yelling every word.  
I was not paying attention  
    To Ms. Jones!  
I was not writing in my  
    Writer's notebook!  
But then I just started  
    To write, write, write  
    Away and I was so  
    Happy!

—Joanie

Joanie was a second-grader when she wrote this poem following a 10-minute anger-filled rant around the classroom. I cautiously pointed Joanie in the direction of writing about her feelings in the wake of our heated discussion about why she was angry with me and thought I was being unfair. I also told her, in terms she could understand, that I understood her anger, but I needed time to think about a better way to negotiate a social conflict in the classroom. During an after-school program I sponsored for girls in a working-poor predominantly White neighborhood, stomping, yelling, challenging authority, and numerous other performances of a class-specific “attitude” were not uncommon. The tough, loud, in-your-face discourse often voiced by the young girls was difficult for me to understand as a teacher-researcher, and it was initially challenging for me to imag-

ine powerful possibilities within such language practices. This article will explore the inextricably linked notions of language and identity and attempt to answer questions about not only how to *manage* seemingly attitude-filled language practices in the classroom, but ways such practices can be understood and utilized to construct multiple alternative language practices (or *hybrid* language practices) that can aid working-poor White girls not only to feel they belong in school, but to internalize linguistic tools that can help them succeed in academic settings.

First I will introduce the girls who were the focus of this three-year study, the community in which they lived, and literature around language and discourse practices. Then, I will present data representing both working-poor ways with words in the community as well as language practices that were more closely aligned with school expectations. In my conclusion, I will argue that classroom spaces be opened up to alternative “ways with words” in order for hybrid language practices—and performances of identities to develop.

### ATTITUDE GIRLS AND THEIR COMMUNITY

Joanie, Callie, Sarah, Heather, Cadence, Alexis, Faith, and Rose were the eight participants in a three-year ethnographic study around identity construction, language, and literacy. Seven of the girls were White and participated in the study for three years, and one (Faith) was African American, joining the study when she moved into the neighborhood. Faith participated for a year and a half and was not present during the conversations that will be the focus of this article. Though she will not be a part of the analyses presented here, it is noteworthy that Faith spoke African American Vernacular English, had no familial ties to the community, and never spoke or acted with what

would be considered “attitude”; instead, she used her knowledge of the Bible and Christianity to try to persuade the others to act differently. For these and other reasons, Faith and her White counterparts in this study were quite different from one another, yet developed close friendships. Narrowing my lens to the White girls and their class-specific ways of engaging the world will help to focus on an aspect of Whiteness that is not typically discussed: the marginalization of working-class and poor Whites through judgment of language practices.

The predominance of Whiteness in this research project reflected the community surrounding the school where 80% of the residents were White, 12% were Hispanic, and 7.3% were African American (Maloney & Auffrey, 2004). No Hispanic children were attending school since the community had recently experienced an influx of Guatemalans who were single or had children not yet of school age. Seven of the eight girls lived with two income-earning adults: mothers worked in fast food, custodial work, or assistance positions in nursing homes or preschools; fathers (biological or otherwise) worked in fast food, carpentry, or handyman positions. The men were more likely than the women to earn money through an informal economy (Halperin, 1998). This economy operated underground and would not have been considered a legitimate “job,” thus contributing to the official jobless rate of 50% in the community (Maloney & Auffrey, 2004).

Sixty-two percent of residents 18 years and older had not completed a high school degree (diploma or GED) at the time of this study, leaving the neighborhood with a stigma of having the lowest graduation rate in the metropolitan area. Stereotypes of the community and those who resided there were too often negative and filled with low-expectations of the residents and their children. The following email “joke” circulated about a hypothetical Barbie Doll that would be representative of the women from this community:

*[Community’s Name] Barbie Doll available with your choice of 70s bitch-flip hairdos, a Ford Ranger pickup, and a pit bull. Another “Classic” version has a mouth that is firmly closed so as not to show her summer [some’re here, some’re*

*there] teeth, Daisy Dukes so tight you can see camel toe, and a half T-shirt that guarantees you can see her navel piercing and at least 5 tattoos. Both versions swear incessantly and are not recommended for children.*

With such constructions of residents in this community, and of women in particular, having a tough-skinned, “bad-ass” attitude was not only desirable but also absolutely imperative to “shout-back” (as Dorothy Allison puts it, 1998) at a mainstream society that continues to oppress already-marginalized groups of people. Shouting back took on many forms for the women in this community, including (among other performances) literally *shouting* at authority figures such as police officers, principals, and teachers. This was often done in an attempt to exercise power within struggles over family rights, appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in school

and in the neighborhood, and knowledge about one’s own children and what might be best for them. For educators, an important question becomes how to productively engage young girls who have been socialized in and through the language practices necessary to construct identities and

performances for shouting back at a society that oppresses them.

## THE RESEARCHER AND THE RESEARCH

Today I am a White, middle-class academic with many privileges, but like a tree that grows new layers of bark with visible rings of evidence, I am still the working-poor girl trying desperately to figure out how language operates in society and where I fit in. Much like the girls in this study, my girlhood was one lived on the border between poverty and the working-class, though it was peppered with temporary experiences of extreme poverty. Though my history is similar to theirs—and sometimes that benefited me as a teacher-researcher—my difference was often a point of contention (Jones, 2006, for more information). My primary Discourses (or the ways in which I used language and performed particular identities within intimate familial contexts) were rich with family meanings, local colloquialisms, and shot-through with a fair share of cussing, rage-filled

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phrases, and certainly physical enactments with language that might have been characterized as irrational and out of control by mainstream standards (e.g., Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). I was often considered to have an “attitude.” By the time this study began, however, I had managed to negotiate an academic Discourse at least well enough to make my way through various gatekeepers and into a doctoral program where I was studying language, literacy, and the social class divide.

*Participant-observation* and *teacher-research* best characterize the research I engaged in for three years. During this time, I facilitated an after-school and summer program for the girls in the study. The after-school program met for three hours each week, with occasional field trips that took place on separate days. The summer school program met for four weeks, four days each week, and four hours each day. Data collection across the project included descriptive and reflective field notes, audiotapes of small-group conversations, interviews with both the girls and their caretakers, videotapes of whole-group lesson presentations, digital photographs taken by me of the classroom and community, digital photographs taken by the girls of the classroom and community, home-school journals written by families and me, and the girls’ writing samples and artwork. Much of the data presented in this article were collected from the after-school program, summer school, and community contexts, but some data from the regular school day are also included.

## CENTERING LANGUAGE IN SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

In her study of Mexican-origin mothers and children and their language socialization, Norma Gonzalez (2001) explores usages of English and Spanish and contends that the most emotion-filled discussions are spoken in the mother tongue—Spanish. As the first language learned in childhood, Spanish was most connected to emotion and lived experience; it was the more embodied of the two languages. As the predominant affective slice of language practices, this mother tongue, or what I will call primary Discourse (e.g. Gee, 1996), is what intimately connected children and their caretakers. Gonzalez writes,

*The interweaving of language ideologies and emotion for children cannot be overemphasized. How language connects with formations of identity and community for children is at the crux of the language wars that rage on (p. 71).*

Echoing Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), Gonzalez implies that the way to injure someone most is to criticize her language. In this case words, not sticks and stones, *will hurt*; attacks on one’s primary Discourse are essentially attacks on one’s self and the selves with whom she learned to speak. The original ways through which we learn to be in the world include how we talk, walk, use our bodies, gesture, and express a wide range of emotions. These ways of being in our body and with other bodies come together to form our primary Discourse, acquired socially and culturally and developed across time within families where love, loyalty, anger, fear, and other complex emotions are initially felt. In this way, a deep emotional, psychological, and cultural attachment is formed between primary Discourses and ways of experiencing the world.

**Thus, hybridity and the creative and powerful use of multiple language practices also creates a new way of *being, thinking about, and responding to* the world.**

Competently using various Discourses (beyond a primary Discourse) flexibly and creatively in appropriate contexts defines hybrid language practices (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejada, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez & Chiu, 1999). More than offering additional ways of *saying* something, hybridity opens up more perspectives from which to perceive what is going on around you. In this paper, I use hybridity and hybrid language practices to describe the use, or performance, of more than one Discourse to communicate and make meaning in different settings. Sometimes two or more Discourses are used within a single setting, and other times decisions are made to use one particular way of speaking over another based upon perceptions about the place and the people where the conversation is occurring. Thus, hybridity and the creative and powerful use of multiple language practices also creates a new way of *being, thinking about, and responding to* the world. Researched and theorized a great deal in educational contexts with U.S. studies, language hybridity is most often associated with children learning English as a second language. However, its principles also apply to those whose primary Discourse, acquired

through emotion-filled experiences in homes and communities, are not valued in mainstream dominant contexts. Along with other researchers (e.g. Hicks, 2001, 2002, 2004; Rose, 1989), I argue that White children of the poor and working classes are struggling to construct hybrid language practices that will work in their favor in academic settings where their own dialect is often criticized as poor language use.

Drawing on sociocultural theory (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978, Wertsch, 1991) and a New Literacy Studies perspective (e.g. The New London Group, 1996), Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejada (1999) argue for language arts educators to “refocus discussion on the centrality of language as the target of instruction and as a tool for learning” (p. 369). Gutiérrez and colleagues ground their argument in the belief that students are socialized in and through language; the language a child speaks, then, invokes particular identities in particular contexts (Gee, 1996). From this perspective, a goal of language learning would be students and teachers co-constructing language practices through joint activity (such as authentic discussions around literature, problems in the classroom and society, project-based inquiries, etc.) that open up powerful positions for students to fill. Through such collaborative processes, students and teachers engage in and draw from various Discourse communities of which they are a part to make sense of the activity at hand and develop new ways of using language. Language, therefore, is understood as always being situated, and students develop flexible, hybrid linguistic abilities to communicate differently in different places. Accessing these malleable language practices potentially offers students entrance to social and institutional spaces that privilege particular ways of speaking and knowing, spaces that are often closed to those who speak a language or dialect outside a mainstream standard.

Learning new ways of using language, however, is always going to be grounded in Discourses to which a learner already has access. Cognitive work and social and cultural practices are carried out through the language that is already available to us, while new ways with words emerge from joint interaction where participants share their knowledge of language use and everyone benefits (Vygotsky, 1978). When discussing classrooms where such

productive work is taking place, Gutiérrez et al., describe them as places where there has been “. . . a shift in foci from teaching to learning, from individuals to collectives, from classrooms to communities, and from habitual to reflexive practices” (1997, p. 372). All forms of language are privileged in such settings where discussion, reading, writing, embodied performances, and other literacies are engaged around topical interests, concerns, social issues, and curriculum-specific content that creatively draw from the cultural knowledge and linguistic strengths of all participants.

### AN INFORMAL DISCUSSION: LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE MARGINS

During a regularly scheduled after-school meeting, Joanie was sharing a story about being punished because she was *messin’* with her brothers who had been *messin’* with her first. The longer

the story lasted, the angrier and more animated Joanie became: eyes widened, a finger pointed wildly, and Joanie’s voice got louder and louder. All of the girls were listening intently, drawn in by Joanie’s performance of

an identity that was intimately known by each of the girls. The end of the story was not one the girls wanted to hear: Joanie was prohibited from going outside to play, but her older brothers didn’t receive any restrictions on their privileges. The conversation turned to the topic of gender relations and “fairness” and how their friend had been cheated. Heather, however, had something else on her mind. She wanted to know how Joanie got her revenge and whether or not she had enacted a physical and discursive practice well-known in the community:

“Did you punch ’em in the face?!” Heather asked as all the other girls giggled.

Joanie responded, “I *popped* ’em and I *kicked* ’em and I . . .”

“I know *where* she kicked ’m at!” Heather added with a squeal.

The conversation continued about how *there* is the place to get boys because it really hurts. Later I asked the girls, “Have you ever kicked a boy there?”

Heather and Cadence responded almost in unison, “Yeah!” and as our talk continued, girls

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began to share the *words* they use for the private area of a boy.

Cadence offered, “The noodle thing,” and everyone laughed.

Heather added, “The hotdog,” and more laughter followed.

Callie reported that her 16-year-old brother called it a “penis” and I explained to the hysterical group that the *real* word, the anatomical term used, is penis. I was quickly put in my place, however, as Cadence informed *me* of what the *real* word was.

“Un-uh! That’s not the *real* word, though,” Cadence said.

“What’s the *real* word?” I asked.

“It starts with a . . .”

“D!” finished Heather.

In case I didn’t know what “D” meant, one of the girls spelled it out for me, “D-I-C-K.”

In this scenario, the second-grade girls (and I) gathered around a friend’s experience, drawn in by Joanie’s loud, in-your-face performance of a girl-done-wrong story. Murmurs of being cheated, how boys get preferential treatment, and how girls are always in trouble turned to bursts of laughter and squeals of excitement when Joanie verbally and physically performed her acts of revenge (either real or imagined). The introduction of a boy’s private area as painfully vulnerable to a girl’s rage began a new conversation that revolved specifically around *words* that led to my learning, and then later to the girls’ learning.

“The *real* word” of a boy’s vulnerable private area was not a productive way for me to phrase my framing of a biological term introduced by Callie. In fact, what is considered the *real* word for anything is always situated, always dependent upon the physical context, the people present, and the Discourse through which participants are communicating (Gee, 1996, 2001). Callie, engaging the Discourse already in action at the time, was ridiculing such an official-sounding (academic Discourse) label when they already had so many more interesting words for it. I, however, inserted the possibility that the official-sounding word was, in fact, the biological term the girls were dancing around.

In other contexts where I have worked as a teacher and/or a researcher, such an insertion by the

authority figure may have shut down the conversation, as it privileged a Discourse other than what the girls were speaking. However, as might be apparent in the transcript above, our group had worked over a year by this point to create an environment where power was shared and language of all forms was explored in creative ways. Cadence knew that her response to me was (probably) going to be received thoughtfully and respectfully and did not hesitate to voice her opposition to my claim of a “real” word. To be sure, however, there were a number of times

when I misinterpreted language use or worked too hard to get the girls to engage in a conversation using academic language when it wasn’t relevant to them. In those moments, quietness would follow my strong suggestions, and it became clear to both the girls and me that we

were no longer involved in joint activity, but activity being driven by me.

## CONTINUING THE DISCUSSION AROUND LANGUAGE

The introduction of “D-I-C-K” led to an extensive conversation about the alleged boys who cuss in school and the boys who simply identified cuss words using the first letter as a representation of the entire word or phrase. Even with allegations flying, I was not convinced that the girls’ language repertoire did not include cuss words when context called.

“You named a lot of the boys who were using these words. Are there girls who use these words?” I asked the group.

“I do,” volunteered Heather, “I do when I just lose my temper.”

Heather continued to tell us that she used the “B” word and she called people “Fat F-ers.” When asked how she learned these words Heather replied simply, “My parents.” However, she made it apparent to us her decision about when and where to cuss (an example of her consciously-informed language use), “I don’t cuss *around* my parents.”

Heather also didn’t cuss around teachers, administrators, or likely any other adults in the neighborhood. She was quite successful at excluding this part of her language experience that was closely connected to her home and community while she was at school—any teacher who knew

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Heather would have been shocked to read the comments made by her above. Slightly below the surface of Heather's performed good girl identity in school invoked by language practices privileged in institutions, was an identity that she usually silenced in school—the one that kicked boys in the hotdog, fought, and used strong language that reflected a Discourse of her working-poor community. This Discourse may seem tragic, disrespectful, and even shocking to some teachers—but this was a Discourse in which the young girls in the community lived outside school walls. Heather, more than any other girl in the study, had already developed hybrid language practices that worked to her advantage in school. Even so, this does not mean that Heather's primary discursive practices should be ignored or expected to stay outside the context of school, for the hybridity and flexible use of language is what will benefit her the most across time and place. Primary Discourses of students must be understood within communicative practices as well as central to identities:

*When inexperienced middle-class teachers take teaching positions in peripheral areas of the city, class-specific tastes, values, languages, discourse, syntax, semantics, everything about the students may seem contradictory to the point of being shocking and frightening. It is necessary, however, that teachers understand that the students' syntax; their manners, tastes, and ways of addressing teachers and colleagues; and the rules governing their fighting and playing among themselves are all part of their cultural identity, which never lacks an element of class. Only as learners recognize themselves democratically and see that their right to say "I be" is respected will they become able to learn the dominant grammatical reasons why they should say "I am." (Freire, 1998, p. 49).*

Freire's words, read in light of the discussion around boys' private areas, offer insight into the girls' insistence that penis wasn't the *real* word. Exercising their right to use their primary Discourses in describing male genitalia (i.e. hotdog, noodle, dick), the girls assert power in an institution where non-standard working-class and poor dialects are not typically valued. Placing value on these language practices within the institu-

tion of school changes the dynamics of who might be considered knowledgeable and proficient language users, since the girls clearly demonstrate sophisticated understanding around gender relations, revenge, and classmates' linguistic repertoires. Their being positioned as knowers within a space where they are routinely positioned as lacking in knowledge opens up the possibility that they may *want* to learn multiple ways of speaking about topics of interest. The girls may find themselves interested in hearing another way of "saying" hotdog—a dominant Discourse around the human anatomy that would consider this private area the "penis."

### A LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSION: CENTERING ATTITUDE IN LEARNING

The following transcript is also from the second-grade after-school girls' group. Unlike the informal discussion discussed earlier, this was a topic for discussion that I had planned. On our bellies, heads pointed toward the center of a circle on the carpeted floor, we began discussing the main character of the Junie B. Jones books (Park, 1992). Building on previous discussions about

different identities girls could take on, we began talking about what *kind of girl* Junie B.'s character was:

**Susanne:** *She has an attitude.*

**Cadence:** *A big attitude.*

**Stephanie:** *What does it mean to have an attitude?*

**Callie:** *You're not listening to your teacher and you ain't following the rules and you need more time to become better and go to college and get out and do whatever you want.*

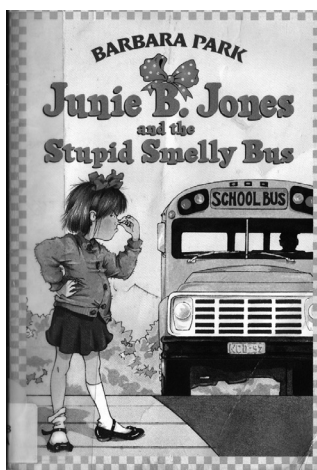
**Stephanie:** *So has anyone in your life told you that you had an attitude?*

**Callie:** *Yeah, my mom did.*

**Heather:** *Yeah. "Heather Ann Pike! You quit that now!" (Heather yells in a tone of voice that sounds parent-like)*

**Stephanie:** *I remember when I was a little girl when my stepdad would yell at me. He would say, "Stephanie Renee, wipe that attitude right off your face!" and I would know I was being mean. Sometimes I was mean to him.*

**Heather:** *When I talk back, my mom stuffs soap in my mouth.*



**Cadence:** *My stepdad be like—I'll be like "mmm!" and that's the attitude and he be flickin' me in my mouth.*

**Heather:** *When I cuss my mom sticks soap in my mouth.*

**Stephanie:** *Has that happened before?*

**Heather:** *Once.*

**Stephanie:** *So let's think about Junie B. Jones. What kind of girl is Junie B. Jones?*

**Heather:** *She's nice and mean.*

**Joanie:** *She's only mean. She's an attitude girl!*

**Joanie:** *She says the bus stinks and she don't even know it.*

**Stephanie:** *Do you like Junie B.? (all girls shake their heads no except for Cadence, who says yes)*

**Stephanie:** *Cadence, you said yes. What do you like about Junie B.?*

**Cadence:** *I like the way she have an attitude because I have an attitude like that, too.*

**Stephanie:** *Oh, so you can understand?*

**Heather:** *It's a connection.*

At this point, a couple of the girls began to quietly voice some positive perceptions of Junie B. Jones. Callie, a quiet and often withdrawn girl in the group, said, "I like her because sometimes she says yes in a nice way, like when she said yes to her mother about riding the bus, but inside she said no."

Callie articulated the possibility that Junie B. Jones engages linguistically much the same way as the girls—that she experiences dialogues within her mind as she examines situations critically and decides how and when to respond. Callie is suggesting that Junie B. is competent in deciding how to use language in particular contexts. Embracing more than one consciousness, informed by more than one cultural identity (as a result of having learned multiple Discourses), Callie considered Junie B.'s decision making through the lens of a hybrid identity informed by having access to hybrid language practices.

Again, I was the learner in this interaction. Indirectly, Callie revealed her own lived hybridity in a way that helped me to understand how she utilized her different consciousness(es) to inform language practices in different social con-

texts. She constructed a dichotomy in her explanation (one performance is on the "outside" while another is on the "inside"), but this dichotomy can be deconstructed and realized as ongoing, complex conversations that a girl has with herself before, during, and after any given social interaction. Such inner conversations do not always result in the same "outward" performance.

Junie B. Jones (and Callie) seemed to wrestle often with such inner dialogues and her final decisions about how best to respond to, or initiate, interaction. The cognitive and psychological processes of productive hybridity, then, are complex and riddled with tension, difficult decisions, and performances. Ideally, these multiple consciousness(es) come together to form powerful analyses and critiques of various possible understandings and performances (Anzaldúa, 1999).

When faced with the character of Junie B. Jones as "an attitude girl" and asked whether or not they liked her, only Cadence said yes, in spite of the fact that Junie B.'s "attitude" was much like their own, but Junie B. and Cadence

had something in common that some of the others didn't quite share: Junie and Cadence were able to assume different "attitudes" depending on the social context, a skill useful in a variety of school contexts as well as other authority-dictated situations. Both the character and the student were just beginning to tinker with the idea of saying or acting differently within varying contexts. Some of the other girls, Heather in particular, had already bought into the notion that they must *be* somebody else when they enter the school building (Walkerdine, 1998). This somebody else, in many classrooms across the U.S., is often characterized as a girl who listens quietly, follows directions without question, and abides by the established (though sometimes unspoken) expectations of school; in other words, a sweet, docile, feminine identity—not an attitude girl. Though the other girls insisted they didn't like the main character, it was clear that they enjoyed the stories, as they had each read book after book in the series. The identity of an attitude girl may be one that the girls believed I would not value as a teacher, even in the nontraditional organized learning space of the after-school group. Therefore, even if they secretly admired Junie B. Jones for being *herself*

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inside and outside school, the girls did not readily admit to liking the character.

Cadence, in her typical style, did *not* silence her community voice, but spoke her mind and connected personally to the character with an attitude. People (like her stepdad) had told Cadence that she has an attitude, and she had begun to take on this identity with pride, “I *like* the way she have an attitude, because I have an attitude like that, too.” This attitude was demonstrated in myriad ways throughout the school day and at home. Exaggerated sighs, rolling eyes, wobbling her head back and forth with her eyes looking to the ceiling, and turning her back to teachers and administrators were all ways that Cadence performed her attitude and asserted power.

Cadence also used a tone of voice, body language, oral discourse, and social conversational style similar to many of the adults in the community. These characteristics, however, were punished in school, even when the student was clever, intelligent, and academically motivated. Take the following example, when Cadence was being served by a “mentor,” a local businessperson volunteering his time as a reading tutor in the school.

### “Gotta Woman?”

Cadence, like all the second-graders in her school building, made the trip to one of the only air-conditioned classrooms in the school where local professionals worked one-on-one with students reading books. Cadence had been warned in the past about potentially losing the privilege because of her *attitude* with mentors. On one particular day in the fall, Cadence’s performance of attitude in the tutoring room was met with horror and disbelief. As Cadence sat at a two-seater table with a young, professionally dressed gentleman, she waved her hand in the air and yelled, “Hey! Over here!”

Finally getting the attention of the three women organizing the tutoring program, Cadence yelled louder, “Hey, you gotta *woman* for me?”

Appalled and disbelieving of Cadence’s audacity, one woman escorted her quickly out of the cool tutor-filled space and back into the unbearable heat of her second-grade classroom. The escort narrated the events for me (the classroom teacher at the time) with wide eyes while Cadence stood nearby looking at the ground.

## Language and Attitude Intertwined

Let’s explore one potentially more productive request Cadence could have made within the context of the tutoring room, “Excuse me, please, but this man is making me uncomfortable. Would it be possible for me to be tutored by a female?” But the words account for only so much—it’s also the delivery, or performance of identity, that matters. In addition to changing the *words* of her request, Cadence would also have had to change her *performance*. Her attempt at changing tutors would have had a better chance of success if, instead of yelling, she had stood up and quietly requested the change. In essence, Cadence would have had to engage in a White, dominant Discourse of middle-classness that emphasizes feminine docility and humility (Walker-dine, 1998). Cadence wasn’t about to do that. Much like her mother (e.g., Jones, 2006), Cadence frequently recognized inequities or social discomfort and had no qualms about confronting them head-on.

Teachers and even the principal could be heard reprimanding “Ms. Nile” (Cadence) in the hallway, in the auditorium, and in the cafeteria. They thought she had a bad attitude. It should be understood, however, that this is the same attitude students witnessed their parents using to gain power at school. They loved telling stories of a parent “going off” on a teacher or the principal—stories that ended with the child being told to “do whatever you want” by the parent. This power, of course, was temporary and often had negative repercussions for the student within the school system, but this was an aspect of power relations the students didn’t yet understand (e.g., Lareau, 2000). What they did understand was “having an attitude”—and it was that understanding that enabled Cadence to make a critical connection with a book character she perceived as similar to herself.

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## LANGUAGE, CLASS, AND TEACHING WITH AN ATTITUDE

*There is hope in the resilience, courage, and perseverance of victims of human callousness as they struggle for survival and dignity.*

*There is hope in the kindness, sensitivity, and concern of those strong enough to be tender and wise enough to be responsive.*

—David E. Purpel (1998, Foreword, p. xi)



Language is learned first through interactions with those we love—and those who love us—most. It is the building block of heart, and mind, and self (Gonzalez, 2001). For children who acquire their first Discourse in poverty and on the margins of mainstream U.S. society, a challenge lies ahead: To gain access to flexible linguistic practices that work to your advantage in various contexts, especially in school, or prepare for a long road ahead that is likely filled with economic uncertainty and continued oppression by those who have gained power through language and privileged positions into which many have been born (e.g. DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1995; Ehrenreich, 2001; Gans, 1995; hooks, 2000; Luttrell, 1997). In the words of Freire and Macedo, “Language should never be understood as a mere tool of communication. Language is packed with ideology, and for this reason it has to be given prominence in any radical pedagogy that proposes to provide space for students’ emancipation” (1987, p. 128). Language is the center of power, and power was what all the girls were exercising through their attitude-filled performances.

In this article, I have presented data that included a written response to an anger-filled rage in the classroom, an informal discussion that focused on multiple ways of talking about boys’ private areas and cussing, a more official literature-based discussion that centered the concept of an attitude identity, and an interaction during the regular school day that highlighted attitude and ended in punishment. Common threads throughout the data (excluding the tutoring incident) include primary Discourses that invoked particular kinds of identities, the development of hybrid language practices (and thus hybrid identities), and joint participation in meaning making among students and teacher. Odds are that at least 62% of the adults (those without high school degrees) in the girls’ neighborhood had not entered classrooms or schools that responded to their primary discursive practices with much respect or validation, let alone the intention to use such language practices as imperative tools for meaning making and language development in the classroom. Such tenets, however, are at the heart of re-centering language in the language arts classroom where students’ linguistic repertoires about and knowledge of cultural practices become the crucial tools for learning. These productive sites of learning demand that teach-

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ers *teach* with a bit of an *attitude*: expect conflict in the language classroom, think critically about social class relations and class-specific language, and work toward better informed understandings of students’ linguistic tools and identity performances.

Far from a harmonious, predictable, and shared vision that the idealized concept of classroom “community” might evoke, classrooms that open spaces where students’ multiple ways with words are centered and engaged in meaningful, productive learning are often sites of conflict. Gutiérrez et al. (1997) suggest that, “Initially, these are contested spaces; in other words, these are spaces where languages, registers, beliefs, and practices may compete and create tensions among individuals and groups” (p. 374). It was *my* discomfort with the girls’ language practices that I found most difficult. I often floundered when the girls’ language and conversational styles were shot-through with a radical edginess that I could only characterize as “attitude.” Thinking too often about a traditional performance of “teacher” and

what others might think if they walked by the classroom door, the conflict within our language community was sometimes too much for me to bear.

But on occasion, I engaged as a participant in the language interaction and attempted to *feel* and *hear* the performances and respond in ways that seemed most appropriate to the context and Discourse in the moment. These proved to be the most productive language learning events our group experienced.

One challenge I faced, and continue to face as a teacher-researcher, was reminding myself that the discomfort I experienced was similar to the discomfort the girls experienced when they were confronted with, and thrust into, linguistic interactions that privileged the preferred Discourse practices of schooling. Despite school practices that belittle working-class and poor dialects and punish performances of “attitude,” the girls and their caretakers in this study continued to speak and act in ways most appropriate to maintain intimate relations with families and neighbors and to shout back at a mainstream society that judged them harshly.

David Purpel (1998) writes optimistically about the resilience, courage, and perseverance of those who are victims of financial distress and

human callousness. All the girls in this study were resilient, courageous, and persevered toward making their voices heard, their stories known, and their emotions felt. Often they did so through language practices that reflected the identities they would need to survive in the callous world that told jokes about their community, constructed hypothetical Barbie Dolls that would represent their mothers and themselves through negative stereotypes, and marginalized their parents and grandparents until they dropped out of school. Claiming an identity in such a cauldron of hatred, as Dorothy Allison (2001) puts it, is complex work, and the girls were already engaged in it as they performed identities and discursive practices that would help to protect them from such harsh realities. The girls in this study *needed* these practices for survival, just as their mothers, fathers, and grandparents have needed similar tactics and strategies.

According to Purpel (1998), we are depending on teachers to be kind, sensitive, tender, and wise in their responses to learners who continue to be positioned outside mainstream society. In addition to these dispositions, educators need to know a great deal about the contexts in which students acquire their primary Discourses and what to do with those dispositions as they enter classrooms. To these ends, I argue that language educators work toward the following:

- Develop a sensitivity to students' primary Discourses; listen more often than not.
- Learn about the contexts where these Discourses have been acquired through ethnographic inquiry in the community and with families (e.g., Moll, 1999).
- Welcome, value, and build upon all ways of using language and performing identities—even those that might eventually need to be challenged, such as those reflecting racist, classist, and sexist ideologies (e.g., Jones, 2003, 2004).
- Engage as a learner and a teacher through joint participation in the classroom.
- Introduce mainstream ways of discussing topics that are of interest to the students, consciously helping students to construct hybrid ways of knowing and talking.
- Explicitly discuss language differences with students, the importance of accessing different language across contexts, and how power operates through language.

As a teacher-researcher, I have made poor judgments in numerous interchanges with the girls' performances of their primary Discourses, and I continue to learn from my mistakes. It is in my commitment to poor and working-class children and families that I continue to grapple with difficult issues in and around the language classroom. For such children to even *want* to engage with academic Discourses, they must find themselves in pedagogical spaces where their multiple and layered language practices and performances are not only welcome and respected, but understood as rich building blocks in the construction of hybridity, attaching themselves to school in meaningful ways while holding tight to their class-specific identities.

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