The Skin That We Speak

Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom

Edited by

LISA DELPIT

and

JOANNE KILGOUR DOWDY

2002

THE NEW PRESS

NEW YORK
LONDON

CHAPTER 7

I ain't writin' nuttin': Permissions to Fail and Demands to Succeed in Urban Classrooms

GLORIA J. LADSON-BILLINGS

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS raises an enormous red flag, and raises it high. In a first-grade classroom, a child is about to be educationally shortchanged. Shannon, a six-year-old speaker of African American language, has been asked to think of a sentence about something special, share that sentence, and then write it down. It's a clear assignment. However, all that it takes for Shannon to be passed over with a "maybe you'll feel like writing tomorrow" from her teacher is a shake of the little girl's head and a firm announcement, "I ain't writin' nuttin'!" In contrast, Ladson-Billings tells us about a teacher who galvanizes his poor and working-class African American students who "hate" to write by creating culturally responsive lessons that include music and drama as precursors to writing. Their final written piece is fueled by their creativity and carefully crafted—the result of much discussion and numerous edits. It is fine, the author tells us, to empathize with your students, but don't allow their language or attitudes to lower expectations of their abilities or to compromise your own willingness to seek creative educational solutions.

Picture a classroom of kindergarten and first grade students. The class has about thirty students with two certificated teachers. Despite the lower teacher-student ratio, the number of children in a relatively small classroom makes it a rather crowded place. Monday morning often starts with the teachers initiating a sharing activity. Each of the students is asked to think of a sentence that describes something special that happened to him or her over the weekend. All of the students will have an opportunity to share their sentences with the other students at their tables. Ultimately, the students will choose one sentence and attempt to write it.

On this particular morning, Shannon*, an African American girl, is sitting at her table with Audrey, Denny, and Keith, three White children. The two White boys immediately begin sharing sentences. Denny's sentence is "I went to my grandma's anniversary party and I played outside." The three White students agree that Denny has proposed a good sentence—one with eleven words! After a moment the students notice that Shannon has not contributed. "What did you do last weekend, Shannon?" asks Audrey. "Oh, nuttin'," replies Shannon. Denny and Keith agree that the table should choose Denny's sentence to write. Shannon remarks to Keith, "You always choose his sentences!" Keith says, "We don't pick your sentences 'cause you're too grumpy!" Shannon snaps

*All classroom participants in this study are given pseudonyms.

back, "I don't want no White people pickin' me!" There is an eerie silence and then the other children settle down to begin writing. Shannon only writes the word, "I" and begins to complain that she cannot write the word, "grandma."

After a few minutes one of the teachers comes by this table and notices that Shannon is just sitting while the others are working at constructing the sentence. "Would you like to try writing your sentence today, Shannon?" Shannon shakes her head no, arises from the table and begins to wander around the room. The teacher says to her as she begins wandering, "That's okay. Maybe you'll feel like writing tomorrow." This is not an isolated incident. On a previous visit my coinvestigator witnessed Shannon talking with Audrey. Audrey asked Shannon what she was writing. Shannon snapped, "I ain't writin' nuttin'!"

What both my coinvestigator and I saw was what I term "permission to fail." Although most students were encouraged to write each day, Shannon was regularly permitted to fail. Her refusal to write was not just stubbornness but a ploy to cover up her inability to read, or more specifically, her lack of phonemic awareness. Witnessing this pattern of avoidance is difficult for me as an African American female parent and researcher. Are there teachers permitting my daughter to fail? Are there teachers in classrooms across the country permitting children to fail? I cannot help but wonder if the permission to fail was granted Shannon so easily, in part, because her cultural style, form of language, and attitude deemed her unworthy of teaching in her teachers' eyes.

My own scholarly work has been grounded in what I have termed "culturally relevant pedagogy." I have written about it in a variety of other places (see for example, Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995). It is a theoretical construct that rests on three propositions:

Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement,

Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence, and

Successful teaching promotes students' socio-political consciousness.

Students' academic achievement represents intellectual growth and the ability to produce knowledge. Regardless of whatever else schools do, students are supposed to learn something. That learning can be manifested in student competency in a variety of subject areas and skills. Can students read, write, problem-solve, make critical decisions? Each of these can represent examples of students' academic achievement.

Cultural competence refers to the ability of students to grow in understanding and respect for their culture of origin. Rather than experiencing the alienating effects of education where school-based learning detaches students from their home culture, cultural competence is a way for students to be bicultural and facile in the ability to move between school and home cultures.

Socio-political consciousness is an attempt to help students develop a sense of mutuality and reciprocity toward others with whom they share cultural solidarity. It is designed to help students ask larger socio-political questions about how schools and the society work to expose ongoing inequity and social injustice. If students do not begin to ask these questions, they are likely to reiterate positions that suggest that the reason people are unsuccessful in school is that they do not try hard enough. Culturally relevant teaching is designed to help students move past a blaming the victim mentality and search for the structural and symbolic foundations of inequity and injustice.

Demanding Success

For three years I worked with a group of eight elementary teachers working in predominantly African American school classrooms who did not grant children permission to fail. Instead they demanded that they succeed.[1] What does a classroom that demands success

from all students look like? What opportunities and requirements for success do they present?

Over the last five or six years I have written and spoken often of my work with successful teachers of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In some circles I think the stories of those teachers have grown "larger than life." Once a school district official called to invite me to speak to the district's teachers. "Oh, and can you bring those eight teachers with you?" she asked. Somehow, these women who do serious and important work with African American students had become something of a "road show." This sense of entertainment that I may have conveyed in my writing trivializes the day-to-day hard work of teaching that happens in their classrooms. It mystifies them. But what they do is not mystical or magical. It is well thought out, careful, reflective practice undergirded by a commitment to the students' academic achievement, their cultural competence, and their socio-political consciousness.

In an attempt to move past the perceived "magic" of the dreamkeepers I have begun to look carefully at the practice of novice teachers. I have selected novices because of my desire to understand how people learn to be good teachers and by extension how we (teacher educators) teach them to be good teachers. Currently, I am analyzing data from a data set of eight novice teachers. It would be premature for me to draw conclusions given the current messiness of the data. However, I can share some things I learned from another novice teacher that pointed me in the direction of novice teachers as a possible site for excellence in urban classrooms.

Carter Forshay was excited about his first teaching job. He had completed his undergraduate degree at a midwestern university not far from his hometown. After undergraduate school he made his way to the West Coast, an area of the country he longed to see. While there he completed a teacher certification program and accepted a job offer from a large urban school district in California. As a young, twenty-something African American male, this job in an exciting, vibrant city seemed a perfect opportunity. Carter began his first year with the youthful enthusiasm, energy and idealism

of the uninitiated. He made a commitment to ensure that his fourth graders would demonstrate high levels of literacy. His undergraduate degree was in communications and in the back of his mind he harbored thoughts of completing a masters degree in the field that might lead to a career in communications. In the meantime, Carter saw teaching as a socially responsible, positive career even if it was not financially lucrative.

Carter's first jolt back to reality came when he learned that his students absolutely hated writing. Several of them were respectable readers, given that the expectations for African American poor and working-class students are exceedingly low. But almost none of the children enjoyed writing. Each time Carter attempted to come up with an exciting and motivating topic on which to write, his students balked. "Ah, Mr. Forshay, I don't want to do this." "Writin' is too hard." "I don't have nothin' to say, why are you makin' us write stuff?" "Why can't you just give us some worksheets? We can do them!" Each day these comments and similar ones greeted Carter whenever he proposed a writing task. After several halfhearted attempts on the part of the students and mounting frustration on the part of the teacher, Carter began a systematic examination of his own practice. This is a significant step because he clearly could have chosen another course of action. Carter began to think about what kinds of things were important in his life. Chief among them was music. Carter had an extensive collection of vintage and contemporary jazz. He knew his students also loved music although their musical taste ran more toward rap and soul. Carter decided to gamble that if he could help the kids connect with music, he could help them connect with writing. Carter chose a CD by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis that featured a song entitled, "Blue Interlude: The Bittersweet Saga of Sugar Cane and Sweetie Pie." He chose this song because on it Marsalis explains the way he uses the various melodies to reflect particular "characters." During the first lesson Carter played the CD and led the students in a discussion of what they thought the action was and how they thought the characters were feeling and behaving. From there Carter encouraged the students to take turns role-playing the char-

acters and their interactions. Once one of the girls took the role of Sweetie Pie and two boys became Sugar Cane and Cotton Candy, the rest of the students delighted in the action. Some students would urge Sweetie Pie to play hard to get. Others would tell Sugar Cane he had to be cooler. Students took turns acting out these roles, each threesome more dramatic and emotive than the preceding one. From their dramatic interpretations Carter helped small groups of students develop character webs for each of the main characters.

On the next day Carter replayed the CD and asked students to review their character webs. Were there any changes they wanted to make? Did their webs best reflect what they believed about the characters? After some changes to the character webs Carter encouraged the students to talk about the kind of story the characters might be involved in. Next, the students began to write some dialogue for their stories. Each group of students shared the dialogues with every other group. The groups made suggestions for change and the students began a rough draft of the story. Carter had the students compare their rough drafts with the premises on which their stories were based. They ended the second day's lesson with thinking about what needed to be added or deleted from their stories.

On the third day Carter had the students review their rough drafts. He asked each group to provide feedback to each of the other groups. The students used the feedback to revise and edit the rough drafts. They then completed illustrations for the finished work. The lesson closed with students publishing their books and sharing them with students from other classrooms. Below is the text of their story:

Sugar Cane's Dream
By Room 19
Based on Blue Interlude:
The Bittersweet Saga of Sugar Cane and Sweetie Pie
By the Wynton Marsalis Septet

One night a man named Sugar Cane went into a bar. There he met a lady named Sweetie Pie. Thus, began their blue interlude. Sugar Cane wanted a beer because he was thirsty. He walked into a bar and saw a beautiful woman working behind the bar. He went over to her and she said, "Hi, my name is Sweetie Pie. How are you doing?"

"Fine thanks," Sugar Cane said and then asked for a beer.

Sweetie Pie said, "Why not? A handsome man like you can have anything from my bar!" They talked for a while. They found out they had a lot in common. Finally, Sugar Cane said, "You look beautiful. Do you want to go out on a date?"

"Yes." Sweetie Pie said.

Sugar Cane said, "I'll pick you up at eight o'clock tomorrow night."

"Meet me here at the bar," Sugar Pie replied.

They decided to go to a restaurant. Sugar Cane asked for Sweetie Pie's phone number. They talked until Sweetie Pie got off from work. Sweetie Pie asked Sugar Cane if he had a car and when he said he didn't, she offered him a ride home which he accepted. On the way home, they continued their conversation. They talked about their jobs, sports, and what restaurant they were going to on their date.

"I'll see you tomorrow at eight," Sweetie Pie said when she dropped him off.

Sugar Cane couldn't stop thinking about Sweetie Pie. He remembered he had her phone number so he called her at home. Sugar Cane told Sweetie Pie over the phone that they were going to the Crystal Light Restaurant on 33rd Street.

The next morning Sugar Cane called Sweetie Pie to check if their date was still it. She said it was. Sugar Cane was nervous about the date. It took him three hours to get dressed. He put on a suit and tie. The suit was black and the tie was white. Sweetie Pie took one hour to get dressed. She wore a red dress with a white collar, red choker, and red high heels.

When Sugar Cane got to the bar he saw Sweetie Pie with another man. In shock, he walked over to them and demanded that she tell him who he was.

Sweetie Pie said, "This is my boyfriend from college. His name is Cotton Candy. He called me last night and told me he was in town. He wanted to go out."

Cotton Candy said politely to Sugar Cane, "Do you want to join us?"

"No," Sugar Cane yelled. "I spent three hours getting ready. I put on nice cologne and here you are with another man! How could you do this to me?"

"She's my girlfriend!" exclaimed Cotton Candy.

Sweetie Pie broke in, "First of all I had a date with Sugar Cane, also I had a date with you, Cotton Candy."

"Sweetie Pie that don't explain nothin'," Sugar Cane said.

Sweetie Pie rolled her eyes and said, "Oh well."

Sugar Cane cried, "Just what I thought! I've had enough of this. I'm going to get myself a drink. I knew something was going to go wrong." He then went off to get his drink.

Cotton Candy said, "You have another boyfriend?"

Sweetie Pie said, "Yes, you have a problem with that? You can't say nothin' cause you called out of nowhere."

"You didn't tell me you had another boyfriend." Cotton Candy walked away from Sweetie Pie and left the bar.

Sweetie Pie walked over to the bar to talk with Sugar Cane. Sweetie Pie told Sugar Cane, "I'm sorry for what I did to you. I got carried away. I apologize."

"I accept your apology but I can't go out with you. What you did was unacceptable and I hope you don't do it to another man," Sugar Cane said.

They went their separate ways.

Two weeks later Sweetie Pie called Sugar Cane. She apologized for dissin' him.

"I'm sorry for dissin' you. I was out of control. Can we try again?"

Sugar Cane answered, "I guess so under one condition—that you don't diss me again."

The End

Carter's dogged determination that his students acquire appropriate literacy skills required that he recognize the language and literacy skills the students already possessed and connect them up with conventional forms of literacy.

Carter's push for literacy represents a demand for success. He could have given in to the students' complaints and compromised with worksheets. He could have pushed for writing the way he began even when the students were reluctant and producing very poor quality writing. But both of those choices would have represented permission to fail. They would have conveyed to students that it was perfectly all right for them to stay where they were because no one, especially their teacher, expected very much of them. Instead, Carter decided to demand success.

Carter took responsibility for moving the students from what James Gee (1998) argues is reading and writing with a small "r" and small "w" to reading and writing with a big "R" and big "W." According to Gee, small "r" reading and small "w" writing refer to "learning, knowledge, performance, or interaction where the focus is on the design features of written language" (p. 5). On the other hand, Big "R" reading and Big "W" writing refer to "any specific social practice or activity in which reading and writing are involved together with distinctive meanings, values, attitudes, ways of acting, interacting using oral language and other symbol systems that these practices or activities recruit or require," *in other words, using reading and writing for real purposes* [italics added]. A failure to understand this distinction between small and big r and w reading and writing is what keeps us locked in warring camps we sometimes call "whole language" versus "phonics," "literature-based" versus "skill-based." There is the temptation to read Carter

as an African American male with an automatic "in" with the students he was teaching. However, that would be a serious misreading. Carter was from a middle-class family. His mother was a teacher. His dad was an engineer. He was a graduate of an elite private university. Carter's students came from the poorest section of the city. To them Carter was something of a nerd. He didn't wear cool clothes and he didn't talk like the guys in their neighborhood. Although he was a young man, he seemed more like somebody's father than an older brother. But Carter wasn't a father. He also wasn't a veteran teacher and colleagues expected him to follow their lead. They taught with worksheets. They accepted mediocrity. They permitted students to fail. But Carter held some basic beliefs about the students that supported his pedagogy and made their academic success more likely. Carter believed that the students had the capacity to learn whatever he taught them. His major obstacle was not the students' ability, it was pedagogical limitation. To meet the academic goals he had set, Carter had to rethink his practice in some fundamental ways. He had to keep asking himself as Haberman (1995) suggests, "I wonder what I do next?" He had to keep a sense of uncertainty and a willingness to question in the forefront of his teaching. Carter believed that it was important to protect learners and learning (Haberman, 1995). More specifically, while Carter empathized with the students' struggle to write he understood that his job was to teach them to do it. He didn't put them down for not enjoying writing or writing well, but he also did not let them off the hook. He had to help them appreciate the power and fulfillment of writing and he had to preserve each student's sense of self.

Carter believed that it was important to put ideas into practice. While I have come to know many teachers (many of them eager young preservice teachers) who can "talk a good game" when it comes to teaching, I know a much smaller subset of teachers who can actually turn that talk into meaningful and productive academic experiences for students. Carter not only had an idea for stimulating the students' interest in writing, he developed a series of pedagogical actions that he needed to take to make that idea a

reality. Today's teacher is not without ideas for teaching. The journals, teaching magazines, workshops, institutes, and conferences all provide resources for "what" to teach. The major stumbling block is how to make use of those resources in local, specific classroom contexts.

Carter believed it was important to cultivate a professional-personal stance with his students. Each day Carter Forshay came to school wearing a freshly starched shirt, oftentimes a tie, sometimes a jacket, other times a sweater. He wore slacks or suit trousers, never jeans. This "professional" attire may seem superficial and tangential to the task, but Carter realized that as a young Black man it was easy for him to be mistaken for something other than a teacher. As a young African American man he felt an obligation to present an image of African American maleness beyond that of the hip-hop rapper or gang banger. This carefully cultivated image is equally important for his students and his colleagues. In the classroom Carter could not be described as demonstrative or as a "warm fuzzy" teacher. He has a business-like demeanor. Carter does not talk about "loving" his students. Rather he focuses on "caring" about and for them. This care is manifested in Carter's insistence on high levels of academic achievement for all students.

Teachers like Carter Forshay give me some hope that we can prepare teachers who will demand success from all students. They reinforce my belief that there is no magic in technique, curriculum, or strategy. The "magic" is in the teaching.

Epilogue—Ethical Considerations

As I close I must return to a point that continues to plague me in my work. At the beginning of this paper I talked about the little African American girl Shannon's refusal to write and her teachers' permitting her to evade the daily assignments while simultaneously allowing her to slip further and further behind her classmates. Shannon's first steps on the road to failure are not likely to lead her to a satisfactory ending.

Shannon is being allowed to fail. No demands are being made for her to perform at the same levels as her peers. Her resistance is a challenge for her teachers but it is their challenge. At six years old Shannon must not be allowed to determine her own demise. She is dependent upon caring adults to act in responsible ways. Just as we would not allow Shannon to stick her fingers in a roaring flame or ride in our cars without being carefully buckled with a seat belt, we must recognize the impending danger of her proclamation, "I ain't writin' nuttin'!"

REFERENCES

Gee, J. P. (1998). Preamble to a literacy program. Unpublished document. University of Wisconsin, Madison (March).

Haberman, M. (1995). Star teachers of children in poverty. Bloomington, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Kelley, R.D.G. (1998). Yo' mama is disfunktional! Fighting the culture wars in urban America. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). The dreamkeepers: successful teachers of African American children. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

——— (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. American Educational Research Journal, 35, 465–491.

CHAPTER 8

"...As Soon As She Opened Her Mouth!": Issues of Language, Literacy, and Power

VICTORIA PURCELL-GATES