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What is This?
Identity, childhood culture, and literacy learning: A case study

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Abstract  Recent conceptions of identity view people’s identities as multiple and situated. The ways we see ourselves are filtered through the relationships we share with others, the knowledges and experiences we bring, and the contexts within which we live and learn. McCarthey and Moje (2002) explain that the identities we construct shape our literacy practices while literacy practices become a means for acting out the identities we assume. This case study demonstrates how children’s identities and cultural resources intersect and converge during literacy learning. Fieldnotes, running records, and audiotaped interviews are used to construct a case study of a reluctant African American student that illustrates the ways students’ identities are constructed and revised in conjunction with literacy learning. This case study demonstrates how teachers can access children’s cultural resources to support literacy learning.

Keywords case study; cultural diversity; identity; literacy; media resources; reading instruction; Reading Recovery

Devon accompanied me cautiously down the stairs and down the hall to the little room under the stairs that is my Reading Recovery room. No sooner had I brought out the first little book and showed Devon the illustration on the cover, when Devon announced ‘I’m bored.’ When asked to write a sentence, he wrote, ‘I got nothing to do.’ It was a disappointing start for Devon.

This was Devon’s first ‘roaming lesson’. In ‘roaming’, which occurs during the first 2 weeks of Reading Recovery, the teacher does not introduce new material to the student. The teacher’s job is to allow the student to revisit and explore his or her ‘personal corpus of responses’ (Clay, 1993: 13), allowing the student to feel comfortable and confident with what he
or she knows. Most children enjoy these weeks; their lessons are filled with individualized opportunities to read and write with a supportive teacher. Unfortunately, this was not initially true for Devon. His first lessons were characterized by reluctant compliance, slow response, and multiple deep yawns that displayed boredom.

Devon is a 6-year-old African American student in first grade. As Devon’s Reading Recovery teacher, my task was abundantly clear. In order to help Devon become a capable reader and writer, I would need to find ways to engage Devon with reading and writing. During those first lessons, this seemed like an enormous task. However, by the end of our time together, the reluctance and yawning Devon had disappeared and Devon had become an engaged and capable reader and writer.

Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention for first-grade students originated by Marie Clay in New Zealand to support children who struggled with literacy during their first year of formal literacy instruction. It involves a specially trained teacher working one-on-one with struggling readers for 30 minutes each day. During these sessions, students engage in a variety of reading and writing experiences involving connected texts, with only a very few minutes dedicated to working with words and letters in isolation. Students remain in the program for 12 to 20 weeks and successfully ‘discontinue’ from the program when they are reading and writing at levels consistent with the other children in their grade. Clay views reading as a ‘message-getting, problem-solving activity, which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practised’ (2001: 1). While she references the importance of teachers attending to cultural and experiential diversity, her primary interests are the perceptual and cognitive challenges that accompany learning (Clay, 2001).

Goals of the case study

The primary goal of this article is to examine how one African American student’s evolving identity, which reflected his media, childhood, and cultural resources, intersected with literacy learning and became a tool to support his reading and writing. The case demonstrates that teachers can successfully utilize media and cultural resources that lie outside of the traditional walls of schools to create learning experiences that are uniquely responsive to individual students. In addition, this case study reveals how school literacy learning experiences are contextualized within larger social and cultural contexts that include issues related to race and gender. The case study suggests that at least some young children are highly aware of the ways they are positioned in classrooms relative to
race and gender and that this awareness raises many questions for further study.

First, I will present current conceptions of identity and examine the relationships that exist between identity and literacy. Next, I will explore issues related to childhood culture and media resources that inform childhood identity. After presenting the methodological procedures used in this research, I will describe Devon and his previous school experiences. Then, I will explore the ways Devon’s evolving identity, cultural and media resources, and literacy learning converged during his Reading Recovery lessons. Finally, I will examine comments made by Devon that indicate that race and gender are salient issues for Devon as a literacy learner and suggest that there is a need for teachers and researchers to better understand the ways race, gender, literacy, and identity may converge for some children.

Constructing a reading identity

Devon’s vision of himself as a reader is caught up in his life experiences and his understanding of the world. As Gloria Anzaldua (1999) explains, identities are the clusters of stories people tell themselves and others. Elliot Mishler explains, ‘We speak – or sing – ourselves as a chorus of voices, not just as the tenor or soprano soloist’ (1999: 8). Identities are not singular, they are ‘full of contradictions and ambiguities’ (Sarup, 1996: 14).

Current conceptions of identity no longer describe identity as a personal and individual essence. Identities are formed within relationships with others and are constantly subject to the influences of other people and institutions.

James Gee (1999) explains that identities are both multiple and situated and that people present various ‘ways of being’ that correspond to particular social situations. Gee argues that teaching entails valuing the ‘discourses’, ‘ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting’ that children use to identify themselves as members of socially meaningful groups (1990: 143).

As McCarthey and Moje explain, ‘identities are always situated in relationships . . . power plays a role in how identities get enacted and how people get positioned’ (McCarthey and Moje, 2002: 231). Thus children’s personal histories as readers, their past successes, the official criteria for determining reading competence, and their current struggles all contribute to the ways in which children identify themselves as readers. These struggles did not occur within neutral social and political contexts, nor are they played out upon leveled social and political planes. Privilege, access, and opportunity, related to race, class, and gender, have influenced and continue to
influence the experiences and relationships that contribute to the formation of reading identities for students.

**Identity and literacy**

It is important to recognize that identities and reading and writing practices are linked. As McCarthey and Moje (2002) explain, people’s identities involve various group affiliations and shared purposes for reading. Thus the identities people construct and the relationships that they form shape their reading and writing practices. Literacy and literacy practices are means for performing particular identities. Frank Smith (1997) referred to the need for children to ‘join the literacy club’. He explained that when children join the literacy club, they take it for granted that they will become like the more experienced members of the club, those who already read; they see themselves as becoming the same kind of people.

Thus, becoming literate involves more than reading and writing. As Bernardo Ferdman explains:

> Becoming literate means developing mastery not only over processes, but also over the symbolic media of the culture – the ways in which cultural values, beliefs, and norms are represented. Being literate implies actively maintaining contact with collective symbols and the processes by which they are represented. (1990: 188)

For students in schools, being literate entails reading and writing texts that are considered appropriate in ways that are expected in schools. For some children the cultural and media resources that they bring to school match school expectations and values while the resources that others bring do not. Teachers are faced with the challenge of helping children master conventional school-valued literacy practices despite the varied literacy resources and identities children bring. Utilizing the cultural resources that children bring entails recognizing and valuing diverse resources grounded in childhood culture, media culture, and divergent literacy practices that are often considered unworthy of school attention.

Literacy learning occurs within social and cultural contexts that feature socially constructed markers of difference such as race, class, and gender. According to McCarthey and Moje (2002), contemporary theorists define these categories as fluid and often contested by individuals. However, the contested nature of these categories does not erase the very real effect race, class, and gender can play in people’s lives, the relationships they form with others, the identities they assume, the literacy practices they engage in, and the ways they are positioned in schools and classrooms relative to literacy.
Thus literacy cannot be treated as separate from issues of race, class, gender, and ultimately identity.

McCarthey and Moje (2002) explain that a great deal of identity work has focused on adolescents; they argue that this is because adolescents are generally more metacognitively reflective than younger children and because adolescents are often viewed as occupying ‘between spaces’ that exist between childhood and adulthood such as home, school, and peer group, and popular culture and academic culture. However, Devon’s case study suggests that identity work begins long before adolescence and that earlier attention to identity in relation to literacy is warranted.

Children’s identities and media and cultural resources

Anne Haas Dyson explains that educational and literacy research ‘tends to look outward at children’s lives from inside the world of official school practices’ (2003: 5); she suspects that schools focus primarily on helping students to manipulate written symbols in ways that are academically and socially valued within the institution of formal schooling. Dyson claims that because of this tendency children’s cultural worlds, ‘and the breadth of their textual experience, the depth of their social and symbolic adaptability – disappear’ (2003: 5).

In her research, Dyson (2003) explores how popular culture including television, films, sports, music, and video games mingle among elements of the official school curriculum as children participate in writer’s workshop in a first-grade classroom. Childhood culture provides more than writing topics. For children, they are socially valued, textual tools that children can explore and manipulate within the classroom. However, as Dyson (2003) explains, adults, including educators, often condemn and reject references to media culture despite the important role they play in popular peer-based culture.

Dyson references Bakhtin (1981) who maintains that languages operate within ‘the midst of heteroglossia’ suggesting that multiple socio-ideological languages and literacies circulate within any social context. These include the languages of various social groups, professions, generations, and eras. The young children that Dyson observed during writer’s workshop began to experience written words as a new medium that was ‘shaped not only by official curricular purposes, relationships, and textual information, but also by unofficial child relationships and by their use of cultural materials that figured into their lives as children’ (2003: 10).

The children in Dyson’s study not only used cultural resources from outside of school within the classroom but they also used these cultural
resources to position themselves within the social networks of the classroom. Sometimes the children accessed cultural resources that referenced race and gender and used these resources to differentiate and define themselves socially; the ‘use of unofficial materials in official spaces made salient larger societal boundaries’ (2003: 36).

Along with accessing cultural resources in the classroom, children in Dyson’s study also appropriated official school conventions into their writing such as sentence frames (i.e. ‘I like . . .’, ‘I went . . .’), writing formats, and conventions. Dyson refers to these intersections of the official and unofficial school worlds as ‘Bakhtinian hybrids’ (2003: 68) in which the child uses the official written language of school to access and explore unofficial resources within the social context of the classroom.

For many readers, it may be easy and perhaps natural to envision children accessing unofficial cultural resources (music, film, sports, television shows, etc.) within the flexible format of writer’s workshop. However, Reading Recovery with its stringent time frame, guidebook procedures, and focus on intervention may appear an unlikely context for showcasing students’ unofficial cultural resources. On the following pages I will share Devon’s story, a story that surprised me in terms of the power of the cultural resources that Devon brought to the lessons and in the multiple and varied opportunities I encountered for building on these resources.

The case study methodology

As part of my Reading Recovery training, I was assigned to conduct a case study of one Reading Recovery student. My assignment was to follow the literacy development of one of my students with systematic attention to the child’s progress in reading and writing.

With this goal in mind, I administered the Observation Survey (Clay, 2002) and the Record of Oral Language (Clay et al., 1983). I collected copies of Devon’s Dominie Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (Deford, 2000) that was administered by his classroom teacher during the first month of school. I kept careful lesson records and running records (Clay, 2002) from each of our daily Reading Recovery sessions. Running records are written accounts of a child’s reading that indicate any digressions the reader might make from the text as well as other observable reading behaviors. In addition, six times during the semester, I made copies of Devon’s classroom writing efforts. I audiotaped Devon’s lesson once a week for each of the 20 weeks he spent in the program.

My first task was to score the various assessments and analyze the assessment data with an eye to information that could inform my teaching as
well as my understanding of Devon’s progress as described in my case study assignment. I delved into Devon’s lesson records, Reading Recovery journal and running records, noting patterns in his processing that included increasing attention to the phonetic information, less reliance on picture cues, and an increasing ability to attend to multiple sources of information, monitor his own reading, and independently correct his errors in continuous text. In his Reading Recovery journal, Devon was gradually able to write more words independently and could use phonetic information to write unknown words with regular letter/sound relationships. By week 10, Devon was beginning to use his visual memory of words along with phonetic information to write unfamiliar words. All of this information was providing me with a good understanding of Devon as a reader and as a writer.

About halfway through Devon’s Reading Recovery program, I invited his mother to school to discuss his progress and to share her insights about Devon as a reader and a writer. I suspected that the conversation might inform my case study and asked her if she was comfortable with my audio-taping the conference; she agreed and she also agreed that I could audio-tape an interview with Devon. Prior to the conference, I crafted a list of questions that I wanted to ask both Devon’s mother and Devon. I interviewed Devon that same morning after his mother had left to return to work. The questions focused on Devon’s abilities and attitudes relative to reading and writing.

These interviews, along with the emerging transcriptions of Devon’s lessons, revealed a much richer portrait of Devon as a literacy learner. As Robert Stake writes in his book, The Art of Case Study Research, ‘The best research questions evolve during the study’ (1995: 33). These experiences inspired me to revisit my earlier records of Devon as a learner, taking note of the role Devon’s cultural and media knowledges had played in his literacy learning. While all of the data collected in this case study have contributed to my understanding of Devon as a reader and a writer, this article draws most heavily upon his lesson records, the audiotapes of Devon’s lessons, his classroom writing and his Reading Recovery writing journal, and the interviews that were conducted with Devon and his mother. Grounded theory methods that involved multiple rereadings across these four data sources were used to identify and triangulate the themes that are explored in this article. Themes evolved as the presence of media characters and superheroes were noted across instructional contexts (i.e. home, classroom, Reading Recovery lessons) and planned and unplanned connections to Devon’s cultural knowledges repeatedly occurred throughout Reading Recovery lessons. Finally, this researcher
found Devon’s attention to racial and gender issues during the interview compelling, particularly in relation to the other aspects of identity that had been raised during the research project.

Devon’s interests in video games and superheroes emerged as symbols, perhaps icons, for understanding Devon’s evolving identity as a person and a reader and writer. While I entered the interviews with Devon and his mother with lists of questions about reading and writing, my conversations with Devon’s mother soon drifted into discussions of Devon’s interests and past experiences with literacy. Devon raised issues related to race and gender that I had not expected. He described his warm relationship with an African American woman who occasionally volunteered in his classroom and queried whether teachers liked girls better than boys.

Devon’s mother informed me that, ‘For the last three years [Devon] has been talking about going to college to become a superhero.’ Thus, Devon’s interest in video games and superheroes was not merely a topic of interest; video games and superheroes were central to Devon’s identity and were potential tools that Devon could access when using, creating, and relating to text.

In the following pages, I present an overview of Devon’s prior school experiences and explore how cultural resources enhanced Devon’s writing, word solving, and reading fluency during Reading Recovery lessons and in his classroom. Finally, I raise questions about how Devon’s raced and gendered position within the classroom intersects with his emerging identity as a reader and writer.

Devon’s school and his school experiences

Devon attends a unique urban school. This school is located in close proximity to a major university in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. The school serves a diverse student body and acceptance to the school is achieved through a lottery system in which children are randomly selected from a pool of applicants. The school is ranked high among the other schools in this urban district and competition to be accepted is immense. While some of the children arrive on buses from poor and working class families from across the city, many of the children’s parents are associated with the university.

Devon’s teacher allows children to pursue their own reading and writing interests. Her days allow for extended writer’s workshop periods, individualized reading conferences, and multiple read aloud experiences. Most of the children in the class are of European American heritage; Devon is one of four African American children.
Devon’s mother explained that although Devon loved preschool, ‘He didn’t like kindergarten.’ Apparently, his assigned teacher left to have a baby; Devon’s mother reports that soon after that, ‘He hated going to school. He hated everything to do with his books.’ In particular, writing became a problem: ‘He totally wouldn’t even touch [writing] any more. As soon as the teacher would bring out his journal, he would cry.’ When I asked Devon about reading in kindergarten, his responses confirmed his mother’s report.

CL: How was reading in kindergarten?
Devon: Um, we had math too.
CL: Mmm-hmm.
Devon: That was fun.
CL: Math was fun? Was reading fun?
Devon: [pause, shakes head]

Devon reports that reading in kindergarten was ‘too hard’ and that he ‘didn’t want to do it’.

The classroom teacher, Devon’s mother, and I have all worked together to help Devon revalue reading and writing and Devon has played a very active role in the transformation. His mom reported in December of first grade that ‘He feels successful with it [reading and writing], you know. ‘Cause I even know when he’s drawing his pictures at home, now he’s writing something. Before you had to say “Please write words”, [now] it’s like, “Oh Mommy, how do you think you spell . . .?”’

In the following pages, I will explore this transformation and suggest that it is in part due to the intertextuality that was allowed to occur among Devon’s cultural resources (home culture and popular media culture), his classroom experiences, parental support, and the Reading Recovery lessons. I suspect that the use of Devon’s cultural resources enabled Devon to identify with school reading and writing practices which in turn fostered his emerging identity as a reader.

**Devon as a reader: building on Devon’s social world**

During those first days of Reading Recovery, Devon attempted to circumvent reading and writing tasks by deferring to boredom and exhibiting lethargy. Although the books and writing tasks were clearly easy for Devon, his responses revealed the contradictions and ambiguities that surrounded his reading identity. He could read the books but would not select a book to read when asked. He could think of nothing to write about, but easily contributed to the written messages that I constructed from his meager offerings. He was ‘bored’ by reading and writing and did his best to avoid
these tasks. Devon’s ways of talking, thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, acting reading and writing identified himself as a person who was unimpressed with written language, had little use for it, and would rather return to his first-grade classroom.

After Devon’s second lesson, I invited him to construct a book about something that he liked. With a good bit of coaching, Devon agreed to write about sea turtles. His first sentence was ‘The sea turtle is slow.’ Together we laboriously recorded each word. At the end of the lesson, we returned to the sea turtle sentence. I asked Devon to read it before returning to class; he refused. With a hint of frustration in my voice, I turned to Devon and asked about his interests outside of school. For the first time, Devon looked me in the eye and started talking. He told me about his Game Boy and the Pokémon games that he played. He described his new DinoThunder game and the characters in the game. For those few minutes, Devon stopped yawning and did not complain that he was bored. Before returning to class, Devon drew a picture of Pikachu, one of the infamous Pokémon characters, and with my help wrote ‘I like Pikachu’ at the bottom of his paper. That weekend, with the help of my expert 10-year-old daughter, I obtained a small booklet filled with names and pictures of various Pokémon characters that could be used as a stimulus for his writing. I was a concerned and frustrated teacher anxious to engage my student in literacy tasks; by the end of my time with Devon, Devon had taught me valuable lessons about the ways literacy and identity are connected and how these connections are critical to literacy engagement and learning.

**Writing unofficial knowledges**

At Devon’s next lesson, the sea turtle book was abruptly cast to the side. The school sanctioned topic ‘sea turtles’ was readily replaced by Pikachu. Using pictures from the booklet I had gotten from the game store Devon wrote his own book. In the book were pictures of various Pokémon characters labeled with their respective names. Each day Devon would create a couple of pages for his book by choosing an illustration from the booklet and pasting it onto a page of his book. He would then write a sentence about each picture. Sentences such as:

- Flareon’s power is fire
- Pikachu’s power is thunder
- Articuno looks like a bird

filled the pages of his book as Devon acted the role of expert, telling me
about each character’s powers and species. I fulfilled the role of facilitator and partial scribe.

Devon’s interest in writing about characters from the popular media was recognized by both Devon’s mother and the classroom teacher. His mother described how she and his classroom teacher supported him with journal writing in the classroom:

He asked can he bring his own [Ninja Turtle] notebook, I said well, bring it one day but I need to talk to Mary [his teacher]. You know, she might not want you [to bring it to school]. At first she was like [hesitant], and then she’s like, ‘Wait a minute [if] Devon wants to write, we don’t care what he writes on. Just let him write.’ And since he gets to write in that Ninja Turtle notebook, he’s like, he’s coming home, ‘I wrote five sentences. Let me tell you about them.’

In the classroom, Devon was also using popular media images in his writing. Sentences such as ‘I like Fire Red Leaf Green [the new Pokémon games for the Game Boy]’ and ‘I like Yu-Gi-Oh. Yu-Gi-Oh is cool’ cohabited on the pages of his classroom journal with Devon’s other interests such as ‘I like soccer. Soccer is cool.’ In his Reading Recovery journal too, Devon did not limit himself to writing about video games and superheroes. Over the first 12 weeks of the program his Reading Recovery journal included 12 sentences referencing video games and superheroes; the other 30 entries explored topics ranging from books he had read to loose teeth and visits to his grandmother. While video game and superhero topics recurred sporadically throughout the Reading Recovery program, these topics were most common during those first 10 roaming lessons when Devon was most unsure of himself as a writer and most reluctant to engage in literacy activities.

As Dyson (2003) argues, these references to media and shared childhood cultures are more than topics that interest children. For Devon, these topics are closely aligned with his identity and his peer affiliations. As a child who plans to go to college to become a superhero, Devon clearly aspires toward flight, supernatural powers, and protecting humanity. His connections with Pokémon and video games are also spaces where Devon holds expertise among his peers and with his teachers. He regularly corrected me when I mispronounced a name, confused a character, or incorrectly identified a character’s ‘species’ and powers. Unlike reading and writing activities where I played the expert, Devon’s adeptness with media images positioned me as the learner, allowing his expertise to coexist alongside his learning.
Word solving resources

The salience and personal significance of media images for Devon acted as tools that he could use to access information about words and texts. During Devon’s initial classroom writing experiences, his mother and his teacher both facilitated his literacy learning by allowing and encouraging him to use media characters and topics in his writing. His mother explained how even the shirt on his back became a resource that Devon could use to mediate his personal interests with school expectations. She explained, ‘You notice he has to wear a shirt [with a media character on it] every day, a Spiderman shirt or something else. [That’s] just so he’ll have something to write about in his journal. That’s the way he was at the beginning of the year, yeah. [Imitating Devon’s voice] “I can’t spell Ninja Turtle.” [Resuming her own voice] “It’s on your shirt.”’

During an early lesson, Devon chose to write about a book that he had read during a Reading Recovery lesson. He was trying to write the word ‘tiger’ and I said the word slowly, emphasizing the ‘g’ so that he could hear that troublesome letter.

CL: [I pronounce the word slowly] T-i-g-er.
Devon: I can copy off the book?
CL: No. T-i-g-er. What makes the /g/ sound?
Devon: A ‘g’.
CL: /g/ Mm-hmm. Good.
Devon: Like in Yu-Gi-Oh.
CL: Yeah.

Devon connects the sound of the letter ‘g’ with the salient ‘g’ that appears in the word ‘Yu-Gi-Oh’, one of his favorite video games. For all of us, learning involves connecting new knowledge with information that is already known. Information that is important to us, including the words associated with favorite subjects, provides particularly useful tools for solidifying new learning.

A particularly powerful example of Devon using childhood culture to support his writing occurred several lessons later when Devon wrote the sentence, ‘My bed has Hot Wheels on it.’ As the reader may know, ‘Hot Wheels’ are small toy cars that have long been popular with 6-year-old boys. Like many toys, these cars have inspired a range of ancillary products including bedding which Devon proudly declares that he owns. To support Devon in writing the word ‘wheels’ I sketched a series of six boxes on the workspace area of his journal (Clay, 1993: 34).

It was mid November and Devon had become adept at recording the sounds that he heard in words in sequence. I had purposely drawn a box
for every letter in the word, even those that are not voiced. Before Devon began to sound through the word, I reminded him that he had probably seen that word many times on the cars and on the packaging and that he should think about what the word ‘looks like’. Devon said the word ‘wheels’ and easily recorded the ‘w’ in the first box. As he spoke the word slowly he was readily able to hear the /E/ and reported ‘It’s an “e”’. I concurred; I pointed and instructed him to record the ’e’ in the third box. To both of our surprise, he drew a straight perpendicular line in the third box and said with a tone of amazement, ‘I almost wrote an “h.”’

I praised Devon for remembering what the word ‘looked like’ as I tore off a piece of correction tape and helped him to relocate the ‘h’ to the second box and then record the ‘e’, ‘l’, and final ‘s.’

Devon was again able to access his visual memory of the word ‘wheels’ to record the second ‘e’. I suspect that his success is attributable to the text that surrounds his many meaningful interactions with the toy cars (i.e. trademarks on toys, packaging, bedspread).

**Fluency resources**

Throughout Reading Recovery, Devon has struggled to develop fluency as a reader and as a writer. Devon could often problem solve words in reading
and writing and was highly adept at making sure that the sentences and 
stories he reads ‘make sense’. However, Devon’s reading could be ponder-
ously slow. I tried on several occasions to help Devon to attend to the rate 
of his reading and to parse the words as he read so that phrasing and intona-
tion became a part of his reading. It was the beginning of December and 
we were reading the book Ten Little Bears. Devon was successfully reading the 
words, but read even the patterned and repetitive passages in a slow, word-
by-word manner. I modeled and he imitated me, but when we encountered 
the same pattern on the next page he returned to word-by-word reading. 
The repetition and the rhythm of the line ‘Then nine little bears were left 
at home’ inspired me to comment that it almost sounds like a song. This 
comment had no effect on Devon. Then I suggested, ‘You know this could 
almost be a rap.’ I modeled the line, applying my white middle-class attempt 
at rap rhythm, and Devon’s eyes brightened. Immediately he assumed a 
swanky position in his chair and repeated the line with an excellent rap 
rhythm complete with hand motions and a bebop bounce. He suddenly 
knew what I was asking as we worked toward fluency on a variety of texts. 

These examples are not simply about enjoyment, self-esteem, or personal 
preferences. The connections that Devon makes between his home culture, 
popular culture, and school learning are connections that help Devon to 
access his wide range of experiences and to use these as tools upon which 
he can ‘hang’ his school learning. It is the intersection between his personal 
experiences and the expectations and structures of school that enabled him 
to take on new learning, thus fostering his literacy development.

Classroom resources

Devon’s classroom experiences mingled with his developing presentation 
of self and entered into Reading Recovery lessons. Like the children in 
Dyson’s study (2003), Devon appropriated official school conventions 
during Reading Recovery lessons. The use of classroom sentence frames, 
such as ‘I like . . .’, ‘I have . . .’, or ‘I go . . .’, appear in the books he wrote 
during roaming sessions and in Devon’s Reading Recovery journal. In 
Reading Recovery, I was able to help Devon to craft his ideas so that as 
Reading Recovery lessons progressed Devon wrote sentences using a variety 
of syntactical structures. In the classroom, where Devon was expected to 
write independently, the use of sentence frames continued into December. 

In early December, Devon wrote:

I like Torchic.
Torchic is cool.
Torchic has fire.
While ‘I like . . .’ and ‘_____ has . . .’ are typical sentence frames for first-grade students, ‘_____ is cool’ is a particularly interesting sentence pattern. During the prior summer, after Devon’s difficult year in kindergarten, Devon’s mother would require him to write one sentence each day before he could watch television or play video games. Devon rejected the school sanctioned sentence frames from kindergarten (i.e. ‘I like . . .’, ‘_____ has . . .’) and created his own. Devon chose a sentence frame that references life beyond school and experiences that lie in direct juxtaposition to school. He chose the word ‘cool’. His mother explains that ‘Um, basically he learned how to spell the word “cool” this summer. Everything was cool. Pokémon was cool.’ In September, Devon brought the word ‘cool’ to school; for Devon it captures experiences outside the classroom and establishes his identity as a child who knows what is and what is not ‘cool’. At these intersections of the official and unofficial school worlds, Devon uses school writing activities to access and explore unofficial resources – those things that he regards as cool.

Classroom experiences spilled into the Reading Recovery lessons in other ways. Devon would sometimes choose to write about the same topic during the Reading Recovery lesson as he had written about earlier that morning in his journal. Having not seen his journal on these days, I was generally unaware when this happened. In early October, Devon wrote:

I like HoT WheeL HoT WheeLs hav Difrant kulls.

Later that morning, with my help during his Reading Recovery lesson, Devon wrote:

I race my hot Wheels On the track.

Later that month, Devon wrote in his classroom journal:

I qlay qIaystation [I play playstation].

During Reading Recovery Devon wrote:

I put games in my play station.

Unbeknownst to me, Devon was using our time together to revisit and record, with my help, texts and ideas that he had independently explored earlier in the classroom. Thus the classroom, home, and Devon’s cultural resources readily coincided, converged, and contributed to his literacy learning.
Literacy, race, and gender

In this article, I have misleadingly presented Devon’s case as if Devon, his childhood, and his cultural resources are unproblematically inhabiting a supportive and equitable space. Despite Devon’s literacy gains, complexities exist. Devon’s classroom teacher, Ms Mary, is a gifted teacher whose expertise lies in allowing children to explore their own interests and in supporting them in these ventures. While Ms Mary’s support has been critical to Devon’s development as a reader, her attention and support do not erase the complexities that race and gender bring to instructional contexts. While identities must be recognized as fluid and contested constructions that are not defined by race or gender, race and gender are very real constructs that affect people’s daily lives and thus their identities in significant ways.

Devon appeared to be aware of some of the complexities that accompany race and gender in his classroom and raised these issues during our interview. I asked Devon what Ms Mary does to help him in school.

Devon: Hmm, sometimes she [Ms Mary] helps me, sometimes Jasmine help me.
CL: Hmm, who’s Jasmine?
Devon: Like, the one that was helping me, was upstairs [when you came to get me for Reading Recovery].
CL: Oh, the black lady that was helping you?
Devon: Uh-huh.

I had seen this woman on a few prior occasions. She is one of many student volunteers from the local university who assist in Devon’s classroom. She is also the only African American ‘teacher’ I have observed in this classroom. Based on Devon’s response, I asked him if he liked it when Ms Jasmine helped him and he responded ‘Yes.’

CL: Why?
Devon: Cause she is nice. She likes me, she knows . . . I know.
CL: She knows you know?
Devon: Yes.

A few minutes later I asked:

CL: You said Ms Jasmine likes you, does Ms Mary like you?
Devon: Ummmmm, uhh, I can’t tell.
CL: You can’t tell?
Devon: Do teachers like boys?
CL: Sometimes. Do you think they do?
Devon: Do they like girls?
CL: I don’t know, what do you think?
Devon: The girls are smart.
CL: Mmm-hmm.
Devon: Why?
CL: Well, I don’t think they’re always smarter than boys. Are they always smarter than boys?
Devon: [nods]
CL: Yeah.
Devon: That’s not fair.
CL: Do you think teachers like girls more than boys?
Devon: What happens when the boys are the bester than girls?
CL: Yeah they could be.
Devon: I, I don’t like to be [bester?], but I like, I like to fight.

In this lengthy section of transcript, Devon raises several compelling issues. Why does Devon call my attention to Jasmine? What is significant in their relationship and does race play a role? What might be difficult in his relationship to his classroom teacher? Is his relationship with his teacher caught up in the struggles that often accompany teaching an energetic and distractible child like Devon? Is the fact that Jasmine is African American comforting to Devon as he finds himself among a handful of African American children in the classroom? Is race significant?

The gender issues that are raised in this transcript are particularly compelling: ‘Do teachers like boys?’, ‘The girls are smart.’ What are the cultural messages that have been transmitted to Devon? What roles are offered to Devon and does he feel free to choose among a vast range of possible options? It is important to recognize that, to a large extent, Devon’s childhood/media resources are gender specific. Game Boys, Ninja Turtles, DinoThunder, Hot Wheels, and even the particular Pokémon characters he chooses to write about are all masculine. Significantly he ends this discussion with the words ‘I like to fight’ – a clear representation of his masculine identity.

While helping Devon to access resources and experiences from home, the classroom, childhood culture, and the media culture is an important and valuable practice for helping him to develop literacy skills, it is important that we remain cognizant that these tools have political and personal significance that relate to power, privilege, and positioning in the larger society. We must remember that Devon, like all children, is learning to read within raced and gendered contexts that tend to offer children from different social groups different opportunities and options. As McCarthey and Moje (2002) remind us, identities are situated in relationships; power always exists within these relationships and it affects how children are
positioned within classrooms. As teachers, we can use this power to enhance learning and help children to extend their existing ways of being, or we can use this power to demonstrate to children our perceptions of the limits of their capabilities.

Conclusions

Devon’s case demonstrates that childhood and cultural resources can be powerful tools for literacy learning. These tools relate closely to the identities that children construct and the social relationships that they build. Devon’s case is a powerful reminder of the important role these childhood and cultural resources can play. Devon has a cluster of stories (Anzaldúa, 1999) that he tells himself and others about himself. He belongs to the ‘club’ that plays video games. His knowledge about video games and their characters resonates with his developing masculinity; he knows what is and is not ‘cool’. For all of us, our identities are full of ‘contradictions and ambiguities’ (Sarup, 1996: 14). Being a cool, video game playing, male superhero did not initially reconcile easily with being a reader and a writer in a classroom. Devon was provided with opportunities to access his cultural resources to learn to read and write and to use literacy to pursue his interests in media culture, which are central to his evolving identity. As James Gee (1999) explains, identities involve both multiple and situated ‘ways of being’ that have very powerful connections to the social situations that people occupy. Reading can coexist with being ‘cool’ but constructing that relationship requires teachers to actively seek opportunities to merge students’ interests and ways of being with literacy learning and to help each child to recognize the ways literacy can contribute to his/her personal goals and interests. Devon’s mother recently informed me that Devon no longer wants to go to college to become a superhero. He is now planning to become a reading teacher. While I suspect that Devon’s future plans will change many times between first grade and college, Devon views himself as a reader and recognizes how his ways of being can be consonant with reading and writing.

Perhaps the most difficult challenges for teachers relate to the hegemones of race and gender identified by Devon. We must find ways to honor Devon’s identities and interests without turning a blind eye to the ways gender roles and racial positionings inhabit children’s ways of understanding the world. Can I help Devon to challenge gender stereotypes without becoming a politically correct teacher-preacher? Is race a significant consideration for Devon and if so what does that mean and how might
teachers address race in classrooms? These questions are raised but remain unanswered, awaiting future research and reflection.

Barnes (1997) has critiqued Reading Recovery for not being responsive to the child. The time limits imposed in Reading Recovery lessons and the teacher directed quality of the lessons are often assumed to be at odds with child-centered teaching. Other critics worry that by failing to address the ways schools operate, Reading Recovery contributes to maintaining the status quo by supporting ‘ways of talking, thinking, acting, doing, and valuing associated with White, able-bodied, middle- and upper-class males’ (Dudley-Marling and Murphy, 1997: 461).

I believe that these critiques can be true of Reading Recovery instruction. Reading Recovery teachers can be overly focused on developing reading strategies while ignoring the uses and purposes of literacy that are significant to individual children. Time constraints that accompany the 30 minute lesson can discourage teachers from deviating from the lesson format. In addition, Reading Recovery’s emphasis on procedures can eclipse the interests of the child. However, as Devon’s case clearly demonstrates, this need not be the case. As the work of Anne Haas Dyson (1997; 2003) illustrates, children bring rich cultural resources and literacy knowledges to classrooms and these can be accessed to support formal literacy instruction during writer’s workshop. In this article, I argue that Reading Recovery lessons can also provide productive and powerful forums in which teachers can build upon the multiple cultural resources that students bring. Furthermore, if Reading Recovery with its mandated guidelines and significant time restraints can be responsive to the cultural and media resources that children bring, the possibility that this can happen in other educational settings is highly conceivable.

According to Angela Valenzuela, for children of color, school is too often a ‘subtractive process’ (1999: 1); it ignores the important social and cultural resources that children bring to school, heightening children’s vulnerability to academic failure. For Devon, and all children, we must strive to make use of the myriad of cultural resources that children bring to classrooms. Be they video games, television shows, music, or films, all of these resources can support us in our quest to help children identify themselves as readers and writers and use their evolving literacy abilities to continue to pursue their own dreams and interests.

References

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