Minnesota Center for Reading Research

Research Brief

Learning on the Blue Line:
Crossing Borders of Race, Class and Social Relations

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It is the end of the fall term, classrooms are empty and I am alone, appreciative of the quiet and accepting of an opportunity to reflect. In the quiet I can reflect on my sophomore Language Arts classroom at the Chicago Public High School where I've taught for several years. The Lawndale community, where the high school is situated, is one of historical significance, particularly with regards to the social, cultural and racial economy of the City (see Kozol, 1991). It sits just west of where my university office is located within the College of Education.

Outside my office window, it would appear that there is no distinction between the brick and mortar of the University and the east-west bound public rail, (specifically the public transit system), whose "blue-line" runs along the northern edge of the Chicago campus. In the solitude I can no longer avoid the audible irony of color-blind conceptions of space and time and of the social and cultural borders I traverse as an African American mother, teacher, scholar etc. This border crossing is most tangible on the east-west bound commuter rail, whose "blue-line" runs along the northern edge of the campus.

I've found inspiration in this rail system, particularly its map posted on the platform and how its intricate, color-coded and deliberate lines and directionality traverse this sprawling city's borders of race, class and social relations. As such, riders from all walks of life interface with diverse geography, people and social phenomena, which are largely reflective of the section of the city in which the train is traveling. As the red line train moves

through each community, beginning in Ravenswood and moving along the 'magnificent mile' through Bronze Ville heading south; or as the blue line train from Halsted Street through Lawndale and into to historical Oak Park heading west, each community is a picturesque representation of the social world order (and dis-order), harmony and disharmony. This social order is constructed through a series of tacit agreements and mediated by images, tales and scripts. Riding these trains one can observe the disparate, physical condition of the trains, train stations and commerce - kiosks, coffee stations and newspaper stands. Thus, the commute is a subtle social commentary on the political and social economy of the city, moving through a complex, interwoven maze of social inequality, privileging and cultural interaction (Kazembe, personal communication). In all that is ordered and color-blind one would assume that all the rail cars and stops along each route are equally resourced. After all, so much time and space separates my (our) commute from the days of Plessey v. Ferguson. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) remind us that:

In Plessey, a black man had challenged a railroad's rule prohibiting him from riding in a car reserved for whites. The railroad replied that it had set aside identical cars for black passengers, hence its practice did not violate the Equal protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court opinion agreed with the railroad, establishing the principle of separate but equal that lasted until the Brown decision of 1954…Supreme Court Justice John Harlan's scathing dissent rebuked the majority's decision. He pointed out that history and custom rendered preposterous the majority opinion's blithe denial that anything untoward had happened. The railroad's separation of the races occurred against a background that made its symbolism and insult unmistakable (p. 103).

Decades later, riders, for their part, have the opportunity to engage and interrogate the commuting experience, through a kind of border-crossing, where people actively move across the socially, culturally and politically constructed divides that separate cultural groups and discourse communities, one from another. Taking note of pending destinations, white men and women in business suits exit the south-bound train, while black and brown bodies sink into seats and opportunities deferred.

As a High School Language Arts teacher, I've strived to better understand and traverse such borders and social locations. My high school classroom is a site where day-to-day border crossing--police brutality, residential violence and abuse coincided with subject-matter learning. As Lee, et. al. (2002) point out, youth from marginalized minority group face additional "mixed messages about appropriate belief systems and cultural displays—as they move across settings, and uneven and sometimes confusing responsibilities for peripheral participation in adult life activities" (p. 6).

Researchers have documented how African American adolescents have assumed tasks that were once the responsibilities of their parents (Burton, Allison & Obeidallah, 1995; Ginwright, 2004; Lee, Beale-Spencer & Harpalini, 2004). The struggles of finding decent work, paying rent, and juggling child-care have undoubtedly placed greater challenges on youth in urban communities. For these students, who often assume adult-type roles at home (e.g., parents, economic providers, child-care providers) while at the same time they are expected to assume docile, child-like, passive roles within the social organization of the school, academic achievement is often delimited by the economic conditions of the communities in which they live (Ginwright, 2004; Lee, Spencer & Harpalini, 2004). These shifts are daily acts of border crossing.

As a class we collectively cross borders through subject matter and literary texts and make use of available tools of literacy and life problem solving that transform the classroom into a community site for learning. Here students interrogate life's challenges, which include tending to color-blind discourses instantiated within texts, drawing on forms of prior knowledge for the consideration of alternative perspec-

tives. Interventions and educational research that do not reflect young people's histories and their unique cultural niches often miss opportunities to influence generative change. Thus, any intervention whose goal is to increase life chances and decrease gaps in achievement ad opportunity cannot ignore students' perceptions of what is threatening (whether it is what and how they are being taught in school or their relationships with adults and peers) and what is supportive to their own development (p. 6).

In the act of literary problem solving, students carry out epistemological roles demanded by the subject matter within culturally familiar participation structures. Together they digest (even assume) multiple points of view in order to counter hegemonic dominant themes of word and world —skills that mimic and at times exceed those required in any Language Arts classroom. As teacher-researcher, I attempt to understand how the complexities inherent in life problem solving intersect in positive ways with their literate achievement, as well as teachers' perceptions of, individual social, cultural and institutional underpinnings that impact that achievement.

The demographic, historical, and ideological contrasts between my university and high school classrooms, however, are alarming, even as one population prepares to service the other. McCarthy (1998) suggests, "Education is indeed a critical site in which struggles over the organization and concentration and emotional and political investment and moral affiliation are taking place" (cited in Winans, 2005, p. 254). For the most part, my university students are crossing borders, sometimes for the first time, but they frequently lack the tools for negotiating their own questions and confronting their own struggles to reconcile new knowledge with what they thought they knew about the world. As a result, many students who have not experienced dissonance may not be willing to talk about their ideas as part of their execution of privilege and willful ignorance.

The challenge for secondary and post-secondary educators who traverse the borders of race, class and social relations is to unpack assumptions but, at the same time, create a space that allows for transformative conversations. This should be an integral part of the socialization process of all students, and it's an area in desperate need of further exploration and research. As Gutierrez and Jaramillo (2006) suggest such work, both theoretical and practical, could unveil the silenced and unaddressed ideological and historical factors that inhibit and complicate our abilities to create and sustain rich transformative learning communities.

The persistence of the normative discourse around non-dominant youth and schooling has led to impoverished representations of what it means to know and to teach, though such representations are continually viewed as normative. As a result, "educational policies and practices will not seek to leverage the full range of repertoires available to all human beings as they navigate what is entailed in learning new things, including learning the disciplines of the academy" (Lee, 2009 p. 66). As suggested by Lee (2009), not only do we need to account for the full ecologies of peoples' lives, we must also account for the fact that vulnerability is endemic to being human, for everyone not just those facing domination. A fundamental task of life-course development, including all the tasks associated with learning in schools, is to manage vulnerability in ways that facilitate what we perceive to be positive outcomes across the life course. The nature of the challenges and triumphs we face and the resources available to us to respond to those challenges will vary according to the cultural and ecological contexts in which we live. As a member of a teaching community, you can:

Seek to understand the ways in which members of particular communities develop with and through the kinds of routine, problem-solving strategies that characterize theirs as a community of practice.
Provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse, culturally rich texts that incorporate linguis-

tic features, such as African American English, in texts—in conjunction with classroom discourse that includes aspects of African American English.

Extend beyond a consideration of literacy as skill to consider literacy as multiple and situated within sociocultural practices, discourse as connected to culturally situated notions of power and power relations, and texts as functioning to represent certain ideologies.

Encourage students to engage in ways that make use of culturally familiar norms while grappling with difficult text.

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