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# Recently I was in a fatal incident: Personal narratives and social identities

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on Wes, a Black student in a 9th grade English Language Arts (ELA) class taught by Ms. Henry. Wes was socially identified as a violent, problematically challenging, and "naturally" academically unambitious student by Ms. Henry based on the perceptions of Wes drawn up from broader social discourses of race/gender identities and also from authorized institutional (school) "acceptable" and narrowly defined ways to perform classroom roles. Using discourse analysis to examine Wes's contributions during one classroom discussion, this work explores how Wes achieved identities other than those imputed on him while explicitly countering prevailing institutional notions of him as a Black adolescent, his linguistic practices, and by extension, speakers of Black Language.

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This work focuses on Wes,[1] a Black student in a 9th grade English Language Arts (ELA) class taught by Ms. Henry. Wes was socially identified in two distinct ways, one based on the perceptions of Ms. Henry, and the other based on his participation in classroom discussions. The purpose of this paper is to closely examine how Wes achieved identities other than those imputed to him.

## 1. Knowing Wes

I spent approximately nine weeks in Ms. Henry's classroom, from March to May 2013 observing, teaching, co-teaching, and modeling ways in which to support students in literary interpretation. A graduate research assistant, Mrs. Kay was in the classroom with me during the nine weeks. This was part of a larger project regarding curricular interventions in ELA classrooms.[2] The purpose of the interventions was to support ELA teachers in teaching their students the processes of literary inquiry and reasoning. Ms. Henry volunteered to be part of the project and one class period was chosen for the intervention. Our work in this class began in January (conducting a six-day related intervention). Wes was not part of the intervention in January because he was not in school but he was in class when we returned to the classroom in March.

Ms. Henry often mentioned that the group of freshmen that school year were "not up to par" and had behavior problems. She used the phrase "They let everyone in this year" to indicate that the school's selective enrollment was either ignored or not working. She often commented on how students did not do homework or know how to behave. She also often relayed information about students getting in fights and being suspended. In attempting to make her case and indicate she was justified and authorized to say this, Ms. Henry presented other 9th grade teachers as saying the same about this group of students. Declaring that this position was not hers alone lent weight and cogency to this concern (Cooren & Sandler, 2014) and indicated a particular recognizable type of student at the institutional (and more broadly, societal) level. That is, Wes was part of the incoming freshmen (mainly Black and Latino male students) whose recognizable social type had been construed as that of stereotyped minoritized urban adolescent males: violent, "naturally" academically unambitious, and anomic (Archer, 2008; Ferguson, 2001; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Lynn, 2006). Wes was not only categorized as part of a group of problem/problematic students, he was also individually positioned as such.

The first time Wes came to my attention was when Mrs. Kay was informed by Ms. Henry that there was a new student in her class who would need a consent form to be part of the intervention. Wes had not been there the previous week when we were consenting students for the study. Ms. Henry pointed out Wes to Mrs. Kay and added, "Well he is not really new; he is back from jail." Wes consented to be part of the study.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

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Approximately three weeks into the intervention, Ms. Henry announced that the class would be reading the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2006). Many students noted their dislike in choice of book by grumbling, stating it was a boring book, and some mentioned they had read the novel the previous year. Wes seemed particularly bothered by the book choice. When I asked him about it, he stated that he had read the book before and that the book was racist and he had no interest in reading about "White people killing Black people and getting away with it." When I brought up Wes's critique to Ms. Henry, she was visibly annoyed and stated that Wes was just using the book as an excuse not to do any work. However, having been in the classroom daily and teaching much of the time during those first three weeks, I had seen firsthand how Wes was actively engaged in the discussions and readings during class.

The last six weeks of the instructional intervention focused on the novel and Wes, despite his critique of the book, actively participated in most of the discussions that took place. It was during the last six weeks that three students, including Wes, were suspended for a few days due to a fight with students from another school. At this time, Ms. Henry suggested that Wes had gang ties; something she had mentioned previously to Mrs. Kay. In May, Tye, another student in Ms. Henry's class and Wes's best friend, was murdered. The following day, Ms. Henry, visibly shaken by the murder of one her students, stated to Mrs. Kay that she would have expected Wes to be killed, not Tye.

## 2. Ms. Henry: voicing a larger societal narrative

Bakhtin's (1981) work on discourse as polyphonic and heteroglossic suggests that many voices are recognized in utterances and statements made, thereby problematizing the question of "*who* or even *what* speaks when someone communicates" (emphasis in the original; Cooren & Sandler, 2014, p. 226). Ms. Henry's comments carried specific intentions and meanings and were socially charged with contextual overtones (Cooren & Sandler, 2014); her words became an orchestration of the various larger societal discourses of race/gender identities (metanarratives) that positioned Wes in a recognizable way.

Social identification has no set rules on the resources drawn to identify an individual. "Instead, different configurations of resources contribute to the thickening of social identity in different cases" (Wortham, 2003, p. 167). However, the process of identifying, whatever configuration of resources used, is deeply ingrained in culture (Racevskis, 1987) and is shaped historically, contextually, and relationally (Jabal & Rivière, 2007). Ms. Henry drew on racist enduring discourses of Black boys/men and on particular metasigns (a set of beliefs that frame particular behaviors as part of a recognizable social type; Wortham, 2003) stretching through incidents involving Wes and spanning across multiple social spaces (Leander, 2002). In Wes's case, being in jail, getting into fights, and supposedly having gang ties framed him as violent and aggressive while his critique of book choice, construed as a complaint and discredited, along with the suspicion that he would not do any work, cast him as a problematically challenging, resistant, and disengaged student. Ms. Henry's characterization of Wes was drawn up from the broader social discourses of race/gender identities and also from authorized institutional (school) "acceptable" and narrowly defined ways to perform classroom roles. As Gee (2001) contends:

> Thanks to more subtle forms of institutional racism still prevalent, many "Black" children fill positions in schools that conflate being "African American" with being "at risk" for school failure and with a variety of other negative attributes. These positions come to constitute institutional identities for them, ones that they may accept or resist, but in terms of which their words and deeds are interpreted nonetheless (p. 108)

## 3. Identities, literacies and discourse

Identities are not freely chosen by an individual nor simply ascribed by others. Identities embody an external/internal dialectic, that is, "[i]dentity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 5). As such, identity can be viewed as drawn up from various experiences, interactions, relationships, all taking place within particular contexts and time (Luke & Luke, 1999; McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

The social/personal dialectic indicates that individuals have agency in how they position themselves and self-identify in social contexts, but since no space is neutral and instead is governed by "acceptable" or "preferred" ways of being, the enacted self is reliant on demands, arrangements, and connections in a given context (Reyes, 2009). This indicates that both structural forces and conditions, along with individual agency, combine to shape identities (Vincent, 2003). Identities are also fluid and dynamic, suggesting an "endless performative self" (Hall, 1996) that "requires reading the smaller and plural stories of social settings through which identities, individual and collective, are produced" (Jabal & Rivière, 2007, p. 202).

Physical markers of identity "play a role in stabilizing, to some extent, how identities are enacted and interpreted, read and written, and how selves are performed" (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p. 234). For students of color, there is often a tension (contextual and situational) between how they are perceived and individual agency in identifying and situating her/his self in social contexts; this is what Gee (2001) refers to as either an ascribed or achieved identity. Various socially constructed categories such as race, gender and other identity markers simultaneously contribute to social inequality (Crenshaw, 1991) because individuals are imputed particular (different as deficit) identities (Gee, 2001). For Wes, being a Black male called up the historicity and contextuality tied to that marker and racial category (cf. Jabal & Rivière, 2007).

Gee (2001) defines identity as being recognized as a "kind of person" within a given context. In this sense, individuals have multiple (fluid, often changing) identities that connect to their participation in society and not to some static internal state. Gee (2001) suggests four interrelated aspects from which to view what it means to be a "certain kind of person": Nature, Institution, Discourse, and Affinity. I briefly describe these four strands.

The Nature perspective views identity as developed from forces in nature (i.e., genes) and outside of the control of society. However, Nature identities always collapse into other identities (Institutions, Discourse, Affinity) and gain their recognition as identities through the effort of institutions, discourses, and affinity groups.

Institutions, such as school, authorize and give power to certain identities (Institutional Identities). This perspective posits that the power and process of authorization derive from institutional rules, laws, and traditions to "author" positions as well as "authorize" individuals in such positions certain rights and commitments. As Black suggests (2007)

> Such authorized or ascribed identities are clearly present in classrooms where teachers are vested with the role of expert, and students by virtue of tracking, individual or independent education programs (IEPs), and sometimes general supposition, are assigned roles as certain kinds of learners. This sort of ascription of identity becomes problematic when students from non-mainstream backgrounds are expected to occupy roles based on deficit models of cultural and linguistic diversity and differences in learning styles. Moreover, such cultural and cognitive-deficit models connote certain types of identities, behaviors, and abilities, without ample consideration of the role that the classroom and curricular contexts play in our

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