Empowering Pedagogies that Enhance the Learning of Multicultural Students

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In this article, I lay out the tenets of a critical pedagogy and present the details of a study designed to investigate the presence of those tenets within the discourse patterns and pedagogical practices observed in community-based classrooms, which serve as alternative sites of urban multicultural education. Through analyses of the discourses and pedagogies used in the classrooms of three African American female teachers, I investigate the degree to which these teachers are able to challenge their students to consider alternative life possibilities, to become critical thinkers, and to consider transformation of their current life situations and the life situations of others. Through depictions of everyday activities and discourses that occur in these community-based classrooms, I illustrate how, although the overt rhetoric of these organizations is one that often says, "follow the rules . . . don't challenge lines of authority," the covert communicative messages in these community-based classrooms were often geared toward encouraging students to develop higher levels of consciousness and the skills needed to take control of and perhaps even transform their existing life experiences. Based on the findings of this investigation, I advocate for the conscious creation of dialogic, multiculturally sensitive classrooms where empowering, dynamic constructions of knowledge can become a reality by expanding upon the strategic uses of discourse patterns and pedagogical practices observed in the classrooms of these African American female teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In 1988 Giroux accurately depicted the state of United States research on literacy as almost exclusively linked either to a functional perspective tied to a crisis in literacy that emphasized a need to train more workers for occupational jobs demanding functional reading and writing skills, or to a logic designed to initiate the poor, the underprivileged or minorities into an ideology of the mastery of a Western dominant cultural tradition. Viewed from either perspective, literacy education was generally seen as disempowering and oppressive. At that time, critical theorists proposed a radical view of literacy that revolved around the need to identify and transform any existing ideologies or social conditions that served to undermine possibilities for the existence of community and public life organized around the

imperatives of a critical democracy. In addition, they proposed a reconstituted view of literacy that provided a language of hope and transformation for those who were struggling for a better future. Johnston (1992) criticized the research on critical pedagogy because of its use of inaccessible language. She noted that the use of such language made it difficult for practitioners to make links between the rhetoric of critical pedagogy and its implementation within actual classrooms. Ellsworth (1989) also criticized the literature on critical pedagogy because of its lack of usefulness in assisting educators to think through and plan improvements in actual classroom practice. She stated that:

> educational researchers who invoke concepts of critical pedagogy consistently strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position. What remain are the definitions . . . which operate at a high level of abstraction. I found this language more appropriate (yet hardly more helpful) for philosophical debates about the highly problematic concepts of freedom, justice, democracy, and "universal" values than for thinking through and planning classroom practices to support the political agenda. . . . (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300)

Such criticisms emphasize the need to bridge the gap between the rhetoric of critical pedagogy and the realities of its implementation in actual classroom practice. One way to accomplish this goal is through the conduct of research designed to extrapolate the tenets of critical pedagogy from the interactive classroom practices of teachers who attempt to operationalize such a philosophy in their day-to-day teaching.

The research reported on in this article was conducted within three community-based organizations that serve as alternative sites in which educational activities take place. These types of organizations often support social, cultural, and political agendas that emerge within a given community. Many of the educational activities that take place within urban community-based organizations have centered on uses of language and literacy, and they serve as community resources for African Americans in historical and present day contexts (Ball, 1995). In this article, I look at the goals that three African American female teachers have described for their students, and I analyze the actual discourse patterns and pedagogical practices that go on in their classrooms to support those goals. I further demonstrate how these teachers operate at different points along a continuum in terms of their implementation of a critical pedagogy, as they press their students to consider the possibilities of becoming "border crossers" (Giroux & McLaren, 1994)—that is, as they press their students to become creative thinkers, decision makers, and transformers of their current life situations.

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AS ALTERNATIVE SITES FOR LEARNING

This research builds on the premise that there exist numerous educational sites within the African American community where students find opportunities to experience a close connection to their own cultural community. The discourse practices that take place within these sites contribute to the building and sustaining of a sense of community and support a pedagogy that takes advantage of the cultural and linguistic knowledge that students bring to the learning environment (Ball, 1995). Such sites (referred to as community-based organizations) exist in most urban areas, but are generally overlooked by city officials, policy makers, and educators as resources for youth or young adults or as potential partners with schools and families in meeting the learning needs of urban students (Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Milofsky, 1987). Community-based organizations are often regarded as supplemental, peripheral, leisure, or recreational sites; their full educational promise is thus seldom recognized. However, the primary contribution of many community-based organizations lies in their ability to provide different types of literacy and learning experiences for culturally diverse youth and adults from those available in schools and other more traditional educational institutions (Ball, 1995). This makes them a valuable space for investigating the discourse patterns and pedagogical practices that take place there as we look for ways to enhance the learning of multicultural students. Because community-based organizations have a track record of providing different types of structured and unstructured learning experiences that are successful with students who have failed to succeed within traditional classrooms, their value and resource potential warrant close attention and further consideration as educationally and culturally responsive learning environments for multicultural populations.

Historically, community-based organizations have served as social, cultural, and political spaces in which African Americans have been able to assert their right and their responsibility not only to read, write, and understand, but also to gain new literacy skills needed for them to transform their life experiences. Community-based organizations have also served as spaces where African Americans have been able to contribute their voices to wider projects of possibility and community empowerment (e.g., Freedom Schools and the Black Panther Schools). This tradition continues, and can be observed within the classrooms of many African American teachers in community-based organizations. I conducted this research within the classrooms of three African American teachers in a Midwestern, urban community. The teaching practices observed in these predominantly African American inner-city classrooms focused, at one level, on how these teachers impart the knowledge and skills needed to get and keep a job. At

a deeper level, my observations revealed teaching practices that focused on laying a foundation for the cultural action that these teachers felt needed to take place to transform the students' life situations. My observations revealed how these teachers' classroom practices were in keeping with the discourse of critical theory, which advocates for the practice of *teaching for liberation.* Stated in a language that is more useful for thinking through and planning classroom practices, teaching for liberation can be described simply as "pedagogical practices that facilitate or encourage human action and agency." If, in fact, the ultimate end of critical pedagogy is to produce liberation, then the process of liberation must be steeped in human agency. For theorists like Freire, that liberation begins as the oppressed begin to recognize their oppression and as they begin to engage in human agency to address their oppression. At high levels of abstraction, the discourse of critical pedagogy talks about the liberation of the oppressed. In real classrooms, however, the discourse of implementing a critical pedagogy is one that encourages students to move toward forms of action and human agency.

Based on my observations of the three teachers in this study, I propose that the implementation of a critical pedagogy plays out in teachers' advocacy for students to consider issues of agency, and that the implementation of agency-oriented pedagogy occurs along a continuum for individual teachers. My investigation revealed that teachers' location along that continuum can be identified by how they differentially speak to matters of human agency in their interactions with students. At the first level of this continuum, students are encouraged to exercise individual agency within a restricted domain. Observations of the first teacher in my study revealed that students were encouraged to exercise individual agency within the domain of the machinist industry. At the second level of this continuum, students are also encouraged to exercise individual agency, but within a more generalized domain. Observations of the second teacher in my study revealed that a key notion was introduced—the notion of choice—such that students were encouraged not to restrict themselves to one career, but rather to consider their life possibilities from a much larger domain. This teacher encouraged her students to carve out their life choices within multiple arenas. The third level of this continuum focuses on agency, not simply at an individual level, but at the level of potential for group agency. Observations of the third teacher in my study revealed that students were encouraged to move beyond considerations for individual life changes toward the consideration of agentic possibilities of African Americans as a group and the consideration of their relationship as individuals within that group. Thus, as we look closely at how teachers practice critical pedagogy, we can observe that their location along a "continuum of implementation" can be identified by how they encourage students to move from considerations of agency at an individual level to considerations of agency at a group level, and from consid-

erations of agency within a restricted domain to considerations of agency within an elaborate domain on matters of choice. Analyses of the discourse practices that occur within classrooms can assist us in locating where teachers lie along this continuum. The investigation discussed in this article focuses on classroom discourse that produces agency. The analysis described in this investigation reveals the location of three African American teachers along the continuum based on how they differentially speak to matters of human agency within their classrooms.

In the first classroom that I visited, teaching for liberation involved an intellectual exercise of consciousness raising. This teacher's classroom talk involved her students in imagining life possibilities and raising their awareness about language use both inside and outside the job context. In the second classroom I visited, my observations revealed that the practice of teaching for liberation played itself out most vividly in the teacher's demonstration of an "intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, and to create and re-create their worlds" (Freire, 1993, p. 71). This teacher engaged her students in discussions that not only raised their consciousness about life possibilities, but also raised questions about their perceptions of themselves in the world. More important, this teacher introduced the role of choice in determining alternative possibilities. In the third classroom, my observations confirmed Freire's notion that

> the starting point for organizing the program content of education for political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation. . . . We must pose the existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action. (Freire, 1993, p. 76–77)

This third teacher engaged her students in discussions about their life situations and about their perceptions of themselves in the world, but she also challenged them to consider their education as a tool to move them toward political action for themselves and for others. To understand more clearly how each teachers' classroom talk encouraged students to produce some form of agency requires that we investigate more closely the discourse practices that occurred within each educational setting.

Almost a decade ago (around the same time that the voices of the critical theorists emerged), Shulman issued the following challenge to the educational research community:

> We find few descriptions or analyses of teachers that give careful attention not only to the management of students in classrooms, but also to the management of ideas within classroom discourse. Both kinds of emphasis will be needed if our portrayals of good practice are

to serve as sufficient guides to the design of better education. (Shulman, 1987, p. 1)

Over the decade, few studies focusing on the management of students and the management of ideas within the classrooms of African American teachers have emerged to meet this challenge (Foster, 1987). This article presents an investigation of the discourse and teaching practices within the classrooms of three African American teachers. Since our ultimate goal is to move toward more successful educational programs within multicultural classrooms, we must first come to a better understanding of the mechanisms through which successful teaching and learning take place. This analysis of classroom discourse practices is designed to address the concerns raised by Shulman (1987), Ellsworth (1989), and Johnston (1992). It is hoped that such an analysis can help teachers and teacher educators to understand and appreciate the discourse practices of teachers who work successfully with students from diverse backgrounds so other teachers can build upon the lessons learned as a resource in the development of pedagogies that are educationally and culturally responsive. This article concludes with a discussion of how the discourse practices observed in this study relate to the notion of a critical pedagogy and how having a better understanding of the discourse and pedagogical practices of these African American teachers may have implications for others who are interested in transforming the rhetoric of critical theory into the practice of critical pedagogy.

TENETS OF A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

According to Lankshear and McLaren (1993), it is possible to observe, in most American classrooms, how agents act within established power structures and within dominating ideologies to determine what literacies will be for others. Studies have traced the varying ways in which people are taught (and not taught) to use (and not to use) reading, writing, and oral language (Allington, 1983; Gilmore, 1985, 1986; Sola & Bennet, 1985; Fiering, 1981; Carini, 1994; Shuman, 1986). Studies have also documented the conditions or restrictions imposed upon the uses of literacies (Fine, 1987) and prevailing conceptions of their legitimate or "correct" uses in various learning environments (Shuman, 1986; Rist, 1970). These studies document important factors in shaping whose language and which interests and aspirations are best satisfied and whose voices are heard within classrooms through established daily routines. Anyon (1981) discusses her observations of how actual physical characteristics and dynamics of the classroom work to produce learning contexts suited to promoting particular interests and patterns of social control among lower, working, middle, and elite classes of students. In many classrooms located in lower- and working-class commu-

nities, heavy emphasis is generally placed on sheer classroom management and students are required to be docile and quiet, except when called on to recite information. Interaction styles that promote obedience, quietness, and discipline are the norm in such classrooms. The method of rote repetition of oral and written material is common in these classrooms as is a "banking pedagogy" that fosters passive acceptance of the status quo (Freire, 1993). At the very least, these practices serve to undermine conceptions of literacies that are conducive to a more reflective and interactive orientation. These practices play an important role in the preservation of established structures, routines, and the hierarchies of interests they ordain.

A critical pedagogy, on the other hand, encourages reflective consciousness and the questioning of social practices and arrangements that promote ruling interests. In classrooms that practice critical pedagogy, serious attention—whether implicitly or explicitly expressed—is given to enlightening learners concerning life possibilities and focus on issues of power and the struggles that have historically shaped the voices, meanings, and experiences of marginalized others. Stated in the lofty intellectual terms of the theoretician, critical pedagogy refers to the development of a praxis of the present and conscientization, as well as the empowerment of individuals through critical reflection and the development of dialogue and voice concerning the transformative power of cultural knowledge. Revealed through the everyday practices of the first practitioner that I observed, implementing a critical pedagogy involved developing students' capacities to read, write, and use oral language in a context where the teacher consciously strives to encourage students to consider life possibilities. Revealed through the everyday practices of the second practitioner that I observed, implementing a critical pedagogy involved not only developing students' capacities to read, write, and use oral language and encouraging students to consider life's possibilities, but it also introduced the notion of choice as students considered how they perceive themselves in the world and considered their capacities to accomplish their goals. Revealed through the everyday practices of the third practitioner that I observed, implementing a critical pedagogy involved developing students' capacities to read, write, and use oral language strategically, encouraging students to consider how they perceive themselves in the world, considering choices as they established their life objectives, and encouraging students to become confident decision makers who challenged individual and group oppressive social forms.

According to Lankshear and McLaren (1993), literacy is recognized as a many and varied construct. As demonstrated in the classrooms of the three African American teachers that I observed, literacy education in its varied versions is shaped by the practice of classroom talk as a means of organizing and inscribing meaning. Documentation of significant aspects of the

classroom talk used by successful teachers can be one response to Shulman's challenge to provide descriptions of the management of ideas in classrooms that can serve as a guide to the design of better education.

My goals in conducting this research were to uncover discourse patterns that served to organize and inscribe meaning and to unveil some of the oral strategies teachers' use to foster different forms of student agency. Here, literacies are identified as forms of discursive production that organize ways of thinking into ways of doing and being.

THE DISCOURSES OF CLASSROOM LEARNING

Generally speaking, discourse patterns are generated and lived out within political contexts, within structures and relations of power inherited by humans inhabiting a given cultural and social time and space. Discourse patterns are recognized as norm-governed practices and involvements around and within which forms of human living are constructed and identities and subjectivities are shaped. The discourse practices in classrooms are no exception to this reality. This means that the discourses of classroom learning are by no means confined to the *words* used to conduct a lesson. They include norms and processes by which authority is established and exercised, discipline is maintained, and decisions are made about what will be learned, how it will be learned, and myriad other ingredients that collectively explain what is going on at a particular moment in a given physical and sociocultural space. Because they are imbedded within social, political, and structural norms and processes, the function and impact of the interactive discourse patterns in classrooms are often hidden and implicit. In order to describe and analyze the management of ideas within classroom discourse (in ways that will serve as sufficient guides to the design of better education), educators must first have opportunities to see examples of the discourse patterns being practiced, and then they must be given opportunities to consider their influences in heuristic ways.

The research that follows took place in three urban community-based programs: two job training programs that serve predominantly African American populations and an ethnocentric rites-of-passage program for African American female participants. During three years of observations in these community-based organizations, four key factors emerged as crucial elements in constructing and sustaining a sense of community in these environments. Those factors included collaboration, negotiation, interactive discourse patterns, and opportunities for participants to view themselves as knowledge sources and important members of a valued community (Ball, 1995). My observations within these environments further revealed how the African American participants were exposed to and used diverse forms of oral and written literacies. In these organizations, it was typical to observe

African American teachers and students engaged in dynamic, interactive discourse that drew on a wide range of communicative styles, including African American vernacular English (AAVE), as mediums for incorporating the cultural language practices of the students when transmitting information and to make that information more accessible to all of the students. Scholars like Lee (1993) point out the cognitive benefits of drawing on students' cultural language as a tool when teaching diverse students. To differing degrees, I observed that the three African American female educators in my study were able to draw on the students' language patterns as a resource as they encouraged and sometimes challenged their students to think critically and to use the cultural capital that they brought with them into the classroom. They also used language that raised the students' levels of consciousness on varied issues and promoted occasions for a wide range of adaptive language uses. The vignettes that follow are provided to give portraits of the activities I observed, and to give the reader illustrations of the discourse patterns and pedagogical practices that took place in these community-based organizations on a daily basis. They further illustrate how teachers use classroom discourse practices to move students toward agency. The observations reported on in this research were obtained using ethnographic techniques—including unobtrusive ethnographic observations, interviews, and participant observations within classrooms—to gain an understanding of the social behavior at work within these environments in terms that reflect, as closely as possible, the ways members of the culture view the universe and organize their behavior within it (Basso, 1974). These vignettes also serve to share illustrations of instances in which these teachers approach—to different degrees—the implementation of a critical pedagogy in their classrooms.

Transcripts of these teachers' class sessions emerged as members of our research team entered the classrooms to observe, record, and code the oral language interactions that took place between the teachers and the students and among the students themselves. In analyzing the data, I was particularly interested in the discourse patterns teachers and students used in classroom interaction. I asked the question: What can we learn by looking closely at how these teachers and students initiate and carry on classroom discourse patterns by expressing ideas in specific ways to accomplish their communicative goals? Because most of the classroom talk was initiated by the teachers, the investigation focused primarily on the teacher talk and, to a lesser degree, on the student talk. Looking at the discourse patterns that teachers and students used and when they used them, I was able to detect patterns of teacher and student language use and to better understand how teachers encouraged and sometimes challenged students in different ways and to different degrees.

At various points, I used a finer level of discourse analysis and microethnography to investigate particular recurring communicative situations

that occurred within these learning environments (Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992). Focusing on the dynamic nature of the discourse patterns and the use of language that encouraged students to think critically and to move toward some form of action, I looked at various instructional situations involving the teachers and program participants. I recorded classroom sessions, transcribed the recordings, broke down the transcriptions into four-minute segments, and coded the discourse for theme, type of verbal interaction, and language use that was either accepting, praising, encouraging, linking to the student's experiences, expanding, questioning, confirming of students' understanding, invoking symbolic solidarity, invoking critique, or invoking action. As the investigation evolved, the goal of the research was to gain an understanding of the ways in which teachers strategically used classroom talk to help create quality instruction that was conducive to a critical pedagogy.

EMPOWERING PEDAGOGIES THAT ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF MULTICULTURAL STUDENTS WITHIN COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATIONAL SITES

VIGNETTE 1: CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING DISCOURSE

Traveling into the inner-city community, down several crowded boulevards and across numerous congested intersections, I arrive at my destination, Workplace Mall. Workplace Mall is a building that houses two of the Operation Succeed job training programs: one, a non-profit specialized "machinist training program" that is referred to as MTP, and the other, *UPWARD BOUND,* a nonprofit program that was developed to address the lack of prerequisite academic and professional skills found among urban populations who are seeking to enter the workforce. The goals of the MTP program are to provide participants with thirty-one weeks of full-time, on-the-job training in basic machinery, and another twenty-six weeks of full-time, on-the-job training in advanced machinery. The *UPWARD BOUND* program goals are to provide young adults, high school graduates, and transitional populations with academic exposures that will enhance their hirability and provide experiences in industry standards of discipline, productivity, and personal conduct. Teachers in these programs work with participants to help them improve their academic and communication skills, learn computer applications, investigate technical career options in manufacturing and other fields, and to succeed in technical training, growth opportunity employment, or higher education.

Ms. Friedson teaches several classes each day in the MTP on-the-job precision machining program designed for urban youth and transitioning adults. She is a no-nonsense, "take charge" type of person who gets right

down to the business of teaching. Ms. Friedson is known by everyone for her ability to engage students in dynamic learning exchanges that result in clear and expanded understandings of math and scientific principles. Ms. Friedson was the first African American female to work as a licensed union machinist in her state. Her students know that before coming to MTP, Ms. Friedson enjoyed a distinguished career in her field. She draws on her more than twenty years of experience and working knowledge as she teaches her students the techniques and principles needed to succeed in the machinist industry.

I observed Ms. Friedson's shop theory class that had twenty-one students; twenty of them were African American and one was European American. Sixteen of the students in this class were men and five were women. All of the students had earned a high school diploma or the equivalent prior to entering the program. In Ms. Friedson's classes, understanding language use appeared to be one key to understanding how the students established a sense of community within their classroom and on the job. It is important to note that Ms. Friedson uses language in her class as a tool for socializing students as they become machinists.

As Ms. Friedson proceeds with an engaging lesson on shop theory and mathematics, I hear one student whisper to another, "Man, ain't she bad!" The students sit in their seats, seemingly almost spellbound and in awe of their teacher's knowledge base and the ease with which she shares that knowledge with the students in her classes. The students' knowledge of Ms. Friedson's accomplishments instills in them the notion of "possibilities" for their own lives—the notion that they too can gain control of their life situations by gaining command, as she has done, over the subject matter that is being presented to them.

Drawing on life experiences, Ms. Friedson engages her students in consciousness raising discussions concerning the role of language and its use in the machinist industry. She uses the teaching situation as an implicit opportunity to teach the students that the language they use in their everyday life also has value in their work situations. As she encourages them to think consciously about their use of language within both contexts, she presses students to think about their language in a reflective way. She begins the lesson by saying,

> *Let's open our minds to something new. Use your mind. Open your imagination.* We're gonna talk about talk, and about reading numbers from machines. Not just so it'll look good on a piece of paper, but because machine language is a language that's passed on. You may not be able to pick up a book and find it all right there. *But you've heard it, and you've used it, and now if you think about it and listen to it . . . you can use it to succeed at work too.*

The following exchange is an example of how Ms. Friedson uses classroom talk about decimals and tolerance (a concept in measurement that has to do with variance, leaving room for give and take) as a metaphor to teach a lesson about life during a math lesson.

Teacher: (While using a technical tool to measure an instrument, the teacher asks) Why do we have tolerances like that?

Student: Cause everyone doesn't read it perfect.

Teacher: That's right ... because everyone doesn't come in perfect on Monday morning, right? Some of us might've had a little arthritis acting up or something. Or anything could've gone wrong, so if we're not "dead on the money" (that is, exactly precise in our measurement), then we're not gonna throw away all the parts, now are we, Mr. Thompson?

Student: No. But I was wondering, is it wrong if we convert it to decimals?

Teacher: No, it is not. It is just usually easier in fractions if you can work fast in fractions, OK? Either way is okay, cuz what's the main purpose here? The main purpose is, the boss wants to see the job done, doesn't he?

Student: Yeah. That's right. Results is the measure.

Teacher: That's right. And productivity is the measure. So, if you're gonna be there all night tryin' to mess around with fractions ... and here it is four o'clock and everybody's leavin' ... goin' home. Then your boss would appreciate you working in decimals if that's easier for you. Right? So use whatever comes easier. *But we must be able to play around and move around in both of them, and to decide which one works best for us. So never get yourself honed in in life to where you can only do things one way.*

At first glance one might note the limitations of this discourse as one that seems to be preparing the students to take on roles as docile workers. However, after further consideration we notice that Ms. Friedson is moving her students' thoughts beyond these initial notions to encourage them to consider exercising individual agency within the domain of the machinist industry when she tells them that they "must be able to play around and move around" in different mediums to accomplish a goal within the machinist industry, and "to decide which one works best" for them. She further presents a rather revolutionary concept when she cautions her students to "never get yourself honed in in life to where you can only do things one way." As she goes to the board to work out some sample math problems, Ms. Friedson continually flashes a welcoming smile that invites participation from all of the students. She doesn't make students feel nervous about volunteering answers. Wrong answers are accepted as constructively as cor-

rect ones. She commands the respect and utmost attention of her students. And by the same token, she gives this respect back to the students. For example, everyone is referred to as Mr. or Ms. in the class.

In the following excerpt, students review their expertise at converting decimals into fractions.

Teacher: OK, that's real good *Ms. Brench*. Now, tell me, what's one sixty-fourth?

Student #1: That's the same as sixteen thousandths ($1/64 = 0.015625$; which rounds to 0.016).

Teacher: Sixteen thousandths. *Is she right class?*

Student #2: Yes.

Teacher: Oh, come on. *She don't look that tough, we can disagree with her. Come on somebody! Don't you want to challenge her on that answer?* (The room is silent.) OK, so all right. How 'bout one half? One half, somebody help me with this one.

Student #3: How about one fifth?

Teacher: The only fifth we have is in the backyard on the fourth of July.

Student #3: Oh, OK, you straight, Teacher. OK, you straight.

Teacher: Let's try that again. How 'bout one half, can somebody help me with this one?

Student #4: It converts to point two five.

Teacher: Point two five? Uh oh, we gonna have to hurt him! It's not point two five; its point five. But here's another one. Can anyone tell me, how much are steel rule measurements allowed to vary? *Now, think for a moment before you answer that question, you're not allowed the leisure of just throwin' out just any answer anymore, right?* Has everybody thought about it? Yes sir? What's your answer?

Student #5: OK, I'mma break it down for y'all. It's like what Ms. Friedson was kickin' around about how fractions be goin' both ways. So the answer is plus or minus one sixty-fourth.

Teacher: That's right! Plus or minus one sixty-fourth. So . . . he deserves a big kiss cause he had that plus or minus in front of it, didn't he? Cause what happened was, a lot of people just gave me one sixty-fourth. Remember . . . on that little pre-test we took? And that one sixty-fourth is only half-way right. Because when you tell me plus or minus, it means I can be one sixty-fourth less or one sixty fourth greater, and still have a good part. So, if I have a measurement, and my base measurement says one and three eighths of an inch, what's the smallest that part can be?

Student #6:   One point three seven five.

Teacher: The smallest? He said one point three seven five, we ready to get him.

Student #6:   Wait uh, the smallest? Is uh minus point zero, one five two. Two five from uh, um.

Teacher: He's working on it.

Student #6:   What was his lead? (Silence as student thinks) One twenty-three sixty-fourth.

Teacher: OK. I got one twenty-three sixty-fourth, *are you in agreement Mr. Alan*? Uh oh! He must have hit the lottery over the weekend! That's right! Good answer!

In addition to her frequent words of encouragement (e.g., "Good answer"), Ms. Friedson uses humor to help the students loosen up and relax as they are learning mathematical concepts in a class that many of them did not excel in during their high school experiences. She uses quips like "She don't look that tough, we can disagree with her," "Uh oh, we gonna have to hurt him," and "he must have hit the lottery over the weekend" to maintain high levels of engagement and to make informal links between the students and what they are learning. Note how she easily shifts among registers as she uses standard academic English, AAVE, and what she refers to as "shop lingo" in her communications with the students in order to socialize students concerning the language competencies that will be required to succeed in the machinist industry. During the exchange above, for example, she easily shifts from standard English that challenges the class to evaluate "Is she right, class?" to AAVE that talks about being "dead on the money" or says "we ready to get him," to terminology that asks about "tolerances" and variance measurements in technical terms. By strategically modeling these communication strategies that sometimes draws on the students' own discourse styles and sometimes not, she creates some congruence between her instructional styles and her students' learning styles, yet also creates opportunities for learning new discourses.

Throughout her lessons, Ms. Friedson skillfully used a broad range of discourse tools. Her discourse included language that was accepting, praising and encouraging, language that linked the information being discussed to prior experiences, transactional language that expanded upon the ideas that the students brought up, questioning to confirm student understanding of new material, and descriptive language that conveyed new information. My analysis of the instructional style observed over time revealed that the classroom talk used in Ms. Friedson's lessons was mostly teacher-centered. Much of the students' involvement consisted primarily of ques-

tions they initiated or noninterpretative answers offered in response to direct teacher questioning and expressions of awe to one another concerning Ms. Friedson's impressive command of the material and the skillful manner with which she portrayed it to the students in class.

This teacher does not overtly encourage the students to challenge the institutional structures in their environment. However, when she says to her students, "Lets open our minds to something new. . . . Open your imagination . . . you've heard it and you've used it [language], and now if you think about it and listen to it . . . you can use it to succeed at work too," implicitly she is encouraging them to think more deeply about taking more control over their job situations by becoming more conscious of their language use within their work context. Ms. Friedson admonishes her students that they "must be able to play around and move around" in work-related mediums that work best for them and she encourages them to "never get [themselves] honed in in life to where [they] can only do things one way." Implicitly, when Ms. Friedson uses phrases like "she don't look that tough, we can disagree with her," she is encouraging her students to gain practice at challenging the validity of the ideas that are being presented around them.

When we begin to critique the classroom discourse of this teacher, we must consider the population that this teacher is working with. This teacher is preparing students—students who have had limited life experiences and limited visions for their future life possibilities—to enter a new realm of activity within the machinist industry. She is moving them one step beyond the considerations they had for life possibilities in the past. When we consider whether this teacher is implementing a critical pedagogy, we must realize that as Ms. Friedson provides her students, who are struggling in the present for a better future, with a language of hope, she is moving them one step further than they would have been had she not engaged them in classroom talk that encouraged them to consider exercising individual agency within the domain of the machinist industry. When we ask ourselves the question, "Are they at a level of liberation yet?" the answer is "No." However, when we ask ourselves the question, "Is this teacher moving her students further toward considering life possibilities that they may not have considered had they not engaged in her classroom activities?" the answer is "Yes." That movement is observed in students as Ms. Friedson encourages them to raise their levels of consciousness concerning their use of language both inside and outside the machinist industry, as she encourages them to exercise individual agency by not allowing themselves to become "honed in in life to where [they] can only do things one way," and as she encourages them to take control of their work situations through thoughtful reflection, through independent thinking, and through challenging prevailing voices.

VIGNETTE 2: DISCOURSE THAT FOCUSES ON THE POWER OF CHOICE

The *UPWARD BOUND* program operates from 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. each day. The students in this program voluntarily work together to coconstruct knowledge. These students can be seen taking notes on their teachers' lectures, intently composing and revising resumes, autobiographies, poetry, and work plan drafts, and willingly expanding their existing repertoires of literacy skills. Here, in addition to receiving individualized computer-based instruction on self-paced language arts and math programs, students aged 16 and older receive small-group attention in their career planning and communication arts classrooms. The fast-paced discussions that character- ize this classroom command all of the students' attention and vary in registers used by both the students and teachers alike. At times they use a standard academic variety of English to express their ideas, but at other times they shift to use AAVE or liberally intersperse technical specialized varieties of English where appropriate.

On several occasions, I observed Ms. Gabrielle's class, which had twenty- five students, twenty-three of whom were African American. One-fifth of the students in this class were women, and all of the students had earned a high school diploma or the equivalent prior to entering the program. Upon entering Ms. Gabrielle's career class, I immediately observed how all of the students are encouraged not to allow their current situations to define or limit their life possibilities. A poem hangs conspicuously on the wall for all to read:

LINCOLN'S ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Failed in Business in 1831.
Defeated for Legislature in 1832.
Second failure in Business in 1833.
Suffered nervous breakdown in 1836.

Defeated for Speaker in 1838.
Defeated for Elector in 1840.
Defeated for Congress in 1843.
Defeated again for Congress in 1848.
Defeated for Senate in 1855.
Defeated for Vice President in 1856.
Defeated for Senate in 1858.

ELECTED PRESIDENT IN 1860.

—Author Unknown

The display of this poem and other such materials demonstrates ways in which Ms. Gabrielle tries to encourage her students to reflect on their life possibilities. If left to itself, this strategy would probably be unsuccessful at engaging many of her students in reflexivity. However, Ms. Gabrielle goes a step further. She is very conscious in her efforts to challenge her students to consider choices when they think about where and how they perceive themselves in the world in which they exist. She begins one class session by writing the following word on the board: Careers. Then she asks her students the question, "Why is careers plural?" There is a thoughtful silence in the room. Finally, a student volunteers, "Could it be because you want us to plan on having more than one?" Ms. Gabrielle replies, "That's right! Otherwise what might happen?" Another student responds, "You'll be limited." "That's right," says Ms. Gabrielle, "The key to successful careers is choice." Ms. Gabrielle continues to emphasize the importance of choice by helping the students to develop strategies for personal agency and empowerment through activities and discourse exchanges like the ones that follow.

Teacher: Take out a piece of paper and write on one side what you love to do and write on the other side what you hate to do. Use this strategy often, listing the pro's and con's, the loves and hates. This can be helpful. The whole key to a successful career is choice. And, as I've said many times before, what's the most powerful tool we have?

Students: [Many students respond by saying] The power of choice.

Teacher: That's right. Choice is the greatest power you have in your life. Choice is the greatest power that every human being has.

The emphasis that Ms. Gabrielle places on raising her students' consciousness about life's possibilities and on pressing them to think about their perceptions of themselves in the world is evident in discourse that focuses on choices and on students' own unlimited possibilities. Further commenting on the poem above, Ms. Gabrielle says, "I always tell the students, 'Keep this one in your mind. Lincoln never succeeded at anything, and then he became President! Now, can you imagine what your future holds?' Another thing I do on the first day of my class, is give them my speech about how, as an American, it's already been ordained that 'I can do anything I want' because the last four letters of Amer*ican* is 'I can.' . . . And if my class is all African American, I tell them, 'I'm not buying any excuses, because you have been doubly blessed. . . . Simply by the way you're addressed (as an Afr*ican* Amer*ican*), you've said, 'I can, I can.' So, don't come in here tellin' me about 'I plan to,' 'I hope to,' or 'I'm going to.' I say, 'Don't come in here with that.' Cause the 'plan to's' and the 'fixin' to's'—that's a cop out. Because first of all, just by virtue of your birth you're already saying, 'I can.'

I stand up there and I write the words on the board so they can visualize it. And I continue to emphasize this with them."

On the topic of making them more aware of using a language of possibilities, Ms. Gabrielle says, "If a students comes up to me and says: 'Mrs. Gabrielle, I want to . . .' I simply ask them the question, 'Who you talkin' to?' They generally reply with some hesitation, 'I'm talkin' to you,' and I say, 'Well, I don't speak that language.' I laugh, and then they remember what I've been saying all along. Then they respond, 'Oh! Oh, you're right. I mean 'I will—and I can—.' I say, 'OK, fine. Now, tell me what it is that you *are going to do.*' And then they tell me about their plans. So, I make them do positive reinforcement for themselves. And to me that's the only real way to have an impact. You see, I can stand up and I can tell them all about myself . . . saying 'yeah, I went through a lot that you went through and things like that,' but I must make them more productive and start to think 'I can.'" Ms. Gabrielle feels that her methods are successful at raising her students' consciousness levels about their perceptions of themselves in the world. She reports that, in fact, one student came into her office this morning and said,

> Ms. Gabrielle, I just wanted to thank you. Thank you, because I know I can now do this! Now that I've been here in this program, not only have you taught me some techniques for interviewing and things like that, but the most important thing that I've gained out of it is, that I am in control of my life.

In addition to working on her students' capacities to read, write, and use oral language, Ms. Gabrielle clearly challenges them to reconsider matters of how they perceive themselves in the world and to develop the capacities to set some goals and to accomplish them. Below is an example that illustrates how Ms. Gabrielle encourages her students to use their own creative minds to envision possibilities beyond their present reality. She says:

> *Creativity is the ability to envision things that don't exist.* We use creativity all the time when we do problem solving. You used creativity yesterday when you completed your puzzles. . . . It doesn't mean that something is good or bad. It means thinking in different ways about what *you* want to do.

She asked her students on more than one occasion: "If I told you to eat an elephant, how would you do it?" Their response is always, "One piece at a time?" In each of these instances, Ms. Gabrielle uses questioning to press her student to dig deeper and to think harder. A microanalysis of the instructional style used by Ms. Gabrielle revealed that she uses a wide range of discourse strategies to teach her lesson, including language that was accepting, and filled with praise and encouragement, as well as descriptive

language to convey new information. She consciously encourages students to consider matters of how they perceive the world and encourages them to become creative thinkers.

VIGNETTE 3: DISCOURSE THAT CHALLENGES STUDENTS TOWARD AGENCY

Traveling off of a busy interstate exit ramp and across a wide intersecting boulevard, drivers enter an urban neighborhood in a busy Midwestern metropolis. Looming overhead, a large billboard reads: **96.3 JAMS—UNITED WE JAM**. Further down the road stands a large yellow brick building. It stands out like an oasis in the midst of the busy city life that surrounds it. Entering the church, people hug and talk to each other as if they had not spoken to one another in years. Beyond the lobby is a large meeting-classroom. Its walls are adorned with pages torn from children's coloring books hanging like fine pieces of valuable art. Children's toys are piled high in a toy box. Parent announcements cover the door from top to bottom. Two young girls play in the middle of the brown tiled floor. Both girls wear long braids and red sweatshirts that advertise the organization's name and motto: Ujima—Coming Into Womanhood. An adult mentor comes into the room and motions to the girls to start setting up the chairs for the meeting. Other girls—aged 6 to 18 years old—arrive and work collectively to set the chairs in rows of four and five, all facing the front wall. A bustling sense of group cooperation and unity of purpose fills the room. The billboard's slogan is remembered: **96.3 JAMS—UNITED WE JAM**. The women and girls of this rites-of-passage program for African American females form a united community in which they provide emotional support for one another and address common interests that bind the group together.

The theme of the Ujima Training Institute, "Coming Into Womanhood," is taken from the Xhosa and Ashanti nations of Africa. Ujima provides its participants with opportunities for group interaction with other African-American youths and with one-on-one contact with female African American mentors. These mentors take on the responsibility of advising, assisting, and guiding the young participants of the program in areas of education, family, religion, culture, work, and in linking their personal identity to a historical legacy that is grounded in an African American heritage. The Ujima program is divided by age into three groups: Kirabo (6–10 years), Sangoma (11–13 years), and Nya Akoma (14–18 years old). According to the organization's handbook, the objective of each group is to bring about "development of the total person, spiritually, mentally, physically and morally." The mentors of Ujima are highly educated females who possess the training and experience to assist the program's young girls in developing into positive young women who think critically and who are equipped with the skills needed to compete within today's fast-paced society. One poem

shared with each girl in the program focuses on choices, a theme that has been emphasized in more than one of these community-based organizations' programs:

THE CHOICE IS MINE

> I choose to live by choice, not by chance.
> I choose to make changes, not excuses.
> I choose to be motivated, not manipulated.
> I choose to be useful, not used.
> I choose self-esteem, not self-pity.
> I choose to excel, not compete.
> I choose to listen to my inner voice,
>   not to the random opinions of crowds.

—Alexander Starr

Like Ms. Gabrielle, the Ujima program places great emphasis on raising the students' consciousness about the choices that exist for them as they consider life's possibilities. The poem above is shared with the Ujima girls in order to teach them to consider choices in establishing personal objectives and in building their confidence in decision making. Ujima participants are constantly stimulated with these types of messages, which serve to shape and reshape the students' cultural identities in positive and empowering ways. Through the lessons taught and through demonstrations of commitment and discipline, the mentors of Ujima guide their initiates to recognize the following:

> that empowerment is a central concept to be understood and operationalized. . . . Achieving a new sense of empowerment is the key reward for the students. In this case, empowerment means having more responsibility and capability to have the learning environment meet the students' needs . . . and having the ability to make things happen and the confidence in their ability to create their own destiny. Thus, the student is empowered to be successful in school. (Ujima Student Handbook, 1996)

Students receive this message on an ongoing and recurring basis through discussions with their mentors and through the written materials that are distributed to students each week. As with rites-of-passage practices performed in other cultures and societies, the Ujima Institute encourages the learning of specific cultural traditions. Through organized classroom activities, field trips to the nearby African American museum, a sleep-over in the African-centered home of a mentor, and other special projects that

focus on African and African American history and culture, the program increases initiates' knowledge of themselves and their culture.

Today's lesson begins as Mama Olivia, one of the mentors in this rites-of-passage program, stands and directs her thirty students' attention to a long table situated in the main aisle. On the table, a display is assembled. This display was arranged by the youngest members of the organization and consists of several items that were invented by African Americans. A label lies next to each item containing the inventor's name, date of invention, and U.S. patent number. In completing this project, the young girls have been engaged with reading, writing, numeracy, and technology as forms of literacy. After describing the items on the table to the students, Mama Olivia says:

Mama Olivia:	And so you see, we've made a lot of contributions to this country . . . in fact, we *built* this country. We need to constantly remind people . . .
Audience:	(A voice from the right side of the room calls out) Amen! That's right, Mama Olivia. . . . With our sweat we *built* this country.
Mama Olivia:	We need to lift ourselves up, and I don't think it's really brought out or brought up enough in our educational systems.
Audience:	That's true.
Mama Olivia:	In our schools.
Audience:	That's right!
Mama Olivia:	A lot of children in our schools today don't know half of this stuff . . .
Audience:	Uh huh. (Audible and inaudible responses of agreement, e.g., saying "uh huh," clapping, smiles, head nods, etc.)
Mama Olivia:	. . . or even some of the contributions that African Americans have made. And I know when I was going to school, many years ago,
Audience:	(Audible laughs)
Mama Olivia:	. . . we didn't even get African American history in school.
Audience:	(Audible and inaudible responses of agreement)
Mama Olivia:	That was not a part of our educational experience,
Audience:	(Audible and inaudible responses of agreement)
Mama Olivia:	. . . And it was done for a reason.
Audience:	Sure you're right! (Other audible and inaudible responses of agreement are seen and heard)
Mama Olivia:	They don't want us to know how great we are. And, [I'm] not talking about anybody . . . but *we* need to learn about ourselves!

| Audience: | Tell it, Girl. Yes, that's right. (Audible and inaudible responses of agreement) |
| Mama Olivia: | We need to learn our history, it's very important. We've made many contributions and we need to uplift ourselves because we have *a lot* to be proud of. |

Mama Olivia's lesson was an esteem-raising lesson. Throughout her lesson, Mama Olivia's instructional style was accepting and encouraging. It included language that linked the information that was being discussed to the students' cultural experiences and used language to invoke solidarity.

In the dialogue above, Mama Olivia is giving the participants a lesson on knowing more about themselves, on becoming consciously aware of societal efforts to keep their knowledge of their heritage to a minimum, and on encouraging the students to establish their own objectives and take the initiative to create and recreate their own definitions of themselves and their world. When Mama Olivia describes each item on exhibit and says things like, "We've made a lot of contributions to this country . . . in fact, we *built* this country," and a voice from the right side of the room calls out, "Amen! That's right, Mama Olivia. . . . With our sweat we *built* this country," they are communicating in an African American traditional style of discourse referred to as call and response. This type of audience involvement, which took place during Mama Olivia's lesson, was used to elaborate on what was being said and sometimes to expand upon the comments that Mama Olivia had made. This call and response pattern embodies an interlocking and synergistic communicative dimension, in which members of a group participate interactively by adding their own voice to the voices of others to encourage each other and to indicate a collective agreement (Kochman, 1981, p. 109). In Mama Olivia's classroom, students use patterns of call and response to bring their own voices into the dialogue—and to invite others to do likewise—in a complementary way so that all participants might benefit from the power of those combined voices. Through such language use and their clapping to show affirmation and appreciation of Mama Olivia's words and the girls' work, these females express agreement and unity in their sisterhood. Another mentor, Mama Anika, then says to the girls, "I want you all to think carefully about the things Mama Olivia has said, and remember that . . ." she pauses and the girls join her in completing the phrase, "Black history occurs three hundred and sixty-five days of the year."

In addition to the reading and writing activities needed for the preparation and delivery of this lesson, participants have been engaged with other types of literacy practices that do not generally take place in more traditional self-contained classrooms. Through choral repetitions of their

affirmation of sisterhood at the opening of each meeting, through oratory and dramatic activities, and through the interactive discourse and spontaneous call-and-response messages echoed while others are speaking, I observed examples of African American traditions of oral literacy working together to help create a culturally and educationally responsive environment. The oral and written literate practices used in this environment are critical because when Mama Olivia says things like, "we need to learn about ourselves! . . . We need to lift ourselves up," she is challenging the participants to think about existing societal conditions, to question and think about ways to affect their environment, and to work toward reshaping their thoughts on their cultural identity in proactive ways.

PLAYING MULTIPLE ROLES AND RESPONDING TO SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

During three years of visits to these classrooms, two central ideas emerged as key concepts that each teacher emphasized to all of their students. The first concept focused on how these teachers wanted the students to perceive themselves. In raising their students' levels of consciousness about the possible roles they might play in society, all three teachers made explicit efforts to prepare their students for playing multiple roles in a changing society. Ms. Friedson illustrates for her students that different discourse patterns and registers will be needed in the machinist profession. Ms. Gabrielle tells her students to plan for multiple careers and provides a visualization of how they must break goals down into manageable steps so they can conceptualize and act upon these goals. She asked her students on more than one occasion: "If I told you to eat an elephant, how would you do it?" Their response is always: "One piece at a time?" Mama Olivia tells her students that their ancestors have played numerous roles in the past and that they will be challenged to represent themselves in different ways to different people in the future as they prepare to enter a changing world.

The second concept focused on these teachers wanting their students to respond to societal challenges with some form of action. Ms. Friedson wanted her students to become more conscious of the role of language as used in the machinist industry and to take control of their work situations through thoughtful reflection on their use of language in everyday life situations that relate to their work. Ms. Gabrielle wanted her students to reconsider how they perceive themselves in the world, to develop the ability to set and achieve their goals, and to not let excuses stand in their way. She also wanted them to use their own creativity to envision possibilities beyond their present reality. Mama Olivia wanted her students to know more about themselves, to become consciously aware of societal efforts to limit their

knowledge of their own cultural heritage, to establish their own objectives, and to take some individual as well as group initiative.

The vignettes above provide portraits of observed activities and literacy events in community-based organizations that give the reader a taste of the discourse practices that take place in these alternative sites of urban education on a daily basis. Although the teachers here taught different types of lessons, some very important commonalities were noted within each classroom. Each teacher used a wide range of communicative styles in her interactions with students, including standard academic English, AAVE, and technical language, as mediums for transmitting information in ways that would be accessible to the students. They also used descriptive language to convey new information, praise, and encouragement, and transactional language intended to invoke topics known to the students and to build upon shared knowledge and shared experiences between the speaker and audience in order to enhance group comprehension. The effective use of such discourse patterns resulted in classrooms with few discipline problems and high levels of student interest and student engagement.

Looking closely at these vignettes also helps to make more explicit the classroom discourse practices these three teachers used to press students toward agency in ways that caused them to think more consciously about their current life situations, to think more reflectively about their choice of life possibilities, and in some cases to challenge their surroundings and become motivated to envision plans for individual and group action. Ms. Friedson encourages her students to exercise individual agency within the domain of the machinist industry when she reminds them, "never get yourself honed in in life to where you can only do things one way." She further encourages them to do some independent thinking and to challenge prevailing voices when she says things like, "She don't look that tough, we can disagree with her." When Ms. Gabrielle says to her students, "creativity is the ability to envision things that don't exist," she is challenging them to think in creative ways about the limitless possibilities for their futures within multiple arenas. She is further pressing them to analyze their life situations and to think about ways of changing their lives when she says to them, "I won't accept the cop outs . . . tell me what it is that you're *going to do* . . . and then begin to set some kind of plan to achieve it. . . ." Mama Olivia reminds her students of the potential for group agency when she speaks to them as members of the African American community and says that "We've made a lot of contributions to this country . . . in fact, we *built* this country. . . ." She encourages them to question their existing life situations and challenges them to take action when she says, "We need to constantly remind people . . ." and we need to uplift ourselves as a form of political action.

My observations of these three teachers reveal that their implementation of a critical pedagogy played itself out in the classroom discourse that they used to encourage students to consider issues of agency, and that that implementation occurred along a continuum for each individual teacher. At the first level of the continuum, Ms. Friedson encouraged her students to exercise individual agency within a restricted domain, in this case within the domain of the machinist industry. At the second level, Ms. Gabrielle also encouraged her students to exercise individual agency, but within a more generalized domain. In this case, the key notion was one of choice such that these students were encouraged not to restrict themselves to one career. Her students were encouraged to carve out their life choices within multiple arenas. The third level of the continuum focused on agency, not simply at the individual level, but at the level of potential for group agency and liberation. In this case, Mama Olivia encouraged her students to move beyond the consideration for individual life changes and the ability to promote the improvement of their own life chances to having them consider the agentic possibilities of African Americans as a group and to consider their relationship as individual members of that group. Thus, these teachers' implementation of a critical pedagogy occurred along a continuum that encouraged students to move toward agency—from considerations of agency at an individual level to considerations of agency at a group level and from considerations of agency within a restricted domain to considerations of agency within an elaborate domain that focused on matters of choice.

The actions of these teachers testify to a belief that students learn best from concrete examples that relate to their everyday life experiences and that they develop language and literacy skills most successfully through a dynamic process that emphasizes the construction of underlying cognitive skills using the discourses and linguistic resources at hand. When Ms. Gabrielle talks abstractly about creativity as the ability to envision things that don't exist, she then moves on to remind the students that "We use creativity all the time when we use problem solving. You used creativity yesterday when you did the puzzles." These teachers also provide the appropriate support that is needed for meaning-making to take place. Sometimes that support comes in the form of praise and accepting language. At other times, it comes in the form of language that is very firm, like when Ms. Gabrielle says, "don't come in here tellin' me about 'I plan to,' or 'I hope to' . . . Cause the 'plan to's' and the 'fixin' to's'—that's a cop out . . . tell me what it is that you *are going to do.* . . ." When students then begin to describe their plans for action, it becomes obvious that this process of meaning-making is an effective one and that it is highly dependent upon the discourse practices that have occurred in the classroom setting.

Early in this article I asked the question, What can we learn by looking closely at classroom discourse patterns? Looking at the discourse patterns and pedagogical approaches that these teachers used, I was able to detect patterns of teacher talk that occur in community-based classrooms and to understand more clearly how teachers challenge students to become more consciously aware of their life situations. Carlson states that the purpose behind students' acquiring critical literacy is to create citizens critical enough to both analyze and challenge the oppressive characteristics of the larger society so that a more just, equitable, and democratic society can be created (1993, p. 240). My observations revealed that the African American teachers observed in this study do perceive their role as one of encouraging their students to analyze their perceptions of themselves and their positions in the world. However, in most instances, these teachers do not spend a great deal of time pointing fingers at "the man" or allowing students to make excuses. Instead, their discourses centered on encouraging the students to take control of their future wherever possible through knowledge acquisition. They did not spend much time deconstructing "the system," viewing such an activity to be a luxury that these inner-city learners could not afford. Perhaps, having observed the plight of many of their role models who had spent time trying to fight the system (e.g., Denmark Vesay, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panther Party, and others), and having seen those role models systematically and violently eliminated, the "critical pedagogy" that they practiced in these community-based organizations focused first on taking an introspective stance toward their perceptions of themselves in the world. Next, they focused on the power of choice and on using language and literacy skills strategically to obtain achievable goals and objectives. Finally, in the case of Mama Olivia, students were encouraged to question and challenge oppressive social formations.

Critical theory has been criticized because of its use of inaccessible language and its lack of usefulness in assisting educators to think through and plan improvements in actual classroom practice. This investigation begins to address such problems by revealing how teachers who operationalize a critical pedagogy in community-based organizations use language that is indeed accessible to their students. It also describes how teachers operate along a continuum in their implementation of critical theory. This investigation reveals that teachers' location along that continuum can be identified by how they differentially speak to matters of human agency in their interactions with students. The teachers' locations along a continuum, which are derived from the data, are determined by the discourses they use to encourage students to move from considerations of individual agency to group agency on the one hand, and by the discourses they use to encour-

age students to move from considerations of agency within a restricted domain to an elaborate domain on matters of choice, on the other hand. This continuum can serve as a tool (1) to help other teachers locate their own practices on matters of agency, and (2) to implement adjustments to their practices where appropriate.

Most studies related to language and learning have taken place in traditional classrooms, an environment in which culturally and linguistically diverse populations have not fared well. I have chosen to focus on the language patterns observed in nontraditional settings. Based on the effective teaching strategies I observed in these community-based classrooms, I advocate for more widespread conscious creation of dialogic, multiculturally sensitive classrooms. Such classrooms can become a reality by expanding upon the strategic uses of discourse patterns and pedagogical practices such as those observed in the classrooms of these African American female teachers. I believe that what I have observed in these classrooms is not unique to these community-based classroom settings alone. The language and literacy practices I have observed embedded within these African American community-based classrooms exist as resources that can be useful in the design of better educational practices in other classrooms.

This investigation has taken place in community-based organizations as contexts where participants report feeling a close, more immediate connection to their own cultural community. Within these environments, teachers are able to involve students in considering choices and imagining life possibilities in reflective ways, to raise questions about students' perceptions of themselves in the world in which they exist, and to challenge students to consider their education as a tool to move themselves toward political action. This research is offered as an example of instruction that has the potential to speak to the problems of literacy among African American students and, by extension, to other diverse student populations. When teachers work with students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the teachers are challenged to gain an understanding of the cultural and linguistic capital that successful teachers use to help students consider alternative life possibilities. They are also challenged to help students to re-envision themselves as individual as well as group participants within successful school settings as problem solvers and as critical thinkers. In so doing, teachers and students can work together to move toward the creation of dialogic, multiculturally sensitive classrooms where empowering, dynamic constructions of knowledge can become a reality by expanding upon the strategic uses of discourse patterns and effective pedagogical practices like those observed in the classrooms of these African American female teachers.

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