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Available online: 28 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Stephanie Jones (2012): Making sense of injustices in a classed world: working-poor girls' discursive practices and critical literacies, Pedagogies: An International Journal, 7:1, 16-31

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2012.630493

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Making sense of injustices in a classed world: working-poor girls’ discursive practices and critical literacies

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(Received 20 March 2010; final version received 20 January 2011)

Drawing from a larger ethnographic study, this article engages post-structural theories of language and critical feminist theories of social class to examine two fourth-grade, White, working-poor girls’ narratives about their urban neighbourhood in the United States. The author argues that young girls should be perceived as social theorists informed by multiple discourses and that their discursive practices can be analysed and used for pedagogical purposes. Working against the typically deficit, pathological or sympathetic readings of poor children’s life narratives, this article presents the girls as intellectual workers who are constructing theories that may or may not align with discourses informing critical literacies pedagogies for social change.

Keywords: social class; neo-liberal discourses; critical literacies

Introduction

Hope, a 10-year-old girl in this study, stopped our group of four as we walked up to a three-storey narrow brick home that had been converted into a multi-family dwelling on the corner of Ellsworth Street in the community of St. Francis – an urban enclave in the Midwestern region of the United States where this study took place. Cadence, the self-identified digital photographer of the neighbourhood walk that day, began snapping shots of the building while Heather and I listened carefully to Hope’s narration about the building:

... all the cops were afraid to go in there. And my dad went in there looking for my Aunt because she wouldn’t stop doing drugs. And all of them would come over here and say they would give it to her and stuff. And finally my dad went in there and he told them to go in the room and get her and they said, “We ain’t got enough for you”, so he punched one of ’em.

The fundamental concerns of this article are the ways educators may perceive stories like Hope’s in their classrooms, and the various discourses informing Hope’s narration about the social and political space of her neighbourhood. Some educators may respond to Hope’s story with pity, sadness, anger, disbelief, disgust or even worse they may ascribe Hope and her home life to be pathological. Reducing stories such as this one to a pitiful object, worthy only of a range of responses including sympathy or intervention, dismisses the intellectual value of analysing one’s lived experiences in a complex society. Sympathetic or deficit readings of stories told by students living in poverty also

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perpetuates what Nixon and Comber (2006) call the differential recognition of children’s cultural practices since stories told by middle-class or affluent children are more likely to be met with affirmation, curiosity and, in some cases, awe and used as intellectual material for academic engagement. Additionally, simplifying or even public “valuing” of Hope’s narration may be a missed opportunity for educators concerned with social change to think deeply about the discourses Hope has available to her for making sense of her life in such a complex society.

In this article, I aim to reframe neighbourhood narratives told by children as indicative of their discursive construction of theories of sociality: to work against what Nixon and Comber found in their study of children and teachers in classrooms that “the extent to which different children can make use of their everyday community knowledges or their interests in popular culture in literacy lessons is contingent on what teachers recognize as valuable” (p. 128), I encourage readers to marvel at the intellectual work of students and to consider the power such intellectual engagement could leverage in classroom settings and in future trajectories. Additionally, I raise the issue of critically informed pedagogies and how educators can ascertain students’ growing and changing social theories and how these are positioned relative to critical theories enacted in classrooms by educators oriented to social justice. Critical literacies, specifically, will be addressed, but all pedagogies informed by critical theories are impacted given the multiple and even contradictory theories that young students living poverty are likely to construct about society and themselves.

Transcripts represented here are audio recordings from a hot July day when the girls were preparing to enter fifth grade and we went on a neighbourhood walk that was documented by Cadence through digital photography, while Hope and Heather narrated. As the researcher in the fourth year of the ethnographic study, I mostly listened but sometimes asked probing questions, and my analyses in this article inherently reflect my knowledge of the girls, the neighbourhood and the school from having been engaged with them across so much time. The stories selected for analysis will highlight themes that correlate with negative stereotypes of communities such as St. Francis, a decision that is difficult given the plethora of negativity in representations of working-class and poor children. I could have chosen other stories to share such as those the girls told about a colourful mural painted by children in the neighbourhood that has remained untouched by vandalism across several years, and the girls’ belief that adults in the community read the mural as a monument of hope and their deep respect for children. Or the stories about the neighbourhood boys who found old discarded bike parts in and around the neighbourhood and used them to assemble and enhance their own bicycles, and the girls’ belief that the boys’ ingenuity was borne out of both a lack of economic resources and a desire to create.

But those stories will be told in other places and at other times; here, I focus on narratives about the challenges around drugs and drug use in a community strangled by economic marginalization because they are the ones that too often become both silenced and pathologized in educational settings. These are the kinds of stories educators often find most challenging to hear when told by young students in school. Similar to Dutro’s work framing children’s stories as trauma narratives that demand value and a critical witness in education (Dutro, 2008, 2009, 2011), I offer an alternative reading of, and a potential pedagogical response to, what might otherwise only be considered sad or tragic.

For readers who have not had the opportunity to imagine children from poor families as intellectual beings possessing unique experiences and bringing important knowledges and resources into the classroom, I argue that educators must stop pathologizing what it means to be poor and what it means to be a child from a poor family. Respectfully listening to children, who are typically shushed in the classroom or pathologized in the school
system, is one step towards a more powerful education for marginalized students by simply being able to *perceive them differently* (for discussions on “turning around” perceptions and pedagogies, see Comber & Kamler, 2005; Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2010; Kamler & Comber, 2005). For readers well versed in the literature illuminating marginalized children and youth as smart, perceptive, insightful, capable and often critical of or resistant to dominant practices operating in schools (e.g. Campano, 2007; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Lee, 1993; Luttrell, 2003; Willis, 1977), I assert an additional argument. Educators engaging working-class and poor youth in critical literacies might listen carefully to the social theories growing in students’ discursive practices and not assume that children/youth living very similar sociocultural lives are taking up similar discourses or that those discourses are aligned in some way with critical pedagogies. In this effort, I draw on critical feminist studies of social class and gender, post-structural theories of language, and critical literacies theories and practice to analyse the girl participants’ narratives about their social context with a focus on two discourses that operate in the US society and schools: neo-liberalism and critical theory.

**Critical literacies and discourse**

The processes whereby individuals take themselves up as persons are understood as ongoing processes. The individual is not so much a social construction that results in some relatively fixed end product, but one who is constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practice. (Davies, 2003b, p. xii)

Critical literacies pedagogies aim to make curricular engagements relevant to students, to centre traditionally marginalized experiences, to engage students in social critique and critical text analysis and to collaboratively work towards social justice. Critical literacies, by design, elude definition and thus necessitate a specific discussion on the particular lenses being used in theory or practice. The nexus of critical, feminist and post-structural theories of language, power and subjects/identities is a significant part of a critical perspective of literacy and one that assumes that power relations operating within and through language construct inequities and marginalize particular groups of people (e.g. Butler, 1993; Comber, 1999; Davies, 2003a, 2003b; Foucault, 1980; Gee, 1996). This combination of theories provides tools to deconstruct practices with and around texts while foregrounding issues of privilege, power, marginalization and the ongoing constitution of a (non-unitary) self or subject within discursive practices.

Language is at the heart of critical literacies and is bound, unbound and rebound through social uses that both reflect what is possible in the world and create new possibilities. The centrality of language in this article reflects my inquiries into how working-class and poor girls make sense of the social realities in their economically deprived community and how or whether their sense-making aligns with theories used by critical literacies educators like myself. To these inquiries, I also bring biases including my stance that working-class and poor children’s language is too often dismissed as anti-intellectual and in need of grammatical correction or silencing of “inappropriate” content, and that dominant discourses – including neo-liberalism – are taken up by many people including working-class and poor children and adults, working against possibilities for solidarity and change in the form of economic justice.

Discourse, then, is important in this article as how multiple and contradictory ideas about the world circulate through language practices and the ways in which individuals and groups of people use those discursive practices in different contexts. If educators are
to better understand lived experiences and critical pedagogical engagements with children from poor families, it is imperative to focus our attention on the discourses that inform children’s meaning making of the world around them (e.g. Davies, 2003a, 2003b). Here, I focus predominantly on discourses operating in the children’s meaning making aligned with critical literacies pedagogies (e.g. social/institutional critique; collective action; importance of social institutions working for the common good of citizens; “truth” as constructed and in need of deconstructing) and neo-liberal discourses (e.g. diminished government role in social and economic regulation; emphasis on autonomy and individual rights, freedoms and responsibilities for living a fulfilling life; free market capitalism with flexible labour forces; de-emphasis on “groups” of people and “society”).

Nancy Fraser (2009) has written brilliantly about the insidiously seductive discourses of neo-liberalism that can undermine social change projects, and in my analyses I make note of how similar some of the ideals from both discourses seem in practice. Neo-liberal theories of the social and economic world that are grounded in illusions of autonomous transformation and individualist meritocracy are contradictory to critical literacies in theory and practice. When analysing students’ discursive practices and constructions of theories of sociality, then, it would be important for educators to recognize when a student constructs a theory or theories of the social world that may be in opposition to the goals of critical literacies pedagogies. In addition to contradicting such pedagogical goals, a student from a marginalized location who takes up neo-liberal discourses, which are focused on individuals rather than larger systems and practices, may be at risk for what Freire would call the oppressed becoming the oppressor (Freire, 1970; Jones, 2004, 2006a), what hooks would consider internalizing dominator ideologies (hooks, 2000) and what Davies (2003b) might consider being “split off from” authoritative knowledges and oneself. None of these options are productive in the lofty goals of social justice and working for change in economically devastated communities and in increasing economic disparity in the United States and across the globe.

No one can assume that young students growing up in difficult material conditions and on the margins of social and economic privilege will enter a school primed for critical literacies practices aimed at social change for the students’ benefit. For example, critical social theories challenging inequities of all kinds might be met with children’s use of neo-liberal discourses around individual freedoms and the right to free speech, and marginalized people’s failures to make something of themselves. Or post-structural theories of language – that we can deconstruct texts and analyse how power is operating through the text and who might benefit from that particular assertion of power – might be met with children’s use of authoritative discourses about who is “good” or “bad” in society and therefore who inherently should have power over others.

My assumption in this article is that critical literacies are desired in elementary school classrooms where children and adults would engage in recursive and reflexive practices that deconstruct and reconstruct texts, textual practices and the social relations where such practices are taking place (Clarke, 2005; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Spector, 2007). An overarching goal of these practices is to position children as subjects who feel entitled to engage in deconstructive and reconstructive practices, something that connects directly to psycho-social aspects of identity and power.

**The girls and the research**

Hope, Heather and Cadence were young White girls living lives of social class marginalization in an urban enclave within a metropolitan city in the Midwest of the United States.
The three of them were part of a larger ethnographic study of eight young girls and the study spanned their first, second and third grades; but it was the summer between their fourth and fifth grades when data for this article were collected. The three girls in this article are introduced below, but only Hope and Heather contributed to the stories about the neighbourhood while Cadence – who did not live in the immediate surroundings – took photographs with a digital camera.

Hope was tall for her age and had long, thick, dark hair, porcelain-like skin and light blue eyes. She was one of the more soft-spoken girls in the group and tended to listen more than she talked, but she was frequently critical of social and educational practices that did not seem “fair” to her, such as claiming that it was not “fair to call somebody a bully” after her first-grade teacher presented a lesson on bullying. Hope lived fluidly between her mother’s and stepfather’s home where she had a younger sibling and a matriarchal grandmother, her patriarchal grandparents’ home where she had an older sibling and her father’s and uncle’s homes after her father’s release from a multi-year jail sentence. Hope’s paternal grandmother was an active leader in the community and served as a source of strength for the family, including Hope’s mother and stepfather. In general, Hope was considered a “good girl” in school, as she mostly performed a quiet, feminine role typically expected of girls in school and reserved her critiques of the teacher and curriculum for spaces beyond school adults’ ears. Hope’s mother worked part-time at an after-school programme, and her father was looking for work at the time of this July meeting. And both of them, along with Hope’s extended family, encouraged Hope to pursue her interests on a regular basis including her participation on a summer volleyball team, roller skating on the weekends and, when possible, attending big events that were of particular interest such as going to a concert by Avril Lavigne (a contemporary female pop artist popular at the time).

If Hope was considered a “good girl” in school, Cadence was considered a “bad girl” since her first grade (for classed and gendered analyses of Cadence’s school performances, see Jones, 2004, 2006b). Very intelligent and a bit suspicious of school authorities, Cadence had sun-bleached hair and dark brown skin. She went to the local swimming pool every day in the summer with her two older sisters and they were all active on the swim team organized at the pool. Cadence lived fluidly between her mother’s home, her grandmother’s home, her grandfather’s home and her father’s home. Like Hope, Cadence had a strong relationship with her father who had been physically absent during most of her young life because of a multi-year incarceration. Cadence’s father, like Hope’s, had recently been released from prison at the time of this meeting.

Heather typically performed a “good girl” identity in school but was quick to perform in ways that would not have been perceived as being “good” by most school authorities (see Hicks & Jones, 2007). Petite with blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin, Heather spoke of cussing, fighting with boys and going out with boys and had the perception that school was boring and teachers were unfair. Heather lived with her mother, father and younger sibling and felt at ease walking or riding her bike in the neighbourhood to her grandmother’s, aunt’s, friends’ and babysitters’ homes. Heather always had both her mother and father physically present in her life, but she told the group on this summer morning that her father was preparing to “turn himself in” – she did not share with the group at the time of the neighbourhood walk what the charge was.

It was a hot summer day when I met with these three girls after going nearly a year without seeing them. Our clinging shirts were evidence of the humidity as we greeted each other and gathered beneath a wooden shelter to sit our bums on the scratchy concrete patch before heading out for a walk. Ants instantly found us and the suitcase of books and materials I was lugging with me, and we spent considerable time flinging our arms, stomping and “eeek-ing” as they launched their attack.
But once our conversation began, almost nothing distracted us, not even the rumbling of
trucks riding by on the street less than a block away, the starting and stopping of long trails
of cars moving through the neighbourhood or the shrieking of police, ambulance and fire
engine sirens speeding past. It was there in that lonely and sparsely equipped “park” where
we created a space for ourselves to talk about things that mattered. While I had arrived with
clarifying questions for the girls that related to the challenges I was facing in the writing
of a book (Jones, 2006a), I was far from the leader or facilitator of the group. Instead the
girls led me on a trip through their present-day thoughts, concerns and celebrations, and
it is through these student-initiated stories told as we left the park and walked around the
neighbourhood that I think here.

**Stories of drugs, rescues and rehab**

In the opening narrative of this article, I reported how Hope began to tell a story and then
looked at me as she clarified the word “crack” to mean “drug”. Since she looked at me
when she made this change, I presumed that she made the change for me to make sure I
could follow along with the story, just in case I did not know what crack was. This linguis-
tic shift for Hope is more than cleverness or an attempt to be inclusive in her conversation,
but rather an active repositioning of herself as a narrator in relation to me as a listener and
to the social world. It is not unlikely that Hope assumed I would not know what crack was
because she assumed I did not live in a place like St. Francis or know people personally
who were involved with this kind of drug. Beyond Hope’s attempts to simplify the story
for my sake, the narrative can be read through a lens of discursive positioning and social
theory building. Hope manoeuvres to position herself in relation to the specifically classed
nature of the community context – a crack house on the block – and in relation to me, a
middle-class White woman whom Hope presumes would live in a very different context.
The discursive positioning Hope engages in is similar to work by critical feminists con-
cerned with social class and the real and imagined ways working-class and poor children
and families experience surveillance and harsh judgement from middle-class others (e.g.
hooks, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Steedman, 1987, 1994). Four years of working with me might
have put to rest any fears Hope might have about harsh judgement or her family being
reported to child protective services, but she continued to see me as someone who might
not understand the language that she and others would use to discuss community issues. In
other words, I am still the outsider.

Hope reported that the cops were too fearful to intervene in the drug trade that occurred
in the said particular building and that her aunt had succumbed to drug abuse within that
very place. Out of necessity and without the help of institutional authorities who might
have otherwise been expected to stop overt illegal activities in the building, Hope’s father
(in his late 20s at the time) entered the building to rescue his sister. In his disgust at being
mistaken as an addict looking for crack, he ended up punching a man.

Hope continued with her story:

Hope: My grandma told [the one neighbourhood cop that is trusted by community
members], she said “I don’t know if you’ll be mad, but my son did this,” and
um, [the cop] said that was something that needed to be done. And he went in
there and they got that building shut down.

The way that Hope framed this event can be read as reflective of the discourses available to
her and the theories of sociality she was building from her lived experiences. The necessity
of intervention when an individual is addicted to a dangerous substance was referenced by her father intervening in his sister’s drug use, and the belief that social institutions cannot be trusted to act in the best interest of citizens and therefore a citizen must do something himself to make change are also important themes. And, as this story makes clear, in some cases taking action on the local/individual level may lead to someone in a powerful institutional position to take note and use institutional/structural power to change something that is a serious concern of the citizens. In this case, Hope’s grandmother told the local police officer what her son had done, hoping to catapult greater action by the police force. In the end, the building was emptied, condemned, boarded up, not to be used by anyone and became a physical reminder of the struggles – and successes – in the community.

Up to this point in the narrative, Hope’s theory constructions incorporate a critical discourse specifically critiquing an institution (the police) meant to protect citizens. This discursive move of foregrounding social/institutional critique – so central to critical theories and critical literacies/pedagogies – was regularly used by Hope in the stories here and in data from the larger study. While this critique is focused on shutting down a crack house and not the larger question about how and why drug use and the drug trade can become such a problem in communities like St. Francis, Hope articulated that very challenge in a later narrative. But she did not stop critiquing here, she articulated an active stance towards perceived injustice using any means necessary including physical violence (intervention in her aunt’s drug abuse as a result of the accessibility of drugs in the nearby crack house) when social institutions are not acting in the best interest of citizens. Finally, she referred to a collaborative stance of solidarity towards making change when Hope’s dad, grandmother and the police worked together to shut down the crack house.

We continued our walk, and talk about drugs persisted for awhile:

Heather: People come back in this alley to do drugs and stuff... [They need to build] something worthwhile. Because they need to stop doin’ drugs down here and start building their lives better.

Heather began contrasting drug use to “building” better lives, offering insight to her as a theory-builder in this telling of a story. First, Heather framed lives as things that are “built” by people living them, a potential connection to critical pedagogues’ belief in agency but also dangerously similar to a neo-liberal discourse of autonomous self-transformation where individual citizens are rendered the right and freedom to shape themselves into the kind of subject that would be employable and able to live the life she or he wishes to live. Harvey (2005), a renowned anthropologist who focused on the political economy, reminds us of the brilliance of neo-liberal discourse to deploy seductive words and ideals related to an illusory American Dream. This seduction towards specific discourses and ideals distracts from questioning and critiquing the economic realities and how those inherently afford or constrain any one person’s ability to transform oneself – or to “build” one’s life differently:

It has been part of the genius of neo-liberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism. (p. 119)

Neo-liberal discourse is relentless in both its positioning of the individual person as capable of changing her own world and the relinquishing of responsibility of government for social
and economic inequities. The difference I see here from Heather potentially engaging a critical discourse (that would call upon structural change and individual/group agency within a critique of larger inequities) is in Heather’s positioning of herself in relation to the content of this narrative when she referred to “they” meaning the people using drugs. The same “they” is then theoretically to act as powerful agents to build different and better lives, placing the responsibility of change on the individuals who are struggling with drug addiction in an economically devastated community – a connection to economic structures and practices not made here by Heather. This discourse is slightly different from Hope’s stance that a group of powerful agents not suffering from drug addiction can work in solidarity towards change and presumably alleviating the suffering of those addicted.

Heather also perceived doing drugs as an activity that diminishes life and the life experiences of the adults doing them, and she engaged that discourse by articulating the potential diminishment of what is possible in the lives of children who witness drug use:

Stephanie: What does that mean, build something worthwhile?
Hope: Build somethin’ that will help you.
Heather: Somethin’ you’ll enjoy. ’Cuz our kids don’t, can’t like. Kids around here grow up watchin’ these people being a bad example because children will grow up and be like them.

Heather’s discursive move away from “building” something in the community to engaging a dominant discourse many outsiders have about St. Francis (adults here are bad examples for children) has the potential to impose a complex dilemma for Heather if it becomes a dominant discourse for her – just like the women in Beverly Skeggs’s (1997) study of a group of White working-class women in the United Kingdom.

Skeggs studied and theorized the ways in which social class significantly influenced the women’s lives across economic, social and psychological spheres. These influences were felt intimately and emotionally, and though some women participants were comfortable naming social class as a primary force in the shaping of their lives, most worked hard to disassociate from a working-class position through processes of dis-identification and dis-simulation (1997). Skeggs asserted that mainstream rhetoric about class and the associated values of people and their knowledges in class-specific locations (like the discourse used above by Heather) actively work on the psycho-social experiences of working-class women across their lives leading them to feel ashamed of their class status and doing anything they could to “pass” as middle class. Mainstream deficit discourses of working-class and poor communities and people operate to construct hierarchies of a person’s value too, often alongside a neo-liberal discourse that assumes every individual person has the freedom and right to shape themselves into the person they want to be. Echoes of this rhetoric can be heard in Heather’s narratives when she focuses on problems of individuals and their failures. Just as in Skeggs’ study, one way Heather (and other working-class girls in this study) could potentially “pass” as having middle-class values and ideals is to engage in a dominant discourse positioning their own community as filled with adults who are bad examples for children and should work harder to build better lives. But passing as middle class through discourses aimed squarely at the worth of oneself, one’s family members and one’s neighbourhood has consequences after awhile. Shame, dis-identification and dissimulation are only a few of prices paid for taking up such damaging discourses, as indicated by numerous feminists studying working-class women and autobiographical works by working-class women (e.g. Jones, 2009; Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 1997, 1998; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Todd, 2009; Van Galen, 2009; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001).
And while most researchers aimed at understanding working-class consciousness and lived experiences have focused on adults reflecting back on childhood memories, these subtle discursive moves in Heather’s and Hope’s narrations about the place they live their lives can offer a glimpse into the beginning seeds of how the girls may perceive themselves and working-class others while they are still children. And, perhaps, while critical educators can still engage them in creative ways to cultivate value in oneself, a critique of inequities in social and economic practices in society and around the globe, and work towards a class solidarity that could impact their futures.

Deciding not to explicitly challenge Heather’s assertion that adults in St. Francis are bad examples for children nor the discourse of “children will do what they see adults do” that Heather also engages, I asked the girls:

Stephanie: Why do you think people do drugs?
Heather: ‘Cuz they’re bored with their lives.

Stephanie: You think they’re bored with their lives? Like what?
Hope: Like they think they don’t have a chance to do somethin’ in life, so they think it might help ’em I guess. I guess it makes them feel better for themselves.
Heather: ‘Cuz they don’t think they can do nothin’.

Hope and Heather agree that people likely do drugs because they are not content with their lives in one way or another, whether that is a result of being bored (from Heather’s perspective) or feeling restricted in ways that limits their opportunities from Hope’s perspective (“they don’t have a chance to do somethin’ in life”). In addition to their having already given thought to why people do drugs in St. Francis – likely due to the ways various people talk about this in their lives, in media or in schools – both Heather and Hope respond to my suggestion that we might reconsider a blaming-the-victim discourse and perhaps do something different:

Stephanie: Do you think we can blame them for doing drugs? Or do you think we need to get other things in place?
Heather: No. We need to like help. We need to like start a pro-program to help these people. Because if they . . .
Hope: All these people down here, they all have been in rehabs and stuff, but when they get out they just come right back here.

My insertion of “we” discursively aligns with Hope’s assertion earlier that a collective force is responsible for making change. Heather immediately responds to this possibility with her suggestions that “we need” to start a programme – a disruption of a deficit discourse about drug addicts – but Hope interrupts Heather to point out that such a “programme” must be different from the “rehabs” that many residents had already tried, and not very successfully.

Stephanie: Why do you think they come back here?
Heather: They’re lookin’ for everybody like, ‘cuz they know there ain’t many cops down here and they can’t get them.

Heather’s response positions her as someone who might be suspicious of people involved with drugs such as their “lookin’ for everybody” they used to know in order to resume life as it was before rehabilitation. Heather’s discursive move positions drug users as wanting
to continue using and having a lack of desire to do “something different” as she pointed out earlier. The irony of Heather’s stating that “there ain’t many cops down here” is palpable. All three girls in attendance had fathers who had been in and out of jail or prison, and at any given time every single child in a classroom in the community school was likely to name at least one person she or he knew who was in jail or prison. The police presence in St. Francis was significant – but that significance was only in relation to my experiences in other neighbourhoods across the city.

Taking up a discourse of a critical pedagogue, I asked another question that implicitly critiques Heather’s position and the discourse she was drawing on to make assumptions about drug addicts and rehabilitation:

Stephanie: I guess I’m asking a different kind of question. If they cared enough to go to rehab to get clean from drugs, then why is it, do you think, when they get out of rehab they’re not able to ... start working, or build a different kind of life?

I used Heather’s word “build” here purposefully since she had used it in the conversation already. I wanted her to think about the potential tensions between the belief that lives are “built” by powerful individual agents, and the trend that some St. Francis residents had committed to getting off drugs by going into rehabilitation, but many were not successful in staying clean. Heather was quiet after this question, but Hope jumped in right away to offer her perception that draws on a critical discourse:

Hope: Because some people judge people by their record but they don’t judge people like, now.

Stephanie: So Hope, you said that some people judge people based on their record and not what they’re doing now. So how would that make them go back to do drugs?

Hope: Because if like somebody goes to get a job and they have something bad in their past, then they might think they’ll just go back to how they was and they won’t get the job.

Hope refers to a powerful social practice that is likely, in fact, to present numerous challenges for rehabilitated drug addicts among others including citizens with a criminal record to re-enter society through a mainstream door of legitimate employment. Hope moved from an individualized theory of failure focused on individual people and their pathological desires or habits that might be reflective of Heather’s perception that people are free to “build” lives but want to keep doing the same thing (using drugs), and articulated instead that personal experiences are located within larger societal contexts. The latter assertion is a significant grounding belief in critical discourse and critical pedagogies. I would add to Hope’s theory here that the impact of these discriminatory practices are felt more by working-poor individuals and families who are not likely to have social networks that connect them to business owners or other employers who will give them the benefit of the doubt. Neither Hope nor Heather, up to this point, had made any explicit critique of economic inequities in society, but Hope gets closer to this critique when she brings up the issue of employment and employability – a central aspect of neo-liberal economic policies that aims to create business-friendly environments at any cost. Harvey (2005) and others tell us that informal work (temporary and part-time, on-demand work) is soaring, a potential study that could situate the girls’ lived experiences in a broader social and economic
context particularly given Heather’s silence during the talk about jobs and her insistence earlier in the study that her dad was a “loser” because he could not find a job. Heather’s dad was a painter who could not find permanent work but who worked off and on for contractors or individuals who only needed his service temporarily.

In their critique of neo-liberal theories that claim every person a free and rational agent who, regardless of the perceived constraints or obstacles, can transform oneself and create a meaningful life, Walkerdine et al. (2001) write, “If we think about the end of jobs for life and the production of a culture of uncertainty, self-invention through a discourse of limitless choice provides a way to manage the government of potentially unruly and disaffected subjects” (pp. 2–3). Hope and Heather, alongside their families and community, could potentially become the “unruly and disaffected subjects” with whom government would not want to contend. Unless, of course, they come to habitually take up and believe neo-liberal discourses about themselves, the ones they love, and how the world works around them.

We continued our walk and came upon another building that looked like it could be, but was not, condemned:

Heather: This is the baddest crack house – see how messed up it is? [The police] even got a camera there but it don’t help.

Hope: Yeah, my aunt where she works at, she helped get that [camera] because she saw that there was safety hazards, like all the windows were broken.

Heather: And boarded up.

Heather sees the “messed up” multi-family “crack house” as something that is an eyesore and, perhaps, impossible to change (a security camera does not help either). Hope, however, sees the same building through the perspective of one of her aunt as being a safety hazard and something in need of changing. Hence, Hope again engages the discourse that residents can push for change when institutions are not acting in the best interest of the citizens. In addition to the surveillance camera being mounted on the building, the building owner was forced to comply with safety standards including changing and cleaning up the broken windows and glass.

**Hope and Heather building theories through available discourses**

Through Hope and Heather’s co-narration of specific drug-related challenges in their neighbourhood, listeners can begin to get a sense of discourses informing the theories of sociality they are constructing as young girls growing up in a White working-poor urban enclave. The girls have access to multiple discourses available to many of us around poverty and poor neighbourhoods, drug users in society and overarching notions of who is responsible for creating change. Hope draws on a discourse of solidarity and action where local citizens must work – often together – to make change happen and that sometimes their work can get the attention of institutional workers who will then join the effort. Heather draws on a neo-liberal discourse that individuals (including drug addicts) can – and should – “build” their lives better by making different choices and being better examples to children; Hope also explicitly critiques larger social and economic practices (e.g. hiring practices of employers) that may restrict opportunities for one reason or another while Heather agrees with the possibility of individuals experiencing a sense of powerlessness but does not join in the conversation around social structures that may be contributing to the problem.

Heather’s and Hope’s discursive practices, as analysed here, are not assumed to be coherent or singular by any streak of the imagination. Both girls are drawing on multiple
discourses they have access to through their families, friends, media and so forth – but in this narrated event about their community, more discontinuity was apparent between the discourses used by the girls than within their discursive practices.

Though Hope and Heather could not be more alike in many ways – they are the same age; from White working-poor families; self-identified best friends since kindergarten; have mothers who are friends and have been since elementary school; live fluidly between family members’ homes; have fathers who were or are incarcerated; attend the same neighbourhood school; and live only a couple of blocks from one another – they are drawing on different discourses and constructing theories of the social world around them in different ways. And as important as it is to analyse discourses operating in the girls’ stories, “It is to the absences and silences in children’s talk, as well as to the discourses and practices through which they articulate their experience, that any analysis must look” (Davies, 2003b, p. 31).

While Hope did engage a critical discourse to critique social practices (e.g. police failing to do their job; employers discriminating against recovering drug addicts), any critique specifically about economic inequality is missing from both Hope’s and Heather’s narrations about their community. Therefore, it would be important for a critical educator to recognize not only that Heather’s use of neo-liberal discourses works in opposition to a critical discourse (and to decide how to respond pedagogically), but also that Hope’s engagement with discursive practices aligned with critical theory does not specifically challenge an economic system that relies on class marginalization just as much as it relies on wealth and ownership. Without access to strong ways of talking and thinking about social critique and the value of themselves and their community, the girls in this study and other children from working-class and poor families can get trapped in what Davies (2003b) refers to as “both learning authoritative knowledges and being split off from that knowledge at the same time. And they are being given neither the resources to see and name this process nor the knowledge with which to resist it” (p. 50). In other words, Heather understood that her working-poor neighbourhood is pathologized to some extent as she suggested that it is more desirable for people to not use drugs, build better lives and be better examples for their children – but this authoritative “knowledge” that is treated as common sense positions Heather as always outside that more desirable life but also outside her own community about which she comes to believe undesirable.

**Neo-liberal and critical discourses and critical literacies**

Much of the adult world is not consciously taught to children, is not contained in the *content* of their talk, but is embedded in the language, in the discursive practices and the social and narrative structures through which the child is constituted as a person . . . what children learn through the process of interacting in the everyday world is not one single, non-contradictory language and practice . . . rather, children learn to see and understand in terms of the multiple positionings and forms of discourse that are available to them. (Davies, 2003a, p. 4)

In these brief narrations of place, readers can think deeply about the complexities of social class and gender, how girls may or may not come to recognize themselves as active agents for social change, and how multiple ways of perceiving and speaking the world can enter into a classroom where adults might assume children to have similar sociocultural experiences and thus similar beliefs about the social world. Heather and Hope are drawing on divergent discourses to articulate different theories of sociality that would likely position them differently in relation to critical literacies practices and education for social justice.
Their co-narration of a neighbourhood walk offers a complex picture of girls living poverty as social theorists.

One might assume, or at the very least as I did – and hope, that students who were so alike in so many ways would be constructing critical theories of the social world that would align nicely with critical literacies pedagogies. We cannot, however, as critical literacy researchers and practitioners, assume that such would be the case. Once teachers can read stories from the margins as discursive constructions, we can begin to ask ourselves if the discourses informing the theories students are constructing will work towards or against the theories driving critical literacies pedagogies. It is conceivable, for example, that if I was Heather’s teacher, I could introduce a focus on neo-liberalism and flexible labour forces for businesses and open up a discussion exploring the affordances and constraints of such an approach on one’s ability to become employable in the right way. On the other hand, I could also introduce a focus on critical discourses and link some of Hope’s narratives to inequitable institutional structures such as health care and the criminal justice system that can create particular challenges for working-class and poor adults. Merits and challenges of critical theories of the social world could then become a topic of discussion as well as a comparison to neo-liberalism. Understanding young students as intellectual workers, social theorists, or at the very least subjects taking up discursive practices available to them, could offer generative pedagogical responses in the classroom that position students as powerful and insightful rather than victims of circumstance who tell stories of their shamed world.

The girls represented here are not “done” or finalized subjects by any means. They will continue to take up different discourses in different settings, and a study of their narration about the neighbourhood to a different adult might lead to a very different analysis. For example, Heather may have listened to Hope’s narration during our neighbourhood walk and decided that she needed to tell the “other” story of the neighbourhood, therefore positioning herself as the person to talk about individuals and her perception of their lack of desire or responsibility. In another setting, it is possible that Heather might have engaged in more social critique, particularly if someone else was not there doing so (like Hope in this article). Nevertheless, explicit engagement with different discourses informing children’s – and our – understandings of the social and economic world are crucial in a critical literacies project.

Class marginalization and education

Carolyn Steedman (1987) writes that “It is possible that what propels the discrete repression of ability in working-class children in some primary schools is the class background of their teachers – and their gender” (p. 3). I argue, however, it is not necessarily the social classed location of the teacher that might propel what Steedman calls the “repression of ability in working-class children”, but rather a teacher’s sensitivity (or lack thereof) to issues of social class and discursive practices. In fact, if Steedman’s claim carries more power than mine in educational contexts, millions of working-class and poor children will not have a fighting chance at academic success this year in the United States because most of them will have been taught by a teacher from a middle-class background. Educators cannot, and should not, contend that teachers’ class histories align with students’ class histories in order for them to be successful with such students, just as we cannot contend that a teacher’s race, religion, gender, sexuality and disability/ability will magically predispose that teacher to be the best educator for a student “matching” one or another identity marker. Just as a middle-class teacher might hold tight to critical discourses, a teacher from a working-class background might take up – and hold tight to – neo-liberal discourses that would not be in the best interest of her working-class and poor students.
On the other hand, teachers learning to teach and learn across differences of all kinds would certainly be immersed in learning about social class inequities in the United States and across the globe, how those inequities come to be and the injustices experienced by the children living those inequities as they enter educational institutions. Recognizing young working-class and poor children as intellectual workers building social theories out of discursive possibilities suspends momentarily the issue of disadvantage/advantage. Instead, it positions children as intellectual beings who practise the complex processes of reading a world that pushes them and their families to the side and attempt to reclaim a space in that world by making sense of what one does when she is marginalized. This theory-building children engage in as they live their lives among adults enjoying life but also facing economic, social, political and criminal justice challenges to their attempts at wielding power in agentic ways is nothing short of marvellous.

**Forward thinking**

In an era of ever-widening gaps between the rich and poor and neo-liberal globalization reaching its tentacles to every corner of the Earth, it is imperative that educators and researchers hear, listen to and respond to narrated lived experiences of working-class and poor children. Additionally, it is crucial that groups of people work in solidarity against social structures that perpetuate low wages, unemployment and discrimination against working-class and poor folks. Working-class and poor children have been, and continue to be, the ones who suffer most in educational contexts that are supposed to be empowering and somehow “levelling” the playing field of economic opportunity. Tending to pedagogies that build social critique, group solidarity, deconstructive and reconstructive practices, pride in one’s place, value in one’s experiences and powerful discursive practices that work against neo-liberalism is imperative if social change is to take place. Listening closely to the discourses informing children’s meaning making can be a starting point in these lofty goals of critical literacies.

Longitudinal studies of working-class and poor children’s construction of social theories through available discourses could make a significant contribution to the interconnected fields of working-class studies, literacy research and critical literacies pedagogies. Additionally, it would be important to conduct studies of classroom practice that engages critically focused pedagogies such as critical literacies and the impact of such pedagogies on students’ discursive practices and theory building. If as a collective we are to prevent working-class and poor children from becoming adults who have internalized damaging discourses about themselves, their families and their communities, we must act against mainstream ways of responding to children that are saturated with deficit views of class marginalization.

**References**


