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# Beyond "Acting White": Affirming Academic Identities by Establishing Symbolic Boundaries Through Talk

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates interactional processes by which students from non-dominant groups develop academic identities within schools that privilege the dominant group. It draws on an ethnographic study of an urban magnet school, focusing on a discourse analysis of conversations between three eighth grade girls. Findings include that students supported their academic identities through strategically establishing symbolic boundaries between academic content and the standards by which they were judged. Overall, this study explores the ways in which students exercise agency as they develop symbolic boundaries that are more complex than the binary "white" vs. "nonwhite" in order to attain identity-related goals.

**Beyond "Acting White": Affirming Academic Identities by Establishing**

**Symbolic Boundaries through Talk**

**Introduction**

The "burden of acting white" hypothesis emerges from the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who studied the experiences of African American students in high school and found that many students would describe high achievement in school as conformist and "acting white."  In their study, students who invested their efforts in school performance faced possible negative sanctioning by their peers.  Fordham and Ogbu have argued that because African Americans are an involuntary minority and have experienced a history of institutionalized discrimination, their cultural models entail a distrust of dominant institutions, including schools.  Students may therefore perceive striving to achieve in school as futile, as they see little hope of being accepted into communities in which Whites predominate.  If achievement is viewed as "white", developing an academic identity could be seen as a rejection of African Americans' group identity, rather than as an entailing an additional community in which they could participate.  Some research has supported Fordham and Ogbu's findings, such as a study that found that gifted Back students associated "acting white" with high achievement (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008).

However, in recent years the "burden of acting white" explanation for disproportionate low academic achievement among students from non-dominant groups has been challenged for reasons that include its reliance on deficit-oriented perspectives (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus & Harpalani, 2001).  Another problem with the explanation is that it suggests that involuntary minorities do not value school achievement, yet the value African Americans place on school achievement is as high or higher than other groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998).  In

addition, studies have shown that peer groups (Horvat & Lewis, 2003) and school structures influence whether achievement is considered "acting white" (Fordham, 2008; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

Another pressing criticism of the "acting white" hypothesis stems from the assumption that involuntary minority students have similar experiences with schooling.   Yet studies have showed that students' experiences are heterogeneous, including cultural mainstreamers who assimilate to the norms of the dominant culture, noncompliant believers who "exert little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and white society" (p. 312) and cultural straddlers, who navigate school environments in order to both support their ethnoracial identities and succeed within the dominant institution.

Clearly many students are not constrained in their academic achievement by the need to avoid accusations of "acting white."  However, students from non-dominant groups who successfully navigate dominant institutions still have to find some way of reconciling their experiences of discrimination and bias with their goals of academic success.  When these students need to navigate systems in which they experience disadvantage, how do they develop identities that support achievement without absorbing the negative messages about themselves promoted through discriminatory structures and official school discourses?

Some researchers have highlighted the importance of peer groups in supporting students' academic and racial identities (Carter, 2007; Horvat & Lewis, 2003).  This paper explores identity construction within peer groups, taking a view of identity as emerging through social interaction.  It draws on a year-long ethnographic study of an urban magnet school (City Magnet), with a specific focus on discourse analysis of a conversation between three eighth grade girls from non-dominant groups who strive for high achievement.  It addresses the

question: What are the interactional processes by which students from non-dominant groups develop academic identities within dominant institutions that demonstrate discriminatory practices hidden by ideologies?

Based on the data, I argue that students supported their academic identities through strategically establishing boundaries between the academic content and the standards by which they were judged by the school. Students may not identify the institutional structures as racist, yet they were still able to interrogate these structures and the accompanying social boundaries through creating their own sets of symbolic boundaries. Students also defined "acting white" in ways that enabled them to support their ethnoracial identities without equating "white" with achievement. Instead, they defined "white" in ways that enabled them to reject aspects of the dominant culture that they disliked while positioning themselves as more reasonable.

Overall, this study explores the ways in which students exercise agency as they develop symbolic boundaries that are more complex than the binary "white" vs. "nonwhite" in order to attain identity-related goals. In addition, examination of their discourse also illuminates some of the ways in which seemingly "neutral" practices, which are neither identified by the teachers or their students as racist, end up contributing to racial segregation and stratification within a tiered urban school system. The insights that students can provide through their discourse can help generate recommendations for change in order for integrated urban school environments to be more equitable.

## Setting

The study takes place in an urban secondary magnet school, City Magnet. The city in which this study takes place is one of the largest school districts in the country, serving over

200,000 students who are predominantly from non-dominant backgrounds. Eighty percent of the students are non-White and 71% receive free or reduced lunch (Orfield & Lee, 2005). The larger metropolitan area has a tiered school system (Kozol, 1991), with high-achieving suburban schools, urban magnet schools, and neighborhood schools. While students within the city limits do not have the choice of attending the better-funded suburban schools, within the district there is an extensive choice system that includes magnet schools, charter schools, and small learning communities within neighborhood schools.

City Magnet is divided into a middle school, grades 5–8, and a high school, grades 9–12. Students are selected from elementary schools throughout the city to attend the middle school based on their third grade test scores and grades.  In the eighth grade, City Magnet students submit applications for high schools and are chosen for admission based on their grades in seventh grade, behavior marks, attendance record, and scores on standardized tests. Only about 100 out of the 200 eighth-grade students will be selected to enter the more prestigious high school, housed in the same building. The remainder of the students either attends other magnet schools, private schools, or neighborhood schools.

City Magnet's enrollment by race is 52% White, 34% African American, 9% Asian, 4% Latino, and 1% other (School District of Philadelphia, 2002-2003).  These figures are for the high school and middle school combined, and therefore do not reflect that the middle school has a much larger population of African American children than the high school. Given the residential segregation in Philadelphia, the African American students were much more likely to have attended schools in high-poverty areas with fewer resources, and some of them had to struggle considerably in order to succeed at City Magnet.

The eighth grade science classroom that is the focus of this study had 33 students.  Of these, approximately 40% were White, 34 % were Black, 10% were Asian American, 10% were Latino, and 6% were multiracial. Of the students that participated in the conversation detailed in this paper, Jada and Chloe are African American, and Kim's father is White and her mother is African American.

At the time of this conversation, the students had just been through a stressful application process, had heard back from the high schools, and had decided where they will attend.  The students had a heightened awareness of the school as an evaluator of their performance, and the possibility of rejection.  Kim was accepted to City Magnet High, and chose to attend.  Kim came to City Magnet from a neighborhood school and is interested in being a doctor someday.  Jada was accepted to City Magnet High, but chose to attend a larger magnet school.  Jada came to City Magnet from a neighborhood school in a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood. She gets mostly As in her classes, but had to struggle when she first came to City Magnet since "they didn't teach the same kinds of things I had learned."  Chloe was not accepted into City Magnet, nor into any of the other schools where she applied, probably because of her grades, which include a few Cs and Ds, and her frequent lateness.

These students, unlike the resistant students described in some studies, did not reject school success, and were working toward obtaining the future benefits that schooling can provide them in society.  However, their participation was still filled with contradictions and conflict, as they worked to establish academic identities within a school that had subjected them to categorization and evaluation to such an extent that their position there was insecure from the beginning.

**Acting White, School Structures, and Social Boundaries**

There has been considerable research on the relationship between Black students' achievement orientation and their awareness of racism within schools and within the broader society.  The recognition that dominant institutions favor White students may lead Black students to become disillusioned and view school success as "acting White" (e.g. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).  However, O'Connor (1999) argues that there is a more complex relationship between perceptions of opportunity and students' achievement orientation.  Based on interview data, she showed how some students who did not demonstrate much awareness of structural inequalities still did not strive for achievement, whereas other individuals who were fully cognizant of the constraints of race, gender and social class on opportunity still were high achievers.  She writes, "Researchers must continue to explore how some individuals… remain actively engaged in school, despite their recognition of how the social groups of which they are a part are profoundly disadvantaged in the process of social mobility." (p. 154).

Some researchers have aimed to better understand the variation in individual students' responses to their awareness of limited opportunities.  Tyson, Darity, & Castellino (2005) and argue that in schools where there is a strong representation of African American students in high tracked classes, there is less of an association of acting white with school achievement.  Other studies have also showed that Black students' perception of schooling as "acting white" depends on structural factors such as systems that segregate students based on race (Fordham, 2008; Tyson, 2011).  Other structures are relevant to low achievement as well, such as unequal access to resources and opportunities for skills development (Harris, 2011).

Yet even within schools with racialized tracking, some students still maintain an achievement orientation.  Several studies show how the support from peer groups can help

students address racial isolation within integrated urban school environments (e.g. Horvat &

Lewis, 2003.   Carter (2007) described how peers meet in counter-spaces, which are "a positive

resistance strategy" by which students self-initiate their own racial spotlighting in ways that

enhance the positive, as opposed to the negative spotlighting that occurs in classrooms.  While

studies show peer groups can provide support for students' racial identities, fewer studies show

exactly how these peer groups mediate students' understanding of the institutional structures that

promote racial inequalities, yet whose workings are masked by ideology.

Schools can be thought of as disciplinary institutions, with practices such as categorizing

students based on test scores and grades, and maintaining attendance and behavior records.  For

the students in City Magnet, the categorization could result such varied outcomes as a position in

a coveted magnet school or a position in an overcrowded, under-resourced neighborhood high

school.   Given the initial inequalities and racial segregation of both the school district and the

greater metropolitan area, this categorization process serves as a racist institutional structure,

which keeps some Black children with high academic potential from occupying the most coveted

spots.

However, the precise relationships between these institutional structures and racial

inequality may not be apparent to students.  While students may perceive a general unfairness,

the hierarchization process itself is justified by powerful ideologies that mask the inequalities

that result from these disciplinary practices.  By ideology, I refer to ideas and beliefs that are

circulated and widely accepted throughout a society yet reflect the underlying interests of the

dominant group (e.g. Willis, 1977).  Fine (1991) writes about the ideologies that are pervasive in

school, such as the myth that public education provides equal opportunity, social mobility, and

individualism.   In a tiered urban school system, the meritocratic ideology is pervasive, justifying

the school choice and selection process by which some students get to attend better-resourced

middle and high schools with higher academic expectations whereas other students do not.

Ideologies are conveyed through the discourses that are prevalent within institutions

(Gee, 2000).  While there are many relevant discourses that position students, thereby affecting

their identity formation, by ''dominant discourse'' I refer to the discourse promoted by the

school and teachers in official and unofficial communication with students.  This dominant

discourse is integrally tied to power relations between participants and the establishment of

social boundaries between groups.

In this school, it can be considered an ideology that the school is "the best" and rewards

students only based on merit, since in reality there are many factors that lead to someone being

inscribed as a "good student."  For example, Chloe was occasionally late because she had to

prepare two young nieces to go to school every morning, since her parents and sister worked

irregular hours.  One could argue that this student was particularly deserving of merit, as she was

able to manage both her academics and extensive child care responsibilities, yet she was still

inscribed as "tardy," and therefore as an uncaring and/or irresponsible student. Because African

American girls in Philadelphia sometimes have these responsibilities (e.g., Scantlebury, 2005),

many members of this group can be disadvantaged by such policies.

Lamont and Molnár (2002) describe social boundaries as rigid, tending to reinforce

inequalities in access to resources and opportunities.   Within a tiered urban school system, social

boundaries can be set by the official discourse that supports the tracking/selection process.  For

example, in this school the discourse propagated in assemblies about the school choice process

creates boundaries by positioning students either as smart and hardworking "City Magnet

material" or "better off someplace else," in the words of one administrator.   In one particular

awards assembly, students were assigned seats in different parts of the auditorium depending on their grades.  In this case, the social boundaries were established both physically (through seat assignment) and through discourse.  The student sitting next to me was aware of the unfairness and whispered to me throughout the assembly, "This is not right.  I work very hard at this school! Harder than some of them do.  I had never even heard of some of the stuff they teach here!"

As another example of how official discourse can reinforce social boundaries, one student described a field trip in which some of the students were noisy on the school bus.  "The teacher said, (low voice) "This is not how City Magnet students behave!"  She described how this bothered her because, "You can't expect the students to act differently just because you take them out of the ghetto and put them in this school."  Given that the behavior was on a school bus and therefore was not impacting academic performance, the definition of "City Magnet students" as "quiet" seems to be a social boundary that is discriminates against the African American students, who may have a disposition towards verve (Boykin, 1986).   It can also be thought of as racial spotlighting (Carter, 2007) in that the Black students felt targeted for their typical conversational approaches.

Carter (2007) writes, "In learning environments where Black students are the demographic minority, these spaces counter the hegemony of racist and other oppressive ideologies and practices of the institution and its members."  (p. 543).  How exactly can structural inequalities be countered if the racist implications of structural conditions are masked by meritocratic ideologies?  I argue they do so by creating symbolic boundaries that "counter" the social boundaries.

Lamont and Molnár (2002) discuss how symbolic boundaries are more fluid than social boundaries, as they are not backed up by the same differential access to power and privilege.

They are  "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people,

practices.... tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon

definitions of reality."  (p. 168). While symbolic boundaries may "contest and reframe the

meaning of social boundaries," (p. 186) social boundaries reflect the ideology and reinforce the

privilege of the dominant group.

It is possible that students in a selective school within a choice system like Philadelphia's

may not examine the functioning of the system and the accompanying ideologies perpetuated by

dominant discourses, may accept the social boundaries as normal, and reflect them in their own

talk.  Alternatively, students who are marginalized in such a system may resist the negative

categories to which the school district assigns them through refusing to participate, similar to the

students in Willis's (1977) study of English working-class youth who participated in a

counterculture in opposition to the norms of the school.  The phenomenon of associating

academic achievement with "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) also could be thought of as

a form of resistance.

However, students do not just fall within two groups, one that develops identities in

coherence with the ideologies promoted by the school, and one that resists through developing

oppositional identities. Instead, the process is more complex, as people are not passive recipients

of knowledge about themselves and their place in the world, but instead are agentic as they

construct themselves through talk.  Through developing their own narratives, students can resist

dominant ideologies (Kinloch, 2007).  Some students may strive for success within the

parameters of schools' admission criteria, yet criticize the categories by which they are judged.

Carter (2006) writes, "When researchers apply binary markers to ethnic and racial minority

students--for example...oppositional minority versus model minority, acting black versus acting

white--their explanations frequently obscure the heterogeneous cultural and educational

experiences of students within various ethnoracial groups" (p. 307).   In this study, rather than

assuming binary markers, I explore heterogeneity by investigating student agency in the creation

and maintenance of symbolic boundaries through discursive practice.

### Data Sources

In conducting ethnographic research, the research team worked to avoid a traditional

researcher/researched relationship that could exploit individuals.  Towards this end, I worked

with the students and teachers to evaluate the ongoing research project using Guba and Lincoln's

(1989) criteria for validity and authenticity in ethnographic research, which entail fairness, an

emphasis on increasing understandings of others' perspectives, an iterative relationship between

theory, data collection, and data analysis, and working with participants toward positive change

in local settings.

The study primarily took place over the course of one year in an eighth grade urban

science classroom. As the university-based researcher, I was a participant observer in the

classroom and led lunchtime research meetings.  I also spent time with the students during other

parts of their school experiences, such as the cafeteria, hallways, and assemblies.  Data were

collected in the form of field notes, interviews, student work, and video and audiotapes of class

and of assemblies where administrators spoke about other magnet high schools.

The teacher and four of the students participated in the study as co-researchers, reviewing

and discussing videotapes of class.  In selecting the four student researchers, the teacher and I

asked students who were different from each other in terms of their academic achievement.

Involving students who differed in these ways would allow for some of the benefits of maximum

variation sampling, facilitating ''detailed descriptions of each case'' and ''important shared

patterns which cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity'' (Patton, 1987, p. 53). The concern was not to provide a representative sample but to have a variety of perspectives. However, we also were interested in having a stronger representation of African American students among the researchers than in the student population of City Magnet, because the public school population in the city is predominantly African American. The student researchers' roles included participating in research meetings and interviewing other students about science learning and high school selection.  As students' academic identities extend beyond school, it was important to also gain insight into how they situate academic subjects relative to other aspects of their identities that are important to them. Students collected data on their lives through conversations, journals, and the creation of their home ethnographies.

Some of the data collected were in the form of informal conversations with several students, rather than interviews.  The goal of this type of data collection was to seek understanding of how students positioned themselves relative to each other and the school, rather than to me, a university-based researcher.  While my presence certainly would have an impact on what was said during these conversations, their talk was directed at each other and emerged from their own concerns rather than from a set of interview questions.   This paper focuses on a discourse analysis of one of these conversations.

## Data Analysis

**Discourse analysis techniques**

**Positioning.** Davies and Harre (1990) write, **"**Positions are identified in part by extracting the autobiographical aspects of a conversation in which it becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what

position they take up and in what story, and how they are then positioned." (p. 50). Drawing on this approach, I analyzed the conversations to examine how students strategically position themselves and others in ways that served as a counter-narrative to social boundaries.

**Voicing.** Wortham (2001) discusses how words are not just neutral descriptions or representations, but are infused with meaning from the ways in which others have used them before. The choice of a specific term therefore not only carries a literal meaning, but also references the recognizable groups or social types who commonly use the term. Further, the context in which the speaker uses the term, evaluative comments, and tone can reflect the speaker's position relative to these groups and/or social types. Through this process of "voicing," a speaker can position others, and in doing so articulate his/her own position relative to these others and to the audience.

It is important to note that there is not a rigid set of "rules" that connect a particular voice to a particular set of characteristics. Wortham (2001) describes the difficulty in elucidating a solid interpretation of voices and context through utterances because of their unfinalizability, as any utterance could be reinterpreted based on subsequent utterances. Wortham addresses this problem by discussing how indexical signs, which point to relevant aspects of the context, mediate between the utterance and the voicing and interactional positioning that takes place. Wortham writes that the process of the articulation of voices stops when over the course of a conversation, the indexical cues hang together in such a way that the relevant context and the interactional positioning accomplished by participants become clear.

Another way in which speakers can assign voice is through the use of quoted speech (Wortham, 2001). In doing so, a speaker brings other people's voices to his/her own utterances, and his/her meaning can emerge in interaction with these quoted voices. In the analysis, I

describe how the students sometimes use quoted speech in discussing their teachers, thereby assigning the teachers a voice and allowing the students to position themselves relative to this voice.

In analyzing how the students voice some of the characters that influence their education at this magnet school, and how the students position themselves relative to these other voices over the course of the conversation, I attended to indexicals, double-voicing, deictics, semantics, grammar, and subject choice.  Deictics work both to reference and establish groups (Wortham, 1996) and are therefore useful in examining interactional positioning.   To examine whether words sßtudents use to describe characters have a positive or negative valuation, I borrowed from Eggins and Slade's (1997) description of appraisal, "the attitudinal coloring of talk along a range of dimensions including: certainty, emotional response, social evaluation, and intensity." (p. 124). In doing so, I examined the adjectives, use of minor clauses, exclamatives and other clause structures, which can help interpret valuation.  For example, Eggins and Slade write that typically, exclamatives are used "to encode a judgment or valuation of events."  (p. 89).

**Narrated and storytelling events.** Wortham (2001) writes that it is important to distinguish between the narrated event and the storytelling event when analyzing a particular interaction.  In telling stories about themselves or in making any type of statement, people are not just relaying stories (the narrated event) but are also participating in an interaction that involves the speaker and the audience (the storytelling event) that has implications for the ways in which participants become positioned, and consequently, their identities.  In the case of this paper, the narrated events are the stories that the students tell about their school, their tests, and their classes.  The storytelling event is the interactional positioning that these students accomplish during the event as they speak with each other and with me.   According to

Wortham, personal pronouns, such as "we" or "they" relate the narrated event and the storytelling event by referring to the speaker, characters in the story, and possibly other listeners depending on the context.   In my analysis of the interaction, I will weave interpretations of both narrated and storytelling events.

**Coding**

In coding the larger data set, I strove for ontological authenticity (Guba, & Lincoln,1989) which entails an iterative relationship between theory, method and data. As an example of how codes evolved over time, in the beginning of the study a transcript of an administrator's talk would be openly coded with emerging themes.   However, over time it became apparent that the student participants wanted to enact changes in the culture of their school to reduce their sense of exclusion.  In the interest of catalytic authenticity, in that research is aimed at working with participants towards positive change, a theoretical frame was developed and codes were created that aimed at understanding how boundaries were set and perpetuated.  The transcript was therefore re-coded based on the whether the discourse was establishing social or symbolic boundaries (or both), the specific character of the boundaries, and how interactional positioning was accomplished.

In order to examine positioning and boundaries, any term associated with a particular social group was coded for the particular group it referenced, its meaning, its connotations, and its attitudinal coloring.  For example, the term "ghetto" emerged in students' talk when discussing events such as teachers criticizing their behavior on the school bus, as described earlier in this article.  However, in later conversations the term also emerged in students' description of the school:

Jada: Our school poor. () (it has a little sign that says chess team) () its ghetto.

Chloe: We need a trophy case. We have trophies on the table.. trophies on the desk .. we

got (5 sec) when you go down to the office.. and you go up to that table.. you got to go

behind the trophies just to see who is behind the counter. You be like EXCU:USE ME!

In the data analysis, terms such as "ghetto" were coded and compiled in matrices with

other uses of the term in order to develop a clearer picture of the types of symbolic boundaries

and positioning that students developed through their discourse.  In this case, it can be posited

that the describing of the students as "ghetto" and the school as "ghetto" serves to question the

official discourse that portrays City Magnet as the "best" and many students from low-income

areas as outsiders.  Instead, the students and the school are positioned similarly.

## Results

### Symbolic boundaries

Throughout the school year, students often voiced the teachers and administrators as

"unreasonable," thereby resisting having their own identities being defined by the school's social

boundaries.  Positioning themselves as reasonable and teachers and administrators as

unreasonable was one of the ways that students maintained symbolic boundaries, allowing them

to reject aspects of the dominant culture of the school without rejecting academic achievement.

The processes by which students created and maintained these types of boundaries are explored

later in this section.

In addition to creating symbolic boundaries between themselves and the workings of the

school, students also set up symbolic boundaries between their own actions and "acting white."

However, in their talk "acting white" was not associated with academic achievement; instead it was also associated with being unreasonable.

*"Acting white" is unreasonable, students are reasonable*

When students did use the term "acting white," they used it not in reference to school, but instead to draw symbolic boundaries between their own cultural dispositions and those of the dominant group.  Following is an example when they explained to me their use of the term:

Jada: Skateboarding is acting white.  You put yourself on some little board on wheels and fall.  Or bungee jumping, "Hey I think I will go jump off a cliff now!". Why make yourself more danger.  Just go outside, you can find some dangerous things around.

Chloe: It's also going to the supermarket and your kid whines for a lollipop and you go buy it.

Jada: Kids don't know how to act.

Chloe: They are yelling and the mother is (high pitched voice) "Oh sweetie, have a candy."

Jada: If we acted like that around our parents....

In both of the discussion of bungee jumping and supermarket behavior, the student voiced "acting white" as being irrational.  Specifically, acting white was equated with over-indulging children, which was contrasted with the parenting styles in their community, which enforced more polite behavior.   In addition, acting white was engaging in risky behavior for no apparent purpose, as opposed to a more reasonable approach to avoiding danger in a world that is dangerous enough on its own.

**Hierarchization is unreasonable, students are reasonable**

While the students did not use "acting white" when discussing achievement, the students did develop other types of symbolic boundaries that helped counter the official school discourse of categorization and hierarchies. Following are some excerpts from a conversation that show how students established symbolic boundaries that enabled them to strategically maintain academic identities within a school that privileged the White, middle class students, without invoking an association of whiteness and schoolwork.

The conversation between the three students and me was held toward the end of the year, over a pizza lunch. The narrated events include the activities that they expect for the end of the year, their school, their teachers assignments and comments to them, their experiences with the PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), and books they have read. The students had just heard back from high schools as to whether they would be admitted for the following year, and had spent a week taking these standardized tests. The storytelling event (the conversation itself) needs to be viewed in the context of these recent occurrences, as students are dealing with issues of whether they were admitted to City Magnet.

While I conducted a discourse analysis on the entirety of the conversation, the sections on which I focus below were chosen because they illustrate several ways in which students establish symbolic boundaries through their talk about their schooling experiences.

Key:
: Elongated vowel
= word said with little space between them
|| Interrupted talk
…: Broken talk
#: Bounds passages said quickly
underline: emphasis
CAPS: Loud talking

°: Low talking
(1): 1 second pause
() : Inaudible section
"" change in tone of voice and facial expression


*Positioning test question writers and characters in books*

In the following section, I discuss how two groups come into the conversation, authors

and test question writers.  I examine the ways in which students use voicing to position these

groups through their talk, and the implications for the students' academic identities.

In this section, from 108-252, the students begin talking about books and the PSSAs.  The

students introduce some characters into their conversation: authors of books, characters in books,

writers of test questions, and "you." Overall, the test question writers are voiced as demanding

unreasonable tasks that make students look bad, and the teachers are voiced as arbitrary and

inconsiderate. While in this particular section, a book character is voiced as silly, this

characterization of book characters varies later in the conversation.


108  Jada: English is so boring because they giving you these stories that don't
109  nobody ever want to read?
110  Chloe: |English like..()|
111  Kim: |Its really easy |
112  Jada: There's one Sto:ry where the girl looks under the flo:or boards for a
113  di:ary.
115  Jada: |That's how'd she know to look under the floorboards for a diary |
117  Jada: There's a Loose floorboard.. talk bout "One day I was cleaning .. and I
118  looked up at a loose floorboard ..a and found a diary" ..Nobody looks under
119  a loose floorboard you just walk over it and make sure you don't fall in.
120  Chloe: I like reading .. better than math.. but I know I got a bunch of questions
121  wrong… because they ask questions like (.5)  "Which is the best answer
122  and I'm be like (.5) OK….  They'll be a lady who opened a bookstore..
123  #this lady opened a bookstore#..and one of the multiple choice questions
124  be like "is the main point of this story a opening a book store,  A woman
125  who loves literature" and its like COME ON!  Which one is it oh my God!
126  Jada:  Its just one of the interpretations=they want you to have an exact
127  answer ..what they want you have for that answer.. It just depends on how

128  you look at the story.
130  Chloe: |I like reading|
131  Jada: |Readings not my best ()|
132  Kim: its (short?) you cant get a lot |from it|
133  Chloe: |Right.| Look and then they ask you question like "in nineteen..uh.. in
134  nineteen eighty nine" Not 1989.
135  Chloe: "In 1872 people used the word saucy. Does saucy mean A.  What is saucy."
138  Jada:  And you can't use ..They give you words you never heard of.. and you
139  can't use the dictionary you just sit there looking dumb like.
140 Chloe: When I was done.. what I was done the multiple choice questions.. I
141 answered none of the questions about septuagenarians..(.5)   When I was
142 done … I looked up septuagenarian I'm like "Hmmm. Maybe I should
143 check my answers."
144 Jada: I'll do well in English anyway cause I don't like read
145 Chloe: Ill do better in English and math .. than math
146 Jada: Math is my favorite subject

In this part of the conversation, the students used quoted speech to voice both the test

question writers and a book character.  Through voicing these characters, they are able to

articulate their own position relative to these groups and to the school itself.  For example in

lines 117-118, when Jada quotes the book, "One day I was cleaning..." she uses a higher pitch

than normal, and shakes her head and smiles.  She seems to be portraying a silly character, which

is confirmed by her next statement, "nobody looks under a loose floorboard you just walk over it

and make sure you don't fall in."  This utterance serves as a negative appraisal of the character,

and a way of positioning herself as a much more reasonable person.  Her voicing of the character

in this way also supports her earlier statement that "nobody" would want to read such stories.

While in the narrated event she is commenting on the characters in books, in the storytelling

event she is also creating and/or maintaining symbolic boundaries by positioning herself as more

reasonable than the types of people (teachers) who would assign such material that nobody

would want to read.

In using quoted speech to voice the test question writers, Chloe adopts a stiff, pedantic

tone, with a lower voice.  While Chloe does not use metapragmatic verbs, her position relative to

these writers becomes clear based on the comments that follow, "It's like COME ON! Which one is it – Omigod!"  Through these exclamations, she conveys a negative evaluation of the writers, communicating that both answers are fine, and it is the questions themselves that is poorly written.

Chloe follows the negative view of test question writers with, "I like reading."  This may seem somewhat unrelated to the prior statements, but it serves to introduce a new distinction: between answering reading comprehension questions on a test, and between reading, which is a different sort of activity.  So far, they have been lumped together, as the students have voiced both books characters and test question writers as sometimes not making sense.  Chloe's statement establishes the two forms of writing - the types of reading that students do on tests and actual books - as different. Kim reinforces this distinction with her comment that implies that the excerpts that they give you on tests are too short, so it is not surprising that it is hard to answer some of the reading comprehension questions.  In the context of Chloe's statement, Lisa's comment suggests that reading real books is a more legitimate type of activity than reading the excerpts on tests.  In this way, the students set up a symbolic boundary between academics and test taking, suggesting that they are separate types of activities.  The implication is that they can identify with reading, without absorbing the negative messages that accompany frequent testing. Later on the conversation, reading becomes the focus of conversation, as the students discuss the books they like and do not like.

Who is this "you" to which the students have begun referring?  In line 126, instead of using "we" or "us" to refer to her class, Jada says, "Its just one of the interpretations.. they want you to have an exact answer...what they want you have for that answer.. It just depends on how you look at the story."  She also uses "you" in line 118, "Nobody looks under a loose floorboard

you just walk over it and make sure you don't fall in." While Jada makes most of the "you" statements, Kim and Chloe also use "you" in similar ways throughout the rest of the conversation. Sometimes in conversation, "you" can accomplish distance from a particular group. However, based on an examination of the sentences in which "you" is the subject or the direct object, it seems like "you" has a different function in the talk among the students, with two related meanings. "You" is a group that extends beyond the eighth grade, includes me the researcher, and is synonymous with, "any reasonable person."

Another interpretation of the use of "you" is that the "you" is subject to unreasonable conditions. They want *you* to have an exact answer. She gives *you* books *you* got to choose from, rather than letting you choose your own. The students may be distancing themselves from the position of being subjected to aggravating conditions, but I think it is more likely that they interpret this "you" to extend beyond themselves, to anyone who has to endure the arbitrariness of teachers who do not give you choices on books to read (line 167) or tests with new words, yet they don't let you use a dictionary (line 139). Students everywhere are included in this group, not just the eighth grade "we" that doesn't get good trips. Even adults like me are included, since the students seem to assume (correctly) that I also would not want to have to take a test on words I do not know.

The test question writers are a new "they" (line 121, 133). It is interesting that they are given a personal pronoun, since Chloe could have said "The question was like 'which is the best answer.' The "they" marks the test question writers as a social group, and connects them with the teachers. When Jada says, "they want you to have an exact answer," it could be just question writers, but it could be teachers as well. As an example of "they" referring to teachers being arbitrary, like the test writers, here is an excerpt from later in the conversation:

260  Jada:  And they be talking about #no questions til the end#  Well by the time
261  the end comes I don't got my question I don't know what I was talking
262  about ten minutes ago.
263  Kim: It doesn't make sense when you ask question|()
264  Jada:| yeah cause then you |()|
265  Chloe: |Why| you ask that?
266  Kim: Yeah
267  Chloe: Ten minutes later… I hate when teachers do that .. Just wait til the end
268  of the class.
269  University researcher: OK..
270  Chloe: OK ()
271  Jada: and my question was … Um.. And they always interrupt () anyway

As we have seen throughout these two excerpts, the juxtaposition of "you" and "they"

reinforces students' identities as reasonable and test question writers and teachers as arbitrary

and somewhat hostile to their achievement by interrupting them or using words that are

unfamiliar.  Jada says, "They give you words you never heard of.. and you can't use a

dictionary," implying that reasonable people would use dictionaries.  She also says, "you just sit

there looking dumb like." "You" make sense.  "They" do not make sense, yet they still try to

place students in situations that make them look deficient.

What types of interactional positioning have been accomplished by the students in this

section, both in the context of the storytelling event and in the context of the narrated events? In

these two excerpts, the narrated events are the students' experiences taking the standardized

tests, and with teachers who do not allow them to ask questions when they want.  Through their

pronoun use and evaluative comments, they position teachers and test writers in negative ways,

and in contrast portray themselves as reasonable.  In the storytelling event, as they interact with

each other, the students are positioned as capable and competent even though their success is

sometimes impeded.  For example, Chloe's narrated event in line 145 concerns her looking up a

word from the test in the dictionary and deciding that she should have changed her answers.  In

the context of Jada's earlier comments, Chloe is positioning herself within the storytelling event

as conscientious and reasonable. Jada voiced a reasonable "you," who would look up an

unfamiliar word, and Chloe takes up this specific action.

The students' talk on this issue may seem to be simply complaining about tests, but it is

also connected to larger societal inequalities that have implications for the educational and career

opportunities available to them, and the development of their academic identities. Some

researchers have criticized standardized tests as not accurately predicting the performance of

African American students (Crouse & Trusheim, 1988) or of being culturally inappropriate

(Hilliard, 1990). Because tests are considered an objective measure, evaluating students based

on vocabulary knowledge can be thought of as legitimating racial and socioeconomic

discrimination. While the students do not mention race here, their rejection of the capability of

the test questions for measuring their intellectual worth is an insight that could allow some

protective measure against accepting being inscribed negatively. As I worked with these

particular students over time, they became more aware of the biases in test questions, and would

discuss explicitly how they were disadvantaged because they grew up speaking in a completely

different way than some of their peers. Yet even as eighth graders, through their talk they

establish various positions (a common sense "you" and test question writers) in ways that allow

them to reject the standards by which they are judged. As I will argue later, in doing so, they are

able to reject the assessment method without developing an oppositional approach to academic

identity.

**Positioning authors**

After a few turns of speaking about the amount of work they have, Jada makes a criticism,

but as an "I" statement, and somewhat hesitantly. "I do not like the fact that she give us a book

called the independent reading but she give you books you got to choose from?" There seems to

be a disagreement in that Kim thinks they were limited last year also, but Jada thinks there were

more books to choose from back then. Kim's statements end up in agreement with Jada, that

there was more choice before, and in support of the idea that it is better to choose your own

book. In line 180, Chloe talks about how she likes old books. She uses quoted speech from

Shakespeare, then says, "What is THAT? .. Like that made any sense." Following are excerpts

from their talk about different authors and characters and books.

> 180  Chloe: I like old books.. Like I read Alice and Wonderland and the looking
> 181  glass. I like books like that .. Like old books… That's why I pick
> 182  Shakespeare  I don't understand what they sa:aying. They was talking and
> 183  then they go.. real 2000 words. And they was in eighteenth century, they
> 184  was like "we ran down the hallway.. and a man attempt to go downstairs
> 185  to see what was going on. We came upon a dog. Gouging the neck of his
> 186  enemy. And then I blew his brains out." What is THAT?
> 188  Chloe: Huh OKa:ay thank you! Like that made any sense.
> 189  (inaudible. Students are showing me a passage in a book)
> 190  Jada: All these books I really like that I had to read in seventh grade we had
> 191  that book challenge thing… the only book that I read like that was ..old
> 192  University researcher: What is it
> 193  Chloe: That book good.
> 194  Jada: I like stuff like that . But *Gather the Flowers* is so boring I don't know if
> 195  its just some stories people make up.. but some of them is so long.. and
> 196  some of them is so confusing…
> 197  kim: I read it like three times before| ()|
> 199  Chloe: I like Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes like the mysteries?.. Some
> 200  are real interesting. Like the one I just read I knew the answer.. But the
> 201  one I'm on now
> 202  Kim: the ()?
> 203  Chloe: No, the ().. The butler read a piece of paper and then they try to figure
> 204  out why he read the paper. ASK the BUTLER!
> …..
> 211  Jada: That title doesn't fit the story.. () Uh I'll talk about (Going for)
> 212  Kim: |That was a good book|
> 213  Jada: |That was a good book|
> 214  Jada: Some of them is good..some of them like "why.. did you write this."
> 215  Jada:  Cause like its confusing.. Almost everything.. cause like almost is a person..()
> ….
> 220  Chloe:  I got to read over and over again cause it was like "Really? What a
> 221  peculiar statement said he?"

222  Sts: (he he)
223  Chloe: And they be having a whole conversation.. and the weird thing is…
224  they'll have a conversation.. and then at the end .. the core points .. and
225  then start a new paragraph with another quote.. and it will still be the
226  person that is talking in the paragraph before
227  Kim: You're not supposed to do that you're suppose to.. I don't know
233  Jada: |No periods|. no commas. and then.. He .almost.. said he like Oh my god
234  Chloe: Oh.. my goodness
235  St: Part of this it said earlier
236  University researcher: That's so long
237  Students: Wow
238  Jada: Yeah.
239  Kim: Then you'll be all out of breath again?..  The next sentence is like five
240  lines long
241  Jada: __ can do that but If we do that in our homework we get five points taken off.
243  Sts: (he he)
244  Jada: That's a run-on sentence.
245  Sts: (He he)
246  Jada: Well you tell him that.
247  Sts: He he
248  Jada: They'll do this and the sentence wouldn't be that long
249  Chloe:  And this is one thing you would never guess.  Sherlock Holmes was a
250  Cocaine addict.  He was on Opium.  Sherlock Holmes = he need help.  He
251  need to go to some AA meetings or something I don't know Oh my gosh (

When they begin talking about authors and books, there is no consistent positive or

negative value assigned to them.  Chloe likes Sherlock Holmes, though she points out aspects of

the story that are unrealistic.  Even Jada, who at first says she does not like to read at all, later

modifies her position and says that she has liked reading some things.  Although the books are

sometimes confusing, it is notable that there are no negative statements about what authors do to

students.  Test question writers make students look dumb, teachers interrupt them, but confusing

writing does not harm students directly.

In line 223, Chloe describes one book that used an unusual structure for paragraphs and

quotations.  Kim says, "You're not supposed to do that, you're supposed to…"  Next, the

students describe a long passage in a book they have to read that has a lot of commas in it.  Kim

shows me the passage (at around line 233) and the students and I comment on it.   Jada then provides some comments about the "run on sentence" that are interpreted as a joke.

Jada's comment refers back to the earlier discussion in several ways.  She speaks of "We," which points to the eighth grade.  The teachers are not referenced directly, nor are the test givers, but they are implicit players, in that they would take the five points off.  There may be multiple literal meanings for this joke.  However, based on the context provided by the indexical cues, Jada seems to be juxtaposing the writer, who has crazy, long sentences, and the teachers, who evaluate the students in arbitrary and unfair ways, in order to provide a stance from which she can criticize the standards by which the school judges the students. In the narrated events, the teachers give students standardized tests on words they do not know, do not let them ask questions, do not let them use dictionaries, which reasonable people would do, and do not let them have choice in the books they read.  Yet they assign the students books written by authors who flout the conventions for writing.

Jada is therefore not just telling a story about a long, confusing sentence. Jada's "You tell him that" suggests her recognition of the inconsistency and unfairness of the school's evaluation practices.  Certainly the teachers would not correct an author's writing.  The value of the knowledge that students are tested on comes into question, since authors who write run-on sentences can be successful and are not subject to the same rules that the students are. Jada's joke could be read as, "You (in this case the teacher who just took five points off rather than the collective you that was used earlier) go and tell him that – I'd like to see how he wouldn't listen to you.  Why should we?" In the storytelling event, Jada positions herself as logical, in contrast to the teachers who are positioned as arbitrary.

While the joke is told by Jada, the other students ratify it with loud, extended laughter.  In doing so, they position themselves in the storytelling event in alliance with Jada.  The joke also coheres with some of Chloe's and Kim's other statements on authors and teachers.  Clear patterns emerge voicing teachers, school and tests as arbitrary, somewhat cruel, and subjecting them to rules and practices that don't make much sense, and authors as varied, unconventional, and sometimes making little sense.  Chloe follows Jada's joke with comments about Sherlock Holmes as an addict. Chloe's new information contributes to the voicing of authors as not subject to conventions.  Not only do they have sentences that flout the conventions for writing, but also some of the characters that they create have drug problems, and thereby exhibit behaviors that conflict with social norms.

The discussion of authors and book characters supports students' opposition to the school by serving as a voice that runs counter to the voices of teachers and test question writers. The authors are voiced as strange, irrational, confusing, and not needing to adhere to the rules to which the students need to conform.  It is important to note that while the students are not as critical of the authors, the students do not seem to identify with them either.  I would argue that both teachers and authors are depicted as not always making that much sense, while they, the students, position themselves as reasonable.  They know how to ask questions, to avoid loose floorboards, and when to look things up in a dictionary.  These students are affirming their own capabilities for acting in ways that make sense, in spite of an environment that at times is "not right."

Through their positioning of authors and teachers, the students are able to take a position in the storytelling event from which they can support each other in being critical of the school's practices of classifying and hierarchizing, yet still maintaining academic identities. There is a

consistency throughout the conversation of students (most often between Jada and Chloe) in not accepting the school's evaluation of them. In positioning themselves in this way, engaging in academic pursuits can still be considered desirable.  They are aware that the standards by which they are judged are unfair, but they do not feel a need to reject all activities associated with school.

## Conclusions

All three of these students ended up with good grades in high school and attended college.  In speaking with these students over the course of their high school and college years, none of them ever described themselves as resisting achievement, or portrayed academic success as "acting white."  While this study has limitations in that it only addresses the experiences of these three magnet school students, a close investigation of the conversations among these students can show the specific processes through which academic identities may be constructed through talk within a competitive and discriminatory educational environment.

One of these processes of identity construction, highlighted in this discourse analysis, is voicing different social types in such a way that academic content (such as books) and oppressive methods of evaluation (such as standardized testing) are separate and opposed to each other.  In the narrated events, the authors of novels are voiced as defying conventions and not even meeting the school's standards, yet they are still successful, which highlights the absurdity of the school's categorizations of the students. In the storytelling event, as students point out the contradictions between classroom content and assessment, and between the high status of the school and the reality they experience, the students position themselves as "people who make sense," as opposed to the teachers and their rules and tests, which do not.   They are therefore able to refuse some of the ideologies perpetuated in the school's dominant discourses, such as

that if one does not get positioned as "City Magnet material", one is somehow lesser. The specific ways in which they refuse do not involve a rejection of academics, but instead allow them to continue to see themselves as achievers despite an organizational structure designed to potentially label them as failures and at times restrict them from membership in academic communities.

Positioning different groups and themselves through talk offers a powerful tool for the students to portray themselves in positive ways, despite their ambivalent relationship with the school due to racist institutional structures. The students do not need to conceive of themselves as model City Magnet students to see themselves as achievers; rather, they can be like the authors that are assigned in their English classes and flout conventions, or be like "reasonable people" and seek information that they do not know. It is important to note that the school itself provides students with the tools and content of refusal and organizational critique by teaching them literature. Without exposure to this type of academic content, it might be more difficult for them to construct themselves in positive ways.

## Implications

Students may be agentic as they create symbolic boundaries, but they should not have to work so hard to cope with a discriminatory system. Carter (2007) writes, "It is the hope of this author that future research will continue to explore how high-achieving Black students are able to resist and persist in predominantly White public schools, and that eventually these institutions will become places that are counterhegemonic in nature and racially affirming for all students who attend them." (p. 553).

How can urban magnet schools become counterhegemonic? One way is to expose the hegemony. Those best positioned to do so are the students who need to navigate these spaces,

such as the students in this study who exposed some of the oppressive institutional structures and official discourses.

One major issue that could be changed is the school choice process itself. It could be argued that students should not have had to compete with each other on an uneven playing field for spaces in the magnet high school. Support rather than competition would have been a more equitable approach. As one of the students described to me, "Once we got in, they should help us do well here, not keep telling us we do not belong here." Another issue is the negative impact of a focus on test preparation at the expense of other parts of the curriculum. In this case, it is the students' exposure to literature that supported them in constructing an academic identity in spite of their experiences with standardized tests in which they were likely to have been disadvantaged.

Further, teachers and administrators could be more aware of the impact of the dominant discourses surrounding selection and tracking. Language that categorizes students as "City Magnet material" presents a dichotomy, whereas the reality of students' abilities, interests, and identities is substantially more complex. Official discourses should not reinforce initial inequalities, but instead should encourage achievement in ways that will inspire all students.

At the classroom level, teachers can be attentive to how their own talk might promote social boundaries that are experienced as hostile or discriminatory. For example, with regards to the school bus incident, the student had a suggestion, "If they want us to be quiet, they should tell us to be quiet. Not say, "this is not how City Magnet students behave." Teachers can set expectations for student behavior and achievement without using terms that place students into insider/outsider groups.

Another approach that teachers can take is to avoid setting up competitive environments within integrated classrooms, as these may just exacerbate initial inequalities in students' educational backgrounds.   Instead, efforts could be made to insure that all students are valued contributors to the classroom community through discursive strategies such as uptake, drawing on students' outside experiences, and open-ended questions with multiple right answers.  In this way, the focus is learning and participation rather than a struggle to decide who belongs and who does not.

In addition to offering practical suggestions for schools, this research has implications for understanding why other researchers have found considerable variation in whether students from non-dominant groups will describe achievement as "acting white."  This study shows that rather than solidifying binary markers, the making of symbolic boundaries is a creative process that can go in many directions.  In this case, the symbolic boundaries that youth established through their talk served to both critique the dominant institution and support academic achievement.   Even the binary categories of "acting white and "acting black" may have very different meanings in different settings depending on how they emerge through students' discursive practice.  In general, there are numerous pathways that students can take in creating symbolic boundaries that help them to make sense of their position within dominant institutions.

One possible area for future study is comparative research on official discourses between different schools related to selection processes and tracking, and the impacts of these discourses on students.  In City Magnet, students received frequent messages that some of them do not belong.  However, not all magnet schools have the same binary categories that City Magnet does. What variations are there between magnet schools?  What variations are there between different schools with tracking systems?  Do different types of "official discourses" lead to different

experiences for students from non-dominant groups, and if so, how and why?  Studies that

compare the impact of different types of official discourses around tracking and selection can

help explore better ways of organizing schools in order to improve support for students from

non-dominant groups.

Another area for future research is the relationship between teacher discourse and students'

identity construction through talk.  Such research can expose other ways in which teachers may

inadvertently perpetuate inequalities.  For example, teachers in this school may not have been

aware how damaging the term "City Magnet material" was to their students.  Similarly, there

may be many other discursive approaches that harm students and of which teachers need to be

made more aware.

Overall this study shows that students are not passive recipients of knowledge about

themselves and their place in the world, but instead are agentic as they construct themselves

through talk.  The students in this study established symbolic boundaries between the content

taught in school and the standards by which their work was judged, between themselves and

those who evaluate them, and between their own cultural dispositions and the dominant culture

that they needed to navigate.  Through this type of positioning, rather than achievement being

considered "acting white," achievement became a reasonable personal goal.   The symbolic

boundaries became a positive force for affirming their own capabilities and rejecting the

internalizing of an unequal educational system.   The insights that students can provide through

their discourse can generate recommendations for building more inclusive communities that

focus on learning and academic achievement for all students.

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