Race and Class in a Culture of Risk

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Studies of race, class, and educational risk often proceed in an established, but misleading order: first, race is defined as a trait given at birth and turned into trouble by prejudice and unequal conditions; then, class is defined as traits socialized into children with diminished socioeconomic opportunities; finally, risk is treated as the result of children being damaged by racism and class disadvantage. The order shapes an easy, but misleading argument: because race and class inequities suppress normal growth and development, minority and poor children are most at risk of disabilities and school failure. The diagnosis of risk is embedded in cultural preoccupations and circumstances that, because rarely specified, invite a general bias: white middle class lives offer children the best of all worlds. The message to educators: fix the children, and race and class barriers can be overcome one person at a time.\textsuperscript{i} By this mainline of reason, to organize classroom activities for access to success, teachers must remediate the effects of race and class on individual children.

This paper complicates the procedures, conclusions, and implications of educational research by treating race and class as social activities: not race and class as what people are, but race and class as what people do to each other. A shadow topic of learning disabilities (LD) receives occasional mention. Race, class, and disability, if treated as traits – we prefer the word situations – are statistically related to each other (Artiles, 2003; Artiles, Klinger, & Tate, 2006), and some analysts think they are related causally. This paper acknowledges only that the social activities of noticing or labeling a person as, say, Latino, increase the chances of labeling the same person poor and/or LD. All three labels allow people to be caught or acquired by a collective representation enforced by convention and conversation.\textsuperscript{ii} Although this paper emphasizes the nuanced production of the race and class labels people use to catch each other, similarities in the logic of race and class talk, on the one hand, and disability labeling, on the other, deserve notice.

Caught by Race and Class

Although race and class are two of the most pressing facts in American society, analytically and politically, they are facts more about the whole society than about isolated individuals. Confusion on this point distorts the task facing educators. Research on race and class
as traits can divert attention from the risk loaded activities, experiences, and histories for which the words became salient. One cannot belong to a race, class or disability group alone; they are all relational terms, and everyone in the culture is somehow involved in their expression. Failure to specify the circumstances of race, class, and disability – as if they could operate on their own, as if environments were mere decorations – ignores the up-close risks and ranks of American culture and obscures the built-in background of actual activities where risk is staged. At play in every race and class relevant moment, there are ongoing histories of subjugation, hierarchical structures of opportunity, an incessantly competitive market, and a culture that stages endless rituals of risk along with promises of fleeting achievement – conditions ironically enacted even by good educators trying to make race and class less negatively consequential.

Risk rituals dominate American life, not just for the minority or poor, but for everyone. Risk lives in immediate environments, in next-door neighbors, next-seat students, and next-race and next-social class job applicants. When called upon, Americans must display inherent worth and ability and/or enforce degradation and disability as strategic moves: up the system for the few, down the system for the rest.iii Even for the majority who seem set in the same positions their parents occupied a generation before, risk is everywhere. In a culture that promises equality but delivers hierarchy, everyone is risk rich, everyone a victim and a perpetrator. Race and class differences are the traditional, and LD the most recent, resources, weapons, and propped-up consequences in the struggle of all against all. At play in every risky moment: everyone.

Studies that make the life and times of risk a primary analytic fact conceive of race and class as simultaneously the problem, method, and product of skillful practices among people in pressing circumstances. Novelists have delivered the most nuanced portrayals of the ups and downs of race and class practices in capitalist states over the last two centuries (for analytic examples, see Kaufmann, 1995; Tratner, 2001), and recent ethnographies of education in and out of school have delivered more analytic versions of the same drama.iv We offer three studies confronting easy conceptual ties among race, class, and education in a culture of risk: one on the risks of talking about race in school settings, a second on risky race and class borders between neighborhoods, and a third on building school environments in which students can forcefully confront race and class borders without too much risk. Each begins with situated versions of race and class, seeks analytic methods focused on how people collectively produce success and
failure, and finds responsibility for inequalities in ever emerging situations in which risks, winners, losers, races, and classes are locally produced and ameliorated in varying proportions.

Race and Risk in Education

Inquiries into educational risk usually conceive race as a personal trait consequential for a child's learning. Directly racist accounts theorize outcomes as the effect of biological inheritance: most infamously, racial differences in intelligence. More egalitarian accounts stress how racial minorities suffer diminished access to social and cultural resources, but unless supported by an aggressive political stand, these might just as well be blatantly racist. The first puts educational failure on biology, the second on society, but both use race as a naturally occurring fact – an independent variable – to support the arguments.

Biological anthropologists have been dismissing race as a descriptive category for more than a century (Baker, 1998; Smedley, 2007), but it remains a robust identity tag (for a summary and an American/South African comparison, see Fredrickson, 1997, 2002). Categories of racial classification, from Linnaeus's five (white, black, yellow, red, and other) to 20th-century taxonomies with hundreds of entries, have flimsy borders. Americans achieve rough consistency by isolating a few physical traits and treating them, in proportions convenient to the situation, as markers of racial identity (the same logic applies to the diagnose of LD). Educational researchers rely on these flimsy categories as units of analysis. A better strategy asks about the social contexts and political uses of racial terms.

First as a teacher, then as a researcher, Mica Pollock (2004) observed students, teachers, administrators and others using – and not using - race labels in and about Columbus High. Her achievement: she shows when race is the subject not talked about; that is, she gives enough detail on how school personnel talk to determine when race is the topic at hand even when it is not directly mentioned. For example, although race must be talked about in a district office meeting on achievement gaps, race labels are avoided at school faculty meetings on the disproportionate number of African American students wandering the halls during class or not graduating at year's end. The silences are systematic and reveal a concern for race and rank as dangerous; behavior aimed at altering the plight of students can become new occasions for racism and/or accusations of racism.
The fears are played out against every school's preoccupation with assessment and embarrassment at differential performances across groups, and speakers respond with silences, clichés, or complaints designed to reduce risk. Differential performances across racial groups can be measured and discussed objectively on formal occasions, but are addressed as racial by teachers only in informal conversations. Figure 1, roughly based on Pollock, shows a general pattern of talk and topic. As long as a topic remains distant and abstract, and implicates only those not present, people address race matter-of-factly and out-loud. As a topic moves closer to home, refers local events, and has implications for speakers, race is limited to whisper.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Similarly, the details of race talk depend on whom one is speaking as, to whom one is speaking, and who else might be listening and judging. Figure 2 is stimulated by Pollock's representation of race and rank in talk about race-relevant topics. Educators and students who share race and rank generally use race labels matter-of-factly. Race talk up and down the hierarchy (e.g., between principal and teacher, or teacher and student) can be difficult, even if it occurs in private; so too race talk between teachers of different race groups. Sharing neither race nor rank, participants limit race labels and categories. Students accuse teachers of racial injustice, principals demand reform from teachers, and superintendents assign blame to whole schools for racial differentials in achievement. When pressed, participants can almost always find ways to not talk about race.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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Life is never as simple as a two-by-two figure or table. Topics shift quickly, and group membership moves around easily among students. By Pollock's stories, people are constantly figuring out who's who in relation to whom, and race talk is moved in and out accordingly. If race talk is an effective strategy for reckoning relative position in a group of speakers, it is because they make it so. Race talk can go badly, even for those trying directly to make it otherwise (Lin 2007). Depending on who remembers and reports what is said, how, to whom, and under what conditions, race talk can be a little or a big problem, an immediate or a long later
problem. Teachers at Columbus find themselves stuttering, pausing, hedging, and complaining. It is difficult to speak truth in race terms. Race in a culture of risk is a resource in the calculation of who wins, who loses, who moves up, who moves on, and who moves to the back. Education is risky game, and the race card, like the LD card, gets played accordingly.

Recognizing the cultural play of race categories tied to school performance does not make racial problems easy to fix, but it shifts responsibility to the gatekeepers who make racial struggles institutionally consequential (Morrison, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Analyzing race as a work-a-day construction or fiction does not make race not-real. The adjective real makes a misleading contrast with preceding or transcending ordinary human activities. Ethnographic studies of the uses and consequences of race in social practice bow to its political reality by locating it at work. Race is never before or outside of current engagements. Race is locally produced for everyone to see, feel, occasionally expose, and mostly keep quiet about, except at times pre-arranged and tightly scripted enough to not make a difference (as in policy discussions). The unit of analysis is not anyone's race, but the high-risk stakes that keep performance differentials and degradation rituals racialized and generally unspoken. Anyone entering an American school has to learn how to talk about race. It is an activity fraught with risk to the extent it overlaps with success, failure, and access to the rewards of the wider society.

Class as Risk in Education: From Poverty to Neighborhood

Both race and class identify traits seemingly consequential for a child's educational potential, but they are operated on differently. Race is easy to articulate, but often silenced or turned into trouble (the latter sometimes productively so). Class, in contrast, is difficult to articulate; it is a third-person ascription more than a term of self-reference (first person) or address (second-person). A simple two-part concept of social class (Marx's owners and workers – with no middle-class) has rarely fueled the American imagination, and class warfare looks more like an occasional prizefight put on for ritualized public proclamations.

School failure correlates well with poverty. The situation screams out for explanation, but receives mostly accusations: that poor children can't think straight for the problems on their minds; that their parents have no time to spend or no knowledge to impart; or that people in poor neighborhoods are unmotivated and have little sense of what the world offers. Even studies trying to contradict deprivation theories – studies showing how wonderful the children are –
support the usual stereotypes by accepting the dichotomies that frame the arguments: smart/dumb, middle class/poor, enabled/disabled, and so on (McDermott & Varenne, 2006; Wacquant, 2002). Statistics are gathered and predictions made. The correlations hold. New data are tweaked, old explanations reframed, new ones formulated, but not much changes. The bell curve tolls for every new generation of poor children with rarely a mention of those who succeed at the expense of the poor: auto factory executives at the expense of the unemployed, the SAT rich at the expense of the SAT weak. Risk is everywhere responded to by individuals, but rarely addressed collectively.

Limiting public knowledge of the poor to school performances hides their capacities and achievements and allows the lazy assumption that an absence of middle class things – books, computers, travel, tutors, coffeehouses – degrades intelligent thought. Because school is demanding, as if the rest of life weren't, educators claim authority to sort by ability. A better view appreciates the survival knowledge required of children and parents with little leeway in the dance of social structure. School is not so much harder, as it is well designed to sort. Poverty has become a balance point for individual identity and a measurable determinant of aptitude and ability. Educational and social policy has investigated poverty without a corresponding critique of those who profit and succeed (Katz 1997; Schram, 1995), and the well-off have successfully avoided detection. The poor now face two problems: one is not having access to material and cultural resources and connections; the other is to be constantly probed and degraded by explanations officially designed to help. This is an old tradition (Ranciere, 2004), but particularly complex in societies claiming democracy. Can educators and researchers address the plight of poor children without making things worse? Answer: not without taking responsibility for their privileged positions in the cycle of competition and risk.

Neighborhoods offer a productive focus for making class visible. The concept of neighborhood is blatantly collective, and twice so. Neighborhoods are defined by their borders – both sides of their borders – and survive on the pathways that connect and constrain them. A focus on neighborhoods should remind researchers to examine both sides and to resist the analyses of one kind of person at a time. Across borders, neighborhoods harbor the full round of economic life. Teachers and poor children, for example, generally live on opposite sides of school borders. Neighborhoods are vibrant, alive at the edges, undeniably part of larger structures of production, consumption, and distribution, and organize the full press of current
circumstances – right down into the vocal cords (Rampton, 2005). Lively, contested, and sometimes profitable border crossings should be a first consideration for policy researchers.

Educational research has focused on isolated children, but homes, stores, and parks animate and constrain their lives. Insight comes with zooming the analytic gaze into the moment-to-moment organization of children's activities while simultaneously zooming out into the traffic of people, goods, and ideas that shape the sensuous lives of neighborhoods – into their inhabitus (Varenne & McDermott 1998). Analytically, neighborhoods require focus even as they expand one's questions. Examining the local production of risk in a neighborhood requires both a deep description of people's engagements with each other and expansive accounts of the political, and economic forces beyond the line of sight or insight available to most participants (Bartlett, Hart, Satterthwaite, de la Barra, & Missair, 1999). Without looking both in and out, porous and vibrant borders can be mistakenly (or politically, and thereby invidiously) conceived as rigid, with each side a nowhere to the other. A ghetto label can be used against a people. Looking simultaneously in and out keeps the mutual constitution of borders at the center of analysis.

School achievement is easy to plot by neighborhood variables. The Achievement Gap is literal: it exists only incidentally in the skill-sets of children and more actively in the gaps that divide urban neighborhoods from each other and from suburban and rural areas. In ways various, but relentless, every city has major borderlines dividing it into two rough halves (in a big city, many times over). With each border, one side is filled with school failure, the other with school success. Consider MacArthur Boulevard separating the Hills from the Flats in Oakland, the 40ft rock wall keeping Columbia's white Upper Westside from Harlem, or the eight-lane highway dividing well-to-do Palo Alto from the struggling minority city of East Palo Alto. These obvious structural barriers are also porous and, because porous, both defended and carefully criss-crossed by participants on both sides: the specifics vary most immediately by time of day and almost imperceptively by shifts in real estate demands. We turn now to San Francisco's six-lane Geary Boulevard sealing off Japantown and Pacific Heights from the Fillmore.

Seyer-Ochi (2006) describes the race and class history of San Francisco through a study of one neighborhood as a web of relationships across the surrounding city (in the traditions of Basso, 1996; Hayden, 1996; Nespor, 1997; Rosaldo & Flores, 1997; Zerubavel, 2003). As a long-term teacher and researcher, she worked for six years with four students whose lives revealed a network of families, friends, jobs, churches, stores, and gangs with which they had to
deal. All four youth and most of their peers were also caught in the web of labeling, sorting, and risk that is Special Education. Some were directly caught by LD diagnoses and others were in remedial classes. The risk of disability caught them all.

Her ethnography of neighborhoods shows how, in daily trips to and from school, her students encounter a full run of risky environments that can limit their institutional horizons. After-school jobs and family responsibilities across the city make life complex. Minds do not go to school alone, but emerge from put-upon homes, go through competing neighborhoods, and land in schools that impose a competitive structuring of their own (thus LD: a way to do race and class without talking about race and class). The mind’s road to learning is more about roads than minds.

Seyer-Ochi's ethnographic atlas of space, place, and movement in and around the Fillmore portray her participants as less risky, or personally at risk, than as constantly immersed in risky circumstances produced and nurtured by a city-wide division of labor, opportunity, debt, crime, and levels of enforcement. She documents the organization of opportunity and risk not just in the Fillmore, but miles away in the halls and classrooms of Jefferson High and along the streets of San Francisco. To outsiders, risk is always everywhere in the Fillmore. To insiders, risk is ever ready across all neighborhoods. Her maps identify key institutions, practices, and actors staging risk rituals. The homicide rate in the Fillmore is among the highest in the city, particularly for young African American males. Media and police surveillance focus on the neighborhood’s key corners, most of them known for active drug sales by young men in the service of passer-bys (many of them outsiders from other neighborhoods). Labels abound – the corners are risky, the youth criminal – but the maps overwhelm the labels with detail. The distribution of key institutions demands an account of their relation to each other and the people involved. As the social network gets better described, the individuals, and even the corners, begin to recede from view.

Consider the convenience and liquor stores that dot the Fillmore landscape more than in other neighborhoods. They are no mere backdrop for the activities that unfold day and night at the nearby “key corners,” they are full participants. How did they get there, and how are they related to other institutions in the neighborhood and beyond? With no large-scale shopping malls or few food-chain stores near-by, the small stores offer necessities to shoppers and possibilities for small business owners. Many of the stores are situated at the main gates of the
low-income housing projects concentrated in the heart of the Fillmore thanks to an aggressive urban redevelopment plan a half-century ago. The analytic question shifts from who is involved in the stores and "key corners" to who is not involved. Everyone participates: city planners, housing developers, media, police officers, storeowners, delivery trucks, drug dealers, residents, students, tpeers, and the passer-bys. Risk is staged by all hands.

The neighborhood stage extends across borders into classrooms miles away. It draws all the students at Jefferson into its rituals. Seyer-Ochi collected city and neighborhood maps from an entire Jefferson senior class. Figure 3 is a telling example drawn by Raisa, a Fillmore student, who sketched San Francisco’s primary neighborhoods and defining landmarks. Over 15% of the Jefferson student body commuted from the Fillmore, but Raisa does not note the area on her map. She marks other key neighborhoods, many in risk-laden ways. The Mission (a core Latino community) shows stick figures in a hold-up ("give me your money"), and Hunters Point, another African American neighborhood, shows one figure telling another, “let’s do a drive-by today.” Race and class are ever at work. Raisa sat every day at Jefferson alongside students from the Fillmore, Mission, and Hunters Point areas. Along with their peers, teachers, and families, they collectively produced risk and opportunity in their moment-by-moment interactions. Race and class are always getting worked on, worked in, worked out, worked through, worked over, and over worked. This work is in everyone's face — in everyone's face-to-face — and far from random. In the segregated, tracked classrooms at Jefferson, it reproduces the hierarchies of educational access while across the city it responds to and recreates slippery, risky borders and boundaries of neighborhoods.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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Any one crossing neighborhood borders in American cities finds out that class, although well patterned, refers to emergent and situated activities presented, manipulated, and enforced across persons in social interaction. Every move is fraught with class relevance on both sides of every border. While it is no surprise that specific packages of attire and comportment slot children into various levels of hierarchy in schools, it is important, says Seyer-Ochi, to recognize and reorganize the role of all parties to every occasion of academic and social risk.
Beyond the Usual View of Class and Race as Risk

American schools run on risk and competition. It is the first fact for children going to school in a market designed for the few to lord over the many and a culture that makes desires and achievements dependent on the deficits and deficiencies of others (Henry, 1963; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). A too easy focus on race, class, and LD as traits obscures the invisible demands of the political economy from those who are operating on it, worrying about it, talking about it, strategizing it, and manipulating it from within partial positions and perspectives. Risk is the first consideration; race, class, and now disability, each in its own way, are its tools.

Hierarchies reproduce race and class as resources in risk management. They can be reformed and reorganized, but not if focused too quickly on the race or class of analytically isolated individual children. As long as schools pit everyone against everyone else, as long as success is defined at the expense of others being called failures, massive inequalities follow. Race and class problems in school replicate social structural problems so closely that educators should not drop children too quickly into success and failure piles and then explain them as a product of race and class differences.

Raley (2006) offers an alternative situation that keeps risk at bay long enough that race and class can be used to new ends. After three years of fieldwork in a small, independent high school, he delivered a close analysis of a single classroom argument on the decision of a prominent African-American civil rights lawyer to defend the First Amendment rights of the Ku Klux Klan. It is not an easy task, but the students laugh and shout their way to a direct, earnest, and sustained discussion of how race matters. Popular race labels and racialized talk were the stuff of teases, dares, and parody instead of silence or violence; the students seemed to arrange the argument so they could have something to untangle together. Race was more than the destination for their talk; it was both method and material for finding the way.

What made this discussion possible? Raley had followed the same cohort of students in and out of school. They talked about the school as a “safe” place. By the usual views of race and class, a complementary pair of images comes easily to mind: the school is physically safe, offering students shelter from the violence that characterizes their poor, mostly brown community; the school is psychologically safe, sheltering them from the risks that come from being brown and mostly poor. At best, these images are a partial fit. At worst, they obscure the real accomplishment of the school: the necessary articulation of race and class.
In 1976, poorly conceived desegregation policies closed the neighborhood's only public high school, and the children of Bayview's 25,000 residents were placed in high schools scattered throughout the region, often in the lowest tracks. By their own account, the students often felt unwelcome, and perhaps as many as 65% left school altogether. Pacifica is a local alternative, with a promise to students: Come, and we will do whatever it takes to pave your way into a four-year college or university. Pacifica's network of adults—teachers (working and retired), administrators, fundraisers, entrepreneurs, university faculty—struggled to fulfill the promise. They kept the school open all day and many nights, connecting students to mentors and work as interns, and finding money to pay for applications and tuitions. The adults were convinced their hard work could open a path for every student, and they refused to sort students into success and failure piles. Structural inequalities and the risks associated with rank were the direct concern of the grownups. The structural risks of going to school pushed away from the day-to-day lives of students. They were offered the relative safety of not having to tear each other down, at least not in ways recorded in the Principal's office. The specter of failure was softened, and the children were asked to pull up their chairs to work together.

With the risks of being put down, dropped out, or left behind reduced, students were free to take more educationally generative risks. Race and class did not disappear, but turned into a risk of a different type. No longer personal markers of shame and risk, race and class became materials for playful discussion. The new risk lived in the spaces occupied by people rather than in their genes. Pacifica's students showed each other how to achieve trusting relations, both momentary and durable. This demanding work was at least educative and, at its best, democratic.

Race and class could be problematic enough to keep students locked out, but the only question at Pacifica was how everyone could succeed. The students could talk about race and class forcefully, even aggressively and to the point of confrontation, and then they could compromise, move on, and return to the business of doing school together. Race and class did not seem to scare anyone in this school community. Life outside school remained risk and rank rich, but life in school, even in the midst of heated arguments, was safe. Race and class did not divide; instead, they became points of consideration and engagement.

Respecifying race, class, and LD does not make them go away, but it does reorganize their usual run through our lives. Building situations in which race, class, and LD can be repositioned in school requires also a reorganization of the adults who run the schools. It requires
a reorganization of those who have been profiting from race, class, and even LD (the new upper class syndrome of choice if it leads to extra time on tests).

Our position stands with Toni Morrison, who critiqued *The Bluest Eye*, her 1969 novel about an African American child badly violated by family and neighbors, for excusing those most responsible for fixing the troubles:

... the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing... many readers remain touched but not moved. (1993, p. 211; see Bloom, 1999)

Correlations among race, class, and school performance are real, but not as taken. They are not starting places for analysis, but products of the work done by everyone in society to handle the risk of being put down, pushed down, cut off, and certified as failures. They are not calls to pity, but to self-interrogation and confrontation. The assumption of a natural hierarchy of intelligence correlated with race and class places bets in exactly wrong place. Race and class are invidious categories when conceived as naturally occurring units for the explanation of school success and failure. Without the reigning assumptions – that schools are working properly and in accord with the biological and social potentials of students – race, class, and the explanation of school achievement can be reformulated. Specifying productive units of analysis in educational research and reform requires a shift in focus: from children and teachers as kinds of person (by race, class, gender, IQ – whether by genetics, socialization, or whatever combination); and from passive over-socialized persons in kinds of situations (by social structure, social status, economic opportunity); to active persons creating kinds of person in situations organized by the wider web of institutions for sorting and socializing a next generation.

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References

Figure 1. Risk and race talk by topic
Figure 2. Risk and race talk by relations among participants

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Figure 3. Raisa’s Map
Endnotes

1 We use educator to refer to those with authority over school policies and practices, but realize the term should ultimately include everyone in education: parents, children, test-makers, community gatekeepers, etc (Varene, 2007). The term must include university researchers who are, by their privileged position, deeply complicit in current arrangements (Mehan 2008).

2 The analytic work used to destabilize notions of race and class can be used to destabilize LD. No one has to be a racist beyond using American English for racism to be at play in school, no one has to be class biased beyond living where they do to enforce hierarchies of access, and no one has to be LD to be declared broken, special, or in need of extra time. People do not have to be what they are called for the system to work, for the social order works on what people – mostly other people – do. No one in modern rural France claims to believe in witchcraft, but with accusations and denials rampant, people can get caught by a witchcraft complex of gossip, alignment, and condemnation (Favret-Saada, 1984); similarly, everyone entering prisons and half-way houses in the U.S. gets caught by the loyalty demands put on both inmates and staff by the convict code (Wieder, 1974); and so again, everyone entering American schools, to the extent they are fully organized for half the students to fail, one way or another gets caught by LD (Mehan, 1993; Varene & McDermott, 1998; McDermott & Raley, 2008).

3 For an historical summary of failure in American culture, see Sandage (2005); for the rhetoric of saving children, see Levander (2006).

4 The ethnography of education, in and out of schools, has been coming of age for 50 years (for summary statements, see McDermott, 1997; McDermott & Varene, 2006; for recent collections, see Bekerman, Burbules, & Silberman-Keller, 2006; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2004; Hull, 1997; Singleton, 1999; Varene, 2007; for after-school settings, see Cole, et al., 2006; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005). Since 1955, George Spindler has edited 11 volumes of papers on anthropology and education; for the latest, see Spindler & Hammond (2006).

A word of caution: the word is ethnography; the caution is that it refers to well documented, long engagements with the emergency filled lives of people interacting with each other. Ethnography is not a simple reporting of what people say in over-determined interviews or unanalyzed and detail-thin transcripts – as if the world were available for the asking, as if anyone would listen if it were. The difference between good journalism and good ethnography: analyses methodic and self-conscious enough to reveal the hidden systematics of everyday life (linguistic anthropology offers the best examples; for studies without explicit ties, but with great relevance, to American education, see Basso, 1996; Frake, 1998; Kuipers, 1998; Conklin, 2007; for studies directed to education, see Wortham, 2005; Wortham & Rymes, 2002; Viechnicki & Kuipers, 2006).


6 Silence is an important but generally unrecognized resource in social interaction. To say the least (good joke here), silence is hard to describe. The Irish poet, John Montague, has called silence "a hunger strike of the tongue" (personal letter; see McDermott 1988), but it can serve events with much less purpose. Feminist and minority scholars have examined it most thoroughly, and Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are its deepest explorers. Basso's (1979, 1996) accounts of Apache Indians mocking white American speech conventions are a delight. Pollock is interested in the systematic silence that occurs when people together build a road to a topic and then get quiet.

7 Unspoken racism allows received inequalities to go unchecked. Pollock has gathered accounts of educators confronting race silence (2008).

8 A definition of objective reality: "all that is appropriate to, noticeable within, and marked by the self-directed, or practical, actions of collectivities in situations of conflict" (Brown, 1986, p. 15).

9 Descriptions of class as multi-layered are more accurate and account for how class struggle becomes visible only intermittently (Hall, 1997; Wright, 2004). Martin Packer (2001) describes social class highlighted in a school system in economic crisis. First the children had parents with steady employment. Then the local automobile factory closed. The children changed classes. They were suddenly at risk. Budgets were tightened. Positions on fault and justice became news. Important people – local politicians, company apologists, even the Governor – argued for back-to-basics classrooms, and the children were asked to solve their own problems. Packer's question: Whose social class
alignments acquired the children? In no time, with no change in cognitive skills, the children lost ties to opportunities. Who wasn't involved in producing their poverty?

* For more than 40 years, an emerging literature on ethnic groups has focused on borders, because that is where the action is. All communities, says Gerald Suttles (1973), near the end of the Chicago tradition of urban sociology, exist at their borders; other traditions making the same point at that time include linguistic anthropology (Moerman, 1968; Frake, 1980), cultural geography (Ley, 1974), and British social anthropology widened by Fredrik Barth (1961, 1969). For a contemporary version on "global neighborhoods," see Blommaert, Collins, & Slemrouck, 2005.

** Herman Melville thought any seeming intellectual superiority is likely a bad measure of intelligence in practice. His 19th century voice cries out for a democracy of intelligence:

For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always in themselves, more or less paltry and base. (1991, p. 165)

For another 19th-century voice against a hierarchy of false smartness, see the new translation of Abbé Grégoire (1808/1997; and related scholarship from Popkin & Popkin, 2000).