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Assigning Marginality: The Case of an “ESL/learning Disabled” Student¹

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Abstract: This paper is focused on the school experiences of an immigrant child, Surjeet, over the course of three years from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of Grade 2. While her teachers attributed her school performance to her personality and learning characteristics, the attempt here is to understand how the particular interactional circumstances of her classrooms regulated her access to learning English there. I consider the possibility that the diagnosis made of her in Grade 2 as having learning disabilities, in addition to the initial diagnosis (assigned in kindergarten) of her as a learner of English as a second language, might be linked to her particular access to language and other practices of her classrooms. The learning of English by immigrant students in schools is argued to be at least partly a matter of identity construction, and the paper demonstrates that this construction is especially problematic for some students.

Introduction

When language is systematically unavailable to some, it is important that we not limit our explanations to the traits of the persons involved; it is equally essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that position the people in the world with a differential access to the common tongue. (McDermott 1993, 283)

This paper focuses on the school experiences of an immigrant child, Surjeet, over the course of three years from the beginning of her kindergarten year to the end of Grade 2. While her teachers attributed her school performance to her “traits”, her linguistic experience and her learning characteristics, I consider here how some “interactional circumstances” of her classrooms regulated her access to learning English there. I wish to explore the notion that the diagnosis made of her in Grade 2 as having “learning disabilities” (LD) in addition to the initial diagnosis (assigned in kindergarten) of her as a learner of English as a second language (ESL), are linked to her particular access to language and other practices of her classroom. I also examine some of the consequences of those diagnoses.

Background

Most discussions of children who are second language learners, and who are also diagnosed as having learning disabilities, focus upon means of diagnosis (e.g. Gonzalez 1998), various instructional techniques (e.g. Echevarria 1996; Klingner and Vaughn 1996; Klingner, Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm, and Elbaum 1998) and bilingual approaches to instruction (e.g. Cummins 1999; Maldonado 1994). The focus in this paper is different: I wish to understand how it is that some children are diagnosed as ESL and LD, the functions served by these diagnoses, and their consequences.

This paper contributes to recent discussions of language learning as particular sets of socially, politically, economically, culturally and historically situated practices (e.g. Appel and Lantolf 1994; Toohey 1998, 2000; Canagarajah 1993; Gutierrez and Larson 1994; Hall 1993, 1995; Kramsch 1993, 2000; Norton Peirce 1995; Norton 2000; Pennycook 1990; Willett 1995; Willett, Solsken and Wilson-Keenan 1999). More specifically, I draw on a body of work that examines how identity positions are assigned to and/or resisted by children by schools (Day 2002; McKay and Wong 1996; McDermott 1993; Mehan 1993; Varenne and McDermott 1997; Walkerdine 1997, 1999) and how those positions might affect learning.

As well as the above, I have found helpful Foucault’s (1972, 1979) historical analyses of how ranks came to be assigned to individuals through surveillance and normalization in institutions like prisons, hospitals and schools. Foucault (1979) outlines how “ranks” were given to students, as they were compared one with another, and how efforts were expended to “normalize” deviants who were seen as too far away

from norms. In addition, Foucault's focus on discourses as "systematically forming the objects about which they speak" (1972: 49), provides a basis for examining school discourse as producing certain kinds of children: e.g. the gifted, the at-risk, the attention deficit disorder, the learning disabled, the ESL. As Walkerdine (1999: 4) puts it:

The human subject is produced in the discursive practices that make up the social world (as opposed to a pre-given psychological subject who is made social or socialised).

Many cultural and feminist theorists also see persons as produced by the particular discourse practices of their situations (e.g. Gal 1991; Hall 1990, 1996). These theorists emphasize the politics of identity construction, seeing individuals as positioned by the powers/knowledge, and the discourses that surround them. This positioning of individuals is a socially achieved process, and identities from this perspective are assigned.

Many theorists in a variety of disciplines, while accepting the view that social practices (or discourses) form individuals in important ways, have called for what they see as a less deterministic view of persons, that is, the development of understandings of how individuals might form and re-form their social positionings and identities in social contexts that are at the same time exerting positioning on those individuals (Butler 1997; Day 2002; Holland et al. 1998; Kirshner and Whitson 1997; Kramsch 2000; Litowitz 1996; Norton and Toohey 1999, 2002; Varenne and McDermott 1997; Walkerdine 1997, 1999). Walkerdine (1999) makes a helpful distinction between subjectification (being assigned a position within certain practices) and subjectivity (the lived experience of being a subject). From this perspective, individuals are both socially constructed by the discourses of their domains (discourses which provide both affordances and constraints), but also are "embodied, semiotic and emotional persons who identify themselves, resist identifications and act on their social worlds" (Norton and Toohey 2002). As Holland et al. (1998) put it:

The objective of this line of research is to respect humans as social and cultural creatures and therefore bounded, yet to recognize the processes whereby humans collectives and individuals often move themselves—led by hope, desperation or even playfulness, but certainly by no rational plan—from one set of socially and culturally formed subjectivities to another. (p. 6-7)

Here we see an emphasis on the partly conscious, partly unconscious desires and efforts of learners to affect their social worlds and their positionings in them.

Current literature on identity from the theoretical perspective I have briefly explained here, then, sees both social boundedness but also action and agency. In this paper, I wish to examine several instances over three years in the school life of a child, and attempt to understand how identities were ascribed to this

child, what these identity practices obscured from view, how this child works with or against these identities, and what consequences there are for her in being ascribed particular identities.

Methodology

The data considered here comes from a corpus gathered in the course of a four-year ethnographic study² that followed two cohorts of ESL learners enrolled in mainstream Canadian primary classrooms from kindergarten through Grade 2. The setting for the study is a school in a suburban Canadian working-class neighbourhood. About 50% of the children at the school have a language other than English as their home language, with a wide variety of languages represented, including Punjabi, Polish, Cantonese, Thai, French, Spanish and several others. The remaining 50% report English as their home language.

The study is situated within an ethnographic epistemological framework (Davis 1995; Watson-Gegeo 1988); and the complete methodology is described in Toohey (2000). A research team and I conducted half day observations in the children's classrooms once a week over the school years, during which time we took field notes and audiotaped children as they went about their activities, collecting four to six audiotapes per observation. In addition, an experienced video technician from the university videotaped the children for two hours once a month, filming a range of instructional and non-instructional activities in which children were engaged. Bilingual research assistants interviewed parents and children in their homes twice a year, and provided informal assessments of the children's proficiency in their first languages. In collaboration with trained research assistants, we transcribed samples of audiotapes and all the video recordings for the various years. We analyzed the data in an ongoing and recursive fashion, using triangulation to confirm, disconfirm or check interpretations (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Research associates and I independently viewed and analyzed videotapes, looking for examples of episodes in them that confirmed, or more importantly, contradicted, developing interpretations.

Surjeet, an ESL student

Surjeet was one of the subjects observed over the course of three years. The oldest child in a Punjabi Sikh family who immigrated to Canada in 1989, Surjeet lived with her parents, a younger sibling, grandparents, an aunt, and older cousins, who also attended her school.

Before kindergarten entry, all parents of children whose last names and/or whose kindergarten entry forms had suggested that a language other than English was used in their homes, were asked if they

wished their children to participate in a special afternoon “Language Development” program, in addition to the “regular” morning kindergarten offered by the school. Surjeet’s parents agreed to her participation in the afternoon program, which was defined by the school and her teachers as a program for “ESL” students. This designation was not strictly accurate in the case of Surjeet and a few other children. For Surjeet and several other of her enrolled classmates in ESL kindergarten, were not speakers of the languages of their parents. In Surjeet’s case, her mother stated in an interview with me in November of Surjeet’s kindergarten year that on the advice of Surjeet’s maternal grandfather (a retired school principal from India), the adults in her household had decided to speak English with the children so as to ease their way in school. Older children in the home (Surjeet’s cousins) had learned English at school, and the children spent a great deal of time playing together, in English. Her mother estimated that Surjeet was primarily an English speaker, and that she knew very little Punjabi. While adults used Punjabi, children were not normally participants in adult conversations, and directives given to children, as well as conversations with them, usually occurred in English. The bilingual researcher’s assessment of Surjeet’s Punjabi use corroborated her mother’s opinion.

So the first identity position given to Surjeet, ESL, was not strictly accurate, in that she did not speak English as a second language. That such inaccuracy was applied to her as well as several other children in her ESL class, is in keeping with Leung, Harris and Rampton’s (1997) observation of the complexities of children’s social and linguistic identities. Despite these complexities, counting ESL students is seen as a necessary practice in most Canadian schools because increased provincial funding accompanies the ESL designation.

While some of her classmates who were also designated as ESL at the beginning of school, in a sense, “graduated” from ESL over the kindergarten year, Surjeet’s identity as an ESL student was solidified by the end of kindergarten and both her teacher and the school’s ESL specialist teacher, who tested Surjeet in May of her kindergarten year and with whom Surjeet was not previously acquainted, believed that Surjeet should receive specialist ESL teacher support in Grade 1. Her verbal performance with this specialist ESL teacher was minimal and somewhat incoherent. The support that she received in Grade 1 and subsequently in Grade 2, entailed removing her from her “regular” class for specified periods several times a week, for small group English instruction with another specialist teacher.

I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Toohey 2000) the character of Surjeet’s participation in all three years of her schooling. The data upon which that discussion rests are extensive and cannot be discussed in detail here. In this paper I wish to examine five samples from the data that show some of the varying character of Surjeet’s conversations with teachers and classmates. From these, I wish to speculate

² I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a Standard Research Grant in 1996 that funded the first analysis of the data (Toohey 2000). The RIIM funding has enabled the

about how the particular character of those conversations and the identity positions Surjeet occupied in them, might have been implicated in her eventual diagnosis as “ESL” and “LD.”

Surjeet at school

Very soon after school opening, Surjeet seemed to have developed a close association with another girl, Donna, in whose home only English was used and the two girls played together a great deal. With Donna, Surjeet also played other children who were experienced speakers of English. When Surjeet was involved in disputes with other children, (as is common in playgroups), her participation in them was lively and sometimes effective in the sense that she was successful in gaining access to disputed play materials or in deflecting potentially-insulting comments. As well, Surjeet also participated more and more actively in the choral activities of the classroom and her increasing comfort with and participation in choral counting, chanting, singing and so on were clearly visible (and audible) in the videotaped data.

The first conversation I wish to present is one that Surjeet had with her friend Donna in kindergarten in October, as the class participated in crafts associated with Halloween. This audio-recorded conversation shows the girls having what appeared to be an enjoyable time playing with modeling clay.

(1)

Surjeet and Donna with clay.

Donna: I'm a spider web.

Surjeet: Do you know how to make a spider web?

Donna: Yes.

Surjeet: Out of play dough?

Donna: Yeah. Make a ball first. *(Pause 30 seconds as she makes a ball.)* Then you squish it. Do you know how to make a ghost?

Surjeet: I know how to make a ghost out of playdough? *(question intonation)*
(Pause 25 seconds as girls continue to work with clay.)

Surjeet: I'm gonna make a turkey.

Donna: I wanna make a turkey too.

This conversation was typical of many of Surjeet's interactions with her classmates near the beginning of kindergarten: the conversation as a whole appeared fairly harmonious. Donna was positioned as “expert” for a turn or two, as she directed Surjeet in making a spider web, but Donna's directions are offered in a friendly manner and both girls contributed to the conversation.

However, after the Christmas break, Surjeet's relatively easy access to many of the experienced English speakers, indeed to many of the children in the room, appeared to become more problematic. Her close association with Donna ceased and I observed children usurping Surjeet's place in the kindergarten, dismissing her and excluding her from their play. In disputes over classroom materials, Surjeet often deferred to classmates, and would surrender materials she was using, or find materials elsewhere for other children who complained about not having them. Her teacher also told me in April that Surjeet appeared to be having some social difficulties in the classroom, and she wondered about what Surjeet might be doing so as to cause this.

There are probably a myriad of subtle reasons as to why Surjeet's position in the kindergarten shifted, but I have considered the possibility that Surjeet's social difficulties may have coincided with the beginning of an instructional practice instituted shortly before the December break in the classroom: an early literacy activity called "reading the morning message." This circle activity consisted of the teacher asking individual children if they could pick out letters or words in the short message she had written on the board. These were "solo" performances, and participation as a solo performer in the practice seemed to be highly prized by the children. While previously there had been other solo performances in the classroom (e.g. "sharing"—which Surjeet never volunteered for), reading the morning message differed in the respect that performance in it seemed more highly charged, i.e. somehow performance in it seemed a way of gaining a "smart kid" identity. Surjeet rarely or never volunteered to be a participant in the practice, although she did participate in the choral reading of the message after individual children had finished their performances. She also was active in reading the signs and labels around the classroom to other children, and sometimes to me, participating in the "show-off" display of literacy in which many children engaged ("I can read this! So there!").

In play activities such as Excerpt 1 above involving Surjeet and Donna (as well as in others, such as the choral speech and singing common in kindergartens), children have the opportunity to use the language and knowledge of others, as well as the mediating means of play materials as resources in organizing their performances. In many such interactions, which occurred more or less frequently over the course of the three year observation, Surjeet appeared as linguistically and cognitively competent as she needed to be, to be an active participant. However, in interactions in which the teacher's and other children's linguistic and cognitive resources were unavailable to her (as in "solo" reading) or when she needed to perform individually in front of her teacher, Surjeet sometimes appeared cognitively disorganized and linguistically incoherent. She also seemed to display this kind of incoherence in conversations with children who were not friendly toward her. There are numerous examples in my data of

“conversations” in which Surjeet’s contributions were contradictory and difficult to understand. The following more extended conversation with a peer in kindergarten illustrates these contradictions:

(2)

Nina: What are you making?

Surjeet: A phone. *(She looks up at Nina)*

Nina: What kind of phone? What kind of phone?

(Pause 5 seconds)

Surjeet: It’s not a phone.

Nina: Then why do you need that red paper?

Surjeet: *(Glances at red paper.)* It’s not, it’s a pur: *(eyes widen)* I don’t need it! I only need /dIs/ *(gestures to white paper beside her)*

Nina: Then why did you get that red paper?

Surjeet: I didn’t do it. Randy got it.

Nina: I don’t believe you.

Surjeet: I saw ****

Nina: I didn’t even just see Randy on this table.

Surjeet: I sitted here! *(Eyes widen and she gestures to chair beside her.)*

Nina: Well, he’s *(Randy’s)* on that table. *(Gestures to the table where Randy is sitting.)*

Surjeet: ****

Nina: I know everything

Surjeet: No you don’t.

Nina: Yes I do.

Surjeet: No you don’t.

Nina: *(Singing)* I know everything. I know everything.

(Julie approaches.)

Julie: *(To Surjeet)* What are you making?

Nina: Julie, Julie, what did the cat do?

Julie: I don’t know. I don’t know. *(She walks away. Nina also leaves.)*

Nina, an experienced English speaker, was confused by Surjeet’s contradictory assertions (it’s a phone/it’s not a phone) and then queried Surjeet about the red paper. She told Surjeet she didn’t believe her, and that she (Nina) knew everything. She answered Julie when Julie asked Surjeet a question. Surjeet resisted Nina’s assertions to some extent, but overall she seemed positioned in this conversation as someone who didn’t know everything, was not believed and was not allowed a conversational place. This became an increasingly common position for Surjeet in her classroom. Commonly, the data show instances

in which Surjeet was subordinated in this way: children told her to get out of seats they wanted, or to give them materials she had. She was not believed, or was ignored, and her attempts to counter such positioning seemed relatively unsuccessful.

In the second year of observation, Grade 1, Surjeet was the target of a racist comment made by a white Anglo classmate:

(3)

Mary: *(to Tiffany)* Don't go to Surjeet's birthday. It would be Indian smell *(wrinkling nose)*

Tiffany: I won't.

Mary: Will you come to my birthday? I'm Irish.

Tiffany: OK.

(Surjeet covers her ears and turns away.)

The interaction occurred while Surjeet was sitting in her desk with children sitting beside her for about half the school year. While this was the only explicitly racist comment I recorded over the year, Surjeet's social relations with the girls who sat near her always seemed fraught with difficulties.

An interaction in Grade 2, shows Surjeet in the interactional circumstance of having to answer her teacher in front of her class (a very common event, of which I have several examples in the data).

(4)

Teacher: No Surjeet, it's not on the ceiling dear, it's right up here in front of you. Tell me the name of one food group, one of the four food groups.

(Pause 5 seconds)

Surjeet: *(quietly)* Apple?

Teacher: Surjeet, I need the name of the entire food group. Apple is part of a particular food group. The names are written right there dear. They're printed right there. All you need to do is read it dear. *(Pause 11 seconds)* What's the name of that food group that apple belongs to.

Surjeet: *(answers very quietly)****

Teacher: I can't hear you honey, a little louder.

Surjeet: Veg-e-tables, veg-e-tables.

Teacher: Pardon me? *(leans forward)* *(Pause 6 seconds)* What is an apple dear?

Surjeet: Fruit.

Teacher: An apple is fruit so it belongs to the fruit and... *(rising intonation)*

Surjeet: Vegetables.

Teacher: Thank you dear. The fruit and vegetable group.

In this interaction, a recitation sequence (Gutierrez and Larson 1994), Surjeet answers very quietly and, with respect to the customary rhythm of classroom question and answer sequences, slowly. In this, I think, humiliating interaction, Surjeet was presented as incompetent, and not only the teacher but also other students were witnesses to this presentation.

The final interaction to be considered, again recorded in the Grade 2 classroom, shows Surjeet in interaction with a group of boys with whom I had never seen her play, discussing items needed for space travel.

(5)

Teacher.: Yes, you need air. What else do you absolutely have to have?

(Surjeet looking thoughtful says “eh:::.” Teacher walks away.)

Ricardo: Food! food! *(Claps his hands.)*

Surjeet: *(Looks at Ricardo.)* Food! *(Bounces as she says it, then stands up and looks at what Jason is writing.)* Food. Drink. Drink.

Jason: Food’s the same as drink, Surjeet.

Surjeet: Okay.

Sam: *(To Jason.)* No! You just keep printing it down there.

Jason: Sorry I’m gonna do it on this.

Ricardo: Yeah, don’t just **. Drink! Drink!

Jason: *(Looks at Ricardo.)* Drink is the same as, oh yeah, drink! *(He writes it down.)*

Surjeet: Put drink there. No, put food with drink, eh? Nahh.

Jason: Nah.

Surjeet: Nah.

Jason: D-r-ink *(sounding out)*

Surjeet: ink, ink *(offering the final syllable)*

Jason: No. Drink.

Surjeet: Drink.

This excerpt shows Surjeet in conversation with interlocutors with whom she was not well-acquainted or friendly. Her participation in this conversation was minimal, but complex. She repeated the utterances of others, and made one attempt to offer a different item, drink. Jason rather witheringly told her that “Food’s the same as drink”, a point with which she acquiesced. Ricardo later told Jason that he should write drink. Jason started to repeat that drink was the same as food, but then wrote it down. Surjeet’s “Put drink there. No, put food with drink. Nahh” shows some of the contradictions in Surjeet’s utterances, pointed out earlier.

Surjeet's teacher, Mrs. Larson, believed quite early in the school year that Surjeet was "limited" and she continued to believe that as the year wore on. In an interview in October she said:

Surjeet continues to have difficulties with reading, spelling and even a little bit of oral language. However, I don't feel it's necessarily an ESL problem, I think Surjeet is just low... She's limited in just what she can absorb and in what she can understand and I think that's going to dog her all her life...

Mrs. Larson's estimate of Surjeet's abilities did not change over the year, and despite Surjeet's almost "average" score on a standardized achievement test administered in May of Grade 2, Mrs. Larson believed her to have crucial learning difficulties. Mrs. Larson recommended Surjeet for "Learning Assistance" toward the end of Grade 2, after which she was tested, again by a specialist teacher with whom she was not previously acquainted. Staring at the beginning of Grade 2, therefore, Surjeet was to be removed from her "regular" classroom, not only for ESL instruction, but also for "Learning Assistance."

Discussion

I present here only five brief episodes in the life of an immigrant child over three years. The data selected here illustrate some of the interactional circumstances, the instructional and assessment practices that appeared to position Surjeet in particular ways in her classrooms. McDermott (1993) makes the point that certain classroom circumstances set up social relations that, in effect, prevent learning. In the case he examined, a boy labeled at school as LD presents as LD in classroom lessons and even more in testing sessions, while in everyday life and under the "gentle circumstances" of working with a friend, he appears as cognitively competent as he needs to be. McDermott argues that much of the effort of students differentially labeled in schools is directed toward not getting caught not-knowing or not-able. He urges attention to those circumstances that seem to "organize the search for differential performance", because that search "organizes the degradation of those found at the bottom of the pile" (p.286). Recognizing that it is undeniable that some children learn at different rates from other children, he argues that if "less fuss" was made about this, such children might not have to be concerned with degradation possibilities, and that their learning, as well as that of the classroom communities in which they participate, might be enhanced accordingly.

The data I have presented shows occasions, I think, on which Surjeet was subject to degradation. Increasingly, the positions she was offered in her classroom community were subordinate to that of other children, and as someone speaking from a subordinated position, her incoherence, her self-contradiction, might be predicted. Gutierrez and Stone (1997) describe the increasing participation of a boy defined as LD in particular classroom discursive practices, such that he "appropriates literacy knowledge" by which they mean "sociocultural, linguistic and content

knowledge needed for successful participation and membership in this community” (p. 125). I did not see Surjeet increasing her participation in classroom discursive practices over the course of her first three years of school, or perhaps it might be more nearly accurate to say that over time, Surjeet assumed an increasingly subordinated position in the practices of her classroom over time.

I have been considering the possibility that some of the classroom practices in which Surjeet appeared as ESL and LD were ones designed to “organize the search for differential performances” (as McDermott, p. 286 puts it) and that such practices became more common over the three years of observation. Identifying ESL students upon entry to kindergarten was the first such practice whereby differential abilities were attributed to some children. Later, practices like solo reading in front of the teacher and other children, or answering teacher questions alone or before large groups of children, provided opportunities for children to be displayed individually and differentially. Recall that Surjeet appeared as good as she needed to be in chorus or play with children who were friendly toward her. However, when practices changed and she was increasingly presented as an unable student, Surjeet’s vulnerability to degradation seemed to increase. Her efforts to avoid getting caught not-knowing, or to avoid committing herself to any one point of view, may have contributed to her seeming verbal incoherence and contradiction. The practices of her classroom may have taught her to be more silent, to venture opinions less often, to repeat the remarks of more powerful children and to limit her attempts to appropriate the linguistic as well as other resources of her community. Far from being internalized “traits”, these aspects of her behaviour might be seen as produced, in a sense, by the organization of classroom events.

On the whole, then, I argue that classrooms are sites in which it is possible to be assigned a “damaged” or “marginalized” identity, and the assignors of this identity include other children, teachers and subjects themselves. McKay and Wong (1996) argue that identity positioning is work that all members of school communities do: teachers, children, parents, school officials, as well as the wider educational community. The assignation of damaged or marginalized identities is a classroom practice that is congruent with practices in other arenas whereby citizens are differentiated from one another. Marginality can thus be seen as a rather inapt metaphor for classroom political relations, as the damaged “have always been ‘inside’--inside the structure that makes them beings for others” (Freire 1970, p. 55). Examining the practices of classrooms and seeing how they resonate with other larger societal practices, may encourage us to organize more comprehensive critiques of both those levels, concentrating efforts on the identity practices, and not on normalizing children or trying to help them learn to “fit in.”

My question concerning the issue of whether or not Surjeet accepts or resists the construction of herself as ESL and LD, is one that the data presented here does not directly address. A current trend in much philosophical, anthropological, psychological, feminist, cultural and gender studies work has been to question the determinism of seeing discourse as totally defining subjects’ identities. These theorists

recognize that, while powerful discourses position subjects, such positioning can always be destabilized by the possibility of resistance and denial. The methodology used in some of these studies has included subject interviews (e.g. Harklau 2000; Kanno 2000; Norton 2000; McKay and Wong 1996). While the children in my study were not interviewed about these matters, in another study (Toohey 2000b), I analyze children's disputes in classrooms, in an attempt to examine the extent to which classroom discourse is or is not totalizing: that is, do students display resistance to being positioned as damaged or marginal? These data suggest that some children appear more able than others to resist subordinating discourse about them, and investigating how race and gender intersect with possibilities for "successful" resistance to subordinating positioning is an important future question.

While I am sympathetic to the view that individuals accept and resist particular constructions of themselves, I am mindful of Terdiman's (1985) reminder us that dominant discourse is just that, and that social actors carry differential power. Terdiman argues that those engaging in counter-discourse (a complex and frustrating project because "our efforts to produce difference...inevitably meet the resistance that sustains the stability of all cultural systems" (p. 14)), discover the "apparent seamlessness of social domination, the seeming capacity of established discourses to ignore or absorb would-be subversion" (p. 13). I believe it will be important to consider the possibly limited opportunities of children and certain other subjugated groups for "human agency" and resistance to school discourse. As Holland et al. put it:

Socially constructed selves are subject to positioning by whatever powerful discourses they happen to encounter—changing state policies that dictate new ways of categorizing people in the census, educational diagnostics that label some children "at risk"... Perhaps they are resistant to such social forces; they nonetheless remain provisionally at their mercy. (p. 27)

Perhaps recognizing the considerable power of school (and outside school) discourse that subordinates some people, underlines the importance of teachers examining with students, effective ways to resist totalizing discourses that position them and others subordinately. Morgan (1997) provides an interesting and provocative example of this in an adult pronunciation lesson.

What happened to Surjeet? One of the consequences of her diagnoses was removal from "regular" classrooms for specialized ESL instruction and learning assistance in Grade 3 and beyond. One possible consequence of removing Surjeet (and other children) from their classrooms is put by Vygotsky (1993):

Why do the higher functions fail to develop in an abnormal child? Not because the defect directly impedes them or makes their appearance impossible... Underdevelopment springs from what we might call the isolation of an abnormal child from his collective. (p. 199)

The normalizing implied in removal of children for “fixing” in special classes is, for me, one of the most pernicious possible effects of the pathologizing of some ways of learning and some ways of being in schools. Varenne and McDermott (1997) argue:

[T]he problems many people have in the American School stem only incidentally from what they can or cannot do and much more radically from the way they are treated by others (possibly in relation to the designation, assignment and distribution of more or less temporary or partial difficulties interpreted as success or failure and responded to in terms of the testing world. (pp. 134-135)

As they suggest elsewhere, and the present analysis illustrates, the practices by which schools assign success or failure to children urgently require wide critical scrutiny.

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