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# Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead

**Culture can construct what counts as reading and who counts as a reader.**

Often our identities as readers are decided for us, as when others label us as avid readers, slow readers, mystery readers, and the like. By taking up one or more of these identities, we soon learn to recognize ourselves and others who are like us (Gee, 1996). A good entry to this article on adolescents' reading identities is through a short story entitled "The Country of the Blind" by H.G. Wells (1979). Briefly, it is a story about Nunez, a sighted man who miraculously survives a nasty fall from a peak in the Andes and lands relatively unharmed in an isolated valley populated exclusively by people who for generations have been born blind. They have no words for *see* or for anything that can be seen. Nunez, being an opportunist of the worst kind, immediately senses he will have many advantages and privileges accorded him in a land where he alone can see. What he fails to take into account, however, is that the people who live in "The Country of the Blind" have no need to see. They live a well-ordered life, moving about confidently in a culture that fits their needs precisely:

> Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its [curbing]; all obstacles and irregularities [in] path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all of their methods and procedures arose naturally from their special needs. (Wells, 1979, p. 135)

Time passes, and the people of the valley grow weary of putting up with Nunez's pompous and clumsy ways. They turn to their surgeon to define the problem so that they may find a solution to this stranger's intrusive ways. After examining Nunez, the surgeon's diagnosis is *diseased eyes*: "They are greatly distended, he has eyelashes, and his eyelids move, and consequently his brain is in a state of constant irritation and destruction" (Wells, 1979, p. 142). As it turns out, the only solution to the problem that the people will entertain involves surgically removing his eyes—the thought of which sends Nunez scurrying back up the mountain from which he fell.

This story, which education anthropologists McDermott and Varenne (1995) used to introduce their essay on the cultural construction of disability, has its analogue in a conversation I had recently in Athens at the University of Georgia with Shalva Dundua, a guest lecturer from Tbilisi, the capital of the Georgia that was part of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. As the director of his country's Open Society Project funded by the Soros Foundation and staffed by reading professionals from the International Reading Association, Shalva was in Athens to visit two of my colleagues who are staff developers for Soros's Open Society Project. After the lecture, I asked Shalva how classroom teachers in his country were working with adolescents who struggle with reading. He assured me that this was not a problem in Georgia: All students learn to read well in his country.

Thinking that I might not have clearly communicated the intent of my question, I tried again, this time asking Shalva if classroom teachers could send adolescents who experience difficulty comprehending their textbook assignments to someone else for help, such as a reading specialist, or perhaps to a special program. He indicated "no" to my question, explaining that such help is unnecessary because everyone learns how to read from the early grades onward, with the possible exception of youngsters he referred to as "severely damaged" who for medical reasons need special assistance. Thus, it seems likely from speaking with Shalva that the concept of a remedial, disabled, at-risk, or struggling reader does not exist in his country, at least not in any institutionalized sense of the term. This struck me as odd at first.

Then I remembered the lesson to be learned from "The Country of the Blind."

Culture constructs disability, as well as ability. McDermott and Varenne (1995) pointed this out in their observation that *what* differences count, under what conditions, and for what reasons are strictly cultural issues—but hardly inconsequential given that "the lives of those unable to do something can be either enabled or disabled by those around them" (p. 328). Readers locked into "special" identifications know all too well which side of the enabling or disabling binary they occupy and the consequences such identities carry.

My purpose in writing this article is to read—in a sense, unpack—some of the reading identities ascribed to, and taken up by, adolescents who struggle with school literacy tasks. I want to look at assumptions underlying the construction of *struggling readers* from the three approaches McDermott and Varenne (1995) introduced in their essay on the power of culture to disable individuals: the deprivation approach, the difference approach, and the culture-*as*-disability approach. But I want to do more than simply examine the struggling reader label. I want also to consider where we've been as a culture of reading professionals and to use this retrospective glance as a way of thinking about where we might head in the future, as enablers of youth and their literacies.

In the remaining sections of this article, I will first define *culture, identity,* and *struggling reader,* at least as I am using those terms here. Next, I will explore several assumptions underlying the cultural construction of struggling readers and how such assumptions influence their reading identities. Then, I will use those assumptions to interpret a case study of a ninth-grade boy whom I call Grady. Finally, I will offer suggestions based on Grady's case for working with other readers like him in the future.

## Defining *culture, identity,* and *struggling reader*

Like all definitions, those I use here are best understood when considered within specific contexts. Thus, I begin each definition by situating the term within the context it is meant to serve in this article. In instances in the literature where other

writers have contested certain definitions and offered competing ones, I include those as well in order to delineate more clearly the perspectives that frame this article.

**Culture.** A much-contested term among anthropologists, *culture* is generally thought to include the routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that people produce, make meaning of, and share as they work communally with others in their group. This allusion to culture as a bounded entity has its critics, however. For example, in "The Country of the Blind," the two cultures—the sighted and the blind—typify what McDermott and Varenne (1995) described as "containers of coherence that mark off different kinds of people living in their various ways, each kind separated from the others by a particular way of making sense and meaning" (p. 325). The problem with this definition, as McDermott and Varenne went on to point out, is that the container leaks. Rarely are cultures as isolated as the two Wells (1979) would have us imagine in his short story. Wells noted as much when he made an old version of Spanish, left over from earlier generations, the language of contact (minus visually related words) between Nunez and the people of the Country of the Blind.

The leaky container metaphor also applies to the dynamic and permeable boundaries that mark the lifeworlds of adolescents and adults. Adolescents' contacts with adult family members and with adults in community institutions such as schools, libraries, youth organizations, and churches contribute to the shaping of both worlds. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) work to reinforce this notion of the inseparability of adolescent and adult cultures, Cintron (1991) described the two cultures as "interanimating" each other. In Cintron's words, "They infect, disrupt, and even discharge their differences during their interaction such that each community's beliefs, values, and language system (including its way of speaking) are exchanged, resulting in ephemeral identities" (p. 24). In short, cultures are ways of "doing" life, not simply products of that life.

When culture is understood as the working knowledge that people must have of one another if they are to live together in a productive manner, it is easy to argue for cultural arrangements that take into account individual differences. In arguing

for such arrangements, McDermott and Varenne (1995) warned against the danger in assuming that there is one way to be in a culture. Specifically, they emphasized the need to avoid educational practices that mark those who are different from the perceived norms as lacking in something that is of their own doing—that they are being singled out for a reason and are in fact disabled.

The notion that there is no one "right" way of being in a culture is brought home in "The Country of the Blind" through the character of the blind woman to whom Nunez was betrothed. Marginalized prior to Nunez's arrival for having eye sockets that to the touch, at least, seemed fuller than those of other people in her country, the blind woman could well understand Nunez's predicament and sense of confusion at being picked on for his sightedness. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) were quick to point out, the story also shows how even a blind woman in the Country of the Blind can be made disabled by a culture that fails to respect differences. It is this potential for culture to act as a disabler among adolescent readers (at least where school literacy is concerned) that is the focus of this article.

**Identity.** The word *identity* first made its appearance around the 16th century during a period known in history as the Enlightenment. Thus, it carries much of the baggage of modernist Western cultures in that it evokes an image of a bounded, rational, and unitary self—a self capable of both agency and autonomy (Harré, 1989). However, as Davies (1993) pointed out, young people are often positioned as individuals without agency and autonomy, particularly in instances where adults perceive them as being irresponsible and lacking in good judgment. So-called struggling readers whose identities are marked by unsuccessful efforts at (or perhaps by resistance to) "getting reading right" may have decidedly different perceptions of how agency and autonomy work from those of their teachers and other significant adults in their lives. It is this difference in perceptions that makes the case study of Grady (later in the article) interesting and worth considering by those who teach other youths like him.

As with culture, the concept of *identity* is a contested term. For example, a postmodern critique of identity takes issue with the unitary, or

noncontradictory, nature of the term as spelled out by the humanists at the time of the Enlightenment. Claiming that while the concept of identity is one we still need and use, Davies (1993) and others (Sarup, 1988; Weedon, 1997) would have us focus more on the processes through which being a particular kind of person (e.g., a struggling reader) is achieved. They would argue that the concepts of subjectivity and subject positioning are more useful than identity in understanding the ways in which some adolescents construct themselves (and are constructed by others) as readers who struggle. Although I agree with their argument, I will stay with identity in this article because most of the literature available for illustrating the different approaches to teaching struggling readers does not take the critique of identity into consideration. Where I will draw from that critique, however, is in the final section of the article in the suggestions I offer that are based on what I learned from working with Grady.

Elsewhere in the article when I refer to struggling readers' identities, it will be with Gee's (1996, 1999) concept of socially situated identities in mind. I make this distinction in order to avoid the constraints imposed by the more commonplace psychological definition of identity, with its emphasis on oneness in being, or the unitary self. Gee's concept of identity, in the socially situated sense of the word, leaves room for multiple identity formations within different Discourses, which to his way of thinking function as our "identity kits"—that is, our ways of seeing, acting, believing, thinking, and speaking that make it possible for us to recognize (and be recognized by) others like ourselves.

***Struggling reader.*** Attempting to define the term *struggling reader* is like trying to nail gelatin to a wall. The term takes on different characteristics depending on who is defining it and for what purpose. Currently, it appears to be the preferred term among reading professionals for adolescents who for whatever reason are unable to keep up with the reading demands of the school curriculum. As a reading educator for more than 30 years, counting my public school and university experience, I would be hard pressed to name all the labels I've heard (or used) to describe students who fall below "average" on some measure of reading competence. The few such labels that come instantly to mind are *slow reader, low*

*reader, disabled reader, at-risk reader,* and more recently *struggling reader.* Currently, the major difference in our labeling, as I see it, is that we are learning to put the person before the label, so that now we speak of readers with learning disabilities or readers who struggle. If only it were that simple—as if by changing syntax we could also change a struggling reader's self-esteem.

In the professional literature, as well, there is little agreement on what constitutes a struggling reader. A cursory analysis of the table of contents of the recent International Reading Association book *Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Collection of Teaching Strategies* (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000) reveals that the term *struggling* can refer to youth with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities as well as to those who are unmotivated, in remediation, disenchanted, or generally unsuccessful in school literacy tasks. A smorgasbord of descriptors, these labels tell little or nothing about the cultural construction of even a single struggling reader. They do, however, provide ways of thinking about culture and disability that are seldom addressed in the literature on teaching adolescents who for whatever reason are thought to be achieving below their "full potential" as readers.

## Assumptions underlying the cultural construction of struggling readers

The possibility that as a culture we are *making* struggling readers out of some adolescents who for any number of reasons have turned their backs on a version of literacy called school literacy is a sobering thought. Although it is not a new idea (witness the related work on disabilities by McDermott and Varenne, 1995, in anthropology of education), it is one that only recently has made its way into the reading field. Largely through the writings of a cross-disciplinary group of scholars (Gee, 1998; Knobel, 1999; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997; Luke & Elkins, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1999; New London Group, 1996), reading educators around the world are being exposed to the idea that literacy education is less about skill development and more about access to cultural resources and to understandings of how schools that promote certain normative ways of reading texts may be disabling some of the very students they

are trying to help. This is particularly problematic given that many such normative ways of reading are losing their usefulness (and validity) in the wake of new technologies and changing literacies.

But the problem does not lie solely with schools. The cultural construction of disability—in this case, the struggling reader—is all inclusive. According to McDermott and Varenne (1995), it "includes everyone involved in constructing 'School'...school personnel, of course, and parents, and let us not forget the philosophers, curriculum designers, textbook publishers, testers, and educational researchers...in other words, 'Us'" (p. 331). As a result of our own activities, it is conceivable that the struggling reader may be worse off for our efforts, if we are to take McDermott and Varenne at their word. To understand why this may be so, it is instructive to consider how we, as educators and concerned adults, have established cultural norms that outline particular identities for youth whom we then define as either struggling or not struggling with reading.

The framework I use to examine the assumptions underlying these cultural norms is one that McDermott and Varenne (1995) initiated in their attempt to show the development of disability as an institution and trope in U.S. culture and most notably in education. The framework, slightly adapted, provides three approaches to thinking about culture and the struggling reader: the deprivation approach, the difference approach, and the culture-*as*-disability approach. In introducing each approach, I borrow from McDermott and Varenne's work, but the literature on which I draw for my examples is easily recognized as the knowledge base that supports much of what we have done and continue to do in the name of teaching adolescents who struggle with reading—however broadly this group of readers is defined.

## The deprivation approach

This way of thinking about culture and the struggling reader suggests that adolescents can be shown to fall into reliably distinct categories of cognitive processing abilities that include reading, at least school reading as measured by standardized, performance-based, or informal tests and teacher observations. There is usually a stable set of tasks, deemed milestones by a particular

culture, to which all its members must respond if they are to qualify as developmentally competent on those tasks. For example, being able to decode, comprehend, and summarize large chunks of informational texts would qualify as one such set of tasks among adolescent readers, their teachers, and their parents, to name just a few of the interested parties. Low-level performances on these tasks by some members of the group are taken as evidence that these members have not yet developed the requisite set of skills necessary for reading competently at a particular grade level or in a particular set of texts. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) observed, cruder versions of this argument might be that "We have culture, and you don't" (pp. 333–334), or a Nunez version might have it that "I have eyes, and you don't."

By unpacking some assumptions underlying this argument, it will be possible to see a culture's influence on a reader's identity, but first let us look at an example from the literature on struggling readers. Consider Brett (not his real name), a sixth grader of "average" intelligence who had scored at the second-grade level on a school-administered standardized reading test. Brett's mother asked Darrell Morris, a professor in the reading clinic at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, to evaluate her son's reading difficulty.

After a clinical evaluation that included informal tests of Brett's reading ability and an interview with his mother that took into account Brett's school history, Morris (Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 2000) concluded that the boy did indeed have a reading disability. Morris assigned Criss Ervin, an experienced first-grade teacher enrolled in the clinic's reading practicum, to tutor Brett during the university's 14-day summer session. She continued working as his tutor for the following school year, meeting with Brett once a week to improve his comprehension, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, word recognition, and spelling skills. Ervin's colleague, Kim Conrad, joined her during the next school year, and together the two women continued the tutoring procedures developed earlier. In summarizing Brett's progress, Morris et al. (2000) wrote the following:

> When tutoring began in the summer of 1992, Brett was a struggling reader, severely lacking in confidence.... Balanced instruction and appropriate tutor

support were important, but the essential element in Brett's successful reading program was the tutor's diligent, unrelenting attention to instructional level. Initial testing showed Brett to have, at best, a second-grade reading level. [The tutor], putting aside age and grade expectations, began working with Brett at the second-grade level.... Over a 2-year period, Brett progressed steadily—from a second- to a fourth-grade instructional level in both reading and spelling. Progress was slow but foundational, and, importantly, it was sensed and appreciated by the tutor and student alike. (pp. 14–15)

One assumption underlying the deprivation approach is that Brett has the potential to reach his grade-level placement in reading if he receives appropriate instruction from a school culture that takes his developmental characteristics (at least as measured psychometrically) into account and provides reading materials that are below his frustration level. Deprived of such instruction, Brett will continue to be identified as a struggling reader, and in time he may come to see himself as less deserving than his peers. Even worse, he may blame himself for failing as a reader and translate that failure into reasons that keep him from succeeding in other ways throughout his life.

A further assumption of the deprivation approach is that adolescents who struggle with reading will find they are unable to compete for the privileges that come with grade-level performance (or above) on literacy-related tasks. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) put it, "there is a public assumption that, although society can care for those who lag behind, they are out of the running for the rewards that come with a full cultural competence" (p. 334). For Brett, this might mean being barred from playing sports, competing for college scholarships, and the like. But whatever the consequence and whether or not he ever escapes the struggling reader label, one thing is pretty much for certain: Brett's identity as a reader will bear the residuals of having been part of a group of people described by both achievement tests and school personnel as the "have-nots" in terms of access to cultural capital through literate means.

Individuals who recognize and are recognized by others like themselves as being struggling readers often end up the recipients of what Finn (1999) called "a domesticating" education—that is, an education that stresses "functional literacy,

literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome" (pp. ix–x). The fact that Finn equated being "not troublesome" with settling for a second-rate kind of educational arrangement—a kind that invariably leads to lower expectations and to social and economic inequalities—is reason enough to examine the assumptions underlying Brett's status as a struggling reader.

## The difference approach

This approach argues that the ways people in different groups develop competencies as literate beings will vary according to the demands of their particular cultures. For example, adolescents who struggle with school literacy tasks under the difference approach would likely be subjected to few predefined reading tasks; instead, they would be encouraged to focus on the literacy activities that adults in their culture regularly perform as fully functioning members of that culture. Moreover, they would be encouraged to develop multi-layered identities and perspectives that might vary considerably from those of their higher achieving peers, to say nothing of how they might also vary among themselves. In short, according to McDermott and Varenne's (1995) tongue-in-cheek observation, under the difference approach it might simply be a matter of declaring, "We have culture, and you have a different one" (p. 335).

Before examining the assumptions underlying this approach, it will be helpful to have a real example from which to draw some specifics. Consider, therefore, this opening segment of a book chapter by Brozo, Valerio, and Salazar (2000) on teaching literacy from a difference approach:

Two blocks from West Oso Junior High School, Gracie Mendoza, a Mexican American faith healer, stands under a Chinese plum tree, holding one of its tender light green leaves up to the sun. Smiling, she says, "Estas hojas tiernas se hierven para hacer un te. Este te es para los diabeticos. Ellos lo toman para su enfermedad." (These tender leaves are boiled to make a tea. This tea is for diabetics. They drink it for their illness.) Gracie's weathered dark brown skin attests to the many hours spent tending her garden under the hot and humid south Texas sun. Yet her eyes, behind her large plastic-framed glasses, are

crystal clear and shine with an honest passion as she attempts to educate her audience.

In the early morning hours that make up second period, Gracie finds herself surrounded by a group of 22 eighth-grade students. Their attention drifts from Gracie's instruction to the enticing aroma of tortillas and chorizo in the air of the neighborhood they know so well. "Listen up," says Minerva, their teacher. "Mrs. Mendoza is talking about making a tea of herbs just like in the stories we've been reading with Mr. Valerio and Dr. Brazos [sic]." (p. 66)

As the authors of this chapter went on to explain, the junior high school that these eighth-grade students attended is nearly 90% Latino/a, with 70% of the youth speaking English as a second language. Both the young people and the adults in the school community and surrounding neighborhoods were described as harboring feelings of academic inadequacy. The school itself was in danger of losing its accreditation as a result of the students' low scores on state-mandated reading, writing, and math tests. Against these odds, school personnel were working with some success to implement a language arts curriculum that had relevance and meaning for the student body.

For example, Minerva Salazar, the teacher and a coauthor of the chapter, was interested in building a community of learners among her students: 19 Mexican Americans, 1 Filipino American, 1 African American, and 1 Anglo. With the help of her two coauthors, she planned a variety of literacy activities and a culminating unit that encouraged her students to learn about one another's cultures. The unit, which included a walk through Gracie's garden, also involved students in reading *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972), a novel about traditional Mexican American faith healing, and in exploring the cultural resources of their community. One such resource was a local Mexican American scholar who visited the class and gave a talk on "green medicines." Other resources included the students' parents and a field trip to a nearby university's celebration of Cinco de Mayo.

Throughout all of her attempts to use local resources to bring about a community-school dialogue, Salazar made sure that students engaged in reading and writing strategies that were compatible with the content being learned. While they were

reading *Bless Me, Ultima*, she had students keep journals in which they reflected on their families' responses to the ideas generated by the novel. She also provided group assignments that required students to work collaboratively in pairs or through peer-led discussions to make meaning of what they read. For instance, one girl taught her group the meanings of several difficult words from Chapter 16 of the novel by giving examples that related the new words to her peers' everyday experiences.

One assumption underlying the difference approach is that an arbitrary set of reading tasks deemed important by one group of people may have little or no relevance for another group. The possibility of this being the case in Salazar's eighth-grade classroom seems likely. Prior to her implementing a culturally relevant unit on Mexican American community life, the majority of the students in her room showed little or no inclination to become involved in school-related literacy assignments. In fact, they were struggling readers who exhibited low self-esteem much like the other students in their junior high school, which was always near the bottom in any ranking of area school districts' state test scores. It was only after Salazar and her coauthors had taught the unit that they noted a heightened awareness of positive reading identities among several of the Mexican American students. They attributed this change, in part, to having involved the students in a variety of literacy practices that had meaning for them and other members of their community.

A second assumption of this approach is that teachers will have the resources necessary for implementing instructional interventions that take into account students' varying cultural backgrounds and literacy practices. In Salazar's case, there was adequate support for implementing an in-depth study of Mexican American community life. However, it was unclear whether similar support would be available for addressing the cultural differences represented by other students in her classroom. Addressing the concerns of one group while ignoring those of other groups could conceivably lead to difficulties and raise questions about fairness and the quality of instruction for all students.

A third assumption of the difference approach is that by focusing on what struggling readers can do (given a relevant set of cultural experiences) rather than what they cannot do (based on an

arbitrary set of reading tasks), we will be meeting their educational needs. This assumption, however, is problematic. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) have pointed out, "despite a liberal lament that variation is wonderful, those who cannot show the right skills at the right time in the right format are considered out of the race for the rewards of the larger culture" (p. 335). One has to wonder, therefore, if the Mexican American students in Salazar's class would be shortchanged if they were to continue their education under other teachers who, like their eighth-grade teacher, opted for the difference approach.

## The culture-*as*-disability approach

This approach assumes that all cultures, as historically evolved ways of "doing" life, teach people about what is worth working for, how to succeed, and who will fall short. To McDermott and Varenne's (1995) way of thinking, "cultures offer a wealth of positions for human beings to inhabit" (p. 336). Each position requires certain things. For example, to inhabit the position of "good reader," one must possess certain abilities that are verifiable and recognizable to others who occupy that same position. But how people end up inhabiting some positions and not others is more a matter of being put into those positions because of differential treatment than of being incidentally born into them, according to McDermott and Varenne. They argued that culture disables some of its members by developing what is assumed to be a stable (though arbitrary) set of tasks against which individuals can be measured and perhaps remediated. But if these individuals don't measure up, they can be pushed aside. Here is a cruder version of this approach:

> It takes a whole culture of people producing idealizations of what everyone should be and a system of measures for identifying those who fall short for us to forget that we collectively produce our disabilities and the discomforts that conventionally accompany them. (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, pp. 337)

Here, I unpack the assumptions underlying culture-*as*-disability without first offering an example from the literature on struggling readers. This time the example will follow. In writing about it, I will use these assumptions to help me think about

how they, in large part, have culturally constructed Grady as a struggling adolescent reader—a reader whose identity, while linked to disability, is still part and parcel of the wider culture.

One assumption underlying culture-*as*-disability is that, unlike the deprivation and difference approaches, this approach does not isolate groups so that one group stands outside another; nor is one group marginalized in relation to another group. Instead, all groups—both dominant and minority—stand in relation to the wider culture of which they are a part. In this approach, the old way of dividing adolescents into two groups—the good readers and the struggling readers—no longer works. Struggling readers, like good readers, stand in relation to the wider culture. They are best represented ecologically in the form of *us/not-us*, a concept that has its roots in the work of French philosopher Merleau-Ponty and that subsequently has been developed by several literacy educators, including Sumara (1996). According to Sumara and his colleagues (Davis, Sumara, & Kieren, 1996):

> "Us" cannot be separated from what is thought to be "not-us." In fact rather than thinking in terms of us and *not-us*, we prefer to encode the inextricable nature of world and person as the unity of *us/not-us*. Although it seems to each of us that we are somehow autonomous and independent beings, we are, in fact, woven into the world that we perceive as "other." (p. 158)

Thus, adolescents who struggle with reading are part of the same cloth from which good readers come. Neither group stands alone in opposition to the other; both are bound up in the cultural contexts they inhabit.

Another assumption of the culture-*as*-disability approach is that schools actively arrange for some adolescents to take up, or inhabit, the position of struggling reader. According to McDermott and Varenne (1995), "the ethnography of schooling is rich with accounts of teachers, students, administrators, and researchers disabling each other in fully cultural ways" (p. 338). The examples they provide are drawn largely from the literature on learning disabilities. However, the literature on struggling readers (Alvermann, Umpleby, & Olson, 1996; Moje, Willes, & Fassio, 2001; O'Brien, 1998; Young, Mathews, Kietzmann, & Westerfield, 2000) is equally rife with case studies of how school has

become a primary site of resistance for some adolescents. When these youth find the school's institutionalized practices of reading and writing irrelevant and at odds with their motivation to learn, they typically look for ways to avoid such practices. Often, their avoidance takes the form of high absenteeism, neglect of homework, and overall disengagement leading to failure. Viewed from the culture-*as*-disability approach, McDermott and Varenne (1995) would argue that these students' failure is a display board for the problems of the system—a system whose members seem bent on labeling and documenting one another as failures.

A third assumption of this approach is that culture is a politically charged arrangement of hopes and aspirations about how the world should be as well as how individuals should be in it. Inhabiting, or taking up, various positions in such a world, therefore, amounts to dealing with certain arbitrary tasks that are continually being shaped by the cultural process. It also involves recognizing that these tasks, if they are to be completed, presume certain levels of competence in an individual. But therein lies the rub. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) put it, "Competence is a fabrication, a mock-up, and people caught in America work hard to take their place in any hierarchy of competence displays" (p. 337). For example, they point out that despite little evidence to support the notion that literacy is difficult to acquire and that it is best learned in classrooms, some societies will work hard to sustain this very idea. Why? McDermott and Varenne speculated that it is because

- the more people believe that literacy is difficult to acquire, the more they find reasons to explain why some read better than others and, correspondingly, why some do better than others in the economic and political measures of the society; and

- the more people believe that literacy is best learned in classrooms, the more they ignore other sources of literacy, and the more they insist on bringing back to school those who have already "failed" to develop school literacy. (p. 341)

Whether or not one agrees with McDermott and Varenne's reasoning and their stance on culture-*as*-disability, it seems likely that struggling readers caught up in a society that insists on treating literacy as something that is hard to acquire will indeed experience difficulty in achieving competence in reading. Finally, although it is the case that literacy can be taught in classrooms, it also seems likely that an insistence on privileging school literacy over out-of-school literacies will ensure that students like Grady will continue to struggle in reading.

## Grady: A case study

My focus here is on Grady (not his real name), an African American boy in the ninth grade who was reading at the fifth-grade level when I first met him as a participant in an after-school media club study that I was conducting at the Athens, Georgia, Regional Library. The study, which involved 30 adolescents in Grades 7–9, focused primarily on how these youth made meaning of various media literacy practices in which they engaged over 15 weeks. Known by their parents and teachers as having difficulty in reading their regularly assigned textbooks, these 30 adolescents all professed to dislike reading in general.

During the first 2 months of the media club, Grady participated very little in the literacy activities that my research assistants, Margaret Hagood and Alison Heron, and I had developed around the music CDs, video games, and various magazines (on sports, celebrities, fashion, hair, and nail care) that the kids in the club had asked us to buy. Through funding from the Spencer Foundation, we were able to purchase different forms of media that appealed to the students' interests and at the same time provided us with a means through which to introduce some critical media literacy activities. These activities involved club members in reading and critiquing, through highly interactive discussions, some of the subtle (and not so subtle) print and nonprint messages that were present in the media.

To avoid spoiling any pleasures that the adolescents might take in the media (Luke, 1997), we made certain that they felt free to opt out of a discussion at any point. We also noted which activities went over well and which did not so that changes could be made in the way we conducted the study. In short, we used participants' feedback to structure the club's activities. However, despite our efforts to be inclusive, Grady appeared to have an attitude about most whole-group activities.

He would quickly disengage and go off by himself to play Metal Gear, a video game that was of little interest to anyone in the club except Grady. In fact, it had been on his recommendation that we had purchased the game, and largely through his interest in it that we had taken the time to learn some of the moves associated with the various characters.

One afternoon I left the larger group and wandered over to Grady's corner of the room. Careful not to bombard him with questions that would interrupt what appeared to be a very motivating game for him, I watched in silence for about 10 minutes. When he finished the game, he told me he was getting bored with it because there were at least three more levels of difficulty to master and he was unable to move beyond the entry level. I asked Grady if he had ever tried to use the "cheat" codes (written hints about how to excel as a player) for Metal Gear that were in one of the video game magazines the club owned. He indicated he had not and took little interest in my leafing through the magazine in search of such codes. So much for modeling literate behavior, I thought to myself. Just as I had suspected, if the task involved reading in any way, Grady would have no part of it. I chalked up his disengagement as a defense mechanism for avoiding embarrassment about his long-time struggle with reading.

But then one day in the third month of the study, a series of e-mail discussions began that involved Grady, Margaret, and me. My earlier assumption that Grady would go to great lengths to avoid any activity involving reading proved wrong. We observed him reading and responding to our e-mail messages about his club project. Using e-mail, he also began to write freely about his frustration with Metal Gear and his growing interest in Pokémon. This new interest came as a surprise to both Margaret and me, for although we knew very little about Pokémon we had assumed that it appealed primarily to kids much younger than Grady. Also, we noted that beyond offering players the option of advancing to different levels of proficiency, Pokémon and Metal Gear seemed to have little in common. Whereas Metal Gear carried the "Parental Advisory" warning label (a point I had discussed with Grady's father at the time I purchased the game), Pokémon featured characters that simply fainted in battle—only to regain consciousness at the hands of skillful players, or trainers as they are called in Pokémon.

Grady was to become just such a trainer. In the sampling of e-mails that we share here with Grady's and his parents' permission, it is clear Grady is writing as the knowledgeable one, in contrast to Margaret and me. We are truly novices when it comes to understanding the rules and maneuverings of popular video games, but we were eager learners as our e-mails to Grady indicate.

Sunday, 7 Nov 1999
Hi, Grady,
Ever since you played the game Metal Gear, I have been thinking about it. Video games are hard to play! Have you thought about what you want your project to be about for the Media Club? Would you like to do something on Metal Gear? Let me know. I would be happy to help you. Margaret

Monday, 8 Nov 1999
I don't care if [I] do the project. I don't know what else I would do. I am lost I don't know what to do because I cant think right. Grady

Note: Omitted here are some follow-up messages in which Margaret and I attempted to help Grady decide on a project. Also omitted, but necessary information if the remaining e-mails are to make sense, is the gist of a face-to-face conversation that Margaret and Grady had about the usefulness of a Pokémon trainer's manual. Briefly, Grady had heard about a book that helped trainers advance to increasingly more difficult levels of the game. He seemed exceedingly interested in this book and had asked Margaret if she would use club money to purchase it.

Friday, 19 Nov 1999
Margaret I am in the labary [library] on Friday and I went to my message thing and you said that you were going to write me and I don't see it. Grady

Friday, 19 Nov 1999
Hi Grady!
I am sorry that I have not written you back! Guess what! I found the Pokémon book that you asked me to get. It is really complicated. It was expensive too! What is it? Some kind of cheat code book? Write back. Margaret

Monday, 22 Nov 1999
It helps me to go to another stage. Grady

Monday, 22 Nov 1999

Okay Grady, now that you have seen the Pokémon book, would you please explain to me how it works? Why do you read it? What is that little yellow creature anyway? Margaret

Monday, 22 Nov 1999

It helps me go father on my gerey [journey] and the yellow cereater [creature] is pikachu a elitric poke'mon.

Wednesday, 24 Nov 1999

Hi Grady,

I am impressed with how much you know about Pokémon characters. How is the Pokémon book helping you earn badges? Donna

Monday, 13 Dec 1999

By going and find the head leader of the fire gym and I have to find the key on cinnabar iland [island] and then I will get the new bage. It is helping me very much because it tell me were to go to get to the next bage. Thanks for asking I am glad to tell what avery [ever] you want to know. Grady.

We subsequently learned from talking with Grady that he was glad to have the Pokémon book over Thanksgiving break because he was able, in his words, "to get ahead." He explained that the way he used the book was to read something that interested him (e.g., a special move or training skill) and then try it out. During club meetings when we observed Grady playing Pokémon, he appeared to use the Pokémon book as a source of reference. When he got stuck, he would put the game on pause and turn to an appropriate page in the book for help. After finding the information he needed, he would close the book and go back to the game.

On one occasion, Grady explained to us that he was training his 64 Pokémon to do special skills (e.g., flash, dig, fly, and surf) as they developed from babies into grown-ups. When I asked him to show me how he did this, Grady began to walk me through a series of steps that he pointed to in his book—steps that he read aloud fluently as I haltingly pushed the appropriate keys. While we worked, he told me that he had purchased a new red game (meaning he was working on another level of difficulty in Pokémon) from someone in the library for US$6.00, which he claimed was "a steal." He remarked again that he was glad to

have the Pokémon book that Margaret had purchased for him because now he could look up information on the red game as well. He said that he still had a lot to learn and that he planned to spend the week between club meetings reading the Pokémon book and playing the red game.

On another occasion, Grady told us that he preferred Pokémon to Metal Gear because in Pokémon "you have to take care of the characters, not kill them." He elaborated further, saying that it was important to save money to take his Pokémon to the hospital when they needed care because "Pokémon never die in battle, but they do faint!" Grady also spoke sensitively about the need to teach his Pokémon how to evolve from one stage of development to the next. On his own, he noted that the names of the Pokémon characters were spelled in ways that made it easy to remember them and to identify them at each new stage of their development.

All in all, we were impressed with what Grady had learned about the game and the manner in which he had learned it. In retrospect, I am left to wonder how I had managed to read Grady all wrong at the beginning of the study. By assuming that his avoidance of reading meant he had low self-esteem as a reader, and thus sought to isolate himself from the rest of the group, I had reverted to my old ways of thinking about reading as a subject, rather than viewing it as a practice that is socially, culturally, and institutionally situated— one that is rarely about just written language. I had also assumed too quickly that Grady's reticence in engaging in club activities that involved discussions of media texts reflected his sense of failure at having nailed down reading in some generic sense of the word.

It is embarrassing to admit that at a time when I was teaching my graduate-level classes at the University of Georgia about the theory behind reading as a social practice I was also continuing to think about reading as a subject, at least when I thought about Grady and reading. Why? Could it be that in constructing Grady as a struggling reader, I was acting out of what McDermott and Varenne (1995) called the deprivation approach to thinking about culture and disability? That is, did I let my knowledge of Grady's standing in the lowest quartile on a recently administered school reading test color my expectations of his performance in the

media club? In identifying him as a reader who had not yet developed the requisite set of skills needed for reading and responding to media texts in a peer group activity, had I fallen prey to the notion that Grady would be unable to take advantage of the club's rewards (e.g., the socializing, the potential to improve in critical literacy?) Even more troubling, had Grady constructed himself as failing at reading? Was he, like Brett, in danger of seeing himself as a "have-not" when it came to reading ability?

Or, if not the deprivation approach, was it the difference approach to thinking about culture and disability that I had used in constructing Grady as a struggling reader? For instance, did I believe that the literacy activities of the media club were less arbitrary than the set of reading tasks his school expected him to master? Had I, like Salazar, the eighth-grade teacher in Gracie's garden, acted on the belief that I knew what a culturally relevant curriculum should look like for readers who struggle with school literacy? Did I believe, for instance, that reading activities built around video games, popular music, and teen magazines were more suitable for Grady's development as a reader than were the end-of-chapter questions in his social studies textbook? If I did think this, what might be a potential downside of such thinking?

Possible answers to these questions, and others like them, are best explored using the assumptions underlying McDermott and Varenne's (1995) culture-as-disability approach to understanding how adolescents, such as Grady, get positioned as struggling readers, and, in turn, take up that positioning by using it as their identity kit for recognizing (and being recognized by) others like themselves. Fortunately, however, in Grady's case, the struggling reader identity that culture (and we, as part of that culture) foisted upon him seems partially to have been deflected by Grady's own ordering of his subjectivities, which included being a capable video game player. But more about this will be discussed in the last section of the article. For now, it is enough to consider how culture constructed Grady as a struggling reader.

Culture arranged for Grady to take up the position of struggling reader by institutionalizing a set of school-related literacy tasks on which Grady was measured and found to come up short. In taking up the position of struggling reader, Grady

assumed an identity kit (Gee, 1996, 1999) complete with ways of believing, thinking, acting, and speaking that made it possible for him to recognize (and be recognized by) other readers like him in the Discourse of school. However, in the media club, where school-related literacy tasks were less obvious (except for the critical media literacy activities that Margaret, Alison, and I organized and Grady shunned), culture offered another way to be a reader. In that context, Grady took up the position of a Pokémon trainer/reader who needed information from the game's training manual to advance to the next level of difficulty.

In the Discourse of video gaming, Grady positioned himself as knowledgeable "other" to Margaret and me, and we struggled under a set of expectations and tasks (e.g., reading how to train evolving Pokémon) that seemed every bit as arbitrary to us as our school-related critical literacy activities must have seemed to Grady. But "othering" is not a condition of the culture-as-disability approach. Unlike the deprivation and difference approaches to thinking about culture and disability, McDermott and Varenne's (1995) notion of culture-as-disability does not isolate the individual from the larger culture of which he or she is a part. Thus, Margaret and I were no less a part of Grady's video game world than he was a part of our world of school literacy. Although it may have seemed to Margaret, Grady, and me that we were operating in fairly autonomous and independent ways of thinking about literacy, we were part of the same culture. We did not stand, therefore, in opposition to one another, but rather in relation to the larger culture that we all inhabit. This way of thinking about what kind of reading counts, under what conditions, and for whom would seem to have implications for how we, as literacy educators, choose to work with the other Gradys in the world who have learned to recognize and accept their identity as the "have-nots" of school Discourse.

Through exposure to and success in a different type of reading, Grady's response to the Pokémon book certainly called into question my earlier assumption about his inadequacy as a reader. Any ideas I might have had about what he could and could not do as a reader were based on a set of presumptions I carried with me from my earlier education in, and experience with, the deprivation approach to teaching struggling readers. Now,

rather than seeing Grady as a "have-not" in terms of some stable set of reading competencies, I have come to understand how it is possible for a different set of competencies to construct him, as well as Margaret and me, in some very different ways.

Having said as much, it must appear that I am championing the difference approach to thinking about culture and struggling readers. But, I would argue that this is not the case. I am not proposing that Grady's teachers substitute video game books for the texts he is expected to read as part of the traditional school curriculum. This will not suffice. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) warned, focusing solely on a set of cultural experiences that are relevant to a particular kind of reader does not ensure that that reader will demonstrate the "right" skills at the "right" time in the "right" format in what they referred to as "the race for the rewards of the larger culture" (p. 335). Despite how one might feel personally about such a race, it exists, and Grady needs to be in the running. Some suggestions for making it a race that Grady might see himself entering are offered in the concluding section of the article.

## Suggestions

The particulars of Grady's case cannot be translated into the "shoulds" and "musts" of working with other adolescents who struggle with school literacy. As Morgan (1997) reminded us, even if such exhortations and generalities were indulged, they would need to be modified and particularized by what she described as the "is"es (p. 28) of each moment of one's own teaching. With this in mind, I offer suggestions based on what I learned from working with Grady, along with some ideas for how I might approach him if I were his teacher. Although these suggestions—in the form of notes to myself—do not generalize beyond Grady, they may still prove useful if they do no more than simply call to mind the specifics and possibilities of other cases like his.

One suggestion for making the race seem worth the time and effort Grady will need to spend in qualifying as an entrant is this: Show him that school literacy is not as difficult to acquire as he's been led to believe. Do this by communicating to him that he is already a reader. Demonstrate how reading a Pokémon training manual involves some of the same information-seeking strategies as reading a chapter in his social studies text. Talk about the differences in the two kinds of reading, and make a list of what he already knows about reading media texts that he might apply to school texts. Teach him strategies for studying and remembering what he reads. Explore with Grady why reading something of personal interest is always easier than reading something that seems irrelevant, even boring. Share ideas for reading past boredom, for reading to compete—as in sporting events. Elicit his perceptions of the rewards and privileges that come with skilled reading. Support him in setting short-term goals for entering the race, and then encourage him every step of the way.

A second suggestion for preparing Grady to enter the race involves coaching him in ways that will enable him to intervene in how he perceives himself (and is perceived by others) as a reader. Do this by communicating to him that there are many different ways of being a reader, and that each way carries certain assumptions about the person that may or may not be accurate. Begin by engaging Grady in a discussion of football, a sport he likes and knows well. Focus the discussion on the positions different team members play, and ask him how the coach decides which person will play which position. Do the players have any say in which positions they play? Why or why not? Relate this discussion to reading. Talk about how being in the position of someone who struggles with classroom reading assignments is part of a storyline that Grady has helped to write, though perhaps neither consciously nor totally. Elicit from Grady who else might be coauthoring this story about him as a reader (e.g., his teacher who made the assignment, the textbook author who chose to write in a certain way about the material, the tests that determine how well he performs as a reader).

Next, engage Grady in a discussion of how he reads his Pokémon book. Ask him if he is the same reader in this situation as he is when he reads an assigned text. Help him to understand how, as readers, we are not always the same, but also help him to explore the consequences of not having full authority over how we are perceived as readers. Do this in order to show Grady that knowing how he is positioned as a reader in school-related activities is the first step to knowing how to change some of what he doesn't like about it.

Finally, a third suggestion for encouraging Grady to enter the race is one that cuts two ways. It focuses on the question of what counts as reading when reading really counts. A discussion along this line could lead to productive inquiry into the multiple literacies of youth culture and away from some idealized generalization about what "real" reading is (and is not). It could also lead Grady to conclude that while cultural practices vary, "getting reading right" is the only game in town. To begin the discussion, ask Grady to predict whether or not his teachers would count his reading of the Pokémon book as "real" reading. Note whether he qualifies which teachers would (or would not) count it as a legitimate act of reading, and why. Explore the conditions under which they might believe differently. Ask him to imagine a situation where his teachers included something that he liked to read outside school as part of the homework they regularly assigned. Elicit from Grady whether or not this situation would create more interest in reading for him (about the same, or less), and why he believes such would be the case. Suggest to him that he poll his classmates and teachers on what counts as reading when reading really counts. As a culminating activity, Grady might share the results of the poll through his high school newsletter. The value I see in this activity in relation to Grady lies in its capacity to demonstrate how culture constructs not only *what* counts as reading when reading really counts, but also *who* counts as a reader.

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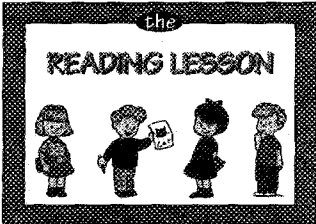
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