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Influences of the Experience of Race as a Lens for Understanding Variation in Displays of Competence in Reading Comprehension

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This chapter examines the interconnected ways that experiences with positioning around race play out in displays of competence in reading comprehension. In reviewing relevant research literatures, it is important initially to make explicit two fundamental propositions that guide this review. First, race is a social and political construction, not a biological reality (DuBois, 1996; Long, & Kittles, 2003). Differences at the level of the genome among human communities are insignificant. It is important to note that constructions of the idea of race are historical and have not always existed. The history of such constructions is fraught with conundrums: using physical characteristics such as color and hair texture to distinguish among presumed racial groups; attributing inferiority and superiority along multiple dimensions to presumed racial groupings; shifting classifications as to different racial groups; shifts in the meaning of race in different parts of the world and at different points in history (e.g., meaning of race in the United States versus across Latin America) (Gould, 1981; Mills, 1997). In the western world, especially in the United States, conceptions of race have historically been correlated with opportunity within and across multiple levels of the ecological system. Bronfenbrenner (1998) describes an ecological system as consisting of the macro-level (broad societal beliefs and institutional practices), the micro-level (the local settings in which individuals participate), the meso-level (relationships across the various settings in which a person participates) and the exo-system (with regard to children's development, the places where parents and other adult caregivers participate). I reference these multiple levels of an ecological system as opportunities associated with race, at least in the United States, have been associated with societal racial stereotypes, political ideologies, and the structuring of economic opportunities. At the level of micro-systems, the quality of local schools serving predominantly racial minorities and the poor, the availability of quality housing, the availability of youth serving organizations and green space also create challenging contexts for racial minorities and the poor. The construct of a meso-system is important because it highlights the concentration of challenge in neighborhoods that are both racially segregated and poor.

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And the construct of an exo-system provides leverage for thinking about the range of social capital that adult caregivers may accrue based on their experiences in terms of schooling, participation in the job market, etc. I will argue that these constraints at every level of the ecological system must be understood in terms of affording both risk and protective factors (Muschinske, 1977; Tucker, 1994; Carruthers, 1995). Thus, in this chapter I examine the influences of racial positioning on displays of competence in reading comprehension as having to do with the experience of race, rather than with race as an uncontested given, or a deterministic categorization. The second basic proposition reflected in the title is displays of competence with regard to reading comprehension. So much of the data we have to measure reading comprehension focusses on assessments in schools which do not address the question of what people read and do with texts–broadly speaking–outside of school. Thus, I am positioning competence as related to the contexts under which we attempt to determine what people know and can do.

What Reading Outcome Data Suggest about Race and Opportunity to Learn

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate a persistent achievement gap on NAEP reading outcomes in relation to race and ethnicity (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). However, there are several interesting caveats related to this persistent pattern. While we have seen progress since the 1970s for 9 and 13-year-olds, the average reading scores for 17-year-olds have remained relatively flat. The gap between whites and blacks, and whites and Hispanics has narrowed largely because gains for white students have not been as great. These racial gaps narrow primarily when compared to data trends before 2008. However, since 2008, on the whole the gap has not changed (except for 13-year-old Hispanics). These data suggest that the tasks of reading comprehension change substantively from elementary to middle to high school. This data also suggests, at least, that there may be differences in the experience of middle and high school that are related to positioning with regard to race. There is evidence that academic tracking, enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, and the general rigor of the curriculum are associated with students' race, where African American, Latino, American Indian, and certain Asian American groups are significantly less likely to experience optimal opportunities to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2010) than white students, although this is complicated by socioeconomic status (SES). The lack of equal access is further complicated by the fact that schools in the US remain largely segregated with regard to race and class (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012) and as a consequence schools with majority minority populations are likely to have less per pupil funding, more teachers who are not certified in the subjects they teach, more teachers who lack experience, and less access to information technologies (Darling-Hammond, 2010). All of these influence the quality of students' school experiences, including reading comprehension instruction. And throughout the school years, but especially in middle and high school, the ability to comprehend texts is among the most critical variables affecting success in school across the curriculum, certainly creating challenging contexts that racialized young people have to navigate.

Impacts of a Racialized Ecological System on Opportunity to Learn

This experience of race in the US manifests itself at all levels of the ecological system, from family life to resource availability in neighborhoods to broader societal stereotypes that play out

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in institutional configurations in schools, in the media, and the workplace. While the challenges are most intense in segregated black and brown communities living in poverty, the prevalence of racism remains a challenge for the middle class as well (Patillo, 1999). For example, there are persistent achievement gaps, based on students' race, even in more affluent suburban schools, especially high schools (Oakes, 1985, 1990). Ferguson (2003, 2007) has identified a myriad of social network issues and perceptions on the part of teachers and students in these schools that may well contribute to these gaps. Thus the social territories the black and brown youth in these middle-class suburban schools must navigate are complex and complicated by positioning with regard to race. And while the focus in this chapter is largely on black and brown youth, it is important to note that poor white youth face similar ecological challenges (e.g., dropout rates in Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta; Purcell-Gates 1995; Hicks 2002; Teets 2006). It is interesting to note that when thinking about race and educational outcomes, we tend to focus on black and brown youth and to not address poor white youth. Thus, there are interesting intersections between positioning with regard to race/ethnicity and SES. Black and brown youth in integrated middle-class schools face constraints in opportunity to learn where SES is not the predictor; and yet poor white youth in schools of concentrated poverty also experience restricted opportunities to learn.

Describing the experience of race, especially for black and brown youth, demonstrates that learning to navigate these challenges (e.g., subject to stereotyping, restrictive school environments, neighborhood poverty, etc.) is part of the life course socialization required for these youth (Spencer et al., 2006). As a consequence, learning to read—in school and out—is situated within ecological spaces that extend beyond the individual classroom. The array of resources that must be recruited and coordinated as youth learn to read and comprehend texts— knowledge structures, motivation, persistence, relationship building—are socialized and supported both within and beyond the walls of an individual classroom or school building (Lee, 2002, 2007).

The coordination of the complex psychological system to support student reading development must focus on individuals and their interactions with other people as well as artifacts available within and across settings (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998; Cole, 1998; Fischer, & Bidell, 1998; Rogoff, 2003). This psychological system includes the work of identity building as a reader and a participant in the practices that especially school based reading can invite. This identity work for students includes perceptions of the self in terms of individuality, race and ethnicity, gender, class, ability, and abilities to do particular kinds of tasks (Spencer 2006)— including reading intently and critically in school and out, for particular reasons, with particular kinds of texts. It includes perceptions of school tasks, including reading, as a meaning-making endeavor or something of an artificial task that one does or not for the purposes of getting a grade; perceptions of school as a place that is supportive or threatening to the ego; of teachers as persons who intend to help one or hurt one. These perceptions arise out of the history of students' participation, to a large degree, in the practices of the particular kind of schooling they experience over time. Experiences with texts outside of school matter, including being read to as a child, having copious reading materials in the home, and participating in social networks that entail reading particular kinds of texts. However, considering the amount of time young people spend in school, the experiences of reading in school are critically important. The issue here is that while we may have less opportunity to influence literacy experiences of youth outside of school, especially within the home, we certainly have significant opportunities to influence those literacy experiences in schools. And as argued earlier, these school-based, and for that matter neighborhood-based, experiences around literacy are influenced by positioning with regard to race.

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Psycho-Social and Ecological Models of Learning Influencing Reading Comprehension

Psycho-social and ecological models of learning help us understand how students' identities and perceptions influence learning, and suggest implications for how meaning making around race is entailed in how and what people learn. The models I discuss are Eccles' Achievement Motivation Model (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) and Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2006). I will argue that while these two models do not address reading comprehension as a domain of learning, they are sufficiently comprehensive as to provide explanatory power as to why race matters for learners, no matter what the domain. Both models have been empirically validated.

Eccles argues that motivation to pursue and persist toward academic goals is not simply an outgrowth of traits of the individual. Rather, she argues, achievement-related choices are an outgrowth of dynamic relations among ten factors identified in Table 21.1.

From the student's perspective, subjective task value includes perceptions regarding interest in the task, the value of attaining competence, the utility of the task, and the relative costs entailed in pursuing the task. Consider the task of learning to read and comprehend texts in the contexts of schooling. What matters includes what the student believes the teacher thinks of her or him; what the student believes is the point of making sense of texts, especially in later grades where reading in the disciplines is the norm; what the student believes about his or her ability to comprehend, especially complex and discipline-specific texts; and how the student interprets success or failure to comprehend—all matter for goals and effort. These perceptions are colored by the experience of positioning with regard to race, for students, for teachers, for parents and other socializers. As a consequence, if students spend their K–12 experiences in schools with a culture of low expectations, with scripted curricula that focus on a narrow conceptualization of what students need to develop into engaged readers, with limited exposure to reading purposefully across genres within school subject matters, developing the grit to pursue rigorous academic tasks is made more complex and challenging. The fact of the matter is that black and brown youth living in poverty—and for that matter poor white youth—are more likely to attend schools of this sort than their middle-class white peers. Lest we think these conditions are solely an outgrowth of poverty (see Chapter 22 on poverty), the data on tracking and enrollment in advanced placement classes associated with race in middle class,

Table 21.1 Eccles Subject Task value model

1.	Cultural milieu (including prevalence of stereotypes)
2.	Socializers' beliefs and behaviors (which can include both parents and teachers)
3.	Stable child characteristics
4.	Previous achievement related experiences;
5.	Child's perceptions of socializer's beliefs, of gender roles, of the demands of academic tasks
6.	Child's interpretation of his or her experiences
7.	Child's goals and general self-schemes (including perceptions of ability, of goals, and the social milieu)
8.	Child's affective reactions and memories
9.	Expectations of success
10.	The subjective value of a task.

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often suburban school districts, suggests these challenges are not merely class based (Ferguson, 2003).

One important point to emphasize is that the impacts of exposure to the conditions of racism and poverty are not deterministic. For example, we do have examples of schools that "beat the odds," serving majority black and brown youth living in poverty, where students excel on measures of reading comprehension (Langer, 2001). Even in schools where a majority of black and brown students are struggling readers, there are still students who excel as readers. And there are powerful examples of black and brown youth living in poverty who excel in rich literacy practices in out-of-school environments (Ball, 1995; Morrell, 2002; Fisher, 2003; Kirkland, & Jackson, 2009; Kinloch 2010). Spencer (2006) argues that resilience in the face of challenge is an outgrowth of the relationship between the nature of the risks and the nature of the supports available. For example, in schools reported as "beating the odds" in literacy outcomes, schools are organized around robust pedagogical practices. Documentation of rich literacy learning in informal community-based settings in low-income neighborhoods highlights the importance of nurturing relationships between adults and youth, structuring reading and writing tasks to connect both with students' interests, and also of addressing community needs. Often both the relationship building and the articulation of literacy tasks and supports for developing competence in such tasks address the range of risks with which these youth wrestle as a consequence of their positioning with regard to race and class (Lee, 2007; Ball, 2009; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Paris, 2012).

Spencer's PVEST situates understanding academic challenges with regard to race centrally in the model. It also posits a powerful and often overlooked proposition, namely that to be human is to be at risk. This premise is important to the discussion in this chapter because sometimes our attention to the risks associated with race blinds us to the risks that all of our youth face over the life course, and shifts our attention from focusing on sources of resilience in black and brown communities. Again, I argue, learning to read and comprehend texts is not accomplished in isolation, but is situated in a wide array of experiences with literacy that are not restricted to the home and school alone. Rich literacy learning depends on relationship building within and across multiple settings, and is sensitive to how meaning-making processes are influenced by where in the life course learners are. This developmental dimension is another important contribution of Spencer's model. For example, classroom culture in primary-level classrooms tends to be more nurturing than in high schools. Young children are more likely to be able to move around the classroom, to make choices about what to read, to demonstrate their understanding through multiple modalities including speaking and drawing, and to experience personal connections with their teacher. Older youth in high school are more likely to have an opposite set of experiences. Additionally, high school students are at a point where social comparisons with regard to ability are more pronounced. They have more complex cognitive capacities for making inferences and attributions related to ability, relevance, and utility (American Psychological Association, 2002; American Psychological Association Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Youth at both levels are going through important life course transitions that can influence what significance they place on what they are asked to read and write about in school. The prevalence of learning to read through stories in primary grades offers more opportunities for personal meaning making than the informational text genres that are prevalent in middle and high school. In early grades, the focus on skill acquisition in decoding increases the likelihood that students experience some measure of success in reading. However, this contrasts with what may be a lack of attention to teaching strategies for comprehension in discipline-specific classes in high school, especially for struggling readers (Snow, & Biancarosa, 2003; Heller, & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee, & Spratley, 2009;

Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). In addition, primary grade teachers have a much broader and richer array of resources to support reading instruction, especially with regard to decoding, than middle and high school teachers, particularly with regard to reading in the disciplines. Just this distinction alone illustrates one of the core principles of PVEST: understanding outcomes in terms of relations between risks and supports. In the examples I have provided, risks of poor reading outcomes associated with racial positioning and SES can be buffered with the nature of relationship building more typical in primary classrooms, access to reading narrative texts that invite personal meaning making, and availability of professional supports for teachers (e.g., diagnostic tools, professional development, curricular materials explicitly focussing on skill development in reading) that are more characteristic of primary level classrooms. By contrast, the risks associated with race and SES for negative reading outcomes in adolescence differ from childhood and can be exacerbated by how reading comprehension is taught (or not) and experienced in middle and high school (e.g., disciplinary texts decontextualized from personally relevant purposes; the psychological demands of navigating multiple-subject-matter teachers who require that students read and comprehend, but typically do not teach students, especially struggling readers, how to tackle such tasks; lack of availability of diagnostic tools and rich curriculum to support comprehension in content areas). While these are my hypotheses, the decline in reading achievement the longer students stay in school at least suggests possible warrants for such ideas.

The PVEST model includes five dynamically connected dimensions represented in Table 21.2. This model has interesting implications for how we can approach understanding outcomes in reading comprehension for black and brown youth, and generally youth living in poverty. The developmental lens of PVEST helps us appreciate that it is important to understand that these youth must wrestle with both the normative challenges of where they are in the life course (e.g., the differences in the need for attachments among young children and among adolescents who are entering sexual maturation where the meaning of peer relationships is highly consequential) along with the additional challenges of wrestling with positionings around race (e.g., stereotypes around ability, conceptions of beauty, gender, etc.). Again, I reiterate that learning to read and comprehend complex texts in the contexts of schooling is not an isolated, purely within the individual, cognitive process. The net vulnerabilities of black and brown youth, especially those living in poverty, are populated by the historical and contemporary vestiges of racism that include residential segregation, lack of inter-generational wealth, placement in schools with limited resources and cultures of low expectations, health care disparities, as well as negative

Table 21.2 Dimensions of risk and resilience in Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

1. Net vulnerability (the objective nature of risks faced and protective factors available)

2. Net stress (how the individual experiences those vulnerabilities as an outgrowth of the relationship between challenges and supports)

3. Reactive coping processes (how the individual copes with challenges, which can be adaptive or maladaptive

4. Emergent identities (the kinds of ways of coping that emerge over time, across the life course, that become part of the meaning making repertoires upon which one draws, which can be negative or positive

5. Stage-specific coping outcomes (productive or unproductive outcomes in early childhood, adolescence, adulthood, etc.).

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societal stereotypes. An interesting perspective on the question of curriculum content—what students are expected to read and read about—is to what extent such content can play a role in helping black and brown students, and indeed all students, to wrestle with understanding these political, economic, and social conditions, on the assumption that having more complex understandings of these macro-level issues may serve a buffering function in expanding the conceptual resources available to them to make sense of race-related negative experiences. (Boykin, & Toms, 1985; Miller, & MacIntosh, 1999). Research on racial socialization documents positive academic outcomes associated with positive racial socialization, although this has not been documented with respect to reading outcomes particularly (Hughes, 2003; Mandara 2006).

The focus on reactive coping processes and emergent identities is useful in several ways (Spencer et al., 2006) . Particularly in middle and high school, it is important to realize that students accumulate a long history of experiences in this place called school (Spencer et al., 2006). And because reading is so central to learning across domains in school, they come to middle and high school with histories of imputing salience to what it means to read in school. This distinction between the salience of reading in school and reading out of school is important as studies have documented discontinuities between how often and for what purposes students read outside of school versus in school (Mahiri 2000/2001; O'Brian, Moje, & Stewart, 2001; Fisher, 2004; Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Kirkland, & Jackson, 2009; Moje, & Tysvaer 2010). These young people have developed routinized ways of coping with the experiences of failure in reading, as indicated by low test scores and grades; of being asked to read and knowing they do not understand; or of being able to comprehend but not seeing the point of working to deeply understand the texts they are being expected to "cover" in content area classes. These routine coping processes include criteria for perceiving when the reading experience is likely to be threatening. Behavior problems, especially in middle and high school, can often be attributed to such perceptions and coping responses, especially for youth with histories of low achievement (Spencer, 1999; Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004). Perhaps the most central question to emerge from using the PVEST model to examine the question of this chapter is what kinds of supports will be most relevant to the challenges that black and brown youth and youth living in poverty face with regard to learning to become successful, critical readers. I will address this question at the end of this chapter, but will explore next how some of these challenges are situated in terms of the demands of reading comprehension.

In Box 21.1, I offer the story of Mykelle Wheeler (http://www.wbez.org/story/news/education/keeping-mykelle-class; http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/5050-grading-mykelle). His story was reported in 2008 on WBEZ (Chicago's National Public Radio station) as part of their 50–50 Series: The Odds of Graduating. The series focused on the dilemmas in Chicago high schools where at the time of this story 12,000 students had dropped out, the majority black and brown males. I present this case to illustrate the challenges many black and brown students living in poverty face in urban school districts and the challenges their teachers and administrators face. I then offer an example of how researchers and practitioners might employ ecological, cultural, and human development perspectives to figure out what generative questions to ask. I argue that posing the appropriate questions is the first step in avoiding what is the dominant deficit orientation that dominates how in both practice and research we typically address the achievement gap, with the gap in reading comprehension as just one area where the gap persists. As I will explore in the next section, it is interesting that in the United States we have made greater gains in mathematics than in reading comprehension.

Box 21.1 **The story of Mykelle Wheeler**

The Challenge

Mykelle Wheeler is a young African American male enrolled in 2008 as a freshman in Robeson High School in the Chicago public schools. He lives in a low-income community and is enrolled in a low-performing public school. He lives in a two-parent working-class household, in the home in which his father grew up. His English Language Arts (ELA) instructor, Ms. Ring, is a first-year teacher. She is facing pressures from the school administration to try to make sure that most of her freshmen students pass the course. Mykelle is failing English and other courses. His ELA teacher initially begins the school year teaching novels, but finds many students are not reading, not bringing the books to class, and not completing assignments. She then reverts to using work sheets. She creates time for students to complete missing assignments. The reporter covering the story observes Mykelle in the back of the class copying from the worksheet of another student.

From the Transcript of the Program

Like a lot of 9th grade teachers, Mykelle's English teacher is new to Robeson. Caitlin Ring came straight from Barnard College, where she studied English and writing. At the beginning of the year, Ring issued Mykelle and his classmates two brand-new novels, She was going to help them find meaning in those pages. It wasn't long before she'd collected the books again.

Ring: Whoever thought that giving freshmen two novels that they need to carry around, bring to class, read on their own, it's just not gonna happen. By the second or third class there were only like six people who actually knew where their books were.

Ambi: So it's a red day sheet, a blue-purple day sheet, a bright yellow day sheet, and a green day sheet.

Now, instead of essays and discussions, Ring makes color-coded worksheets, a different color for every day. She says it's helped students focus. And instead of assigning students to read she tried that initially she now reads aloud to them.

Ring: My standards have gone down so much since working here. Part of me, when the kids show up and they sit down and write anything, whether it's right or wrong I want to pass them. Which is really unfair to them, because most of them can't do the work.

Mykelle: Can I get my stamp?

Ring: Mostly the reasons that I fail people is because they don't come to school.

Reporter: So basically if you just show up and . . .What? Do anything?

Ring: Uh huh.

Reporter: You get a D at least?

Ring: Yeah.

Ring and other teachers at Robeson say students don't comprehend what they're reading. But 70 percent of Ring's students passed the semester and earned their credit toward graduation. CPS has no uniform policy or philosophy on grading. And it's not an easy

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issue, especially in a school system that includes the best and worst schools in the state. Should kids who are poorly prepared for high school be held to the same standards as other kids in the city who are well prepared? Robeson's principal says it's impossible.

(www.wbez.org/episode-segments/5050-grading-mykelle)

Understanding Mykelle's Challenge from an Ecological and Human Development Framework

Rather than interrogating Mykelle's dilemma simply through the cognitive lens of his skill set for reading comprehension as an individual capacity or trait, or his motivation from a deficit perspective, I offer a more comprehensive set of questions to examine, informed by what studies in ecological systems and human development pose:

1. What perceptions of the task of reading in school does Mykelle bring from his prior experiences in school? (Note: Mykelle says he is bored.)
2. What perceptions does he have of his ability to do the comprehension work he is being asked to do, and the relevance of such work for his immediate and distal goals?
3. What perceptions does he bring of the school as a supportive or threatening environment?
4. With what challenges is he wrestling, what challenges is he attempting to balance that derive from the fact that he is a teenager, from the fact that he is a black male (not just in America but especially in Chicago where the high school graduation rate for black males in 2009–2010 was 39 percent, where the discipline referral and suspension rates for black males far outweighs that of whites, where the murder rate in 2012 was the highest in the nation) (Boykin 1986; Noguera 2003; Toldson 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education 2012)?
5. What resources are available to him to navigate these multiple challenges (e.g., in his ELA class, in his other classes, in the school, in his neighborhood, in his family, in his peer social network)?
6. What resources are available to his ELA teacher (and other content area teachers) to understand:

    (a) what skills and dispositions he brings as a reader
    (b) how to understand Mykelle's resistance
    (c) how to structure instruction in such a way as to position Mykelle as competent and efficacious
    (d) how to scaffold the relevant knowledge and dispositions that Mykelle has developed from his everyday practices outside of school
    (e) and how these resources are constrained by the state of our knowledge base for instruction and the uptake and interrogation of that knowledge base inside practice.

Demands of Reading Comprehension

In this section I examine how processes of learning to comprehend written texts as cognitive may be connected to positioning with regard to race. I am defining "cognitive" broadly to include thinking processes within individuals, but also as intertwined with people's participation in an array of cultural practices within and across settings. To do so, let me first articulate what we know from the extant research base about what is entailed in comprehension.

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All learning involves some recruitment of prior knowledge—whether simple recall or constructing new knowledge. This is certainly true of acts of comprehending texts. For the purposes of text comprehension, relevant prior knowledge includes knowledge of the following (Snow, 2002; Anderson, 2004):

* topics
* text structures
* syntactical structures of language
* phonology
* vocabulary
* pragmatic goals that genres and disciplines may typically examine
* strategies for constructing literal and inferential meanings from the language and structure of texts.

The terrain of relevant prior knowledge for text comprehension has been contested territory for many decades with regard to black and brown students who speak a non-standard dialect of English as well as black and brown students for whom English is a second language (Lee, 2005). Prior knowledge required for reading comprehension is tied to linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of topics, text structures, vocabulary, and syntax. These are all embedded in language and, with regard to reading in school, embedded in academic language.

Thus the language question has most typically been the root of debates (Farr, 1991; Ball, 2002). For example, African American English (AAE) and African American English Vernacular (AAEV) (an important distinction) have been the most widely studied and debated variety of English studied in relation to literacy teaching and learning (Smitherman, 1977). The origins of Direct Instruction (DI) in early reading were based on research which proposed that children who were speakers of non-standard dialects had linguistic deficits that had to be explicitly addressed in early reading instruction (Bereiter, & Engelmann, 1966). Even today, DI is commonly used in primary grades in schools serving largely black and brown youth living in poverty. In fact, at one point the state of California required DI. Even before this, there were programs of research examining the impact of what were called dialect readers, written in such a way as to reflect morphological features of AAEV to determine if they improved reading comprehension for AAEV-speaking children (Baratz, 1969; Johnson, & Simons, 1973; Piestrup, 1973; Culinan, 1974; Hall, & Guthrie, 1980; Rickford, & Rickford, 1995). The hypothesis was that phonetic features of AAEV would interfere with pronunciation and comprehension (e.g., distinction between told and toll, four and foe,); or syntactic features such as the use of the copula be in AAEV (e.g., he be instead of he is; he be doing it). Findings from these studies showed no significant impact of dialect readers, suggesting that dialect interference was not a major factor influencing comprehension. Other studies that attempted to teach standard English phonology were also found to have no impact on comprehension (Melmed, 1971; Rentel, & Kennedy, 1971). This hypothesis was further refuted in comparative studies of comprehension of stories written in AAEV and standard English (Johnson, & Simmons, 1973; Sims, 1972).

Political debates have surrounded the uses of AAEV in literacy instruction, from the King case from Ann Arbor, Michigan to the highly politicized debates over the decision of the Oakland, California school board to address AAE directly in instruction (Smitherman, 2000). These political debates over the function and relevance of AAE in literacy instruction abound despite repeated declarations from the American Society of Linguistics and an abundance of research in sociolinguistics that AAE and AAEV are not inferior versions of English and have systematic features that serve important pragmatic functions (Labov, 1972; American Association for Applied

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Linguistics, 1997). While the focus of this chapter is on reading comprehension, it is useful to note an important study by Smitherman (1994), who did a post hoc analysis of NAEP writing samples of 17-year-olds from 1969 to 1988/1989 to examine how the presence of what she called African American English rhetorical features were correlated with quality determinations by the original raters. She found, interestingly, that the presence of these features was positively correlated with quality of writing. While the logic and systematicity of AAE has been well established in linguistic research, attitudes toward its status and attributions made about its use in school contexts have been and remain problematic. Other studies have documented the challenges teachers face in evaluating children's knowledge displays around oral storytelling in AAEV despite research documenting the complex structures, rhetoric, and pragmatic functions of AAEV-speaking children's linguistic repertoires (DeMeis, & Turner, 1978; Michaels, 1981; Gee, 1989).

Another dimension of these debates over language repertoires entailed in comprehension has focused explicitly on the question of vocabulary and access to books in the home. In early reading there has been a wealth of research arguing that poor children typically come to school with limited vocabulary knowledge compared to their middle-class counterparts. Again because race and class are so deeply correlated in the US, these claims are relevant to understanding how achievement in reading comprehension may be influenced by race. The most widely cited study is that of Hart and Risley (1995), which found that by the age of 3, middle-class children had experienced 30 million more words than their peers whose families lived on welfare. Beyond exposure, they documented more complex verbal interactions between children and adults in middle-class families. In addition, studies have documented that there are fewer books available in the homes of children living in poverty and less regularity of parents reading to their children. I do not call the validity of these studies into question, but rather the implications that have been taken up widely. The implicit assumption is that there is a singular pathway through which children learn to read and comprehend. On the other hand, the research on the rich oral narrative repertoires of children who speak non-standard English dialects (Gee, 1989; Bloome, Champion, Katz, Morton, & Muldrow, 2001; Champion, 2003) and empirical studies of literacy interventions that draw upon these repertoires suggest that multiple pathways for learning to read and comprehend are possible (Stahl, & Miller, 1989). The institutional infrastructures to bring such a range of instruction into wide use is limited (e.g., teacher training, commercially available curricular materials, assessments). And while this chapter has discussed dialect variation in English, there is a similar breadth of research on the intellective repertoires made possible through the availability of use of multiple national languages in literacy instruction, including research on the ways that students for whom English is a second language navigate, cognitively and affectively, through multiple languages in their sense-making processes while comprehending and communicating their understandings (Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, & Lucas, 1990; Valdes, 1996; Garcia, 1998; Orellana, & Reynolds, 2008; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez 2009).

Overall, the disconnects among the range of variation in American English dialects across the country, the empirical base in linguistics documenting the complex structures of these dialects, and the breadth of knowledge about language processing in both oral reading and reading comprehension contribute to the challenges that black and brown youth face when instructed in classroom environments where teachers' knowledge in these domains is limited (Wolfram, 1981; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999).

The role of content area prior knowledge has been well documented in the research on text comprehension. Starting with Barlett's (1932) early work on what has come to be referred to as cultural schemata to schema studies from the Center for the Study of Reading (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffenson, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982; Delain,

Pearson, & Anderson, 1985), research documents how prior knowledge, including culturally situated prior knowledge, can impact what readers come to understand from texts. This question of prior knowledge and comprehension is complicated and consequential along multiple dimensions. First, as students move into middle and high school, texts become discipline-specific (e.g., reading in literature, in history, in science, in mathematics). Whether these are textbooks, literary works, or largely expository primary source documents, the requirements of prior knowledge increase substantively (Lee, & Spratley, 2009), or what we can call content area prior knowledge. This aspect of text comprehension can play out in several ways with regard to black and brown youth living in poverty. First, the broader stereotype that the life experiences of these young people work against them in school decreases the likelihood that instruction will be structured in ways that draw upon these experiences. These are youth who are more likely to be enrolled in schools with scripted curriculum and limited exposure to being expected to read across genres beyond textbooks in their academic classes. They are also less likely to experience literacy instruction where building requisite content prior knowledge in preparation for reading across multiple texts is the norm. And they are less likely to be in schools with sufficient assessment tools and instructional capacity to disentangle how insufficient prior knowledge may impede comprehension. I make this case because, particularly with the kinds of accountability measures that have been in place in recent years across districts for moving from elementary to high school, low-achieving students entering high school are less likely to have problems with decoding (e.g., reading the words on the page). This suggests that their problems with comprehension are more likely related to prior knowledge of content, vocabulary, or strategies.

Earlier I raised the question that PVEST (Spencer, 2006) implies: What supports are needed to address the challenges related to the role of schools in developing high levels of competence in reading comprehension for black and brown youth and youth living in poverty generally? While there are many examples of work being done in out-of-school settings to address these challenges, I will focus attention on schooling. I will address reading in the disciplines in middle and high school because NAEP data trends suggest this is where black and brown students face the greatest challenges in reading achievement. While the challenges of reading comprehension at this level are great for all students, in part because of our limited infrastructure at this level, they are greatest for black and brown youth because of the multiple ecological factors I have described across this chapter, including the dual demands of wrestling with the normative challenges of adolescent development along with the additional challenges posed by poverty and racism (including the greater likelihood of being in schools with restrictive curriculum and pedagogy in reading comprehension).

Specialized Demands of Reading in the Disciplines in Middle and High School

Reading in middle and high school is focussed on the content areas (Heller, & Greenleaf, 2007). Generic strategies for comprehension, such as determining main ideas or making predictions of text content, are necessary but insufficient for discipline-specific comprehension. Textbooks are the dominant texts used in middle and especially high school (Lee and Spratley, 2009). Textbooks have generic structures that can be explicitly taught (e.g., headings, illustrations, margin notes, indexes, and use of prototypical text structures such as compare/contrast, problem/solution), but the language and conceptual density of textbooks become more complex over the grades (Snow, & Biancarosa, 2003). Illustrations in science, history, and mathematics serve explicit functions and have explicit structures that can be taught. However, rich understandings

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of the problems of the disciplines require reading beyond textbooks. Primary source documents in history and science include specific genres, genres that can also include illustrations and graphic representations (Wineburg, 1991; Levin, & Mayer, 1993). The tasks go beyond recall of facts to interpreting and making judgments, drawing on accepted criteria in the disciplines. Constructing arguments based on data from across multiple texts is what is required for college readiness. Such arguments should be both oral and written. These are the foci of the Common Core Curriculum State Standards and earlier College Readiness Standards. However, addressing these challenges is complicated, especially in high school, when students are struggling readers. Teachers have few tools available to help them assess sources of text complexity in disciplinary texts. While Lexiles and other readability measures are useful, they can be deceiving because they do not measure conceptual complexity (Goldman, & Lee, in press; Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004). In addition, there are virtually no measures available to high schools to assess discipline-specific reading skills. Finally, these conundrums are complicated by stereotypes suggesting that everyday repertoires of black and brown youth and youth living in poverty are not relevant to the tasks of disciplinary comprehension. These complexities of disciplinary comprehension confounded by the insufficient professional infrastructure for addressing them, especially for struggling readers, poses a significant challenge for black and brown students living in poverty and for white students living in poverty.

There are a number of interventions and programs of research that take on these kinds of complex reading challenges for adolescents, particularly black and brown youth. I offer several as illustrations of possibilities. The first is Cultural Modeling, focussing on literary reasoning (Lee 1993, 1995, 2007). The second is the Migrant Youth Program, focussing on reading as a tool of ideological meaning making (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009).

Cultural Modeling (CM) identifies specific interpretive problems that readers will meet across genres and literary traditions, and strategies expert readers bring to detecting and examining these problems (e.g., symbolism, problems of narration, satire, irony; criteria for examining archetypal themes and character types; Lee, 2011). It articulates specific criteria for examining sources of text complexity. Similar to the focus on processes for reasoning in mathematics, CM specifies processes for reasoning about interpretive problems, characterization, and themes in literature. CM has documented how youth from black and brown communities tacitly employ these strategies and epistemic orientations toward language in their everyday lives. CM curricula pose cultural data sets from students' everyday practices as objects of study to make public knowledge of strategies that is typically tacit. Texts are selected by the nature of the interpretive problems they pose and sequenced so that students' prior knowledge of themes and character types can initially support their emerging explicit knowledge of strategies. Classroom discourse invites everyday interactional patterns and instruction positions students from the very beginning as competent. Thus CM seeks to leverage everyday knowledge, scaffold disciplinary specific reading, and leverage students' perceptions of their competencies and the potential relevance of the reading tasks to their lives. Box 21.2 gives an example of CM in practice.

The Migrant Student Leadership Institute at UCLA was a summer program started in 2000 for high school students whose families were migrant workers. Gutiérrez (2008) describes the goals of the program as follows:

> Within the learning ecology of the MSLI at the University of California, Los Angeles, a collective Third Space is interactionally constituted, in which traditional conceptions of academic literacy and instruction for students from nondominant communities are contested and replaced with forms of literacy that privilege and are contingent upon students' socio-historical lives both proximally and distally. Within the MSLI, hybrid language practices;

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Box 21.2 **An example of Cultural Modeling in practice**

In an instructional unit on symbolism and coming of age, texts sets are organized to begin with cultural data sets and then move on to novels, short stories, and poems in which both symbolism and the theme of coming of age are prominent. Initial canonical texts are ones in which we presume that students will bring significant prior knowledge with regard to theme, characterization, and setting. Students then go on to read texts which pose the same technical challenges but where the characters and settings are further removed from their experiences. Cultural data sets include such rap lyrics as "The Mask" by the Fugees and a five-minute film replete with symbolism called "Subway Stories," directed by Julie Dash who made the acclaimed film "Daughters of the Dust." Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* serves as the anchor novel in one such unit. Students read historical texts to provide background knowledge about the African Holocaust of Enslavement and view the film Sankofa directed by Haile Gerima. Sankofa provides both a visualization of the experience of enslavement, but also has a recurring symbol (the image of a bird flying overhead, referring back to the Akan Adinkra symbol of the Sankofa bird, conveying the proverb "in order to know where you are going you must know from whence you came"). Stories and poems that follow include William Faulker's "Rose for Emily," Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," selections from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* ("Rice Husband" and "Ying Ying"), Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," and Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."

See Lee (2001, 2007) for detailed descriptions of the enactments and outcome data.

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the conscious use of social theory, play, and imagination; and historicizing literacy practices link the past, the present, and an imagined future (p. 148).

Students were brought to the UCLA campus and were supported in reading complex sociological texts through which to examine the social, political, and economic factors that shaped the challenges they faced (Espinoza, 2009; Pacheco, & Nao, 2009). The use of multiple languages was encouraged as a resource for meaning making. A central goal was to help these young people see themselves as members, contributors to the UCLA campus (Gildersleeve, 2010), but equally importantly as empowered to pursue their dreams and to interrogate the political and economic forces that shaped their life conditions, and to resist these forces. The curriculum was designed to use literacy as a tool for personal and community empowerment. A systematic study of differences in outcomes for equivalent groups of students who applied for the program but did not attend and students who attended shows significant impact on college applications and acceptance rates. Eighty-eight percent of participants who applied to UC schools were admitted (Nunez, 2009).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to integrate the implications of psycho-social frameworks for understanding academic motivation as well as mechanisms underlying risk and resiliency to place the persistence of the achievement gap in reading associated with race and ethnicity in a broader context. I have further situated the challenges that black and brown youth, especially black, brown, and white youth living in poverty, in a broader ecological context, beyond viewing

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pedagogy inside schools as the sole resource available to address this persistent gap. Fundamentally, the argument is that academic motivation and persistence are influenced by students' perceptions of themselves as learners, of the tasks they are asked to carry out (in this case around reading in schools), of their teachers and caretakers in schools, and of their school environments as supportive or threatening. These perceptions are influenced certainly by individual differences in temperament, knowledge, and personal goals. However, these perceptions are also influenced by the broader ecological contexts in which the students live (societal beliefs, institutional practices, neighborhood resources, social networks, etc.) I have argued that these ecological contexts, including the organization of schools and instruction, can offer both sources of risk and protection.

I have further argued that these ecological contexts are again complicated for black, brown, and white youth living in poverty by the state of knowledge and practice with regard to teaching reading comprehension, especially in middle and high school grades (Lee, 2014).

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