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What is This?

Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools

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This study explores smartness as a cultural construct rather than a biological capacity. The cultural construction of smartness has broad consequences related to teacher expectations, student academic identity development, and schooling inequities. This study is based on a 1-year ethnography in a kindergarten classroom, and the author investigates smartness by first historicizing the concept of intelligence and then using the theoretical framework of figured worlds. Through the teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical practices, students were taught and learned not just whether they were smart themselves, but how other student identities were constructed according to smartness as well. Analysis suggests smartness was used as a mechanism of control and social positioning along racial and class lines. Implications are discussed related to schooling practices and policy.

KEYWORDS: intelligence, figured worlds, social class, race, equity

In his seminal article regarding the cultural construction of intelligence, Sternberg (2007) contends achievement and intelligence tests are culturally grounded. Sternberg frames intelligence testing as generating an *explicit* theory of intelligence. On the other hand, he defines our everyday perceptions of someone's intelligence as generating *implicit* theories of intelligence. For example, we make implicit judgments about intelligence when listening to a politician or interviewing someone for a job. Sternberg claims implicit judgments are much more common than explicit ones and, as a result, can have powerful implications for every aspect of society. Here I

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argue that nowhere are these implications more pronounced or more critical than in the practices of schooling.

Within this article *implicit* theories of intelligence are my focus, and I build on Sternberg's (2007) ideas about implicit theories of intelligence in two ways. First, I do *not* frame culture as static and representative across groups of people. Instead, I define culture as the intersection of "the development of people, cultural forms, and social positions in particular historical worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 33). That is, I study smartness—the term I use to refer to implicit theories of intelligence—not just as an ideology or belief but as actual practice: more verb than noun. Unlike Sternberg's (2007) concept of explicit intelligence, I argue smartness or implicit intelligence is something *done to* others as social positioning. In addition, I represent smartness as a tool utilized by some not only to determine the social identities of others, but to make sense of their own identity. In this article I explore smartness as a cultural practice based on my year long ethnography in a semirural school's kindergarten classroom. I explore implicit theories of intelligence or "smartness" using Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of figured worlds, which characterizes social and cultural forces that influence how people represent themselves within social spaces and (re)interpret their own identities.

Smartness and Schooling

The practice of smartness is also tied to notions of academic identity that I define as the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this identity shapes our own self-perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academic potential, performance, and achievement. All those involved in the institution of schooling help to shape who we think we are, who others think we are, and who we think we can become. In relation to identity, smartness becomes a dynamic concept *experienced* by people through identity construction. In the kindergarten classroom I studied, the figured world of smartness signified not only a cultural practice of social control but a process of ascribing social power defined along lines of class and race. Kindergarten represents a key point of socialization into the institution of schooling and a point in time wherein student "ability" becomes centered through school-readiness rhetoric. Graue (1993) highlights the ways perceptions of ability and readiness are social constructs rather than natural processes, emphasizing how these constructs can be harmful to children by hindering their ability to "catch up" to rhetorical definitions of readiness. These and other reasons make critical the need to examine the practice of figuring smartness within the institution of schooling.

Judgments about intelligence or smartness are based on implicit cultural understandings of the term (Sternberg, 2004; 2007), and such judgments

often take place within school settings. "Whether teachers take into account the differences in conceptions of who is intelligent and who acts intelligently can also affect how well students learn" (Sternberg, 2007, p. 148). Most importantly, a student's high performance is tied to how closely the student's parents have trained their children in a way that matches the teacher's conception of intelligence. Teachers tend to reward those students more often (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993), but what a teacher attributes to students' general intelligence or ability might in fact be differences in cultural understandings (Helms-Lorenz, Van de Vijver, & Poortinga, 2003). Many students become "viewed as incapable of success despite having the capabilities to succeed" (Sternberg, 2007, p. 152). Teacher perceptions of ability can be connected to teacher expectations, which directly relate to low achievement among culturally and linguistically diverse students (van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Hence, it is important children be taught by teachers who value their cultural knowledge or funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Sternberg, Lipka, Newman, Wildfeuer, & Grigorenko, 2007; Urrieta & Quach, 2000).

Valenzuela (1999), in her landmark ethnographic study of Mexican American youth, found many youth did not feel "smart enough" to attend college. Students in her study spoke of being made to feel "dumb" by teachers through being told to quit raising their hand or asking "stupid" questions. As a consequence, students stopped participating. Although Valenzuela does not specifically address "smartness," her conclusions suggest the construction of smartness is directly connected to the dissonance created when teachers value cultural attributes differing from those of their students.

Bennett's (1991) work in an urban, Appalachian first grade classroom reflects a similar pattern where students were placed into reading ability groups based on teacher interpretation of behavior with little regard to the ways the reading materials and classroom construction largely ignored the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of the students. Group placement limited what student learning occurred, influencing student social and academic identities as well. Woolen and Otto (2010) echo these findings in their study of an urban elementary school reform initiative, positing teachers' *habitus* has a profound influence on the way teachers "reveal their personal connections to and reverence for the dominant culture" (p. 11), including notions of smartness, as evidenced by teacher perceptions of students' academic and social abilities.

Rubin (2007) and Finn (2009) build on Valenzuela's (1999) work by highlighting ways teachers' low expectations and rote teaching styles negatively influence the academic identities of low-income African American and Latino youth in urban settings. According to Rubin (2007), "smartness" is framed by these students as compliance with meaningless, boring schoolwork. Many students resist this "passive and obedient identity" (p. 228) because it counters their own self-perceptions as thinking, active agents.

Even students who do comply find themselves underprepared for higher education because of their school's emphasis on low-level skills (Weis, 2004).

Additional research (Finn, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2007) suggests communication styles play a key role in perceptions of smartness. Sue and Sue (2007) state,

> Most Euro-Americans encourage their children to enter freely into conversations . . . [and therefore] teachers of minority children may see reticence in speaking out as a sign of ignorance, lack of motivation or ineffective teaching when in reality the students may be showing proper respect. (p. 134)

Children employing nondominant forms of communication such as non-standard English, English language learners, and children with speech impediments are more likely to be perceived as less intelligent (Sue & Sue, 2007).

As early as preschool, African American children begin to be overrepresented in "low ability" classes or classes for the "educable mentally retarded" (McBay, 1992). Such assignment can be devastating to students' self-concept, leading to perceptions of themselves as "not smart," resulting in many African American students exhibiting low achievement, lack of motivation, and a desire to drop out of school. As Joseph (1996) states, "[T]he failure of many of these students is often attributed to their ability rather than the school's ability to provide quality education" (p. 344). Nieto and Bode (2007) posit,

> Black and Latino students are chronically underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented; they are only half as likely as White students to be placed in a class for the gifted though they may be equally gifted. (p. 71)

Sapon-Shevin (1987, 1994) addresses the ways giftedness is a social construct that works to *resegregate* schools, wherein White students attend gifted programming while students of color are tracked into "regular" educational programming. Staiger (2004) goes one step beyond to claim Whiteness and giftedness can be framed as inherently connected in schools.

Students, as a result of tracking, "begin to believe that their placement in these groups is natural and a true reflection of whether they are 'smart,' 'average,' or 'dumb'" (Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 119), connected not to education but to the "natural order." Students in top tracks are more likely to attend college while students in lower tracks frequently drop out or become unskilled workers (Nieto & Bode, 2007). Tracking continues to be utilized in schools despite the fact it is shown to be largely based on ideologies of race and social class and does little to improve academic achievement, especially that of students in lower tracks (Finn, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Furthermore,

recent research shows ability grouping continues to persist in schools beginning as early as kindergarten (Buttaro, Catsambis, Mulkey, & Carr, 2010; Oakes, 2005).

Researchers (Gardner, 2000, 2006; Sternberg & Detterman, 1986) attempt to reframe smartness by redefining intelligence and emphasizing intelligence or smartness should not be limited to narrowly defined abilities. Their work has led to the rethinking of smartness within some educational contexts, but it largely remains framed within the disciplinary boundaries of psychology. Furthermore, their analyses do not include how notions of smartness are connected to power, status, and social inequality, and hence are limited and partial.

In my work, admittedly partial as well, I attempt to fill this void, pushing the questioning of intelligence/smartness into new domains. Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Villaverde (1999) argue we need to rethink "smartness" in schools because

> [a]n understanding of power's complicity in the production of society's validated knowledge, its educational knowledge in particular, is essential information for racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized students who are trying to figure out why they are deemed slow and incompetent in the schools they attend. (p. 11)

My work builds on Kincheloe et al.'s (1999) critique by offering an ethnographic understanding of how smartness operates as a *verb* or an active construct on students and teachers within schools. I place smartness as initially located *outside* students—culturally produced—before moving through students as spoken discourse and embodied practice. In the next section I place the cultural figuring of smartness within a historical context before detailing my methodology.

Historicizing Smartness

One way of understanding the current cultural concept of smartness is by looking to the historical development of ideas surrounding intelligence. A quick review facilitates an understanding of how the cultural practice of smartness has morphed into an individual, partially genetic attribute associated with social status (Gould, 1996). Intelligence emerged over time as a culturally produced notion tied to and imbued with relations of power. Fueled by newly created and validated empirical measures of intelligence, the power of being labeled intelligent became linked to cultural capital. Given the necessity of smartness to success, schooling became all the more important in constituting one's smartness, even as early as kindergarten.

Darwin constructed the transmission of intelligence as central to human evolution. His nephew, Galton, used Darwin's perspective to "prove" intelligence runs in families (Oakes & Lipton, 2006). In 1869 he wrote *Hereditary*

Genius, proposing intelligence as innate (Galton, in Gould, 1996). In the late 19th century the idea of "recapitulation" arose, linking body shapes and measurements to one's place on the evolutionary scale, ostensibly proving intelligence increases as *Homo sapiens* evolve. Based on the idea of recapitulation, physician Paul Broca posited, "In general, the brain is larger . . . in eminent men than in men of mediocre talent, in superior races than in inferior races. . . . [O]ther things equal, there is a remarkable relationship between the development of intelligence and the volume of the brain" (Broca, quoted in Gould, 1996, p. 115). Today, research shows the size of one's brain merely relates to the size of the body that carries it—not to one's intellectual capacity (Gould, 1996).

Around this time, Binet began to look toward psychological methods of measuring intelligence and in 1904 was asked to develop scientific techniques for identifying children who might require special services in school, so he constructed a test consisting of a series of short tasks related to everyday problems in life (e.g., counting coins). These diagnostic tests eventually transformed into the intelligence tests of today. Intelligence then became something quantifiable through testing, converted from an abstract concept to an actual entity people possess in differing degrees. Binet's findings guided scientists toward developing standard procedures for measuring intelligence on an ascending scale. Terman adjusted Binet's test, developing the Stanford-Binet—the standard for most IQ tests that followed.

Binet initially aimed to identify lagging students who needed to be "caught up" (Gould, 1996). IQ tests were never meant to identify a student as intellectually "high" or "low," nor as a summation of one's capacity to do academic work. Nonetheless they developed at a time of social upheaval when the dominant group in power (i.e., White, elite men) was anxious about losing its economic and social privilege. White backlash included attempts to discredit African Americans' ability to hold public office or positions with status, and intelligence testing began to be used in conjunction with such literature as *Uncle Remus* to validate claims of the intellectual inferiority of African Americans (Zinn, 2003).

More recently, the historical construction of intelligence has undergone intensification as schooling has become key to the socialization of children in conjunction with or in place of parents. A focus on division of labor and efficiency continues to find its way into schools as "[s]chools could and should sort out and prepare students differently for their various destinies in life as adults. This [leads] to the use of intelligence tests and tracking as a form of social engineering" (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 51). Schools have become an even more central, epistemological battleground for defining "valuable knowledge" and the place in society students or groups of people will occupy. This battle continues today over who gets to define what it means to be "smart" and which students get labeled as "smart," with results closely linked to race and class.

Conceptual Framework

My analysis is framed using Holland et al.'s (1998) work, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, in particular their concept of "figured worlds," representing how "people are subject to the regulation, which we call . . . figuring, that governs [their] practice" (p. 237). Figured worlds represent the rules, guidelines, or social forces that influence but do not completely dictate the ways people speak, behave, and conduct their practice within social spaces. Holland et al. (1998) base their concept on works by Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1981), and Bourdieu (1977).

What occurs within figured worlds is shaped by the history of people within a space and the history of the space itself. "One's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). The concept of figured worlds becomes particularly applicable to the classroom when considering the history of experiences students compile within classrooms, with teachers, and with other students over time. That is, when students and teachers enter a new classroom they do not begin with a clean slate; they bring a history of experiences from day care, their families, and their previous classrooms that influence their expectations for the new classroom.

Figured worlds are also composed of power and privilege; they cannot escape the larger social structures of power. In essence, what occurs within figured worlds is "mediated by relations of power" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 60). Within the kindergarten classroom, I examined these relations of power and privilege asking the following: Who has power? How is it enacted? What actions in the classroom constitute "privilege," and how is privilege negotiated? I employed the concept of figured worlds to answer these questions because Holland et al.'s concept uniquely theorizes the combination of ways culture and power/status influence our thoughts, behavior, and ways of interpreting the world. Figured worlds reveal personal creativity and improvisation within influences or structures. In addition, the figured worlds concept emphasizes how the everyday, mundane activities in one's life build, inform and (re)create identities and social spaces. In essence, Holland et al.'s theory allows me to analyze "smartness" as simultaneously connected to culture, power/status, and identity within practices of everyday life.

Method

Noblit (2004) argues, "[M]ethods are ideas and theories in themselves. They have histories, are best understood as tentative, and are not separate from the theories they are used to test or explore" (p. 183). My research is no different; my methodology and theoretical framework are intricately

connected. I conducted my work utilizing a postcritical ethnographic/theoretical framework, which refers to an epistemology that critiques dominant ideology and structures of power while simultaneously acknowledging critique is socially situated and constructed (Noblit, 2004). My postcritical lens is predicated on my belief in a world of oppressive structures interpreted and experienced variously depending on the varying identities and spaces we occupy. Therefore, in conducting research it is vital we attempt to better understand people's interpretations and experiences in hopes of working toward social justice while also reflecting on where we stand as researchers and how we construct knowledge.

Context

This article is based on my 1-year ethnography in a kindergarten classroom located in the southeastern United States. Although some students attend preschool, kindergarten is where the majority of students begin school socialization: a key juncture where children enter a new world with new rules and begin to understand themselves differently as a result. Although many rules, behaviors, and explanations are assumed, taken for granted by the time children reach first grade, in kindergarten they largely have yet to be identified and named. Consequently, although I could have conducted such a study at any grade level, kindergarten provides a singular point in time to study conceptions of smartness.

The study school was located in a semirural town I call Magnolia (pseudonyms were also assigned for all participants), chosen for its intersection of families of academics with minority and working-class families. Magnolia's population included overflow from the university community in an adjacent city while also including Latino, Black, and White working-class communities. The classroom consisted of 25 students, 15 White and 10 Black. At the time of the study, the teacher, Mrs. Rayburn, a middle-class White female, was in her 4th year of teaching. Mrs. Daniels, the teaching assistant, was a middle-class White female in her 3rd year working with Mrs. Rayburn. Tied to a larger program evaluation research project, my study was one of four ethnographies conducted in different kindergarten classrooms in that state examining constructions of readiness.

In studying kindergarten readiness, close attention was given to student assessment scores and teachers' interpretations of readiness. The concept of smartness came to my attention when I noticed discrepancies between teachers' characterizations of "smart" students *versus* my own. At the time I defined smartness according to a student's display of academic knowledge, whereas the teachers aligned smartness more closely with behavior and class- and race-based expectations. For example, the child entering with the highest pre-K assessment score was a White male from a very poor family who had a mild speech impediment. During my fieldwork Mrs. Rayburn

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never once identified this child as smart and, in fact, openly held very low expectations for him. By winter break, he was referred for tutoring and had overtly begun to dislike school. Here the teacher's *implicit* theory of smartness trumped her *explicit* knowledge of intelligence evidenced by pre-K assessment scores. When I noticed what seemed to me to be contradictions within the teacher's expectations, I began to question how both the teacher and I defined smartness and subsequently shifted my focus toward studying "smartness" within her classroom.

Data Collection

I used three main methods to collect data: observations, interviews, and institutional/public document review. My role in the classroom was that of a participant-observer. Every aspect of the day was observed including instruction, recess, lunch, hallway activity, specials (e.g., art, music, and physical education), staff meetings, and various types of interactions (student-student, teacher-student, teacher-teacher). Both structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with teachers, 10 parents, and all students in the classroom. Interviews were conducted in the classroom, on the playground, during walks, and in various other spaces of the school. Institutional and classroom documents were also analyzed to triangulate with interview and observational data. For the purposes of this article, document analysis focuses on school assessments of kindergarten readiness and report cards.

Beginning with the second teacher workday of the school year and until the end of the first 9 weeks, I operated on a work schedule similar to that of the teacher and her assistant. I arrived before students and left when teachers left. Between the 10th week and the winter holiday, I kept the same hours, attending 3 days a week. Following winter break, my time varied from 1 to 2 days per week. Toward the end of the second semester, approximately around the first of May, I again spent 3 or more days a week in the classroom.

In sum, data collection for the study was extensive, with more than 865 hours spent in the classroom. The data include more than 600 pages of written field notes, providing for thick description (Geertz, 1973) of classroom and school activities. A total of 37 interviews were conducted, and more than 200 pages of classroom documents were collected. To analyze and make explicit my positionality, I kept a journal of my reflections and regularly debriefed with other ethnographers participating in the larger study on readiness.

Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred in different stages. First, classification and coding of the data took place (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The codes initially arose from the research questions and conceptual framework (Miles &

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Huberman, 1994). Using my data sets, I described and contextualized the classroom, resulting in an examination of the construction of smartness within the classroom broken down into three main components of figured worlds: artifacts, discourses, and academic identities. The initial codes provided a starting list, which was revised during the interaction with data and in conversations with the team of ethnographers. These components were then analyzed to identify and generate themes regarding the figured world of smartness within the classroom according to the social and cultural contexts of the classroom (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The scope of this article narrows my larger analysis to the artifacts and discourses of smartness in the classroom.

Researcher Subjectivity

My positionality is structured through being a White female growing up working class. My interest in smartness originally arose through being an "outsider" in the academy as a graduate student. Now a faculty member and researcher, I continue to struggle between resisting and reproducing cultural forms of the academy and the connections I have to working-class communities and relational ties. Admittedly, my writing and analysis reflect this struggle. I maintain that my working-class positionality is a *strength* in that it provides me a unique perspective from that of many in academe, enabling me to be sensitive to the ways differing educational contexts construct smartness. Now as I teach largely White, rural students, many themselves ill prepared for entry into college, I am fortunate to gain yet another perspective on smartness.

Artifacts of Smartness

Holland et al. (1998) draw from Vygotsky's (1978) work on analyzing the ways artifacts contribute to the construction and maintenance of figured worlds. "Artifacts 'open up' figured worlds. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61). Artifacts within a kindergarten classroom may include the teacher's desk and students' backpacks, two objects that transition a student into the figured world of kindergarten as semiotic mediators. Artifacts (e.g., desks) act as transitional objects into new spaces that trigger psychological processes and behaviors, learned through socialization over time. Within the kindergarten classroom two key artifacts organized student and teacher interpretations of smartness: the stoplight and the Shoe Tyer's Club.

The stoplight Each student had a car inscribed with his or her name placed on a large stoplight displayed in the classroom. At the beginning of the day, each student's car began on green but could move first to yellow, then red, for inappropriate behavior. It was described to children as,

"Green means 'good,' 'keep going'; yellow means 'you better slow down'; and red means you need to 'stop what you're doing and think about what you're doing.'" When a child disobeyed a rule he or she was told to move his or her car. The student then typically walked to the stoplight with his or her head down, moved the car either to yellow or red (depending on where the car was originally), and most often began to cry.

When I interviewed students, I discovered *every* child defined being smart as "not having to move your car." For the children, being smart had come to be closely connected to the stoplight. This interpretation of smartness was reinforced by the teacher and assistant. At times students were told, "Keep being smart and you can move [the car] back [to green]." Parents also reported the first thing students discussed when arriving home from school was who moved his or her car that day.

When students defined smartness as "not having to move your car," I then asked them to identify students who moved their car the least *versus* the most in the classroom. *All* students identified Natalie, a middle-class White female, as never having to move her car and, hence, identified her as the smartest student in class. Whether or not their characterization was accurate, students' perception of just who was smart rang clear.

I observed this discussion occurring between teachers, taking place in front of students:

> Mrs. Daniels is getting ready to assign jobs in the classroom. She says, "I need someone who makes good choices. Mrs. Rayburn, who is someone that makes good choices all of the time?" Mrs. Rayburn replies: "Natalie makes good choices all the time." Sammie says loudly: "I make good choices." Sadia adds: "I always make good choices. I've always been on green." Natalie gets the job.

Making "good choices" meant keeping one's car on green, resulting in teacher approval and privileges such as special jobs in the classroom depending, it appeared, on a student's race and social class. The data reveal teachers acknowledged Natalie as "smart" by keeping her car on green, but Sadia, an African American female from a low-income household, went unacknowledged, overlooked as either "good" or "smart," although her behavior qualified her for privilege.

Students overwhelmingly identified Jackson, a Black male from a low-income household, as one who always moved his car and, consequently, was "not smart." On his first day of kindergarten, because Jackson had to move his car, he was the only student who did not earn a sticker at day's end. On another day,

> Jackson has to move his car to yellow for repeatedly making "mouth noises." While moving his car, he begins to cry. Mrs. Daniels pulls him to the side and asks him if he has been making "good choices"—he nods his head, "yes." Mrs. Daniels with frustration replies, "No,

> *Jackson." She mentions if his car moves to red a note will go home. Jackson says he gets a "whoopin'" when notes get sent home. He is then told to go back to the rug. He is told to "shut it off" and to "cry quietly." Jackson is unable to do so and placed in time-out. Mrs. Daniels says to Jackson, "You're in big school now and in big school we cry quietly." He is eventually allowed to leave time-out and told to make "good choices." Within the next hour, Jackson must move his car to red for moving around too much on the rug during story time. He is sent to time-out where he starts to cry. Mrs. Daniels tells him, "time-out starts all over if you start crying."*

Students learned being smart was tied to the stoplight, defined as maintaining a "docile body" (Foucault, 1977). Students such as Natalie learned in the classroom (and also likely have prior, parent-taught knowledge of) how to be conservative in speech (e.g., speak only when called on), in movement (e.g., hands to self, legs crossed when sitting), and in communication with authority (e.g., "yes, ma'am"). Such conservative behavior allowed a student success in keeping his or her car on green, potentially allowing him or her to receive the label "smart." In the classroom, Natalie was a "fish in water"; she stood out as smart by not standing out behaviorally, functioning effortlessly within the rules of the classroom. Alternatively, Jackson was spontaneous, "on the move," and had a difficult time adjusting to the rigid rules of classroom docility. As the data reflect, he clearly did not want to move his car but consistently struggled with becoming a docile body. In essence the stoplight served as a giant, constant visual symbol and reminder of who was good and, consequently, smart: there for all to see. More abstract yet, the stoplight reminded students of the consequences of not being good or smart. One day as students were heading out to recess, a student said to me, "Red is bad. Yellow is too. But green isn't. I'm trying to make good choices."

Initially I interpreted being "good" and therefore "smart" simply as obeying classroom rules. However, I discovered certain students were asked to move their cars faster than others while some students were better at breaking rules without getting caught. For instance, White males from middle-class families repeatedly avoided Mrs. Rayburn's surveillance. African American students, especially Black males, who refused a submissive position in the classroom were repeatedly the first to get in trouble and received the harshest reprimands. Hence, being good became about one's relationship with authority and teacher attitude rather than whether one broke rules more than others. Mrs. Rayburn's race- and class-based stereotypes had significant implications for which students were identified as smart. For example, she made a face of disgust aimed at adults while hugging low-income White and African American students who initiated a hug. She kept her arms stiff and attempted to touch the children as little as possible while miming disgust over students' shoulders. Mrs. Rayburn also put food such as cookies given to her by low-income White and

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African American students in the trash, waiting until students went home for the day, then throwing the food away, often commenting she did not want to get sick or get germs from their homes. Mrs. Rayburn also held low expectations for these students, once stating of an African American boy from a low-income home and his low academic achievement, "His father is a janitor; all he will ever be is a janitor."

Finally, Mrs. Rayburn regularly made negative comments about low-income parents of White and African American students. For example, she expressed frustration on parent night that both the parents and grandparents of one African American male attended, stating it was ridiculous for all the family to attend. In addition, she expressed frustration when the low-income mother of one White male child did not attend parent-teacher conferences even though she knew the mother did not have an available vehicle. On the other hand, Mrs. Rayburn regularly made positive comments about parents of White middle-class students. She seemed to especially like Amy's mother, a former first-grade teacher, often making a point of asking her to accompany the class on field trips.

As an important artifact of this classroom, the stoplight provided a visual reminder to students identifying their standing in relation to smartness, also establishing a connection between smartness and autonomy. The consequences of one's stoplight status, as I point out in more detail shortly, gave smart students more autonomy of movement and speech. Students could glance at the stoplight and, based on the location of each child's car, immediately ascertain which students were deemed "smart" and, by direct implication, which were not. Consequently, the stoplight became "the" key classroom artifact—whether by design or coincidence—that let students know who was and was not smart, providing a very public measure of smartness paired with potential sanctions for not being judged smart and reinforced by repetition. While use of the stoplight may seem isolated to a single classroom, stoplight-themed disciplinary systems of "turning one's card" from green to yellow or red abound, taught as classroom management within teacher education programs nationwide (Marr, Audette, White, Ellis, & Algozzine, 2002).

The Shoe Tyer's Club Additional key artifacts were images of a large shoe and telephone posted on one wall, listing students in the "Shoe Tyer's" and "Phone Number" Clubs. Upon entering kindergarten, students were expected to be able to tie their shoes and recite their home phone numbers. In September, the first full month of school, Mrs. Daniels announced,

> *"Ashley gets to be in the Shoe Tyer's Club!" [Everybody claps.] Mrs. Daniels says, "I want everybody in both of them." Tyrone's turn is next. He seems very nervous because he walks to the front with his shoulders hunched to his ears and he begins to start breathing hard—he almost hyperventilates. With his attention solely focused on his shoe, he is able to do it and everybody claps. Then it is Matt's turn but he is unable to do it. He bows his head and sits*

> *back down. Mrs. Daniels tells him to ask his mom and dad to help*
> *him. William tries but is unable to do it either. Mrs. Daniels tells*
> *him: "You need to work on that and practice at home." Michelle is*
> *able to do it and gets a star for being able to tie double knots. After*
> *everyone has had their turn, Mrs. Daniels explains that because*
> *you're in the club, you get special privileges sometimes. She ends by*
> *saying, "Guess what? If someone needs their shoes tied, the people*
> *in the club get to do it!" The students show excitement and say*
> *"Yeah!" Mrs. Daniels then lets people in the Shoe Tyer's Club go first*
> *in getting their towels and lying down for naptime.*

Students did not learn home phone numbers or how to tie their shoes at school. Mrs. Rayburn and Mrs. Daniels gave parents responsibility for these tasks, refusing to tie students' shoes. If a student could not tie his or her shoes, he or she either had to find someone in the Shoe Tyer's Club to do it or walk around with shoes untied. Children able to tie their shoes were framed as smart. On the first day of school, Mrs. Daniels said to one girl after seeing her tie her own shoes, "You're so smart! Did you tie your shoe by yourself? We have a Shoe Tyer's Club. You're gonna be a part of it. Two thumbs up!"

Because learning to tie one's shoes was neither taught in school nor something a child could easily learn on his or her own, membership in the Shoe Tyer's Club was closely linked to students' home circumstances— not in-class learning. For example, three out of four original Shoe Tyer's Club members had mothers who stayed at home with them before they began kindergarten. Children with parents who worked two jobs or second shift were at a distinct disadvantage since those children had fewer opportunities for their parents to teach them to tie shoes. For example, Amy stayed at home with her mother before entering kindergarten. She was an original member of the club while Jackson, whose mother, a single parent, was raising him and two other siblings while working full-time, never accomplished tying his shoes during the school year.

Membership in the Shoe Tyer's Club was construed as a "big deal," yet differences in students' home situations and the unfairness of teachers' expectations were left unrealized, unchallenged, and unapologized for. Mrs. Rayburn encouraged club members to feel special just as if they inherently deserved special status over non–club members, and in spite of the fact that she knew children's different home circumstances. The concept of "smartness" makes one's ability to tie shoes seem based on one's innate smartness rather than familial circumstances and teacher implementation.

The figured world of smartness acts as a *tool of social positioning*. Smartness is used to assign social status to some children. Holland et al. (1998) refer to status within figured worlds as positional identities, positing,

> Children in their development and neophytes entering into a figured
> world, then, acquire positional dispositions and identities. . . . [T]hey
> come to know these signs as claims to categorical and relational

positions, to status. More important, they learn a feel for the game, as Bourdieu calls it, for how such claims on their part will be received. They come to have relational identities in their most rudimentary form: a set of dispositions toward themselves in relation to where they can enter, what they can say, what emotions they can have, and what they can do in a given situation. (pp. 142–143)

Students entering kindergarten do not learn an innocent, benign concept of smartness, but a concept used to teach them their status within the classroom and larger society, whether school is a place they fit, and what privileges they deserve. Consequently, both the stoplight and the Shoe Tyer's Club constituted "being smart" as a collective event. This concept was actively, purposefully used to teach students about themselves. In conjunction with teachers, students learned who was and was not smart, the privileges that went along with being smart, and whether they were smart themselves. Through these artifacts being smart became both socially and personally powerful.

The Discourse of Smartness

Figured worlds include the development of particular discourses "imposed upon people, through recurrent institutional treatments and within interaction, to the point that they become self-administered" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 62). The kindergarten classroom included rhetoric such as "making good choices" and completing "first grade work," concepts students used in a similar manner to evaluate their own efforts and understand themselves, for "[t]he discourses and categories dominant in a society . . . are 'inscribed' upon people, both interpersonally and institutionally, and within them" (p. 26). Classroom discourse was used to inscribe on students the category of smartness as part of learning to "do school."

The concept of smartness entered classroom discourse initially through Mrs. Rayburn and Mrs. Daniels, along with other authority figures in the school, in essence operating as a *tool of social control* introduced during the first 2 weeks of school in numerous ways. One way students were taught to understand smartness resulted from listening to authority. For example, when a student stated he liked to listen to Mrs. Rayburn, Mrs. Daniels stated, "Aren't you smart. You'll get very smart if you listen to Mrs. Rayburn." Listening to authority connected appropriate behavior and one's ability to become and maintain a docile body. These data recount two such examples of reverence for authority:

> *"This is a smart class, Mrs. Rayburn," says the school counselor who comes to the classroom to have students agree upon rules for the classroom. She states students are smart because the class listens quietly to her and students raise their hands before speaking.*

> *On the first day of kindergarten, Mrs. Rayburn says, "We have some smart kindergarteners. They already know how to put their puzzles up. Ah, look—Michelle already knows how to sit Greene Elementary–style."*

Smartness related to a student's prior knowledge of taught material. For example, students already able to count to high numbers or who knew the seasons were often called "geniuses" or were told they were "so smart." In addition, when students demonstrated they knew material before it was taught, they were typically given privileges such as getting nap towels first or being first in line. Through the discourse of smartness students were taught being referred to as "smart" was a form of praise. In addition, they learned to intrinsically connect smartness to schooling practices. Being smart was exhibited as prior knowledge as well as fulfilling teacher expectations.

If a student was perceived as smart, he or she became "like" the teacher, teaching other students. In essence, being viewed as smart led to gains in power, authority, and autonomy. For example, one day during calendar time Kyle demonstrated he knew the seasons and was praised as "so smart" and then allowed to teach the seasons to the class. Additional ways of inscribing the reward of power transfer were through classroom routines such as calendar, assigning jobs, and show-and-tell, for which Mrs. Rayburn and Mrs. Daniels explicitly selected students making "good choices."

Mrs. Daniels typically chose which students would participate in calendar, be assigned classroom jobs, and contribute to show-and-tell. One example of such a "choosing" occurred when,

> *Mrs. Daniels tells students to sit on the rug, "Greene Elementary–style with your hands in your baskets." She sits in a chair beside the calendar posted on the wall, facing students, who sit on the rug, silent and still in anticipation of who will be chosen for calendar. All eyes are on Mrs. Daniels who says with excitement, "I'm looking for someone making really good choices" while over-exaggerating her scanning of the students. She then turns to Mrs. Rayburn, who sits at her desk, and says, "Mrs. Rayburn, who do you think has been making good choices today?" Mrs. Rayburn replies, "Hmmmm, Mrs. Daniels, that's a tough question. I think Ashley has been making very good choices today." Ashley immediately jumps up with a smile on her face and stands next to Mrs. Daniels. The other students become slightly restless as if they have finally started breathing again after holding their breath. Mrs. Daniels asks Ashley, "If yesterday was the 16th, then today is ____?" Ashley replies, "the 17th." Mrs. Daniels exclaims, "You're a genius!" Ashley then has a seat and Mrs. Daniels begins the process of choosing another student by saying, "I'm looking for someone else who has been making really good choices today," and the process starts again with students stiffening in anticipation of who will be chosen next.*

Students chosen for calendar stood in front of the class with Mrs. Daniels to teach the date and the day's weather. For show-and-tell, the students sat in the teacher's chair and told students about the special object they had brought to class with them. Finally, the classroom's most coveted jobs included "centers" and "caboose." The centers person walked through the centers after everyone had cleaned up and let Mrs. Rayburn and Mrs. Daniels know if people needed to go back and clean some more. The caboose always lined up last but was asked to "check the line" and let other students know if they needed to "fix themselves" before the class could leave the room. While students completed these two jobs, they often took on an "authoritative stance." For example, they typically clasped their hands behind their backs or placed hands on their hips while walking through centers or along the line. They often kept a serious face and did not smile. They projected a disposition they were conducting serious business.

When assigning the centers person and caboose, Mrs. Daniels always stated she needed someone "who is very responsible" to do these jobs. Being responsible meant acting the way Mrs. Rayburn expected. Although Mrs. Rayburn never explicitly defined what she meant by "responsible," her criteria appeared strongly to relate to students who rarely moved their cars; therefore, "being smart" and "being responsible" became closely intertwined. Students who moved their cars were penalized and not allowed to show their object in show-and-tell or have a class job. Hence, students were taught not only that smartness and authority go together but also that those not smart enough did not have nor deserve privilege.

For example, when entering the room after lunch, Mrs. Daniels informed students if their car was on yellow they needed to go ahead and lie down on their towels for quiet time. She then checked her list to see who was supposed to do show-and-tell that day. If a student who was already on his or her towel came up, she typically remarked, "Mrs. Rayburn, I'm so very sad because _____ doesn't get to do show-and-tell today because [he or she] had to move their car. Maybe next time they'll make better choices and get to do show-and-tell." Mrs. Rayburn usually responded by frowning and shaking her head. Often students on their towels had tears on their cheeks as a result of being denied participation in show-and-tell. Mrs. Daniels's denial of privilege and public shaming of certain students who had moved their cars proved an especially difficult sacrifice for students because show-and-tell happened only once every 2 weeks. Consequently, students such as Jackson, whose car was on yellow or red often, rarely participated.

Also compelling was the way students appropriated teacher discourse. Throughout the year, I *never* heard students use the term "smart" in non-teacher-directed activities or play. Over time, however, students adopted teacher discourse, particularly when given authoritative roles, appropriately modeling teacher behavior and using the term "smart." For example, one time a student, Sarah, brought in a snow leopard for show-and-tell. Mrs.

Daniels named what kind of animal it was, and Matthew replied to Mrs. Daniels's answer, "Aren't you smart! You're a genius!" His words and intonation directly mimicked Mrs. Daniels's when she would tell students they were smart. Encouraging students to appropriate authoritative discourse in the classroom overshadowed students' own voices, and students thereby became ventriloquists of teachers' voices of authority. Because students adopted teacher discourse, student agency became limited; Mrs. Rayburn in effect became the author of their words, interpretations, and meanings, and students became stratified along the lines of who could best approximate the teacher's authority.

Conclusion

Within Mrs. Rayburn's classroom, smartness operated as a *tool of social positioning*, authoritatively used to denote which students had social power. Those students framed as smart, such as Natalie, became the students most other students wanted to befriend. Natalie constantly negotiated demands from students to sit beside her at lunch, play with her at recess, or hold her hand, while students framed as "not" smart, such as Jackson, were excluded, not chased after, not sought out to sit beside at lunch, not asked to hold hands or included in games. Jackson played by himself at recess and never seemed to acquire a special "buddy" or friend in the classroom. Students' popularity—or lack of it—connected to teacher praise and public lessons of smartness around the stoplight, Shoe Tyer's Club, and Phone Number Club. One telling piece of information regarding teacher perceptions of Jackson and Natalie was seen when Mrs. Rayburn told me on the first day of school she knew Natalie would be her favorite student. On the other hand, she regularly complained Jackson "got on her nerves."

Theorizing the cultural production of learning disabilities, McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006) discuss ways schools are preoccupied with labeling mental capacities, resulting in "simple [bipolar] contrasts such as smart/dumb or gifted/disabled" (p. 15). Schools' labeling of mental capacities is embedded in issues of power. Smartness is culturally produced (as are learning disabilities) but made "real" through discourse and tangible artifacts such as grades, standardized test scores, entrée to gifted programs, and academic credentials. Such artifacts become connected to and underlie students' academic identities, "influenc[ing] students' perceptions of themselves and their own abilities over time" (Hatt, 2007, p. 151).

Smartness operates as a *tool of social control* largely through the stoplight in the classroom: All students defined being "smart" as not having to move one's car. Smartness came to be associated with following rules, becoming docile bodies, and behaving in ways expected by teachers. However, as discussed previously, not all students received the same level of surveillance. For example, Jackson was often placed in close proximity

to Mrs. Rayburn during circle, nap, and lunch times. It seemed every small step Jackson took outside the rules came to Mrs. Rayburn's immediate attention. Alternatively, Kyle, a White male, was typically placed far away from Mrs. Rayburn based on the assumption he needed less supervision. However, my data included numerous examples of Kyle doing *anything but* trying to fall asleep during nap time, for example, communicating with a friend across the room regularly.

Smartness operates as a *tool of social control* since it was defined as maintaining a docile body and modeling authority figures. Smart students sat "Greene Elementary–style," kept hands "to themselves," stayed in line walking down the hallway, and spoke only when given permission by authority. Furthermore, students framed as smart exhibited they valued that which was upheld as valuable by authority figures. Students were told they were smart if they listened to authority figures, kept their cars on green, and knew curricular material and behavioral expectations *before* being taught. This particular finding reinforces Okagaki and Sternberg's (1993) conclusion that students are more likely to be framed as smart if parental expectations closely align with those of the teacher. Hence, smartness becomes largely about possessing the cultural capital most valued by the teacher. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) represents valued ways of looking, behaving, and thinking and forms of knowledge. Over time, valued cultural capital in kindergarten translated into symbolic capital, with one becoming publicly perceived as having status and authority, including the power to represent commonsense and "objective" versions of the world (Bourdieu, 1977). Defining smartness is a tool for maintaining power and limiting who has access to power.

Smartness is primarily perceived as nonrelational, impersonal, rational, and scientifically objective. At the same time, it is indeed something personal and social that influences everyday practice. It teaches us about our academic identities by answering the questions, "Do I have something worth saying?" "Do I have authority in this context?" and "How should I behave?" As Holland et al. (1998) theorize identity, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3).

Visioning the institution of schooling as a key place of socialization teaches us about what it means to be smart. From there, we look to educational identifiers (e.g., grades, credentials, teacher expectations) to determine whether we ourselves are smart, only then deciding if school is a place we belong and something in which to invest ourselves. For many poor students and students of color such as Jackson, they learn early on school is not where they belong or worth investing in, so they begin to disengage. These students may not perceive themselves as "dumb" but may have figured out that regardless of talent or effort they will never be identified as smart within the institution of schooling. I maintain this relation is what led Jackson to state he hated school before he had even finished kindergarten.

What children learn about smartness within schools has powerful implications. The hidden curriculum remains tied to tracking students based on class and race and encourages gender roles reinforcing patriarchy (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Oakes, 2005). As de Marrais and LeCompte (1995) claim, "The hidden curriculum consists of the implicit messages given to students about differential power and social evaluation as they learn how to work in schools, what kinds of knowledge exists . . . and how students are valued in their own right" (p. 207). What is taught in schools includes who "is" and "is not" smart and what smartness means. Determinations are based on teachers' expectations mediated by knowledge of students' socioeconomic backgrounds and racial identities.

Finally, the institution of schooling is intrinsically connected to smartness and a key process by which students are sorted, inequalities in academic achievement (and treatment) justified, and social power ascribed across students. Castells (1997) posits, "The new power lies in the codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, people build their lives, and decide their behavior. The sites of this power are people's minds" (p. 359). Smartness operates as symbolic capital, and schools have become institutions largely concerned with perpetuating the raced and classed symbolic capital of smartness. In a postindustrial, neoliberal economy, schooling becomes linked with producing not just smart people and a smart citizenry but smart workers. Hence, smartness becomes synonymous with developing human capital designed to serve the knowledge economy (Hatt & Otto, in press).

The figured world of smartness is located within us, not as a biological capacity but, instead, as a cultural practice we use to invest meaning in others and ourselves. If we fail to pay attention to how smartness operates in schools and within larger society, we miss a critical opportunity to reimagine and reinterpret smartness, particularly for low-income students and students of color. We also miss the opportunity to explore how we perpetuate it ourselves. We must see smartness as a *tool of control* and *social positioning*. Only then can we begin to disrupt smartness in everyday schooling practices, empowering students to frame and author their lives.

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