

Sociocultural Considerations for Students and Classrooms: The Case of Alicia Rodriguez

Catherine Compton-Lilly

Many years ago, Alicia (pseudonym)—now a high school senior—was a student in my first-grade class. Since then, I have returned to visit her and her family every three or four years. When I visited her at school last year, I found her sitting in the long term detention room because of a history of fighting, gang connections, and general disaffection from school. Although her cumulative school records are most certainly filled with assessments of her reading ability, reports on her behavior, old report cards, and state test scores, these records do not come close to telling her whole story.

In this chapter, stories about Alicia and her family are presented. These stories are part of a 10-year longitudinal case study that I feel demonstrates the importance of sociocultural understandings about literacy and learning. First, I describe incidents from Alicia's story to present and define *historical precedents*, *literacy practices*, and *ideological awareness* as aspects of sociocultural theory. Then, I share more of Alicia's story to demonstrate how literacy learning and sociocultural considerations are interwoven and inextricable from each other.

Examining Sociocultural Influences on Alicia's Literacy Learning

In the following section, excerpts from Alicia's story that extend from first grade through eighth grade are presented to illustrate the historical precedents, literacy practices, and ideological awareness that shaped Alicia's views on literacy and learning.

Historical Precedents That Informed Alicia's Literacy Learning Experiences

In first grade, Alicia was an energetic, African American child with a big smile. In my field notes, I described her as a bright child who enjoyed the social aspects of school. My research focused on the ways Alicia, her peers, and their parents viewed reading. Historical precedents related to learning to read involve ways of understanding reading that are grounded in people's collective experiences over time; historical precedents became evident when I asked Alicia, "What do children

have to do to be able to read?” Alicia offered three interrelated answers: “Sound it out . . . sound out the letters . . . sound out the words.” This response was not unique to Alicia. It was echoed by the other students whom I interviewed, and it was repeated by those students as they moved through the grade levels. In fifth grade, Alicia explained, “I practice sounding [out] the words and I read the books and I know how to read and I started learning how to read by myself.” In eighth grade, she still reported “sounding out words.”

“Sounding out” has a history that is reflected in the ways students, their parents, their siblings, their peers, and their teachers talk about reading. For example, Alicia’s mother and older brothers used the term *sounding out*, and this usage of the term was related to their own experiences with learning to read. Thus, Alicia’s use of the phrase reflected a long history of uses. Her mother described helping Alicia learn to read as follows:

When she’s reading along, she comes to me, and if she don’t come to me she goes to her brothers, and we tell her the same thing: “Sound it out!” [Ms. Rodriguez laughs.] We help her sound it out . . . and then she be like, “OK, OK, OK, wait a minute, wait a minute.” And then we keep going until she gets it, because we don’t want to tell her the word because . . . she’s not going to get it if you just tell her. Let her do it on her own.

In this quote, we witness Ms. Rodriguez and her sons offering sounding out as a decoding strategy that Ms. Rodriguez associates with independent word solving, perseverance, and accomplished reading.

Although sounding out is grounded in historicized notions of reading and is associated with independent reading, it also conveys a range of meanings. Through my research, I learned that sounding out refers to more than the letter-by-letter decoding of words. Some people in the study used sounding out to refer to word solving in general. One parent was observed telling her daughter to sound out a word, and then she immediately directed the child’s attention to the accompanying picture, encouraging the child to think about the story. Other parents described sounding out as being able to identify known parts within words; one child offered the word *without* (with-out) as an example. All these meanings circulate via language potentially contributing to the meanings Alicia and her family members convey when they use the phrase *sounding out*.

The sociocultural approach to literacy and learning reminds us that all words bring a history of meanings that intersect with our lives in complex ways while revealing much about the social worlds we construct (Bakhtin, 1994). Sounding out has a powerful history grounded in our collective experience of learning to read. Words enter classrooms, bringing with them messages and meanings that we might not realize. Sounding out can be problematic if it silences alternative word-solving strategies and is the only available reading strategy available to students.

Other educational terms can also be problematic. Terms such as *at-risk*, *student-centered*, *hyperactive*, *whole language*, *scientifically based*, *developmentally appropriate*, *teacher-proof*, *minority*, and *special education* carry histories of meanings that reflect particular ways of understanding students and schooling and reveal our assumptions about particular groups of people; the histories these words bring can be dangerous and can infect our intended meanings and messages.

Alicia's Family's Literacy Practices

Literacy practices are regularly performed activities that involve the use of written texts (Street, 1984, 1995). During the interviews that took place across the grade levels, Alicia made reference to a range of literacy practices (see Table I.1). Alicia's mother described one of her own literacy practices of trading and sharing books with her friends. This literacy practice has been repeated on many occasions and is social in nature and grounded in personal relationships. It is a literacy practice that is often not associated with a mother of six children living in a poverty-stricken, inner-city community.

Having heard Alicia describe school literacy tasks as “boring” and hearing her mother describe Alicia's interests in the social aspects of school, I was surprised when in eighth grade she described the poetry she wrote. She agreed to share a poem with me (see Figure I.1). Alicia's poem reflects her fears and hopes. She presents her faith in love and fear of bullies. Alicia explained that she did not learn to write poetry in school and that she taught herself. Poetry writing is a literacy practice that Alicia values and enjoys. As these examples reveal, literacy practices can be surprising and unexpected. In some cases, literacy practices remain unrecognized even by people who participate in those practices. Reading recipes, newspapers, food labels, signs, advertisements, and bus schedules are all common

Table I.1. A Sampling of Alicia's Literacy Practices

Grade	School	Home
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading trade books with her friends • Participating in guided reading groups (defines reading groups as being about reading with friends) • Writing in her journal • Using friends' names as characters in her writing • Reading independently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting help with reading from her brothers • Playing school • Reading books from a large box of trade books and textbooks
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking tests • Reading independently assigned chapter books • Defining vocabulary words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading chapter books and series books (The Baby-Sitters Club and Goosebumps) that her friends also enjoy • Reading her brother's book about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. • Reading “baby books” to her sister
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading classic literature (e.g., Poe) • Preparing for tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading chapter books and “love” novels she gets from her neighbor and mother • Reading books with Black characters • Writing poems • Reading teen magazines • Surfing the Internet • Using the computer at friends' homes to do puzzles and activities

Figure 1.1. Alicia's Poem "Scared"

Don't be afraid of love.
Remember your faith of the person who live up above.
Don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.
Be afraid of the bullies.
Their self does.
They're afraid of making changes.
Don't be afraid of yourself.
If you dare to stop the praise above,
there's nothing you are scared [of].

literacy practices that people do not always identify when asked about their reading and writing practices.

Ideological Awareness in Alicia's Family

An awareness of ideologies, the particular ways people understand the world, and specifically the role literacy plays in the world, affect the ways people view literacy and learning. During the first-grade interviews, Ms. Rodriguez told me a story to illustrate her views on African American speech patterns and how they might affect her children's futures. Ms Rodriguez explained that she tells her children, "You can walk around saying, 'Yo, what's up' and 'Chill,' but once you get out there into the business world—that 'yo, chill'—throw that out the window and you start talking like you got some sense." She explained that she periodically tests her children to see if they can code switch, as illustrated in the following description:

I didn't think they could . . . you got to test them out every now and then. Now this one, when he goes to a job interview he can do it because he always proper. But them [her other two sons] I gave [them a test] to see whether they can do it. And I was like now go talk to so-and-so and so-and-so and he was like "What?" I says, "Now you got to *walk the talk*, like you got some sense." He goes up to him [the person Ms. Rodriguez had indicated], "Excuse me." You know. . . . And I'm sitting there looking at him like now this is the same kid that works his mouth all over town, I was like "uh-uh" [shaking her head as she speaks]. So I know that they can make that conflict and I'm glad about it because it's easier for them. It's not, it won't be hard as they grow up changing. When they get to work, then when they get home "OK, chill." All right, fine. I'm glad they can do it though.

Although some teachers may insist on students using standard forms of English, Ms. Rodriguez's story suggests that context is critical and that her goal is for her children to know when and how to use various language codes and systems. Ms. Rodriguez associates knowing how to speak in formal contexts as key to economic access and social success. She "tests" her sons on their ability to "talk like you got some sense" and celebrates their ability to do this. Ms. Rodriguez also demonstrates her understanding that particular ways of using language are associated with access and power. Her ideological beliefs about language include the understanding that some language variations are more highly valued than others in particular contexts. Ms. Rodriguez realizes the importance of her sons being able to access and use

mainstream English patterns to gain access to opportunities and to participate in some social networks. She also recognizes that other forms of language work in other contexts. She displays her belief that getting a good job is contingent upon more than literacy achievement; it is related to the ways people present themselves and the language systems that they access. Ideological beliefs like this reveal people's understandings about the ways power operates through language and within social networks.

Entanglements: Literacy and Sociocultural Considerations

In this final section, I present more of Alicia's story to illustrate the many ways in which literacy and sociocultural considerations are interwoven and inextricable from each other. Although policymakers and curriculum developers often fall victim to the temptation to separate literacy from issues of class, identity, access, race, and social relationships, Alicia's story illustrates how these issues are inherently intertwined with literacy learning and literacy practices.

Social Relationships and Their Effect on Alicia's Literacy Practices

Throughout the time I have known Alicia, reading has always been a social activity caught up in her relationships with her friends, family, and teachers, as illustrated in many of the literacy practices listed in Table I.1. In first grade, she often wrote about friends and family members. During independent reading time, she was surrounded by a group of friends; when they finished one book, they would proceed together to the book corner to select their next title. Although I grouped students for reading instruction on the basis of their strengths and weaknesses as readers, Alicia surmised that I grouped students together so they "could be friends."

Alicia had a reputation in her family for being talkative. In first grade, Alicia qualified her talkativeness as relative to reading, saying, "I'm getting [to be] a better reader . . . I just talk a little and then read." Alicia had clear ideas about learning to read. She explained that her friend Jasmine is a good reader because she "don't play" and she "don't hit people." She described students who have trouble learning to read as "fooling around." I asked Alicia how being good in school affected learning to read:

Alicia: If you be good in school you might get something for free and the teacher might give you something. A treat or something.

CL: But does being good help you learn to read?

Alicia: Yes.

CL: How does that happen?

Alicia: Because if you don't read good you won't be like the people say, if you don't do what the teacher say you might go to the office.

CL: Well, how does, how does being good help you learn then?

Alicia: If you don't learn and read and learn and read 'cause if you don't read you won't go outside or you might be on punishment at home or [if]

you won't read a book when it's time to read a book on the rug, you might stay at the table and put your head down.

Access, opportunity, and learning to read are described as contingent upon demonstrating good behavior. Alicia clearly identified a relationship between being good and learning to read but struggled to articulate the details of this relationship.

In fifth grade, Alicia still described reading with friends. She reports that her best friend Rizette is a good reader. She said, "I help her read some of the words. And she'll be like, 'What's this word?' And I'll be like, 'Sound it out,' or 'Try to look in the dictionary.'" Alicia says that school has changed since first grade because she is older now and she's "got more friends." Alicia's mother remained worried that Alicia talks too much in school: "It's just she just got to stop running her mouth." Alicia confirmed her mother's fears, "I read a lot and I talk a lot, and it gets me in trouble." Unlike her description in first grade—when she would "just talk a little and then read"—her talking is now a problem.

In fifth grade, Alicia reported that she reads a variety of books: "I read chapter books and I read baby books and sometimes I read to my sister. And I read big, big dictionaries." Her favorite books were from *The Baby-Sitters' Club* series. She had read eight books from the series. I asked if there were any Black characters in those books, and she reported that one of the characters was Black but that she forgot the character's name. She shook her head when I asked whether it was important that there were Black characters in the books she read. Alicia wrote about reading books from the *Goosebumps* series with a sense of bravado: "I always like to read the *Goosebumps* books because they are funny and sometimes they scary 'cause [but] I don't believe in the things they think they make kids scared."

In contrast to her own reading, Alicia generally described school and teachers negatively. She explained, "Some of my classes get on my nerves, like usual," and that her teacher "yells for no reason . . . because I tell people to shut up, because they be 'dissing' me." Although Alicia's words alone are not conclusive, on the basis of my eight years of teaching in this school I can attest that teaching at this school is difficult. Serving more than 1,000 children from a struggling and diverse community with a 97% poverty rate, while managing on very minimal classroom budgets and large class sizes, with little administrative support and extreme pressure to raise test scores, teachers at this school are prone to frustration. We often chose between spending our own money on books and supplies or going without. These are factors that affect Alicia's school experiences.

In eighth grade, Alicia was still reading *The Baby-Sitters' Club* books as well as teen magazines and "love books," which Alicia described as being "mostly about sex." At that time, Alicia reported that she enjoyed reading books with Black characters. However, Alicia said that she never reads with her friends, reporting, "We don't read nothing." Instead she said, "We have fun." She explained that reading is something she does when she is "bored."

Ms. Rodriguez continued to report that Alicia talks too much in class. At the beginning of eighth grade, Ms. Rodriguez reported that so far things were going well but that she was "getting ready for the middle of the year when she gets to know everybody and she starts talking a lot." She remarked, "Every year we go

through that.” Ms Rodriguez reported that Alicia loves her school, “It’s just all her friends and everybody is there.” She says that Alicia’s friends are very nice, but they talk a lot. She explains that their conversations are not generally focused on school. Instead of talking about what they should be talking about, “it’s ‘Ooooh girl, you know what you got on.’ ‘I’m wearing that tomorrow.’ ‘I’m wearing this color and di-di-di-di.’ You know. ‘Oh he’s cute.’ You know, girl talk.”

Ms. Rodriguez explained that Alicia was “more interested in how she looks” than reading or academics. At this point, the social dimensions of reading have become distractions for Alicia. No longer is reading a socially defined, shared activity; reading is juxtaposed with friends and fun.

The School Context and Its Impact on Alicia's Learning

By eighth grade, Alicia described her school and her teachers negatively, saying “when the kids fight in class, they [the teachers] don’t try to break them up. They don’t. They think that the kids will try to hurt them or something” (see Table I.2). She reported that “[teachers only help children] when they feel like it.” School is “kinda fun [but] it’s a lot of fighting going on . . . I got a lot of friends there so I’m not alone.” It is her friends rather than her teachers that Alicia credits with keeping her safe from the fighting at school. Alicia describes her teachers as fearful of students; the current barrage of negative media depictions of African American youth who share similar social class, dress, and language styles with Alicia and her peers contribute to this unwarranted fear.

In contrast to her critique of her teachers, Alicia thought highly of the school’s principal, saying, “I don’t hear her say nothing bad about kids or they don’t say nothing bad about her. . . . She be polite to everyone. She don’t always got to be

Table I.2. A Comparison of Alicia's Attitudes Toward School Across Grade Levels

First grade	Fifth grade	Eighth grade
Likes her friends and teachers	<p>“Some of my classes get on my nerves, like usual.”</p> <p>“[The teacher] yells for no reason . . . because I tell people to shut up, because they be ‘dissing’ me.”</p> <p>“[My teacher] don’t do nothing. She don’t help me.”</p> <p>“The teacher just yells at you.”</p>	<p>“When the kids fight in class, they [teachers] don’t try to break them up. They don’t. They think that the kids will try to hurt them or something.”</p> <p>“[Teachers only help students] when they feel like it.”</p> <p>“Let the kids be who they are instead of trying to change them.”</p> <p>“I don’t hear her [the school principal] say nothing bad about kids or they don’t say nothing bad about her. . . . She be polite to everyone. She don’t always got to be mean about everything, so [that’s] probably why.”</p>

mean about everything.” When asked, Alicia offered three poignant pieces of advice to her teachers:

1. Talk to kids more.
2. Be respectful to kids.
3. Let the kids be who they are instead of trying to change them.

Ms. Rodriguez confirmed Alicia’s critique of her teachers:

When we used to go to school it’s like the teacher was there to teach and not just get their paycheck. And it seem like [now] they just get her paycheck. And that’s wrong. ‘Cause you got a lot of kids that need help, and they ain’t helping them.

Alicia’s literacy learning occurs within a context where race, class, and the identity positionings that Alicia is constructing all cohabitate and interact in complex ways. As Gee (2001) argues, “we do not have a reading crisis in our schools. Rather we have what I would call an affiliation crisis” (p. xviii). The problem is not merely about reading ability; Alicia’s literate and learning identities are difficult to reconcile with her school and peer affiliations. If we explore Alicia’s literacy and school experiences through the lens of sociocultural theory, we reveal the ways literacy and sociocultural considerations are intertwined and inextricable from each other. Issues of class, identity, access, race, and social relationships have affected and will continue to affect Alicia’s trajectory as a reader and a learner. Instruction in alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension is not enough.

Sociocultural Considerations Matter to Alicia and Her Peers

This chapter’s brief description of Alicia over time illustrates how her school literacy learning has occurred within particular school contexts involving particular people and expectations. Alicia’s teachers and her mother, Ms. Rodriguez, bring expectations related to Alicia’s behaviors and her interactions with other children; by eighth grade her relationships with her teachers seem to have deteriorated. Alicia complains that her teachers do not respect students and suggests that they fear their students. Both Alicia and her mother agree that teachers do not provide students with enough help to be successful in school.

Although Alicia treated reading as a social activity when she learned to read and continued to report helping her friends in grade 5, by eighth grade she reports that her friends never read together. Talking in class is presented as a problem. Although Alicia continues to read books and write poetry at home, she reports that she reads when she is bored and teaches herself to write poems.

Alicia’s identity as a reader and a writer is developing in conjunction and sometimes in opposition to her more general identity positionings. Alicia is becoming a young woman who values her friends and her many social relationships. Although her public persona involves “hanging out” with her friends, talking about clothes, and having fun, her personal identity involves reading books and writing poetry. Alicia does not share her literacy activities with her friends.

Alicia's story reflects historical precedents that define learning in school as antithetical to talking in class or fooling around. Although Alicia's complaints about her teachers are echoed by her mother, her complaints may also reflect her developing identity as an adolescent girl who is supposed to be interested in her appearance and who values her friendships with peers. Adolescents have traditionally been depicted in opposition to teachers, reflecting historically constructed precedents that contribute to the distancing that is often reported between adolescents and their teachers.

Despite Alicia's negative reports about school, she describes a range of literacy practices at home including using the Internet, writing poetry, and reading "love stories" and teen magazines. She reports that she reads books that her mother brings home and shares them with her brothers. At the end of eighth grade, Alicia could easily decode text at a sixth-grade level; although her accuracy rates were close to 100%, she struggled significantly with answering questions about the nonfiction passages she read. According to these assessments, she is at least two years behind.

Literacy is enmeshed with various ways of understanding the world and the role of written text within the world. When Alicia was in first grade, she associated literacy learning with good behavior and not talking. The separation between learning and social activity is maintained over time as both Alicia and her mother describe social activity as an obstacle to learning; it also supports the idea that accomplished reading is independent reading. The ways Alicia and her mother portray teachers can also be viewed ideologically. Teachers are positioned by Alicia and her mother as "others"—people from the outside who are not committed to students. These views of schooling, learning, and literacy are immersed in issues related to power and access. Teachers are assumed to have the capacity to help students but choose not to exercise that power. Teachers are described as negligent and uncaring. Understandings about race are ideologically laden. When Alicia was in fifth grade, she reported that the race of the characters in the books she read did not matter to her; by eighth grade, it matters.

Although phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension have all played a role in learning to read for Alicia, her story reveals additional complexities that are addressed by various sociocultural understandings about literacy. These are often the same issues that consume our professional lives as teachers. Student diversity, language differences, and the economic difficulties faced by some of our students' families all contribute to the challenges we face as we bring our own experiences and understandings to classrooms of students who do not always share those experiences and ways of being.

Exploring Silences: Identifying Possibilities

The pages that follow break the silences that accompany official descriptions of literacy learning by exploring the connections that exist among teaching and learning and the sociocultural contexts in which schooling occurs, highlighting the relevance of social and cultural diversity, acknowledging the complexities of teaching and learning, and reminding us that teaching and learning are human

activities that involve individuals who bring unique interests, goals, and experiences to schools and classrooms. Leaders in sociocultural research describe a set of the key understandings that hold promise. Together, these research exemplars provide not only a lens for focusing on dimensions of literacy learning that are often ignored in official discussions, but also reveal a range of classroom practices that promise to address the challenges that so many of us face as we enter our classrooms each day.

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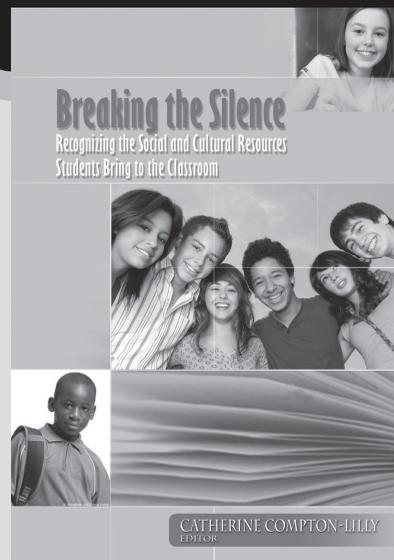
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