

Elementary School and Spelling Bees as Sites of Struggle: Akeela and the Bee

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Abstract: In the popular film, “Akeela and the Bee”, a struggle between power and non-power discourse unfolds in a working-class community. Akeela’s determination and the cohesiveness of the community ultimately challenge the social boundaries of discourse. Representations of literacy and language are analyzed through Gee’s definition of discourse and Verdoordt’s notion of a Pygmalion film. Key themes found in the film are discourse in contact and conflict, the mentor/mentee relationship, community support for learning, and the negative impact of a performance-focused learning environment. Ultimately, consolidations and opportunities are proposed through critical literacy and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy”

Keywords: discourse, Pygmalion film, literacy, language, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, critical literacy

Introduction

In this paper, I will address themes in the representations of literacy and language in the film, *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006) and analyze them in terms of Gee’s concept of discourse (1989), the notion of the Pygmalion film (Verdoordt et al., 2010), critical literacy (Williams, 2007), and a testing-focused environment (Stack, 2006). I will argue that Atchison (2006) used the themes of community support and personal determination to challenge the social boundaries of race and discourse. Ultimately, critical literacy (Delpit, 1993; Williams, 2007) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) (Ferlazzo & Paris, n.d.) offer a means of addressing race and discourse in this context.

Synopsis of *Akeela and the Bee*

Akeela and the Bee is a film about race, class, and discourse in the life of a young girl (Atchison, 2006). Akeela is one of four children from a racialized, working-class neighbourhood in Los Angeles. Her hardworking, widowed mother is trying to keep her brother away from the dangers of the street. Due to her immense responsibilities, Akeela’s mother is very busy and does not have much time for her. Akeela distinguishes herself at school through her performance on a spelling test.

The school principal is under pressure to improve academic performance. School funding is tied to student performance, so the principal is desperate to improve the school’s scores on the standardized assessments. He pushes Akeela to compete: first, in the district spelling bee; then in the regional, state, and national spelling bees. The principal goes to his old friend, Dr. Larabee, a professor of English, and begs him for ideas to improve the academic climate at his school. Dr. Larabee offers to coach Akeela for the upcoming spelling competitions.

At the first tutoring session, Larabee gives Akeela his rules of punctuality and hard work, telling her he will accept no “ghetto talk” (Atchison, 2006). Akeela balks at the constraints, but once she is committed, she accepts them and studies hard. Dr. Larabee mentors Akeela, but challenges in his personal life have had a negative effect on his outlook. When Akeela becomes blurred in Dr. Larabee’s mind with his late daughter, he steps back and lets the community mentor her. Ultimately, Akeela becomes a national champion. Akeela’s family, Dr. Larabee, and her community are inspired and healed by her success.

Theoretical Lenses

Gee’s definition of discourse will be used as a lens to analyze the representations of literacy and language in *Akeela and the Bee* (Gee, 1989). Gee defined discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (Gee, 1989, p. 1). Gee also linked discourse to power, which is tied to race in the United States, “discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society. Control over certain discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society” (Gee, 1989, p. 3).

The high stakes educational testing environment in the United States has a very negative impact on the learning of diverse, non-establishment discourse individuals (Berliner, 2011, p. 288). Certain discourses are linked to power and money, while others are stigmatized (Gee, 1989). Gee stated that “research pretty clearly shows that many school-based secondary discourses conflict with the values and viewpoint in some non-mainstream children’s primary discourses and the community-based secondary discourse” (Gee, 1989, p. 10). The opposition of community discourse and the educational system makes it challenging for children from diverse backgrounds to receive an education, and as such, is a salient issue in contemporary language and literacy education.

The Pygmalion film (Verdoodt et al., 2010) is another conceptual framework that will be used in the analysis of *Akeela and the Bee*. The Pygmalion film is relevant here as, by definition, it involves a conflict between discourses and an exploration of the impact of literacy on identity, which are central to the film, *Akeela and the Bee* (Verdoodt et al., 2010). A Pygmalion film involves a transformation of the social class of the subject by a mentor (Verdoodt et al., 2010), including discourse and style of dress, which is one of the tensions in *Akeela and the Bee*.

Analysis and Findings

I initially chose the film *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006) for analysis as the plot involves issues of discourse, race, and class and it was considered a Pygmalion film (Verdoodt et al., 2010). I then viewed *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006) with a focus on analyzing representations of literacy and language. I took notes to document and explore these representations. The salient themes that arose in the analysis were discourses in contact, the value of the mentor/mentee relationship, a performance-focused learning environment, and the value of community support for learners.

Discourses in Contact/Conflict

The theme of the social power differential of the distinct discourses (“ghetto talk” versus “spelling bee English”) is central to *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006). When Akeela decides to enter the first spelling bee, she enters a White world where the discourse is school English, not the stigmatized English of her community. She experiences a culture clash not only between her own discourse and the that of the school’s, but also in terms of parental and school expectations (Verdoodt et al., 2010). For example, in her neighbourhood, there are “socially accepted ... ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (Gee, 1989, p. 1). As soon as Akeela agrees to participate in the spelling bee, she in effect agrees to learn a new discourse pertaining to the world of power and prosperity. The power discourse has different “ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting” (Gee, 1989, p. 1) that Akeela needs to learn to be successful outside of her community. When Akeela agrees to be in the spelling bee on the condition that the principal buys her a new dress, she shows a desire to dress differently and take on the “emblems and attributes such as accent, dress-codes, and cultural taste” (Verdoodt et al., 2010, pp. 526-527) of the powerful group.

Akeela is pressured by her younger brother to give up the spelling bee because Black discourse is not valued in the competition and he fears she will lose. He says, “you goin’ up against a bunch of rich, white kids. They gonna tear your black ass up!” (Atchison, 2006, minute 16). Akeela’s brother knows his sister is attempting to cross ideological boundaries with her literacy and it makes him uncomfortable. Although her brother has already checked out of White society, she remains. As a case in point, Akeela goes to her coaching session with Dr. Larabee, finds him working in his garden, and asks, “So what are you gonna do today? Ain’t you got no job?” He replies, “Do me a favour and leave the ghetto talk outside.” She retorts: “Ghetto talk? I don’t talk ghetto.” Dr. Larabee first mimics her discourse, then establishes firm guidelines for their work together: “Hmm, ‘Ain’t you got no job?’ You use that language to fit in with your friends. Here, you will speak properly, or you won’t speak at all. Understood?” (Atchison, 2006, minute 18). Here, Dr. Larabee shows Akeela unequivocally that her home discourse is not valued, not acceptable, and will not be tolerated in his home or in the world outside her Black community.

Near the end of the movie, Akeela is in the national spelling bee in Washington, DC. Her younger brother and sister are watching her on television from home. Akeela gets a tough word to spell and her brother shouts at the television: “Man, that’s a White word if I ever heard one. It’s a trick. Stop playing!” (Atchison, 2006, minute 90). Akeela’s brother still thinks she should walk away from this competition in the power discourse. However, at this point, Akeela has learned from Dr. Larabee how to function and thrive in the world of White discourse. She follows the steps of word derivation that she has been methodically taught by Dr. Larabee, and then correctly spells the word without knowing the meaning. Akeela shows that she has learned the rules of winning in the power discourse. During

the competition, she confidently asks for repetition, clarification, remembers her kinesthetic learning style, and spells the word correctly. She does not follow her brother's advice to drop out. Akeela does not need to escape before losing face, as she has been taught the techniques and content matter to thrive in the world outside her community using the power discourse (Gee, 1989).

When Akeela challenges her mentor's belief that she should abandon her home discourse and ignores her brother's exhortations to leave the White environment, Akeela is in one of the "ideological sites of struggle that simultaneously contribute to the construction and the deconstruction of the literacy myth" (Verdoodt et al., 2010, p. 534). When Akeela wins the spelling competition as a girl from a poor community, she deconstructs the literacy myth that only middle-class children win spelling bees. Amid the struggle between power and non-power discourses, Akeela constructs her own literacy story around studying hard, persistence in the face of obstacles, and having community support.

The Pygmalion Mentor/Mentee Relationship

The Pygmalion mentor/mentee relationship has clear rules, boundaries, and status. When Akeela oversteps the boundary, Dr. Larabee immediately reminds her.

"You can leave now," said Dr. Larabee. "Why?" said Akeela. He replied, "Because I don't have time to waste on insolent little girls." Akeela retorted, "I ain't insolent!" (Atchison, 2006, minute 18).

She is sent away. She later returns and asks to be coached for the state spelling bee. He corrects her English grammar and invites her in (Atchison, 2006, minute 38). Even though there are firm rules around the mentoring relationship, Akeela benefits from it. As inflexible as he is, Dr. Larabee provides a valuable role model and mentor as a present, educated, and professional Black man in Akeela's community.

As the story progresses, Akeela eventually stands up to her mentor. After Dr. Larabee tells her again that he will have no "ghetto talk" and she defends her discourse when she says: "I wasn't dissing you." He replies, "Dissing? I thought we only used words from the dictionary here" (Atchison, 2006). Akeela energetically looks up the verb to diss in the dictionary, finds it, and loudly reads the definition to a stunned Dr. Larabee. She has found her own identity in that she refuses to give up her home discourse, yet she chooses to follow his language rules so that she can learn to compete in the power discourse (Gee, 1989). At this point, Akeela is thinking critically about discourse without having been formally taught to do so. Akeela uses critical thinking to make choices about using the power discourse to enter and win the spelling contest yet holds onto her community's discourse as a means of self-expression.

A Scores-Focused School Objectifies Akeela

It is clear from the start of the film that Akeela's school is in a strongly performance-based learning environment where student scores on tests are paramount. As we know, "A plethora of research has demonstrated the negative effect of high stakes testing on poor students and racialized minorities" (Stack, 2006, p. 56). It makes sense that a racialized school where the children speak a discourse other than the power discourse would have low test scores, especially since the school and the community have few economic resources.

The principal in the film is under a lot of pressure. He starts out asking Akeela to join the spelling bee, but he later threatens her with detention if she does not comply. The principal uses pressure and eventually threatens Akeela to participate in the spelling bee (Atchison, 2006, minute 7). After the ceremony to honour her for placing third at the state spelling bee, the principal pushes her to speak to a reporter. The principal states: "Are you kidding, this is exactly the kind of publicity that Crenshaw needs!" (Atchison, 2006, minute 62). Later, Akeela receives community pushback from her friend, as well as Dr. Larabee, for speaking to reporters; however, they do not know that she was coerced into speaking with a reporter.

In Canada, provincial and federal governments take school performance on international tests, such as the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA), as a reflection of the school's educational effectiveness (Stack, 2006). This film is set in the United States, where teachers' tenure and financial incentives can be linked to test scores and school performance (Berliner, 2011), so it is not surprising that Akeela's principal takes his students' scores very personally and will do anything to improve them. In Akeela's interactions with the principal, he objectifies

her as a means of increasing his school's test scores and funding. Akeela, however, is a critical thinker with her own motivation; she does things for her own reasons.

The Impact of the Community on Learning

The film, *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006), emphasizes the importance of having community support to be successful in the educational system. For example, during the national spelling bee, when Akeela tries to recall the spelling of a difficult word, she sees mental images of everyone in her community who helped her practice, with each person saying a letter in the word. In the final scene, Akeela's success at the spelling bee heals her family and community. She makes it clear that her family, her community, as well as her mentor all taught her to be successful. These two scenes highlight the impact of community support on literacy.

Williams (2007) urged readers and viewers to think critically about "the myths and realities of literacy" (p. 685). In that light, we can reconsider whether Dr. Larabee is in fact a success. Dr. Larabee may be initially depicted as the epitome of Black success. He is a professor, a doctor, and speaks the language of power, yet he is profoundly uncomfortable in his own skin and has lost his personal relationships. He has internalized the negative messages about Black English and attempts to push them onto Akeela to help her succeed. In adopting the power discourse, Dr. Larabee separated himself from his community and lived an isolated life. This stands in contrast to Akeela whose linguistic and social connection to her community is key to her ultimate success.

A Way Forward for Alternate Discourses

Given the challenging environment for young people who make a place for themselves amidst the issues of race, class, discourse of power and powerlessness depicted in this film, it is important to put forward some ideas of what can be done to improve the situation. Williams (2007) proposed teaching critical literacy and a critical stance. Williams (2007) stated that "it is vital to me that students think carefully about how they construct their own literate identities" (p. 685). As such, young people should be made aware of different discourse choices and their implications. They should be taught to think critically about discourse and make informed choices.

The wider educational implications of the cultural politics of these representations of language and literacy are that Black students' discourses must be valued in the school system. All discourses must have equal access to power, and none should be stigmatized. Janks (2000) described a world that was rebuilt after the end of apartheid in South Africa in which the social roles had to be re-imagined and re-designed through the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's policies and vision. Ferlazzo and Paris (n.d.) described an approach where multiple discourses are the norm, and all are valued in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Delpit showed a way forward in challenging the boundaries of discourse, race, and class: "The point must not be to eliminate students' home languages, but rather to add other voices and discourses to their repertoires," (Delpit, 1993, p. 163). These cornerstone ideas in language and literacy lay the groundwork for an educational environment in which discourse is fluid and multiple discourses are possible based on the speaker's critical choices. Akeela models making critical choices about her discourse to achieve success on her terms. Ultimately, this popular film, *Akeela and the Bee* (Atchison, 2006), used themes of the mentor/mentee relationship, discourses in contact and conflict, personal determination, and community support to challenge the social boundaries of race and discourse.

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