

The Social Construction of “At-Risk” Status: The Intersection of Policy, Practice, and the White Gaze in a First Grade Classroom

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Abstract

This case study examined how artifacts, like “at-risk” status, shaped and positioned some children’s literate identity as deficient. A Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) framework illustrates how policy, at the federal and state/local levels, influenced a first-grade teacher's beliefs and practices about children labeled "at risk" for reading.

Implications from this study demonstrate the urgency for spaces that provide opportunities where teachers, researchers, and policymakers can critically interrogate how their positionalities and policy exacerbate inequitable learning environments for children whom schooling has historically underserved.

Keywords: case study, DisCrit, reading disability, at-risk, struggling reader

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"The very serious function of racism...is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work."

—Toni Morrison, 1975

Introduction

On this particular Friday afternoon in Ms. Brown's first-grade classroom, I observed two smiling children playfully using language to make sense of a story. Using their meticulously crafted paper bag puppets, the children co-constructed a retelling of *The Garden* from *Frog and Toad Together* (Lobel, 1972). Earlier that morning, Jayda, an "at-risk" reader, and her friend, an esteemed "high" reader, participated in a whole-class choral reading of the beloved Frog and Toad classic. All children in first grade were permitted to remain together for reading instruction regardless of their perceived reading ability on "Fun Friday." Although Ms. Brown roamed about the classroom ensuring all children followed directions, the omnipresent "White gaze"—viewing the world from a White, Eurocentric perspective —(Morrison, 1998) distracted her from observing the confidence and accuracy with which Jayda retold the story during this joyful interaction. During the other four days of the week, Jayda's interactions with her peers were limited because Ms. Brown perceived her language and literacy practices as "at-risk."

Similarly, I sought to examine how young children are constructed as particular "kinds of readers" (e.g., "at-risk," "high"). I wondered how "at risk" was established and might untangling its construction help explain why some young, curious, and vivacious children who enthusiastically arrive at school doors soon "*fall out of love with school*" (Milner, 2015, p. 2; emphasis in original). Milner (2015) suggests that the answer to this question is not about what a particular teacher does but how schools operate. What is

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happening in school, I wondered, that allows so many children to become labeled as "at-risk," and is it related to understanding why they fall out of love with learning?

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how identity artifacts, "any instrument (material tool, embodied space, text, discourse, etc.) that mediates identity-shaping activity" (Leander, 2002, p. 201) affected reading instruction in a first-grade classroom. Thus, I asked the following research questions: *1. How did identity artifacts impact a first-grade teacher's beliefs and practices? 2. How did identity artifacts construct an African American, first-grade girl as an "at-risk" reader?* I was welcomed into Ms. Brown's classroom to investigate this question. What I did not know at the time is that I also revisited my former teacher self; in many ways, Ms. Brown and I are more alike than we are different. First, I will examine the literature about the disproportionality of Black and Brown students in special education and notions of the "struggling" reader. Next, I describe the theoretical framework, DisCrit, that framed the study. Then I will present the study's findings and conclude with implications for educators, teacher education, policymakers, and educational researchers.

Literature Review

Over the course of many decades, scholars have investigated the relationship between race, ethnicity, and culture to understand why some children achieve academically while others do not (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Dyson, 2013; Heath, 1983; Jones, 2006; Klinger & Edwards, 2006; McDermott et al., 2006; Sleeter, 1986). In response, literacy education researchers have advocated culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and designed culturally appropriate materials for assessment. For example, results from one study emphasize the importance of "deep and intimate

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knowledge of the context" when developing these materials that respond to children's diversity through curricula and instruction (Sachs et al., 2018, p. 141).

Despite the substantial body of scholarship arguing for culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy, many children from historically marginalized groups endure bias and discrimination in U.S. schools (Milner, 2015). For instance, Donovan and Cross (2002) found ethnic disproportionality among children in special education. Studies have spotlighted how informal assessments indicate that some children with cultural and linguistic differences, bilingual and multilingual learners, are misidentified as learning disabled; thus, they do not receive the services that meet their learning needs (Spinelli, 2007). Most significant is the pervasive racial disproportionality. Black children have historically been overrepresented in special education classrooms (Blanchett, 2009).

In this article, I unpack some of the complex factors around reading, SES, and race by exploring how policy is implemented. I studied how identity artifacts like federal, state, and local-level policy, reading instruction, prescriptive literacy assessments, and teachers' beliefs construct and limit the reading identities (e.g., "at risk," "struggling," "high") available to young children (Leander, 2002, p. 201). Leander (2002) argued that while researchers from different interpretive traditions have advanced the field's understanding of how interactions within the classroom construct multiple and changing identities, such a lens does not account for the ways in which identity is imposed and maintained. In this study, identity is viewed as unconsciously produced over time, embodied, and constrained through social structure and institutions (Luke, 2009; Moje & Luke, 2009). I examined how identity artifacts, which were designed to "help" teachers

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identify children “at risk” for reading failure, negatively impacted how school personnel perceived some children’s learning potential. In turn, I noted how although they are developed to mediate children's perceived reading difficulties, they resulted in dehumanizing labels and inequitable reading instruction. As I analyzed the “at-risk” construction, which is at the heart of this study, I struggled with how to present the findings in ways that did not vilify Ms. Brown or school personnel. Specifically, as Ms. Brown's former mentor, I apprenticed her into the problematic discourse by modeling how I grouped and labeled children according to perceptions of their reading ability as a former first-grade teacher myself.

The "At Risk" Reading Construct

“At risk,” “struggling,” and “low” are contemporary and normalized terms used to reference children perceived to struggle with the reading process in the context of school (Frankel et al., 2015; *Improving Reading Outcomes for Students with or at Risk for Reading Disabilities*, 2014; Jones et al., 2010; Paris, 2019; Triplett, 2007). Although the labels are constructed in particular social, historical, and political contexts, they shape children's schooling opportunities. For some children, the result is placement in special education. This issue is paramount because studies have illuminated the disproportionate number of historically marginalized children labeled and miseducated according to their perceived cognitive and mental capacity (Artiles et al., 1997; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Sleeter, 1986).

Approximately 80% of children who qualify for special education are considered “reading disabled” (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009). Of the 13 categories under which children can qualify for special education services, a reading dis/ability label is the most

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common under the LD/SLD category, also referred to as Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Three of the 13 categories, including LD/SLD, are subjective and based on “clinical judgment” (Connor et al., 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014, p. 3). These subjective categories evidence the relationship between race, dis/ability, and special education. When data are disaggregated by disability category, risk rates for African Americans and Native Americans are higher in all three categories (Harry & Klingner, 2014). While increased policy mandates like Response to Intervention focused on reducing the number of children referred for LD/SLD through the implementation of “interventions,” they aim to remediate or “fix” children’s perceived deficiencies. Such mandates adversely affect marginalized children in many ways because they are constructed on a medical instead of a social model that insists reading dis/ability is biological (Artiles., 2009).

Therefore, some scholars have argued students “at-risk” for reading failure cannot be considered without highlighting the risks associated with the environment, like inadequate schooling (Clay, 1987; Gibson & Moss, 2016; Vellutino et al., 1996; Vellutino et al., 2008). A pivotal study by Vellutino and colleagues (1996) led some scholars in the field of learning dis/abilities to reject the notion that the cause of learning dis/ability is due to a “neuro-developmental anomaly” identified by a psychometric approach, like an IQ test (Vellutino, 1996, p. 28). The authors found most children diagnosed as “reading disabled” did not have cognitive deficits but instead lacked adequate reading instruction. In other words, the perceived reading dis/ability did not exist inside children’s heads; instead, it was constructed within the learning environment.

Research has responded to the “struggling” or “at-risk” reader construct using various research methodologies. In a conceptual review of this research, Kucan and

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Palinscar (2011) reported that topics have focused on policy (e.g., Allington, 2013), classroom and school-wide "interventions" (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2003), reading processes (e.g., McCandliss et al., 2003), and identity and engagement theories (e.g., Hall, 2007). While this scholarship has highlighted the complexities of learning to read, it has not fully examined how identity artifacts shape the "at-risk" construct through interactions, policy, and instruction. Socially and culturally, these artifacts construct the "struggling" or "at-risk" reader status (Connor et al., 2008). Although these labels create access to services in the form of "intervention," they impact the learning environments and identities available to children. In turn, they prevent some children from access to equitable literacy instruction that affects their lives beyond PK-12 schooling. Research generally has not sought to untangle the nuances of the connections between reading performance and social forces such as race and ability (Connor et al., 2016), structural inequity (Milner, 2015), social class, (Jones, 2006), and perceived intellectual dis/abilities (Kliwer et al., 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Critical literacy education scholars have used Disability Studies (DS) to investigate reading "dis/ability" as a social construct (Collins & Ferri, 2016; 2014; Randel, 2014). Both DisCrit and DS presume that dis/ability exists in society's interpretations and responses to individual differences in the normalized body; thus, dis/ability is socially and politically constructed (Connor et al., 2016). While DS provides a fine-grain analysis of reading "dis/ability" within school, it does not foreground the complex interplay between race and dis/ability in education (Blanchett, 2006). Combining aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disabilities Studies (DS) forward

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a more recent theoretical framework—Dis/ability Critical Race Studies, or DisCrit—that includes a combined analysis of race and ability (Connor et al., 2016). Conceptually framed by DisCrit, this study examined how race and dis/ability mobilized the "at-risk" construction in an early childhood classroom (Connor et al., 2016).

I drew on DisCrit for two reasons. First, it expands current understandings of the relationship between race and reading dis/ability (Connor et al., 2016). For instance, examining how some young children experience the "at risk" construction without attention to the interdependency of race and dis/ability assumes that all children labeled as such share a universal experience. Second, with a DisCrit lens, I interrogated the ways in which the constructs of race and dis/ability operationalize systems that justify the oppression and marginalization of particular groups by limiting access to a fair and just education (Connor et al., 2016). This framework offers a critical examination of the ways that race and dis/ability are used to maintain normalized notions of literacy development.

DisCrit has seven tenets to guide researchers in the types of questions and issues that a study using this approach might address. The tenets share the "desire to reject forces, practice, and institutions that attempt to construct dis/ability based on differences from normative cultural standards" (Connor et al., 2016, p. 18). For the purposes of this paper, I describe the first and fifth tenets because they pertain to this study.

The first tenet of DisCrit foregrounds the interdependence between racism and ableism. Structures of "normalcy" in the school context reflect cultural standards (Connor et al., 2016). For example, "at-risk" for reading failure in an early childhood classroom is operationalized through a set of standards for literacy development. This articulated set of observable and measurable "skills" and "strategies" define what young children are

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expected to "master" linearly and chronologically. These standards are built on the cultural "norms" of whiteness (Dyson, 2015). "At-risk" is made manifest in the standards; thus, they normalize deviance from the center as dis/ability. Absent the coexistence of race and ability, the standards that determine "at-risk" are meaningless. In other words, a child's perceived abilities, regardless of race, culture, or ethnicity, do not require categories and labels because the structure of normativity is dismantled.

DisCrit Tenet Five interrogates the social, political, and cultural aspects of dis/ability and race as well as how each has been used on its own and in conjunction to deny certain citizens their rights (Connor et al., 2016, p. 22). Historically and legally, pseudo-science was used to reinforce whiteness's ideological superiority through, for instance, forced sterilization. DisCrit thus offers researchers a more nuanced analysis of White supremacy (Connor et al., 2016). One way dis/ability surfaces under the purview of tenet five is through clinical assessment practices veiled as "objective." This tenet "challenges beliefs about the inferiority of the intelligence and culture of people of color, born within pseudo-sciences and later upheld by contemporary assessment practices" (p. 23).

I analyzed identity artifacts to examine how identity artifacts impacted teachers' beliefs and practices that perpetuate deficit notions of children's reading status and learning potential. This study used DisCrit, Tenets One and Five, to illuminate how ideology is "not an individually based phenomenon" but instead produced and "nested within educational systems" (Fergus, 2016, p. 120).

Methodology

I conducted a case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) across 16 weeks using ethnographic methods (Emerson et al., 2011). Using a qualitative approach, researchers construct a case study by establishing the context of a social unit or phenomena to bound a study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I was interested in the "local particulars" of the "at risk" construct that some children experience in an early childhood classroom (p. 3). Therefore, case study provided a methodology that allowed me a close analysis of the factors and processes that shape "at-risk" status (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Context of the Study

This study took place in the Midwest region of the United States. The research site, Brantley Elementary School, (all names are pseudonyms), is located in a metropolitan city.

School and Participants

Brantley Elementary School (BES) enrolled 447 K-5 students at the time of the study, 69% qualified for meal assistance. According to official school reports, the student population was 68% African American, 30% white, and 2% other races. BES was identified as a Title I school with a Title 1 school-wide program during the 2016-17 school-year. BES employed 24 classroom teachers, including one special education teacher and one reading interventionist. The student/teacher ratio was 18:1. The 2016-17 state assessment results for all third graders at BES reported 26% of children were proficient in all subject areas. Comparatively, 36% of all third-grade students in the state were proficient in all subject areas. More than 95% of BES' enrolled students took the state test.

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The racial diversity of the children in the classroom reflected that of the school. Room 3, the first-grade classroom where I generated data, included 21 children (14 identified as Black, 2 as white, 2 as Hispanic, and 3 as other races). On the first day of the study, Ms. Brown shared with me an unsolicited list of first and last names of the 21 children in the classroom. A star next to 7 names indicated children were "at-risk" readers. 6 of the 7 children were Black, one was multiracial, and all received meal assistance. When I asked Ms. Brown how she determined children's reading status, she reported that the first-grade teachers and the school's reading interventionist used district-mandated literacy assessment data and teachers' observations.

Focal Child Participant

Jayda, a 7-year-old African American girl, joined Ms. Brown's first-grade classroom one week before the study began (mid-February). Before joining Brantley, Jayda's Grandmother shared with the school that she was no longer able to homeschool her. During the study, Jayda's grandparents were her legal guardians. Although Jayda was quiet while working and during social interactions in the classroom, the other children included her in conversations and recess. She often raised her hand to volunteer during class discussions.

Focal Adult Participants

Ms. Brown

The teacher, Ms. Brown, in Room 3, was a 39-year-old White American woman. At the time of the study, she was completing her 17th year in the district.

When I approached Ms. Brown about the possibility of her classroom as a site for my dissertation research, she was enthusiastic about the opportunity to reflect on her practice.

Researcher Positionality. As a 44-year-old, White American woman and former teacher turned researcher, I taught public and private school for over 10 years as a primary classroom teacher, a K-5 school media specialist, and technology teacher, and a middle school Spanish teacher. I also provided professional development to educators across the United States with a national institute for six years. I taught both undergraduate and master's literacy courses at a large Midwestern university. In each position, I participated in perpetuating a problematic discourse and pedagogy that construct students as dis/abled readers (e.g., "low," "high," "medium").

This study took place in the district where I was a teacher for 10 years. Because of the long-standing relationship Ms. Brown and I had before the study, I had established her trust. While I, the researcher, and Ms. Brown, the classroom teacher, are White the study's student participants are primarily Black. Similarly, the staff at the school where I conducted this study was also mostly white and female. I pause here to emphasize how my whiteness (Matias et al. 2014) was a factor that perpetuated the "at-risk" construct in my teaching and research.

Data Generation and Analysis

I generated data through participant observation (n=98 hours) (Spradley, 1980). Using DisCrit theory as my guide, the data I collected consisted of interviews, video and audio recordings, field notes, and material artifacts (e.g., policy, literacy assessment protocols, lesson plans) (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). I conducted and transcribed one-on-

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one semi-structured interviews with Ms. Brown, Ms. Grove, and the school's reading interventionist. The interviews with school personnel were between 30 and 90 minutes. During each interview, I used an interview protocol; however, the questions varied according to participant responses. Additionally, I engaged in informal conversations with the teacher and reading interventionist, and principal each time I visited. We exchanged emails if I had any follow-up questions. When I observed the English Language Arts (ELA) block 3x/week, I audio- and/or video-recorded each session.

To understand how identity artifacts influenced a teacher's perceptions and instructional practices, I used *post-coding analysis* that allowed me to "think with theory" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717; emphasis in original. I drew on scholars (Augustine, 2014; Jackson & Mazzei, 2014; St. Pierre, 2018; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) who offer alternative methods to "conventional coding in qualitative data interpretation and analysis" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 261) or "explicit coding" (Augustine, 2014, p. 748). I began analyzing data during the data collection phase of the study by writing short memos in response to field notes, interviews, and listening to audio and viewing video. Before and after the data collection phase of the study, I continuously read theory. My "first analytic stances towards the data" was through writing; thus, writing and thinking with theory were my analysis (Augustine, 2014, p. 749).

The identity artifacts that I analyzed through this recursive process of reading theory, writing, re-reading theory, and revising my writing were the following: policy, literacy assessment protocols, children's work, reading lesson plans, district, school, and classroom newsletters, email correspondences between school personnel and myself, interview transcripts, and field notes. As I wrote, I noted how particular artifacts, such as

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the "at-risk" construct, influenced Ms. Brown's presumptions about children's learning potential as well as her practice. For example, I noted how literacy assessments used in the classroom like DIBELS produced labels for children's language and literacy practices according to their scores and how those labels became a sorting mechanism for ability reading groups (e.g., "at or below benchmark," "well below benchmark").

Findings

By applying a DisCrit lens and tracing out policy from the local and state-levels to the federal level, I examined how "normative cultural standards such as whiteness and ability lead to viewing differences among certain individuals as deficits" and the practice of labeling some children as "at-risk" for academic failure (Connor et al, 2016, pp. 19-20). I identified how particular identity artifacts upheld normalized notions of literacy development. The identity artifacts influenced how I interpreted Ms. Brown's beliefs about the "at-risk" reading status and the children identified. Specifically, as I argue here, Title I—a federal policy, and the "Third Grade Reading Law"—a state policy, pathologized Brantley Elementary and some of the children it served. Together, these artifacts promulgated underlying assumptions steeped in racism and ableism that assume some children embody cognitive deficiencies in the form of reading dis/ability (Connor et al., 2016). My data analysis uncovered two findings: (1) racialized notions of ability underscored the federal, state, and district-level policies that influenced Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices and shaped the "at-risk" construct, and (2) Ms. Brown operationalized "at risk" through interactions that shaped children's "a- risk" status.

Reinforcing Racism and Dis/ability at the Macrolevel: Policy Implications of "At-Risk"*Federal-Level Policy*

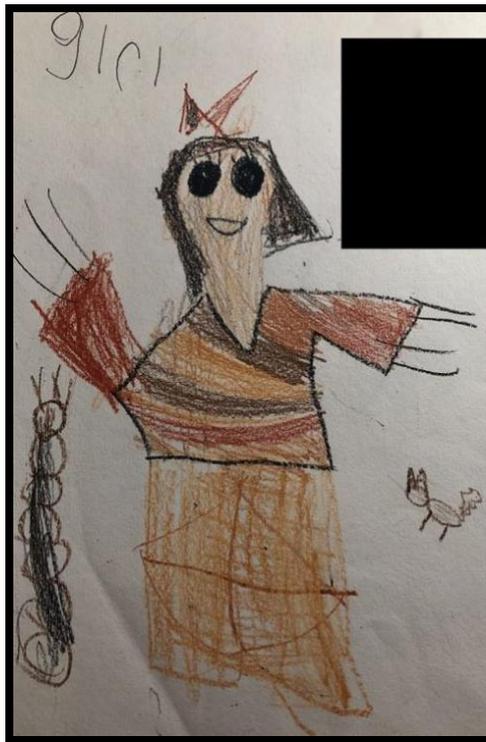
Race, ability, and class unified as a macrolevel system of oppression to produce "at risk." Policy at the federal and state/local levels were macrolevel identity artifacts that operationalized "at risk" and marginalized some children of color. These policies also impacted Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices, and in turn, shaped Jayda's "at-risk" status. For example, Brantley's principal reported that a high percentage of students qualified for meal assistance, therefore the school received Title I funding, the most extensive federal program for K-12 educators. Because the school received Title I money, school personnel implemented school-wide programming (personal communication, November 19, 2017). Through Title I, Ms. Brown carried out a "legacy of historical beliefs about race and ability" (Connor et al., 2016, p. 10). Moreover, the identification process Ms. Brown used to identify children perceived as "at-risk" for Title I services ultimately marginalized children of color, failing to recognize the prominence of ability and the "avoidance of the prominence of race, racialization, and racism" (Paris, 2019, p. 218).

For example, early on in the study, I observed how Title I policy, and her own biases impacted Ms. Brown's notions of "at-risk" readers. Jayda was among the seven students with a star next to her name. I inquired about Jayda's reading status. Not yet having administered district-mandated, first-grade literacy assessments, Ms. Brown shared with me her observation that while Jayda transitioned into the classroom socially, she was concerned about her ability to process language, which was, in her opinion, affecting Jayda's capacity to read and write. Within her first month in school, Jayda was

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evaluated for a Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) at the request of Ms. Brown. Jayda qualified and began receiving services in less than the first six weeks of her public schooling career.

Figure 1. *Jayda's Self-portrait*



Whiteness contributed to the arbitrary boundary Ms. Brown drew between her perceptions of "normal" and "abnormal" language. These perceptions positioned Jayda's language as deficient. Whereas Ms. Brown interpreted and responded to Jayda's perceived language differences as a dis/ability, I observed robust talk. To learn more about children's identities, I conducted a one-on-one interview with each child in the classroom. During this interview, I provided them with paper and crayons and asked them to draw a picture of themselves and describe things that make them special using pictures and or words. Jayda's self-portrait (Figure 1) demonstrates that she processed and followed verbal instructions, offered a detailed drawing of herself, and used writing to

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communicate her self-identified gender. During our conversation, Jayda described her illustration in the following way.

Kristen: Can you tell me about what you drew in your picture?

Jayda: I drew a squirrel and a girl.

Kristen: What's over on this side (left) of the picture?

Jayda: Oh, I was thinking of drawing a cake.

Kristen: Do you like cake?

Jayda: Yes. Only chocolate cake.

The details in Jayda's drawing and the above exchange juxtaposed with Ms. Brown's perceptions of Jayda's language and Jayda's perceptions of herself as a reader are incongruent. Later in the conversation I asked Jayda what it means to be a "good" reader. She responded, "You know every single word." Jayda's response indicates a keen awareness of what it meant to be a "good" reader in first grade. I followed up by asking Jayda what advice she might have for teachers.

Kristen: What would you want teachers to know about how kids learn to read?

Jayda: I would tell them that I'm the best reader, and I can read. That's it.

Although Jayda processed and verbalized language that was comprehensible and perceived herself as the "best reader," Ms. Brown was still convinced that she was "at risk." She confirmed these assumptions with a battery of literacy assessments.

State-Level Policy. Another identity artifact imposed from the state level that further intensified teachers' and the district's accountability to uphold the cultural standards of whiteness and ability was the state's new "Third Grade Reading Law." The

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law reified Ms. Brown's deficit conceptions of Jayda and other students of color in her classroom labeled "at-risk." The urgency of identifying and remediating "at-risk" children was reinforced by district administrators, who were also all white, in a monthly district newsletter distributed to all staff that Ms. Brown shared with me dated February 13, 2017:

In response to the 3rd Grade Reading Law, ... the Heights School District has hit the ground running to ensure all 3rd grade students will be reading at grade level. Our current kindergartners will be the first class to feel the effects of this law. In 2020, those who do not pass the ELA portion of the M-STEP [state-level assessment] in 3rd grade would be the first students to be retained.

The newsletter further reported that according to the previous year's M-STEP data, the law would have required the district to retain as many as 50% of last year's third-grade students. For Brantley, the impending law, compounded with the school's established "at-risk" status, legalized the high stakes associated with standardized achievement testing. For some of the children attending Brantley, the law was a barrier for advancement to fourth grade. Brantley complied with the "damaging logics of erasure and deficiency" embedded in Title I policy guidelines (Paris, 2019, p. 217). Echoing the historical aspects of Title I, the Third Grade Reading Law threatened financial punishment for school districts if children's performance on the state test was inadequate. Determinations for cut-points were arbitrary, but ultimately the state wielded its power to make those decisions. Although the law had not taken effect, it was an identity artifact that impacted Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices. Simply put, the "Third Grade Reading Law" was already authorizing Jayda's and other children's future "at-risk" status.

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District/Local-Level Policy. Another identity artifact at the district level that influenced Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices and Jayda's "at-risk" status were two contemporary mandated literacy assessments. Ms. Brown considered these prescriptive assessments objective measures of children's literacy as she used them to identify children "at risk." The first assessment given three times per year was the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIBELS). Jayda experienced the end-of-year assessment only due to her short time in first grade. This assessment consisted of six elements reporting each result and a composite score. Whereas Jayda's end-of-year composite score, 4, was distant from the 155 "benchmark," she scored 20 with a 58 "benchmark" in naming correct letter sounds in nonsense words. She also scored 25 in oral reading fluency accuracy with a 90 "benchmark."

Figure 2 *Developmental Reading Assessment*

Teacher Observation Guide **Get Your Umbrella** 6/6/17 Level 4, Page 1

Name/Date: [Redacted] Teacher/Grade: [Redacted]

Scores: Reading Engagement 7/8 Oral Reading Fluency 16/16 Comprehension 28/28
 Independent Range: 6-7 11-14 19-25

Book Selection Text selected by: teacher student

1. READING ENGAGEMENT
 (If the student has recently answered these questions, skip this section.)

7. Who reads with you or to you at home? grma

7. Would you rather listen to a story or read a story to someone?
 Why? like reading

7. Tell me about one of your favorite books. Cat in the hat he has whiskers & he pl

2. ORAL READING FLUENCY
 INTRODUCTION AND PREVIEW
 7. In this story, Get Your Umbrella, Kim and her dad are getting ready to go outside on a rainy day. Dad tells Kim to get her umbrella. Look at all the pictures, and tell me what is happening in this story.

Note the student's use of connecting words (e.g., and, then, but) and vocabulary relevant to the text. You may use general prompts, such as "Now what is happening?" or "Turn the page," but do not ask specific questions. Tally the number of times you prompt. 111

RECORD OF ORAL READING
 Record the student's oral reading behaviors on the Record of Oral Reading below and on the following page.

7. Get Your Umbrella. Now, read to find out where Kim looks for her umbrella.

Page 2
 "Look at the rain," said Dad. (1)
 "Get your umbrella." (1) good progress w/ reading

Page 3
 Kim looked in the closet. (1)
 "No umbrella," she said. (1)

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Similarly, four times throughout the school year, Ms. Brown administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to measure children's reading level, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This literacy assessment is problematic for two reasons. First, it maintains White cultural norms for reading. Second, the assessments include a set of culturally biased questions about reading engagement (see Figure 2). For instance, the first question assumes all children have caretakers who read print-based text with them or to them at home. It also presumes that the caretakers in a given child's family can read the print-based text. While the second question assumes that all children can listen to a story or read to someone in the family, the third question presumes children have access to books. Last, children orally read a story they have never seen or heard before about a topic that may be unfamiliar.

After completing the assessment, Ms. Brown calculated scores for individual children and then assigned a numerical score. She compared this score against a "benchmark" established by the publisher. Thus, Ms. Brown interpreted the discrepancy between Jayda's DRA score of 3 with 16, the end "benchmark." The assessment protocol nor Ms. Brown accounted for Jayda's access to instruction. Ms. Brown interpreted Jayda's score not as variation in human development but as an indication of abnormality. In other words, the numerical difference between Jayda's score from the cultural standard positioned her as deficient.

Jayda's DRA score increased between March and June. Ms. Brown's notes indicate that Jayda made "good progress with reading." However, Jayda did not meet the grade-level expectation DRA score of 16. On a given day, Jayda was removed from the classroom up to three times per day for various "interventions." Although the adults who

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provided these services analyzed and discussed assessment data and personal observations of Jayda, they did not deliver coherent instruction to meet her learning needs. I did not observe the adults who provided "intervention" services for Jayda coordinate instruction, materials, or lessons. Perhaps viewing Jayda as a potential liability for the district with the impending "Third Grade Reading Law," Ms. Brown, the principal, and the reading interventionist used the district-mandated literacy assessment data and personal observations to justify and recommend retention. Requesting that Jayda remained in Ms. Brown's classroom another year, Jayda's grandparents (legal guardians) agreed.

With a DisCrit lens, I noted how racism and ableism undergirded policies around identification of children "at risk" and current widespread policy around retention like the "Third Grade Reading Law." Additionally, DisCrit exposes how Ms. Brown's whiteness prevented her from recognizing her role in sustaining racialized notions of ability through the administration and interpretation of district-mandated literacy assessments. In turn, policy at the federal, state, and district-levels influenced Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices that reinforced "unmarked norms of whiteness" that shaped and sustained Jayda's "at-risk" status (Connor et al., 2016, p. 19).

Neutralizing Racism and Dis/ability at the Microlevel: Mobilizing "At-Risk"

Identity artifacts like Title I and the "Third Grade Reading Law" legalize the sorting of children according to ability. Thus, they conceal the racialization of ability. Likewise, policy influenced and normalized interactions during the literacy assessments, planning, and instruction that upheld whiteness. One practice that influenced Ms. Brown's beliefs and practices that shaped Jayda's status was a "reading workshop" model

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designed by school personnel in response to Brantley's "Focus School" status. As a result, the staff wrote school improvement goals to respond to the student "achievement gap" prevalent in children's achievement test scores.

The first-grade teachers implemented across-grade ability groups (i.e., children were sorted by perceived ability level across first-grade classrooms) for reading instruction to increase children's performance on the state's standardized achievement test. Twice per year, district-level administrators met with Ms. Brown, the other two first-grade teachers, and the reading interventionist to discuss literacy assessment data, instructional practices and share ideas. I observed what was referred to as a "Data Dig" in April. During this meeting, the reading interventionist, Ms. Violet, noted Jayda's perceived "at-risk" status.

Jayda needs to be a topic of intense discussion because she is extremely low. She's actually getting certified speech and language with an IEP on Friday. We have some things in place. Like Judy [retired teacher who worked one-on-one with Jayda] comes daily for a half hour and works one-on-one with her. But she's so much lower than the other kids in the lowest reading group that Kim [first-grade teacher] is taking. It's almost like teaching two separate reading groups.

Kim explained that one of the paraprofessionals who worked with Jayda during reading workshop is "taking her for LLI [Leveled Literacy Intervention], and she's losing sleep over it. It's getting to be cumbersome."

The conversation about how to piecemeal Jayda's reading instruction continued between the first-grade teachers and Ms. Violet.

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Ms. Brown: The gap is too big. It's almost like she needs one-on-one.

Ms. Violet: It's almost like she needs to be out of LLI.

Ms. Violet: She's getting LLI for a half hour from 12:30 to 1:00 every day
but we don't have a placement for her from 1:00 to 1:30.

Frustrated with Jayda's performance during reading workshop, Kim shared her dilemma about Jayda's arrival during the last 30 of the 45 minutes of the group. Kim taught three other African American first-grade boys, also labeled "at risk." Kim shared her strategy, "so I kind of flipped my reading workshop a little bit.... But, when we go back to reading the book or writing a sentence, it's that learned helplessness....she can sometimes tell me the letter but then she's not very engaged."

The discussion during the "Data Dig" meeting illustrates the piecemeal instruction Jayda experienced. School personnel did not approach the conversation from a strengths perspective. In other words, they did not discuss what she could do or any achievement gains she made in the short amount of time she was in first grade. Instead, Jayda was positioned as a problem. School personnel perceived her literacy and learning potential as behind the rest of the children identified as "at risk." The reading workshop model neutralizes how various interactions during reading instruction mechanized racism and ableism. During a week, I observed Jayda experience reading instruction with five different adults in in different locations within the school. Only two of four adults used a similar prescriptive curriculum (LLI). Jayda was also pulled out of the classroom for speech and language services.

Legal policies like Title I and third-grade reading laws have "racialized dis/ability" so that students of color receive specialized services (Connor et al., 2016). In

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Jayda's case, although she received services due to the imposed "at-risk" status, she endured exclusion from socializing and learning alongside her peers and stigmatization. The quality of the instruction she received is debatable. Remarkably, she made progress on the end-of-year literacy assessments. These gains suggest that access to full inclusion in the classroom, notions of literacy development unhinged from the White gaze, and instruction designed to sustain her, Jayda's learning potential far exceeds the low expectations she experienced.

A year after the study, I followed up with Ms. Brown to inquire about Jayda's progress. Ms. Brown reported that Jayda was tested for special education three months after school started but did not qualify under the LD or Cognitive Impairment (CI) categories that she anticipated. Ms. Brown wrote that while Jayda "has some fairly decent visual processing skills, she had great difficulty with many concepts. We will need to stay with the Speech language impairment (SLI) category to get services. Her profile fits well with SLI as well" (personal communication, February 18, 2018). In sum, Jayda entered into a system that was designed to deny her the right to a free appropriate public education shaped by racism and ableism that pervades the social and cultural landscape of U.S. schooling.

Implications

Although the "at-risk" status is an identity artifact produced by policy that may begin as early as first grade, it has lifelong serve implications for children labeled as such in terms of education, employment, and healthcare. Once a child is labeled "at risk" in school, it is difficult to escape this identity. Historically, the result the "at-risk" label is a disproportionate representation of Black children placed in special education due to

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policy steeped in race and ability. Thus, it is important that educators, researchers, and policymakers must examine their positionalities when designing and implementing policy and practice. Educators must understand the dangers of assessing children's literacy with identity artifacts like assessments that are not culturally relevant for the children they teach (Sachs et al., 2018). These assessments shape children's literate identity. With an increasingly diverse U.S. student population and predominantly white and female teaching force (Sleeter & Milner, 2011), it is also imperative that educators examine their beliefs about the children they teach and the instructional practices they implement in their classrooms. Researchers and policymakers should consider the roles of race and dis/ability when developing and testing "interventions" and policies for children marked as "at risk." Instead, more research is needed that problematizes and dismantles "at-risk" at the intersection of racism and ableism.

As a white researcher and Ms. Brown's former mentor, I am not absolved. Like Ms. Brown, I held the standard view that "at-risk" was intrinsic, and believed that some children were deficient in the "traits and abilities" necessary to succeed in reading (Dudley-Marling, 2020, p. 42). Unlike Ms. Brown, I had access to mentors, scholars, and texts that support my lifelong journey to understand my whiteness and complicity in reifying "at-risk." Therefore, ongoing professional development for educators that addresses their conceptions about students, the community they teach in, and examining their positionality and its impact on their practice could have positive implications for transforming their beliefs and practice. Access to critical theories might also help educators dismantle the notions of normalcy in which they are enmeshed.

Additionally, because I used a theoretical framework like DisCrit, I interrogated my position as a White researcher, notably as I conducted research in a mostly Black and Brown context. Until the editors of this journal recommended DisCrit as a framework for this study, my analysis only consisted of dis/ability and ignored its connection with race. While I was a participant-observer in Ms. Brown's classroom, I observed the instructional practices described in this article and wondered what I could possibly write about. The classroom's daily workings seemed like "business as usual" because of my own participation in the same rituals.

Ms. Brown and I cannot escape the White gaze. However, we can shift the White gaze to be more constructive than destructive. A more positive and transformative approach attuned to children's learning potential and that constructs them as capable is a strength-based perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2015; Paris, 2012, 2019). From a strength-based orientation in the context of schooling, the "at-risk" status would not exist because it requires that teachers build on children's "resources, talents, knowledge, and motivation" and "environmental collateral" to construct possibility and promise (Moll et al., 1992; Saleebey, 1996, p. 302). Thus, teacher education programs could implement strategies to support pre-service teachers to adopt a critical strengths perspective to interrogate policies like Title I and the Third-Grade Reading Law. Thus, they could learn to construct practices that value and respect children's ways of knowing and being.

Conclusion

This case study examined how artifacts, like "at-risk" status, shaped and stabilized some children's literate identity. A DisCrit framework illustrates how policy, at the

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federal and state/local levels, influenced a first-grade teacher's beliefs about children labeled "at-risk" for reading. Implications from this study demonstrate the urgency for spaces that provide opportunities where teachers, researchers, and policymakers can critically interrogate how their positionalities and policy exacerbate inequitable learning environments for children whom schooling has historically underserved. For instance, through my analysis, further reading, and continuous examination of my whiteness, I better understand context's complexity. Various factors within the school context impacted Ms. Brown's notions of children's learning potential, and the reading instruction she planned and implemented. At the same time, I recognize how my positionality and complicity as a White educator reified the harmful "at-risk" artifact and how my exposure to anti-racist scholarship led me to envision a call to action for its eradication.

Research has explored children deemed "at-risk" for reading failure in various contexts and "interventions" to remediate the reading of children identified and labeled as such. Title I and the Third-Grade Reading Law were identity artifacts that were upheld by understanding reading "deficiency" as a dis/ability that exists within individual children. Therefore, the school's job is to "fix" or "cure" their perceived deficiencies. This deficit perspective reflects a belief that some children are biologically incapable of acquiring literacy (Sleeter, 1986). Therefore, additional studies exploring the materials and social interactions in school that construct some children, particularly at a young and impressionable age, as reading dis/abled are vital because they examine the social, cultural, and political artifacts that produce the LD category. While researchers from different interpretive traditions have advanced the field's understanding about how classroom interactions construct identities that are fluid, and oftentimes multiple, such a

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lens does not account for the ways that identity is stabilized during these interactions (Leander, 2002).

While some educators likely enter the profession wanting children to succeed, their intentions are complicated by their positionalities and identity artifacts masked as equitable. The artifacts that are likely designed to support children instead construct and maintain the imposed “at-risk” identity. A strength-based perspective of children in school and educational research disrupt and challenge the "White settler gaze" to advance justice and equity (Paris, 2019, p. 217). If educators pair a strength-based perspective with a critical view of identity artifacts, they can better serve all children. This article demonstrates how Ms. Brown operationalized race and ability to maintain "at-risk" status through policies at the federal, state, and local levels. Ms. Brown, perhaps unknowingly, promulgated whiteness. This study shows the need for intentional teacher education programs, educational research, and professional development that provides a curriculum and space for educators to interrogate how structural barriers are constructed and maintained by the White gaze to disenfranchise students of color.

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