CULTURALLY CONTESTED LITERACIES

America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools

Guofang Li

Culturally Contested Literacies

Culturally Contested Literacies is a vivid ethnographic account of the everyday cross-cultural living and schooling experiences of six culturally diverse families in urban America. Documenting the ways in which these families learn about literacies and their meanings in relation to schools, inner-city environments, and other ethnic groups, Guofang Li's incisive analysis reveals the unique experiences of fractured urban America—the dynamics of how and in what conditions the families take up contradictory positions of conformity and resistance within and across various discourses and boundaries.

Unlike prior research that fragments various social categories, *Culturally Contested Literacies* explores the rich complexity within each family as it makes sense of its daily relations in terms of literacy, race, ethnicity, class, and gender. It juxtaposes the productions of such familial relations across different racial and cultural groups within the context of the larger socio-political and socio-economic formations. By presenting a realistic picture of the varying ways that America's "rainbow underclass" might encounter schooling, Li argues that urban education must be understood in relation not only to the individual's cultural and familial milieu, but also to the interactive context between the individual and schools.

Guofang Li is Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University.

To the families in this study,
for their dreams beyond the city

Culturally Contested Literacies

America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools

Guofang Li

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2008
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's
collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an
informa business*

© 2008 Taylor & Francis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted
or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any
information storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

Trademark Notice: Product or corporate names may be
trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for
identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Li, Guofang.
Culturally contested literacies: America's rainbow
underclass and urban schools/by Guofang Li.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-415-95564-5 (hb: alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-
415-95565-2 (pb: alk. paper) 1. Multicultural education—
United States—Case studies. 2. Education, Urban—United
States—Case studies. 3. Literacy—Social aspects—United
States—Case studies. I. Title.
LC1099.3.L5 2008
370.19´3480973–dc22
2007019500

ISBN 0-203-93557-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-95564-5 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-415-95565-3 (pbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-93557-8 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-95564-5 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-95565-2 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-93557-6 (ebk)

Contents

Acknowledgments vi

1 Introduction: *America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Inner City Schooling* 1

2 Where the Stories Began: *The City and its Schools* 27

3 Being Vietnamese, Becoming Somebody 57

4 Being Sudanese, Being Black 93

5 Being White, Being the Majority in the Minority 127

6 Multicultural Families and Multiliteracies: *Tensions, Conformity, and Resistance to Urban Schooling* 161

7 Culturally Contested Literacies and the Education of America's "Rainbow Underclass" 183

Notes 199

References 201

Index 213

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to many individuals who provided me with support and assistance throughout this book project. The six families invited me into their homes and shared much of their histories, happy and unhappy life stories, worries, concerns, and triumphs with me, and, at times, generously offered me delicious food. The teachers and parent liaisons kindly dedicated their time to this project, sharing what they saw and experienced in the schools and their efforts to improve the education of the children they serve. I remain deeply appreciative of their support and participation, which have made this book possible.

I am also indebted to many of my graduate students at the University at Buffalo, where I completed the data collection, and in the Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, where I completed the writing of the project. Chizuko Konishi and Evelyn at the University at Buffalo were very instrumental in the data collection process. I am grateful for their time and dedication in assisting me in this project. I am also very grateful to Won Pyo Hong at the Michigan State University, who spent many hours listening to me work out my ideas, checking transcripts, and helping me refining the manuscript. I thank Kristen Perry for checking the transcripts and Jamie Puccioni for her editorial help.

I am deeply grateful to many of my colleagues and friends in the two universities. I owe a special thanks to Lois Weis at the University at Buffalo, who spent invaluable time reading and commenting on the manuscript. Her insightful comments have made this book a much stronger piece of scholarship.

My gratitude also goes to the staff at Routledge. I am deeply indebted to Catherine Bernard, who took a strong interest in the book when I first presented her with the project. I am grateful for her faith and belief in me. I also thank Heather Jarrow for her role in the production process and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and feedback on an earlier version of the manuscript.

My appreciation is also extended to many of my friends and colleagues who have helped me embrace life besides work—Xiufeng and Rui, Mary and Jian, Lynne and Shusheng, Tim for also reading some of my work, Diana and Geralyn, Weihong and Biao, Baolian, Dongping, and many others for providing much needed 'distraction' from writing. My final appreciation goes to my families in China and Canada for their continued support and love over the years.

1
Introduction: *America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Inner City Schooling*

> Reality as it is thought does not correspond to the reality being lived objectively, but rather to the reality in which alienated man imagines himself to be.
>
> **–Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1975)**

It's a hot sunny summer afternoon in Buffalo,[1] a middle-sized city in western New York. Music is playing loudly on one of the front porches of West Lane Street in the heartland of the city's impoverished West Side. Accompanying the music, one can occasionally hear laughter amidst someone's teasing, men yelling, and kids screaming. It is too hot to stay inside. Many people sit around on deserted car seats on the front porches of their unkempt houses, either trying to enjoy the music while watching the cars pass by, or trying to ignore it.

A thirteen-year-old Sudanese refugee, Nina Torkeri, and her two younger sisters are tired of listening to the loud music the whole afternoon and they try to ignore it by playing with each other's hair while their eleven-year-old brother, Fred, is cruising up and down the street on his bicycle trying to see what's happening around the block. He is waiting for his older brother, Owen, to come home so that they can go play basketball. Upstairs in their two-bedroom apartment their mother Anne is preparing dinner with their eight-month-old baby sister strapped on her back, crying. She is sweating, rushing to get everything ready. It's too hot inside and the ear-pounding music makes her feel even hotter. She hopes that the music will stop soon. The unbearable noise that she has to endure daily makes her wish she could move to another area. However, she knows that this is an impossibility, for the rent is good here and she will not find any cheaper living accommodations for a family of eight.

Only several houses down, you will find the front porch of the Ton family is empty. The Ton family is the only Vietnamese family on this block. Twelve-year-old Mien sits intently in front of the computer in his room playing video games, while two of his Vietnamese buddies crouch beside him cheering and exclaiming as he moves the mouse. Downstairs in the big living room on the left side of the entrance, six-year-old Dan lies on the floor, eyes glued to the big 57-inch TV screen. He is playing the *Asian Empire* video game, while his ten-

year-old sister, Nyen, watches him play and tries to play along, helping him as he cannot read or speak English. Excited by the game, he kicks, giggles, and shouts in Vietnamese to his sister, who tries hard to get him to listen to her. She is bored and thinks of going outside to look for her friend Mimi, a Lebanese girl attending the same school, to play. In the back, their grandmother, who can speak only Vietnamese, quietly prepares dinner. Their father, Lo, has just left for work in a factory in the south town for his second shift and their mother, Cam, will come home in a couple of hours from the same factory.

Two streets away, parallel to West Lane, the loud music can no longer be heard and the street is rather strangely quiet and empty. The house of another Sudanese refugee family, the Myers, is extremely quiet. A couple of family members watch TV just to stay occupied, while the others play in the backyard. Mother, Gloria, has not come back from her factory job, but all seven other family members are at home. They have to remain relatively quiet as their father, Mahdi, is taking a nap. He usually comes home early in the morning from his night shift at his meat-slicing job, catching sleep for a couple of hours before he drives his children to school during the school year. Now he can sleep one hour longer in the morning, as it is summer and the children do not go to school. He then attends classes at a local community college. In the afternoon after his classes are over, he tries to get a few more hours of sleep before he goes back to work again.

A few minutes away, another Vietnamese household, the Phan house, is equally quiet. The Phan parents are at work. The mother, Lynne, works in a nail salon and the father, Dao Phan, works as a mechanic. They will not come home until nearly 9:00 p.m. Sixteen-year-old Hanh sits in their dark living room trying to read, but she keeps thinking about the house chores she needs to do and the bills she must remind her parents to pay. Even on a beautiful day like this, she cannot go out of the house or talk to her friends over the phone because she is Vietnamese, and as a girl she is not allowed to do so. The living room curtain is tightly closed so that passers-by will think no one is at home. She can hear her brother, Chinh, shouting, chasing, and running with a group of boys outside the house. They are having a great time scourging the neighborhood. She hopes that he will soon come in and study English so that he can improve his reading and writing skills over the summer.

The neighborhood is composed not just of immigrants and refugees; several blocks away on Haven Street, the Claytons are one of the few white families in this area. Twenty-nine-year-old Pauline is a mother of three—two older children from a previous relationship and a baby son from her current boyfriend. She is pregnant with her fourth child, who is due in six months. As a single mother without a car, Pauline relies on welfare to get by. The family's current apartment is subsidized housing from the government. On a hot day like this, it is hard to stay inside. The Claytons' house is not quiet like some

of the other houses. The phone is ringing. The baby is crying. Three-year-old Judd cannot stay still even for a second and is banging on the tables and chairs, running around and throwing things, while ten-year-old Kate runs after him to calm him down. Having a hard time talking on the phone, Pauline yells for her boyfriend, who is upstairs in their bedroom, to do something with the baby or with Judd.

On the outskirts of the neighborhood, the house of another white family, the Sassanos, is peaceful and quiet. Everyone is busy attending to their own matters. Ten-year-old Rod sits on the porch reading a new book he just borrowed from the public library, while his twelve-year-old brother Scott (who does not like books) hides himself in his room playing computer games. Their grandmother, who is hearing-impaired, lives upstairs and is always very quiet. Their father is a local jeweler and is still at work. Their mother, Loraine, happens to be at home after her shift at a local grocery store. She is busy organizing the upcoming Boy Scouts' camping activities for the next weekend. Their dining table is covered with charts, papers, and labels. She is pleased to see Rod reading, but is not happy with Scott, who dislikes reading books. However, since she has no time to think more about the children, she quickly ignores these thoughts and immerses herself in the tasks on hand. She needs to finish them soon, for her class at the local community college will be beginning soon, and she is studying to become a nurse.

All the families introduced above have two things in common in addition to living in the same neighborhood. They all have children who attend the nearby public school, Rainbow Elementary, and they all are committed to their children's schooling. The seemingly peaceful picture painted above, though a superficial sketch of their daily lives, reveals some serious undercurrents that run through these families' pathways to success in the inner-city neighborhood. As their stories will demonstrate in this book, despite their best efforts, many of these children are struggling in school, and only a few of them have achieved success. Even among the few success stories, serious socio-emotional stress seems to have masked the sense of pride and joy among the children.

These six different urban families are part of America's expanding "rainbow underclass," who are culturally diverse (hence the name "rainbow") and economically disadvantaged and who are often caught in downward social mobility (hence the term "underclass") (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zuckerman, 2002). They, together with the poor and working-class African Americans remaining in inner cities, are part of a new class fraction in urban America that is often misunderstood and ignored in social science research and in the general public consciousness (Fine & Weis, 1998; Weis, 1990, 2004). Sitting at the bottom of the richest country in the world, they are often depicted as "the *cause* of national problems" and "the *reason* for the rise in urban crime, as

embodying the *necessity* for welfare reform, and of sitting at the *heart* of moral decay" (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 1, italics original). Yet, this group, especially the foreign-born immigrants and refugees, are often excluded in national conversations and ignored in the policy-making processes—their voices are often not heard and their experiences remain foreign to their middle-class neighbors and to the general public (Fine & Weis, 1998).

The intention of this book, therefore, is to bring the voices and experiences of this group, especially the foreign born, from the margin to the center. Extending prior research (e.g., Fine & Weis, 1998; Weis, 1990, 2004) that argues for the forging of this distinct social class under the new globalized economy, I explore literacy practices in this new class fraction as its members raise the next generation. That is, I examine the multifaceted literacies of this new class in their everyday cross-cultural living in an urban neighborhood as these literacies intersect with their schooling experiences. Specifically, I look at the multiple aspects of their daily literacy practices, as they cross the national, cultural, racial, and educational borders between their home countries and the US inner city and between their home and the school.

In this book, literacy means "an identity kit"—a discourse characterized by socially accepted ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting (Gee, 1991, p. 3). By literacies, I conceive that literacy discourses are intrinsically diverse, historically and culturally viable social practices (Collins & Blot, 2003). This book is about the "maps of meaning" (Hall & Jefferson, 1990) as experienced and understood by the six families—their "values and beliefs, dreams and struggles, newly discovered expectations and misunderstandings" (Valdés, 1996, p. 5). Like many other disadvantaged families, these families are also "consistently thwarted by institutional practices" (Rogers, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, I also analyze how the intricate institutional discourses (e.g., schooled literacy and educational policies) shape these families' everyday living and their children's schooling experiences. By bringing the everyday worlds of the families to the center stage, this book documents how culturally embedded literacies in the families are practiced, negotiated, and contested in the fabric of their urban living and schooling.

The families' everyday worlds of literacies are analyzed from a dialectical view of schooling that investigates the problems of minority experiences not just as isolated events of individuals or deficiencies in the social structure but more as part of the interactive context between the individual and the society (McLaren, 1988, 2003). I follow what Weis and Fine (2004) theorize as "a relational method" or "a compositional study" to understand how each family makes sense of its everyday literacy and living, and how the family members situate themselves in relation to a constructed Other (e.g., the African Americans). Unlike prior research that either essentializes or fragments various social categories, I examine not only the rich complexity

within each family as they make sense of their daily relations in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, but also the productions of such relations across cultural groups and within the context of the larger socio-political and socio-economic formations. Such a perspective allows me to examine not only the individual families' experiences but also the contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege that both shape and problematize the meaning of these experiences. This dialectical thought will function to bring the power of human activity and knowledge to the surface and unmask the connections between the individual experiences and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the more powerful cultural sites such as the schools (Darder, 1995).

In this sense, this book is a study about discursive conditions surrounding the six families' literacy practices and their efforts to construct or take up their particular positions within and across various socio-cultural discourses. According to Foucault (1978), a discourse is not just a language system; it also constitutes power relations and invokes particular notions of truth and thus defines what is acceptable and unacceptable in a given context. As such, power is executed less through physical instruments than through discursive formations, especially in modern societies (Foucault, 1972). Foucault further argues that power relations in discourses are not unilateral or top-down, but dynamic and interactional:

> To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one, but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies . . . . We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposed strategy.
>
> (1978, pp. 100–101)

Thus, this book is also about the six families' dynamic and interactive experiences as they construct cultural/racial identities, make sense of their inner-city environments, and negotiate power relationships with more powerful institutions such as schools. As their stories will demonstrate, at times, these families accept/resign to the dominant discourses in literacy, culture, race, class, and gender prevalent in the inner city and in the wider society. Other times, they choose to reject them and try to create counter-narratives, alternative ways of speaking of and about themselves and their worlds. This book attempts to document their journeys and the complexities in their journeys as they take up particular and often contradictory positions in new and sometimes hard circumstances—the dynamics of how and in what conditions they connect/disconnect or double/split themselves within and across various discourses and boundaries.

In the chapters that follow, I will provide detailed accounts of the six culturally diverse families' experiences with literacies and schooling as they struggle to adjust and understand the American urban education system and/or to survive in an economically depressed, post-industrial city. I will describe the dynamics and complexities of each family's struggles and identity formations within an increasingly intricate situation in which literacy, culture, race, gender, and social class intertwine to make an impact on daily survival and the children's schooling experiences. I pay particular attention to the discursive elements that shape the families' contradictory social positioning characterized by both conformity and resistance to the dominant discourses and the consequences of such positioning—how they are both an effect of power and a hindrance in their everyday literacy practices and schooling.

Through a descriptive account of the culturally different literacy practices within the different households and of their symbolic struggles against institutional practices, I argue in this book that experiences in urban schooling must be understood as products of dialectical interaction in relation to not only the individual's cultural and familial milieu but also the interactive context between the individual and the more powerful cultural sites such as schools. In the current climate, minority school failure is often charged to the deficits of the disadvantaged families (and their children) (Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001) and the parenting practices that induce school failure (e.g., working-class parents believe in accomplishment of natural growth, in which a child's development unfolds spontaneously—as long as basic comfort, food, and shelter are provided) (Lareau, 2003). This study, in contrast, demonstrates that these inner-city working-class or underclass families are highly literate, committed to their children's success and capable of concerted cultivation that generates cultural capital. Yet, despite ample commitment, persistence, and cultural capital, "the sticky web of institutional discourses" (Rogers, 2003, p. 2) as well as the contradictions both within and between home and school cultural sites (Giroux, 2001) hold them in place of failure and disadvantage.

"New" Immigration Patterns and the Schooling of America's "Rainbow Underclass"

The United States is a nation of immigrants. In the past few decades, America has received different kinds of newcomers—professional immigrants (members of the professions of exceptional ability), entrepreneur immigrants (immigrants with substantial business expertise and capital), labor immigrants (illegal or contracted foreign workers for low-paying jobs), and refugees and asylees (people who escape their country of origin for fear of prosecution or physical harm) (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Just as they differ in their pathways

into America, these groups also differ in their resettlement patterns, in their integration into the American cultural and economic structure, that result in segmentation in assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). Whereas some groups have achieved upward social mobility and/or ethnic solidarity, many low-socio-economic status (SES) groups have experienced a downward spiral into poverty, often into an inner-city underclass (McBrien, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001).

Most refugees and asylees are vulnerable to this assimilation pattern and resettle in economically depressed urban areas with high rates of crime and unemployment (McBrien, 2005). National reports show that segmented assimilation among different immigrant groups is reflected in residential segregation across different regions of the nation (Healey, 2003). In general, new professional and entrepreneurial immigrants (e.g., those from Asia) are reported to settle in suburbs outside their urban ethnic enclaves (e.g., Monterey Park in California, nicknamed the "Chinese Beverly Hills") whereas many low-skilled primary labor immigrants and refugees (e.g., Vietnamese, African refugees, and Hispanic immigrants) settle in urban enclaves as they often receive government assistance or work in low-wage occupations (Healey, 2003; Li, 2005a; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 2001). These newly arrived low-SES immigrants and refugees, together with the poor and working-class whites remaining in inner-city areas, have become America's "rainbow underclass." These "underclass" groups not only must contend with the low SES, they must also endure the impact of other social factors such as racism, negative reception, and language and cultural barriers (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

National statistics show that America has been highly segregated racially and economically across the nation since the 1980s. The US Census 2000 shows that growing ethnic diversity in the nation is accompanied by high residential segregation, especially between the black and the white. The average racial and economic composition of neighborhoods occupied by whites differs from that of neighborhoods occupied by blacks, Hispanics, Asians, or other ethnic groups. For example, on average, a typical white individual lives in a neighborhood in which 80.2 percent of residents are white, but only 6.7 percent are black, 7.9 percent are Hispanics, and 3.9 percent are Asian; whereas a typical black individual lives in a neighborhood that is made up of 51.4 percent blacks, 33.0 percent white, 11.4 percent Hispanic, and 3.3 percent Asian (Lewis Mumford Center, 2001). Since immigrants are often drawn to co-ethnic settlement, communities that are geographically separated but ethnically homogeneous are growing larger in immigrant-receiving states. Though there are many factors that contribute to the segregation (e.g., social preference, urban structure, and discrimination), socio-economic factors (e.g., affordability) are reported to exert the most significant impact (Clark,

1986; Krysan & Farley, 2002). Gimpel (1999) suggests that socio-economic mobility and geographic mobility are closely linked. People who have the means to move out of impoverished neighborhoods usually do so: moving up the economic ladder entails moving out. The relative immobility of the poor (including the recent low-SES immigrants and refugees) is part of the reason why poverty is geographically concentrated in certain neighborhoods and cities, as opposed to evenly dispersed across the nation.

Racial and economic segregation has significant impacts on the acculturation and integration of immigrant and minority groups. Gimpel (1999) points out that sometimes co-ethnic settlement provides social networks which can help new immigrants gain a foothold, but these networks are often situated within a context of urban poverty, violence, bad schools, and fierce competition for scarce jobs and housing with rival groups. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants appear not to gain benefits via social networks and wind up in dead-end jobs paying the lowest wages without benefits, or worse still on social welfare. As a result, poverty is persistent in immigrant communities and it limits their geographic mobility as recent immigrants remain stuck in some of the worst labor markets in the country (Gimpel, 1999).

Every year, Buffalo admits over 5,000 refugees. Almost all of them, together with low-SES immigrants, settle in the central city area. Buffalo is a predominantly black and white town with a population of 292,648 in its metro area, 4.4 percent of whom are foreign born (US Census Bureau, 2000). In 2005, this population had dropped by about 3 percent to 279,745. The city sits in the Rust Belt and has experienced deindustrialization since the late 1970s (Fine & Weis, 1998). The poverty rate of the central city also almost doubled, from 14.8 percent in 1969 to 26.6 percent in 1999. In addition, the median family income decreased from $39,966 in 1969 to $30,614 in 1999. Because of the continued loss of jobs, the population of the city has been in steady decline. From 1990 to 2000, it is reported that the population dropped by 10.8 percent. Accompanying the economic downturn and the desegregation of city schools in 1977, the city has also experienced a rapid change in racial demographics, as many whites have chosen to move out of city to live in the suburbs. According to State of the Cities Data System (SOCDS) Census Data in 2000 (http://socds.huduser.org/Census/), between 1980 and 2000 the white population in the central city dropped from 69.6 to 51.8 percent, while the black or African American population increased from 26.3 to 36.6 percent, the Hispanic population rose from 2.7 to 7.5 percent, and the Asians and other races increased from 1.4 to 4.1 percent.

The segmented assimilation has a significant impact on what kinds of schools inner-city children attend and what kind of education they receive (Li, 2005b). The physical capital of schools such as available resources, the social organization of the student population, the teaching force, the learners, and

the nature of curriculum and instruction differ in terms of the SES status of the community context of schools (Knapp & Woolverton, 2004; Li, 2005a). Schools in higher-SES communities possess more physical capital—they attract better-qualified teachers, receive more resources and funding, are better equipped with technology, and are in safer and more orderly environments. In contrast, schools serving students from low-income families have fewer resources, experience greater difficulties attracting qualified teachers, and face many more challenges in addressing students' needs (Lee & Burkam, 2002). In addition to the differences in physical capital, schools with different SES statuses also differ in their cultural and symbolic capital such as leadership, staff morale, expectations for students, and values placed on students' cultures and languages (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) discovered that schools serving immigrant children range from high-functioning ones with high expectations and emphases on achievement to catastrophic ones characterized by the ever-present fear of violence, distrust, low expectations and institutional anomie. The latter kinds of schools, what they call "fields of endangerment," are usually located in neighborhoods troubled by drugs, prostitution, and gangs, and often focus on survival, not learning.

Poverty rate also correlates with students' achievement gaps. The NEAP (2005) report shows that the achievement gap between different SES groups has been persistent throughout the years. For example, as Table 1.1 shows, students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs (high poverty) and those who are not (low poverty) turn out to have substantial differences in their achievement.

Table 1.1 Achievement Gap between High-Poverty and Low-Poverty Students

			Scores		
	Grade	**Year**	**High-poverty group**	**Low-poverty group**	**Group difference**
Reading	4	2002	203	226	23
		2003	201	229	27
		2005	203	230	27
	8	2002	271	249	22
		2003	271	247	24
		2005	270	247	23
Math	4	2002	208	237	29
		2003	222	244	22
		2005	225	248	23
	8	2002	253	276	23
		2003	259	285	26
		2005	262	288	26

In addition to the community context and school factors, the schooling of America's "rainbow underclass" is also influenced by the acculturation process, that is, "their different patterns of learning the language and culture of the host society" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 247). Two factors are important for this process. One is their adaptation to the culture of the host society, which is related to the community's context of reception—i.e., the degree of discrimination in the host community. Discrimination can arise from a variety of sources—historical, religious, racial, or political (e.g., seeing the immigrants as a real or symbolic threat). Communities that welcome diversity and have access to a variety of resources are more likely to foster upward social mobility among immigrants. In Centrie's (2004) study of Vietnamese youth's identity formation, for example, the school the students attend created a Vietnamese homeroom and study hall to assist their acculturation process. The homeroom and study hall allowed a free space for the affirmation of their Vietnamese values of collective learning, hard work, and appreciation of education and served as a safe and protected environment for them to learn English and American culture. The space therefore shielded the Vietnamese youth from harmful stereotypes and helped orient them to academic success.

On the other hand, if communities have negative responses to immigrants and have scarce resources, they are more likely to lead immigrants to downward assimilation, which is characterized by blocked entry into the American mainstream and socialization into the urban underclass. In contrast to the school in Centrie's (2004) study, the high school with a tradition of high academic achievement in Lee's (2005) research on Hmong students saw the minority students through the lens of difference and deficit and deemed them as "culturally, intellectually, and morally inferior to Whites" (p. 15). The school's approach to Hmong students perpetuates a racial structure that favors white students and their culture, fostering an adverse academic environment for the Hmong students. This reductionist approach therefore contributes to students' creation of oppositional identities and excludes them from academic excellence.

Communities' negative responses to minority groups have a profound influence on 1.5- or second-generation students' acculturation process. In her study of Vietnamese youth in San Diego, Zhou (2001) reports that, overall, perceptions among the Vietnamese adolescents about racial discrimination and white superiority were disturbing. Almost a third of the students held pessimistic views on racial discrimination and their economic opportunities in the US. Their perceptions about racial discrimination are often internalized, which often influences their adjustment and coping strategies (Alvarez & Helm, 2001). Similarly, Lam (2003) found that Vietnamese students who receive messages that emphasize positive images of being Asian American function better psycho-socially. In contrast, students who internalize the

negative images of racial discrimination tend to demonstrate more social and psychological struggles. In a review of at-risk Asian students, Siu (1996) found that many Southeast Asian students reported having experienced different levels of racial discrimination (e.g., name calling or being insulted or ridiculed) at school and that these experiences were often manifested in various types of emotional harms such as depressive symptoms, withdrawn or deviant behaviors, and social problems.

The other significant factor in the acculturation process is the immigrant children's attitude and connection to their first language and culture of origin, or ethnicity. One possible tendency is a growing distance from their ethnic language and culture. This tendency, termed "ethnic flight" by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001), "often comes at a significant social and emotional cost," though it can help a person succeed by mainstream standards (p. 104). From early on, these children tend to reject their first language and culture and often refuse to speak it in their home. For these children, learning a second language means losing their first language (Li, 2006; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). The other tendency, ethnic identification, is an overt resistance to the school culture and practices in the host society (Gilmore, 1991). Children who have this attitude tend to develop adversarial identities toward the mainstream language and culture, particularly the schools' sanction against their first language in school (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). They often actively engage in resistance to the mainstream language and culture while persistently using their first language and adhering to their ethnic community. The resistance, however, often has a significant social and emotional cost. Li (2006) points out that their resistance may further prevent them from learning the official knowledge and the codes of power necessary for doing well in school and realizing their parents' expectations. Therefore, unless more positive attitudes to both their home and mainstream cultures are fostered, these adversarial identities may in the long run be self-defeating and counterproductive (Nieto, 2002). In their study of Vietnamese youth, for example, Zhou and Bankston (1998) find that students who remain closely connected to the support system within their family and the community and who succeed in maintaining a more positive academic orientation achieve better than those who are alienated from their families and communities and who construct oppositional identities to the values of mainstream society including resistance to the norms of achievement sanctioned in school.

Another notable issue among immigrant families is the growing generation gap between the parents and the children, which can make the process of acculturation more complicated. For immigrant children, segmented assimilation can also encourage values that are often at odds with those espoused by immigrant parents, creating further conditions for a problematic mode of dissonant acculturation that may lead to downward mobility (Portes

& Rumbaut, 2001). Portes and Zhou (1993) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001) theorize that possible relationships across generations during the process of acculturation include generational consonance and dissonance. Generational consonance occurs when both parents and children remain unacculturated, or acculturate at roughly the same rate, or when the immigrant community encourages selective second-generation acculturation. In the first case, both parents and children resist learning the mainstream culture and language, which often results in family isolation within the ethnic community. The last two cases are conducive to the families' search for integration and acceptance into the social mainstream as well as their preservation of their first language and culture. However, it is more common for low-SES immigrant and refugee families who arrive with limited English and with few economic resources, and who are often segmented into inner-city ghettos, to experience the first case of generational consonance or, more often, generational dissonance. Since the first-generation parents often lack sufficient education or integration into the mainstream culture, their children, who often acquire the new language and culture more quickly than their parents, increasingly become family spokespersons and assume the roles of interpreters and translators (McBrien, 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). As these children increasingly adopt parental roles, parents gradually lose control and the ability to exercise guidance—developments that lead to intensified parent–child conflicts, role reversal, rupture of family ties, children's abandonment of ethnic language and culture, and ultimately the loss of parental authority (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 2001).

Cultural dissonance among generations is believed to have a profound effect on children's psychosocial well-being. In a review of the literature on refugee children's needs, McBrien (2005) argues that, in addition to the socio-emotional difficulties of overcoming the traumatic memories of sudden exile from their homeland (e.g., Sokoloff, Carlin, & Pham, 1984), refugee and immigrant children often experience more psycho-social problems in cultural adaptation (e.g., Eisenbruch, 1988; Nguyen, Messe, & Stollak, 1999). The different life experiences of children and parents inevitably widen the generation gap, leading to intense bicultural conflicts that push children and parents into separate social worlds (Zhou, 2001). The substantial language gap between parents and adolescents, for example, is the most salient generational dissonance that creates acculturative stress. For many of these children, to conform or to reject family histories is also a matter of how to deal with cultural conflicts between native culture and mainstream American culture. Cultural clash between the old and the new is believed to be the most important factor that causes students' psychosocial stress and identity crises. Researchers have pointed out that the clashes of values, behaviors, and attitudes between home and school culture often produce serious internal struggles for immigrant

students to balance the two (Lam, 2003; Lee & Wong, 2002; Tran, 2003). For example, Vietnamese culture often emphasizes obedience, discipline, and filial piety whereas the mainstream American culture values more individual autonomy and independence. Vietnamese students' efforts to be autonomous like their American peers can create family conflicts and internal disharmony (Lam, 2003). Many of them may feel the pressure to assimilate at the expense of their own cultural heritage, or reject being assimilated into American culture, or become apathetic to preserving their cultural identity (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

The adversarial community and school condition and the disconcerting cultural dissonance, however, impact not only low-SES immigrant or refugee students, but also the poor white working-class children who are often neglected in educational research. In the changing global economic structure that is characterized by the rapid disappearance of working-class jobs in America, many have asserted the complete eclipse of this cultural group (Gorz, 1982; Weis, 2004). Sociologists such as Weis (2004) argue that the white working class is not only alive; it has become a newly settled, distinct class fraction that has rearticulated itself in relation to the familiar groups of color in post-industrial urban centers (such as the African Americans, Yemenis, and Vietnamese in Buffalo). Children from this group, like the other racial minorities in urban areas, also experience the painful cultural dissonance in a school system modeled after middle-class values and practices (Hicks, 2002). Hicks (2002) posits that the treatment of white working-class and poor children in school systems and in society at large is also oppressively hegemonic in ways that are submerged because of a lack of class awareness and cultural sensitivity to this group. Therefore, instead of simply writing this group off, there is a need to strive for a critical understanding of this group's experiences in relation to other groups of color and vice versa—"the varying diversity they might encounter—those involving relations of ethnicity, race, gender, *and* class" (Hicks, 2002, p. 4, italics original).

This book is an attempt to address the varying diversity in ways that the different racial groups might encounter by focusing on both the productions of literacies within each family and the intersectionality of various social categories such as ethnicity, race, gender, and class in the production process across different racial and cultural groups. It documents the languages/literacies and cultural practices of everyday lives as lived by three racial groups who are a significant part of Buffalo: the Sudanese refugees, the Vietnamese refugees, and white working and/or poor families. It links the analysis of the families' literacy practices to more general ethnographic accounts of cultural beliefs and practices as the families construct certain social relations with other ethnic groups and with the schools and communities in which they reside. Through the "practices that are engaged in by, and simultaneously

encircle, men, women, and children on a daily basis" (Weis, 2004, p. 4), this book depicts how these culturally different families contest institutional constraints, resist discrimination, countermand the adversarial context of the inner city, and traverse the narrow path toward success. It also illustrates how the families make sense of their everyday experiences, come to terms with their particular socio-cultural contexts, and craft their identities in relation to a constructed other in those contexts. In this sense, the families' literacy practices and learning experiences are viewed as a social construction and as part of the process of becoming culturally competent members of their community. This theoretical framework is explored in the next section.

Theoretical Understandings of Urban Schooling and Living

Cultural Models of Literacy Learning and Minority Discourses

The everyday literacy and living of the six culturally different families can be understood in relation to the theory of cultural mismatch, often referred to as a lack of alignment between the culture, language and knowledge of minority students' homes and their schools and/or other dominant institutions (Dimitriadis, 2001; Heath, 1983; Li, 2003, 2004; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Rogers, 2003). According to Gee (1989), a learner's social world can be categorized into two overarching domains: the primary discourse of the home and community and the secondary discourses of the public sphere—institutions such as the public schools. Gee (1996, 1999) later defines the two socio-cultural discourses and the different social languages within the discourses as different cultural models of literacy. That is, the different cultural beliefs in school and home discourses can be seen as different cultural models that represent their worldviews as shared within their communities and groups (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Quinn & Holland, 1987). In Gee's words, a cultural model is:

> [U]sually a totally or partially unconscious explanatory theory or "story line" connected to a word—bits and pieces of which are distributed across different people in a social group—that helps to explain why the word has the different situated meanings and possibilities for the specific social and cultural groups of people it does.
>
> (Gee, 1999, p. 44)

Gee (1996, 1999) theorizes that a cultural model not only defines what is normal and to be expected but also sets up what counts as non-normal and threatening in certain contexts. Therefore, cultural models often involve certain viewpoints about what is right and wrong and what can or cannot be done to solve problems in given situations. Such functions of setting up what count as right and normal, as Gee (1996) points out, often result in rendering exclusionary actions and creating and upholding stereotypes.

Research has demonstrated that the dynamics and processes of different cultural models of literacy practices can have a significant impact on minority achievement and school reform (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). Since cultural models carry within them values and perspectives about people and reality, cultural models from different cultures can "conflict in their content, in how they are used, and in values and perspectives they carry" (Gee, 1996, p. 90). For minority students who come from different cultural backgrounds, the models of their own home culture can conflict seriously with those of mainstream culture (Gee, 1996). Studies on immigrant and minority groups' literacy practices suggest that immigrant parents differ significantly in their cultural models of learning and their educated values, beliefs, and actions from their mainstream counterparts (e.g., Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Heath, 1983; Li, 2002; Valdes, 1996).

Socio-cultural Construction and Socialization of Literacies and Learning

How do children acquire these different cultural models of literacy practices? Research on language socialization indicates that language and literacy learning is part of a process of socialization through which the learner acquires particular values and relationships in the social context in which learning takes place (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Ochs (1986) posits that children acquire a worldview as they acquire a language. Since the process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of a community, language and literacy learning is intricately linked to the construction of social roles, cultural affiliations, beliefs, values, and behavioral practices (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). For language minority learners who traverse two cultural worlds, the process of acquiring a language(s) and literacies may involve the intersection of multiple/different cultural values and beliefs and multiple social contexts of socialization. For such learners, as Lam (2004) observes, it is important to note that language and literacy practices do not exist in isolation from each other, just as cultures and communities do not exist as discrete entities, but rather interact with each other in various degrees of complementarity or conflict.

The multitude of interactions between different belief systems and social languages define individual learners' social identities and shape what their voice can say (Wertsch, 1991). For example, power struggles between the primary discourse and the secondary discourse may affect individual learners' choices of appropriating or "speaking" a particular social language and becoming a member of that social community. In some cases, learners are capable of repositioning themselves in contesting the official social languages and re/creating their own social languages and identities (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). Therefore, literacy learning as a social practice emphasizes

the relational interdependency of agent and world, persons-in-activity and situated action; and learners' participation in learning is inherently "situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Thus, for language minority learners who juggle between two or more languages and cultures, language socialization can be seen as:

> a site of struggle where language practices are governed by and used to produce configurations of power that determine the norms of conduct and where diverse affiliations or socialization experiences of the learner interact with each other to influence how the learner is socially positioned in any specific language learning contexts.
>
> (Lam, 2004, p. 47)

The families' experiences and their intersecting social relationships in the world of home, community, and school can be seen as a dynamic social process in which a learner is an active meaning maker (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1986). This dynamic process involves complex social relationships that a learner forms with other co-constructors of knowledge in their everyday literacy activities and events. These co-constructors are members of the learners' particular socio-cultural contexts—teachers, peers, parents, and community members. Each of these co-constructors represents a voice of learning and knowing, and thus forms a multivoicedness in which multiple layers of values of knowing and learning are embodied (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272).

Language Socialization, Social Class, and Cultural Capital

When learners are socialized into different belief systems and social languages, they are also socialized into different class-based cultures. Anyon (1980) defines social class as "a complex of social relations that one develops as one grows up—as one acquires and develops certain bodies of knowledge, skills, abilities, and traits, and as one has contact and opportunity in the world" (p. 71). These different bodies of knowledge and skills are subtle mechanisms that socialize them into different social classes and thus reproduce the class structures.

In her ethnographic study on social class and school knowledge in five different elementary schools, Anyon (1980, 1981) concludes that, even if there is a standardized curriculum, school knowledge in different SES schools is highly stratified and there are profound differences in the curriculum-in-use between schools for working-class, middle-class, and affluent groups. In the two working-class schools studied by Anyonh, the emphasis in curricula and in classrooms was on mechanical behaviors (such as carrying out procedures), simple facts, and basic skills as opposed to higher-level skills such as sustained