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*Exploring directions in and issues of language and discourse practices, literacies, learning processes, and social contexts, through research grounded in sociocultural, constructivist, and constructionist perspectives*

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Special thanks to John Cano Barrios, PhD student at University of California, Santa Barbara, for designing this newsletter!

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# Arlette Willis, Gumperz Memorial for Distinguished Lifetime Scholarship

I am extremely honored, humbled, and grateful to receive the John J. Gumperz Memorial Award for Distinguished Lifetime Scholarship. Education, in general, and literacy, in particular, are deeply indebted to his scholarship and wisdom. I am particularly moved by his commitment to issues of diversity and social justice. I have been asked to offer my thoughts on a pressing issue, naturally, I have lots of thoughts but will limit my comments to three that I find to be interconnected.

First, we are living in a time when language has returned to center stage: from school administrators, classroom teachers, and students, to the everyday or common person, to entertainers, politicians, and political pundits, language use is under a microscope. It is indeed as Charles Dickens (1859) mused over a century ago:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Language is a source of power, and in this current political moment, globally, there is no more pressing issue than to understand the power of language: to craft events/ideas/messages/narratives to serve the few at the expense of the many. To be clear, my concern is that language is being used to craft narratives that convey, in coded messages, ideas that are anti: Black, gay, immigrant, Islamic, Semitic, sovereign, land rights, - I could go on . . .



Second, in our current sociopolitical context, literacy education and research in the U. S. appear to be under the influence of the political-corporate state. A force that has caused retrenchment of progress made in addressing social justice issues and the normalization of inequality and inequity. The return to traditional ideological assumptions about learners appears most clearly in the criteria being used to make a distinction between proficient and struggling learners, as young as preschool.

This stance is especially troubling, given the criteria upon which decisions are made appear uninformed about cultural and linguistic differences. I am concerned for young children in general, but I am especially concerned for young children of color, as they will be held to standards that reflect attitudes, behaviors, linguistic and social interactions, and the language of the White middle-to-upper middle classes.

## Arlette Willis, Gumperz Memorial for Distinguished Lifetime Scholarship (continued)

These are children whose communities and home environments as well as attitudes, behaviors, language, and lives, may differ significantly from middle-class standards. There is a growing body of research, for example, that points to the hyper-surveillance of three-year-old African American males, some of whom have been expelled from for behaviors that do not meet State early learning standards. Another example comes from my local community, where preschoolers - who are misidentified as Spanish dominant (they speak Indigenous languages) - are taught in English and Spanish (two additional languages) yet are portrayed as not progressing. Who will hear them when they cry out for justice?

Third, it is imperative that researchers remain vigilant, and resist corporate and political anodyne narratives that obfuscate underlying ideological assumptions and hinder progressive movement toward equality and equity. Martin Luther King Jr. captures this idea as he observes: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

In closing, I have been asked to pose a question. Given the issues, I have raised: what message is conveyed by the phrase ‘all children’ and how does it differ from the phrase ‘every child’?