“We’re the same age!” said 5-year-old Ta’Von with surprise and delight to one of his brand new classmates, 5-year-old Connor (all names are pseudonyms). Connor, reserved and quiet, looked at him with a bit of a grin.

From the first day of school, Ta’Von reached out to others. He was “very lovable and bubbly,” noted his mother, and “he absolutely loves making new friends, which is why he is excited to start kindergarten.” Nonetheless, his negotiations of inclusion had bumps in the road.

Ta’Von, who was Black, had attended a preschool in which most children, like him, were children of color and from homes with limited economic means. He spent his time after school at his grandma’s house in a predominantly Black neighborhood. But in his kindergarten down the street from his apartment, children of color were a minority, as were those whose families lived below the poverty line; children in the dominant group, like Connor, were White. Ta’Von’s identity as a “bubbly” kindergartener was sometimes complicated by relational tensions and institutional labels. For example, Ta’Von’s braided hair style, worn by a number of Black peers (and fathers) in his previous school site, was unfamiliar in his new site and initially deemed “girl hair” by peers at his assigned work table. (Ta’Von, I hasten to add, stood up for his hair style, which was akin to that of his father, a barber.)

Further, and most relevant for this article, Ta’Von’s initial kindergarten literacy assessment was judged one of the lowest in the class. In the required timed tests, he named 22 capital letters in a minute, but only 8 lowercase ones; he did not articulate any sounds for shown letters. In present-day lingo, Ta’Von’s race and income level would produce the label “at risk” from the get-go, and his initial assessment, relative to his peers, would confirm the label in the official school world.

“At risk” is the most recent label in the evolution of socially constructed terms for linking demographic qualities of children and their families to perceived oral and written language deficits and, thereby, potential school failure (Valencia, 2010). Moreover, the academic transformation of the kindergarten into a test-driven reading class has narrowed the ways young children can find success in school (Bassok & Rorem, 2012; Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

In this article, I probe the persistence of deficit discourse in language arts education. My major theoretical tool is language ideology—that is, the intersection of socially and politically influenced attitudes and opinions about language with attitudes and opinions about groups of people (Woolard, 1998). Over time, these ideologies become naturalized (Gal, 2012). This is what has happened with deficit discourse, which affects a disproportionate number of low-income, minority children. In the process of naturalization, assumed deficits of whole groups of children become taken for granted, and, simultaneously, resources and strengths are “erased,” to borrow Irvine and Gal’s apt word (2000, p. 38).

In response to this widespread erasure of children’s potential, I turn to another theoretical tool—sociocultural views of development (Miller
& Goodnow, 1995). These views suggest that this erasure violates an old pedagogical truth: teaching every child depends on knowledge of, respect for, and building on what that child knows and can do, to which I add, what that child, in the company of other children, feels, fears, and socially longs for.

In the last portion of this column, an extended literacy vignette of kindergartener Ta’Von will help clarify my ideas. I met Ta’Von in a nine-month case study of his (and his best friend Salvia’s) transition from their play- and talk-filled preschool to their respective, and much more academic, kindergartens. Ta’Von, who initially showed no particular grasp of the alphabetic system, nonetheless became in four months an “amazing” writer in his teacher’s view, reflected in his written fluency, his textual imagination, and his agency. Ta’Von’s progress was fueled by a desire for inclusion and friendship and aided by his teacher’s flexibility. Still, Ta’Von did not become one of the designated “bright” children. In the article’s closing comments, I link the power of Ta’Von’s social agency, and the elusiveness of his being “bright,” to the continuing need for our efforts, as educators, to disrupt deficit discourse.

The Persistent Ideology of Language Deficiency: Naturalizing Dichotomous Discourse

When a [culturally privileged] child is told that the set of characters on a sign represents the word *stop*, the statement is likely to mean something to him. (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966, p. 275)

In 1966, two University of Illinois educational psychologists, Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann, published a pedagogically oriented book on teaching disadvantaged children. The children featured in the book were preschoolers from a predominantly low-income, African American area in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Lacking any contextual studies of the children’s homes or neighborhood, and being ignorant of the grammatical rules of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Bereiter and Engelmann assumed the children had virtually no language. Moreover, they assumed as well that there was no complex use of language in their homes—no explanations, no comparisons, no descriptions. In so assuming, they contributed to an “axis of differentiation” that produced two different types of children (Gal, 2012)—the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

The standard was the assumed ideal or “culturally advantaged” middle class child; the target was the “disadvantaged” poor and, in their case, primarily Black children. Although some variation certainly existed in low-income homes, as they acknowledged, Bereiter and Engelmann designed a tightly structured curriculum for the culturally “deprived.” Like most programs for young children at the time (Beaty, 2012), Bereiter and Engelmann’s proposed program focused on perceived deficits in poor children’s oral and written language. They advocated drilling children on sentence types and literacy basics (letters, sounds). Their program “starts from zero,” as though children had no “mastery of English” (p. 138), had never heard a rhyme, nor read environmental print (recall that stop sign; for sample lessons, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9dg1kKdR1Q).

This assumption of nothing infuriated many linguistic scholars, among them William Labov. In his famous essay “The Logic of Nonstandard English” (1972), Labov detailed the grammatical complexity of African American Vernacular English and illustrated the remarkable fluency that might be displayed . . . if kids judged the relational context as safe and inviting. Nonetheless, Bereiter and Engelmann’s assume-nothing approach was a pedagogical move that still marks popular programs for the “at risk” (see Dyson, 2003).

As Celia Genishi and I have argued, “we seem stuck in a time warp” (2009, p. 10), in which the discourse of language deficiency is persistent, although it is couched in different discourse (i.e., concern for the “at risk,” rather than Bereiter and Engelmann’s “culturally disadvantaged” or Bernstein’s [1964] discursively “restricted”). Currently, the most cited study detailing the deficiencies of low-income children is that of Hart and Risley (1995). This study has been criticized by language scholars, including in a past issue of *Language Arts* (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009), although the criticism seems to have had little impact.

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Briefly, the aspect of the Hart and Risley project that has gotten the most attention reduces language to number of words spoken to children. At one SES extreme, the subjects came from six welfare families, all Black, living in Kansas City. At the other extreme, subjects were 13 children from professional families, all but one White, also in Kansas City. Extrapolating from the number of words spoken to children between 10 and 36 months, the authors articulated the infamous “30 million word gap” at age 4, accounting, they argued, for disparities in school achievement. By the age of 4, children’s futures were set.

Of course, there are many problems with the Hart and Risley study (Dudley-Marlin & Lucas, 2009; Michaels, 2013; Miller & Sperry, 2012). Among the criticisms are the reduction of language to vocabulary knowledge, the extrapolation from six families in one state to all poor children, whatever their familial, cultural, linguistic, and community circumstances, and the lack of a correlation between children’s vocabulary as measured at age 3 and their school performance in third grade (noted by Hart & Risley [1995] themselves, on p. 161). Nonetheless, it is widely assumed that this study illuminates the “deficiencies” of poor children and that these account for school difficulties. This assumption is simply a continuation of societal ideologies linking income, race, and language deficiency that have been part of this country since colonial times (e.g., the views of slaves’ capacities).

And thus the worries Labov (1972) articulated many years ago have come to pass: educators (and researchers and policy makers, I add) view children through the taken-for-granted lens of language deficiency and, thus, attempt to “repair the child, rather than the school.” One consequence of this is the indiscriminate erasure of children’s language strengths.

The Disrespect of Childhoods: Erasing Children’s Strengths

Some 50 years after Bereiter and Engelmann’s work, children of limited economic means and minority children—Black, Latino/a, Asian immigrants—continue to fare significantly less well in our schools than idealized middle class White children. The reasons for our “education debt” to these children involve complex historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral matters (Ladson-Billings, 2006). That children lack resources for learning is not one of those reasons.

As it happens, I have spent a great deal of time in the economically stressed region where Bereiter and Engelmann conducted their study all those years ago. On their playgrounds and in the peer-woven contexts of their childhoods, children may enact sociolinguistic gymnastics (Dyson, 2013), moving with ease among varied ways with words. For example, kindergarteners can be heard playing clapping games and enacting rhythmic rhymes steeped in African American history (Powell, 2014). Like children the world over, they appropriate voices from media figures and familiar adults to enact dramatic roles. They collaboratively tell elaborate stories, sing songs galore, argue over the exact wording of this rhyme or that song, and tease each other with great pleasure (or irritation, as the case may be).

None of this is surprising and would not be worth reporting . . . except for this societal ideology linking language deficiency with oppressed peoples, an ideology anchored in our history and every day in our media (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Studies inconsistent with assumed language deficiencies receive relatively little attention compared to Hart and Risley.

To illustrate, Miller and Sperry (2012) draw attention to Miller’s comparative research on language socialization. Certainly comparisons between minority communities and the normalized White ideal are always problematic (given that the former always end up “different”). Moreover, the language practices of all families vary enormously depending on factors like culture, family structure, and gender.
Nonetheless, in their studies of particular working class and middle class children in regional communities, Miller and co-researchers have documented storytelling strengths in working class families relative to middle class ones. The kinds of narratives differed, but the performance of true and/or fanciful narratives was an asset of both parent and child in working class homes.

Narrative is fundamental to our capacity to make sense of our lives, to reach out to others, and to aesthetically (sometimes amusingly) perform. Yet, I have never heard these studies reported on NPR or in *The New York Times*, unlike Hart and Risley’s (for ample illustrations, search for the study at http://www.nytimes.com). The findings do not fit with the societal ideology of “at risk” young children, their language-deficient parents, and their lack of resources for success at school. Much the same could be said about the potential of many children who do not speak the language of instruction at home. Deemed “at risk” in official documents, the children nonetheless are potentially developing linguistic flexibility and the capacity to use their linguistic repertoires to act as cultural brokers and translators for their families (Orelhana, Martinez, & Martinez, 2014).

Since childhoods vary in terms of communicative practices (e.g., ways of telling stories), there is no simple or singular pathway into literacy. The complexity of children’s lives as they negotiate family and peer-group relations happens through storytelling and other genres of talk and, potentially, through written text production, as Ta’Von will illustrate. If we are not to erase children’s language strengths, we must look through a lens other than one grounded in official requirements; we must pay attention to children’s use of language to participate in relations with others—to their storytelling, persuading, arguing, playing, and teasing. If we do not, we may severely limit our ability to help children build new capacities on the foundation of children’s everyday practices.

**Developmental Ignorance and Pedagogical Deficits**

In language arts methods text after methods text, literacy development is reduced to a linear list of skills. For example, in writing, children climb a vertical ladder from drawing and scribbling, to using letters and letter-like forms, to beginning to use the seemingly ultimate skill in early childhood—exploiting sound/symbol connections to spell.

This narrow pathway is ubiquitous. Its popularity is attributable, at least in part, to the concern in early schooling that children (particularly low-income children) learn ASAP the “basics” of sound/symbol connections (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). While I do not dismiss the importance of children understanding (or better yet, figuring out) the alphabetic system, I do dismiss this “developmental” pathway as out of synch with sociocultural views of literacy and of development. Conventional encoding is not arrived at in a uniform, linear path (Clay, 1998), and composing itself involves much more than encoding.

In sociocultural views, literacy is understood as situated human activity—that is, as a configuration of culturally valued, intentional practices, mediated by symbolic tools and rooted in relationships (Hull & Schultz, 2002). For young children, familiar practices are filled with echoes of everyday life with family and friends. They enter into new practices by appropriating textual actions, along with social and semiotic resources, from old practices. Indeed, “basic” composing skills entail sociolinguistic capacities like appropriating and adapting relevant symbolic resources for, and responding in relationally attuned ways to, new practices and situations (Dyson, 2013).

Since childhoods vary in terms of communicative practices (e.g., ways of telling stories), there is no simple or singular pathway into literacy. Indeed, as Marie Clay (1980) pointed out years ago, any tightly sequenced curriculum ignores this experiential variation and, thus, leaves some children without resources. Moreover, as she also noted, it ignores the literacy act itself—the actual orchestration of knowledge that allows children to enter into...
interactive literacy practices with whatever they have and can glean from others. Thus, over time, developing child writers are not just climbing up the literacy ladder of success but maneuvering with flexibility on an expanding landscape of literacy practices. It does not matter so much which practices children begin with, just that they begin.

And yet, as exemplified by Bereiter and Engelmann, highly regulated and scripted curricula have long been envisioned as appropriate for poor children and, more recently, for children generally. These curricula are accompanied by periodic benchmark assessments to document progress through a linear list of skills as well as periodic standardized tests to hold children, teachers, and schools accountable for prescribed learning. Teachers in schools serving mainly minority children may have relatively more restrictive curricula in general, and in kindergartens, they have probably had such restrictions for a longer period of time than schools serving higher SES schools (Bassok & Rorem, 2012; Zacher Pandya, 2011). Of course, all teachers must negotiate the required curricular script given the particular responses of their children (Yoon, 2013); however, all teachers are not under the same pressure. Certainly Ta’Von’s teacher was not under the same pressure as others I have studied (Dyson, 2013).

Curricular Flexibility: An Excerpt from Ta’Von’s Case

In Ta’Von’s kindergarten, unlike Salvia’s (in a school serving mainly low-income children of color), his experienced teacher, Ms. Norton, did not follow the prescribed curriculum, although she kept curricular goals in mind. She felt that as long as test results were strong, she could do what she judged was in the children’s best interest. The prescribed curriculum featured nonfiction genres, and Ms. Norton introduced them. But for Ta’Von, as for others, a blank piece of paper in the company of peers could lend itself to drawn stories that veered away from the “true” to the imagined. Ms. Norton responded with interest to all such texts and then wrote a sentence or two with the child that used phonologically-based spelling to produce a nonfiction text.

Ta’Von, though, also used composing time in other ways closely tied to his desire for inclusion as a peer and a friend—one who, like his classmates, was gendered and racialized. First, he was attentive to how he represented his racial identity. After the exchange about his hair, Ta’Von tended to add braids to his pictured self (even early on when that self was a circle with two appendages). Further, he always colored himself brown, often after verbally declaring himself as “Black.” Second, he played with, and expressed himself through, aspects of his speech that constituted his identity as a social and aesthetic being in the situation at hand. As in the preschool, Ta’Von’s speech was relatively standard in its syntax, and AAVE in its phonology (e.g., voiced [th] as [d], deletion of [r] after a vowel, both illustrated by “brother” [brudah]). However, Ta’Von began to use words he “liked to say,” words distinctive from most classmates, like “dude.” And this dude wanted friends. Composing was one means not only for making friends, but also for representing himself as having friends.

Third, Ta’Von was socially alert as he composed, asking others what they were doing or drawing their attention to his efforts. (Not all children were equally responsive.) Moreover, in preschool, Ta’Von had drawn pictures for Salvia and, collectively, his class had made presents and cards for varied occasions. He understood these composing practices and, using whatever means were at his disposal, he could transform his daily composing into affirmations of friendship and even explicit bids for affection. This is what he attempted to do with Vida, an immigrant from Iran and a socially responsive child.

Perhaps in part because of her social responsiveness, along with her physical likeness to Salvia, Ta’Von seemed to think Vida might be his new special friend. In October, just two months after his initial assessment, Ta’Von marshaled all of his resources to mark this hoped-for special relationship. As good fortune would have it, she was assigned a seat right by him.

The official task on this day, the designated “Hat Day,” was to draw and describe the special hat one had worn to school. Ta’Von drew himself, his
brown crayon obliterating his pencil-drawn braids, and then made his SpongeBob hat. Next he drew Vida and her jester hat (with a few pointers from her on drawing the hat’s shape). Ta’Von talked himself through coloring Vida’s image, representing her as “Black” verbally and brown visually. (Vida was darker in hue than the European American girls.) Next, Ta’Von drew her hair, which was long and wavy like Salvia’s. Indeed, he remarked, “Your hair’s long. . . . There goes hair.” Finally, he directed himself to “make dark eyes.” And there she was, standing next to him on his paper.

Now Ta’Von was to listen to the sounds of his words and write a complete sentence describing his hat. Ta’Von, however, was bent on describing his relationship to Vida. He orchestrated every symbolic means at his disposal—writing names and numbers, remembering spellings, trying out his emerging sense of sound/symbol relationships, using a reading voice to elaborate on written symbols, seeking help from his hoped-for special friend, from his teacher, and, at my suggestion, from an earlier page of his journal. The resulting text is novel-like in the trajectories that led to this word or that spelling. Given my space—and my intent herein—I aim to illustrate that Ta’Von was energized by the desire to mark his affiliation with Vida and, eventually, his inclusion with “everybody.”

Below, Ta’Von’s written text is in bold and italics (see also Figure 1); his read text is in quotes and italics. Ta’Von begins by writing the first line on the bottom of his paper. (I have added spaces between written words to make it easier to match what was written and what was read.)

6

*I My to S V V lik to like
“I like to see Vida. Vida is 6 years old. She
*likes to see”

Ta’Von 5 and.

“me, Ta’Von. I am 5.” I made a 5! “Vida is 6 years old. (pointing to the earlier written 6 in the second V) And.”

(*Ms. Norton had helped Ta’Von spell “like” the previous day, but he had abandoned that in this effort, spelling it My. Today, at my suggestion, he looked back at that spelling but did not maintain it, reverting soon to My.)

Having finished his first line of writing, Ta’Von turns to Vida:

Ta’Von: Vida, look what I wrote. “I like to see Vida. Vida likes to see me.”

Vida: I don’t like to see you always. I like to see my sister always.

Ta’Von: Oh. But not me. I didn’t know that. (seriously)

Vida: I like to see everybody.

Ta’Von: Oh! I’ll write that. (begins writing)

I My to
“I like to see Vi—”

Ta’Von: How do you spell your name?

Vida spells her name.

Ta’Von: Thanks for telling me how to spell your name. Thanks for helping me.

Ta’Von continues writing Vida’s name and an s for “see.” He then listens for the first sounds he hears in “everybody” (aw[e], r[v]). Time is up! Ms. Norton’s timer has gone off. Ta’Von quickly adds a few more letters and stops.

As the year progressed, so did Ta’Von’s composing and his evident sense of agency as a composer. He wrote his own permission letter for a field trip when he worried that his mom would forget to sign the official form. He wrote a letter to Salvia’s teacher, telling her to let Salvia come to his school...
for a visit. He also wrote amusing stories to entertain others (and himself), easily inventing phonologically based spelling. Indeed, Ms. Norton thought he was an “amazing” composer, writing more and more imaginatively than the “bright” kids.

More than the bright kids. Hmmm. I close with a reflection on that notion.

**Institutional Exclusion from the Discourse of Being “Bright”**

In Ta’Von’s room, a small group of middle class children were deemed “bright” (all categorized as White, with the exception of Korean American Benny). None of these children wrote as much as, as imaginatively as, or with the initiative displayed by Ta’Von, in Ms. Norton’s own judgment. However, the “bright” children came to school already on the top rung of the kindergarten literacy assessments. They could name the letters and associate them with sounds; they had begun reading conventionally. You, dear readers, can perhaps imagine yourselves saying something like, “Only 5 years old and already Hailey can [fill in the blank].” Ta’Von seemed to have lost “the race to the top” before school even began . . . which is exactly the view articulated by deficit discourse ideology all these years. However, Ta’Von’s exclusion was due to ideologically charged institutional discourse; it was not due to any particular quality of Ta’Von himself.

In enacting institutional discourse, we have forgotten that the ideology of the “proper” kindergartener—or any other human category—is a social construct, not a natural category. (When I began teaching in the early seventies, kindergarten teachers were to leave reading and writing to first-grade teachers.) Moreover, we have also forgotten Vygotsky’s (1978) insight and critique: we judge children by what they can do on their own, not by how they can stretch their capacities in interactive activities. Indeed, writing itself has become a subject in which individuals excel, not a medium through which children participate in official and unofficial worlds. Social agency, along with imagination and flexibility in chosen genres (i.e., breadth of initiated written repertoire), do not matter in institutional assessment.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) have contributed to this reductive, static view of writing. The Standards’ authors had as their goal college- or career-ready high school graduates and, thus, they worked backwards from the skills they imagined would so equip those graduates to the successive skills necessary for children to climb the linear ladder to that goal. Kindergarteners, then, are “college-freshman-in-training” (Bomer, 2013, p. 27). This viewpoint is based on a blatant disrespect for childhoods and yanks children’s writing out of social contexts and empties it of the diverse experiential, linguistic, semiotic, and social resources with which children build new forms of agency (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). The Standards are accompanied by required, frequent, and detailed testing (resulting in a quarterly 6-page rubric per child in Ms. Norton’s district); particularly in low income schools, they tend to lead to a teaching-to-the-test curriculum (e.g., Au, 2007; Zacher Pandya, 2011).

“College freshmen in training” thus begin the race to the top, since, unlike in Garrison Keillor’s mythical town of Lake Wobegon, all of the children cannot be above average. Some come in “bright,” as measured by the tests; some do not. They all, though, are learners, players, peers, friends, family members, fans of popular culture (like Ta’Von’s SpongeBob and, although not illustrated here, Michael Jackson’s dancing), and on and on. As the San Francisco East Bay Teacher Study Group pointed out years ago, teachers’ constantly accumulating knowledge of their students’ complex selves allows them to focus not on “fixing” children, but on using that student knowledge to adapt or “fix” their teaching efforts to connect with their children and support learning (Dyson with the San Francisco East Bay Teacher Study Group, 1997).
As citizens, we are responsible for advocating for children’s quality of life through, for example, livable wages for their caregivers, access to healthcare and good nutrition, nontoxic environments, and places to play and explore the outdoors. As educators, though, we have a particular responsibility to work toward the respectful inclusion of our children as developing learners. In order to see and hear our children’s strengths and weaknesses, we must move outside the narrow image of the “ideal” child, and we must dismantle the myth of the singular path to language arts success. Just off to the side of that constructed “path to literacy” are children maneuvering to participate in school tasks as they orchestrate and stretch their resources in order to achieve basic human needs; chief among them is the need to make sense of a changing world and to have a respected place within that world.

As Ta’Von illustrated, composing is, at least potentially, a social tool linked to social membership, including membership in a given race, class, and gender. In his representations of self, and in his search for a special friend and for classroom companionship, Ta’Von reminds us of the potential importance of writing as a tool for composing a world in which one matters. In our own participation in education as a field, we must protect writing’s—and children’s—ability to work toward the respectful inclusion of our children as constructing an included self from the excluding harm of the destructive discourse of deficits. As Ms. Norton illustrated, even when we appreciatively “see” children, we may not hear ourselves and the way the discourse of deficits may limit us as well as our children. Our work to transform schools and to transform our selves continues.

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**NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2015: March 5**

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, March 5, 2015. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.