Carla Shalaby’s ethnographic study examines the relationship between classroom management policies and the ways in which young children get positioned as “troublemakers” in schools, classrooms, and homes. The research builds upon anthropological literature concerned with the marginalization of children from non-dominant cultural groups in schools and classrooms. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* makes a significant contribution to this body of literature in three primary ways: first, by exploring how the “troublemaker” identity is produced and negotiated through interaction; second, by eliciting the perspectives of the young children to call into question the values conveyed through classroom management policies and the education system; and third, by examining how families confront and interpret school-derived academic labels about their children. My perspective is informed by theories and methods in the fields of Educational Linguistics, Linguistic Anthropology, and the Anthropology of Education, as well as my disciplinary expertise in language learning, home-school relationships, and the educational experiences of elementary-aged children and parents from Mexican immigrant families. I begin by examining the significance of *Troublemakers* for educators and education researchers, focusing on each of these primary contributions. I conclude with a discussion of concerns that the book raises and questions that require further investigation.

One of the strengths of this book lies in the analysis that shows how identities are negotiated through interactions between teachers and students, students and peers, and children with their parents. Through her three-way analyses of classroom interactions, Shalaby demonstrates how classroom management policies that involve rules for controlling how and when students can and cannot talk can be problematic for young children. Language education scholars have argued that such policies represent language ideologies (Woolard, 1998; Baquedano-López & Kattan, 2008), or beliefs about who can and cannot legitimately participate in classroom life. Children and adults are socialized to adopt these language ideologies through routine interactions shaped by community values (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1986). Although Shalaby does not ground her work in theories of linguistic anthropology, her study highlights several core theoretical understandings of linguistic anthropology — that the values and beliefs of a sociocultural community are linked to social identities and everyday discourse features. In one example in the book,
Shalaby notes that Zora repeatedly shouted out a suggestion for a classroom rule — “to comfort someone if they are alone” (p. 13). Despite the validity of her suggestion, she was ignored because she had not raised her hand as required to legitimately participate in the discussion. While the tendency of teachers, including myself, is to enforce these kinds of interactional rules, this book challenges us to reflect further on the way we control classroom talk as teachers, and how sociocultural backgrounds might have an impact on students’ behaviors and identifications. Rather than viewing Zora and other students as inherently troublemakers, Shalaby argues that “[s]chools engender trouble by using systems of reward and punishment to create a certain kind of person — “a good student” — a person suited for the culture of schooling. “Good students sit still: they listen they follow directions; they conform; they take orders; they adhere to the terms and standards of childhood as a marginal social position and to whiteness as the ideal. Students do well in school and will be counted as good when they allow others to exercise power over them” (p. 152).

Secondly, this book contributes to our understanding of the culture of school by foregrounding the perspectives of young children — a group of students’ voices that are typically silenced and delegitimized in schools — and draws on these perspectives to call into question the utility and consequences of classroom management policies. Several scholars have drawn on interviews with K-12 students to demonstrate the need for, and benefit of having teachers listen to students as the means to improving the education system (Nieto, 1994; Schultz, 2003). Troublemakers builds on research that highlights students’ voices by drawing attention specifically to young children, whose voices are underrepresented in the literature. The selection of “troublemaker” students also makes this study unique. While “good” or “successful” students may be more willing to participate (Nieto, 1994), Shalaby effectively makes the case for studies of troublemakers in that they have “heightened susceptibilities to particular hazards” (p. xxi). Like mine canaries, whose sensitivity to poisonous toxins provides a warning to miners, the troublemakers are most sensitive to classroom rules that erode autonomy and creativity. From Zora, we learn that schools have become a place where successful students look and act the same as everybody else. From Lucas, we learn how schools can suppress children’s desires and imagination. From Sean, we learn how schools may demand blind obedience to authority. From Marcus, we learn that schools silence students, and encourage individualism over collaboration.

Lastly, Troublemakers illuminates the ways in which families interpret and confront this school-derived “troublemaker” identity in their homes and communities. While the literature on parent involvement has tended to depict historically-marginalized families as “deficient” or “different” from mainstream families (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013), more recently studies have begun to explore how deficiencies, differences and similarities, and overarching values are negotiated across home and school settings. These studies have shown how teachers, parents, and children interpret, contest, adapt, or reproduce school-based ideologies and academic identities during routine activities such as parent-teacher conferences (García Sánchez, & Orellana, 2006) and homework completion (Mangual Figueroa, 2011; McConnochie & Mangual Figueroa, 2017). While Troublemakers does not focus on the structures of these routines, it succeeds in demonstrating the fluidity with which these labels evolve across these settings by examining the ways that the troublemaker identity is interpreted in the home setting.
and school. Zora’s family grapples with the school’s pressure to force students to conform while simultaneously encouraging her to be unique, creative, and individual. Lucas’s family confronts the idea of student power and authority, encouraging him to ask questions while recognizing that schools punish this behavior. Sean’s family deliberates over whether to medicate Sean in response to his failure to suppress his own desires. And Marcus’s family deals with the school’s concern that Marcus fails to listen to and obey teachers. By examining the experiences of families of different racial background, the analysis also demonstrates how young children and families learn about and contest the racialized hegemonic structures of the education system across home and school settings.

Drawing on the rich data collected and the insightful analysis provided, Troublemakers identifies several concerns that demand our attention as educators, education researchers and policymakers. Drawing from insights gained from Marcus, Shalaby advocates for teachers to let troublemakers be heard, known, helpful, to make you proud, and be good. The book concludes with a Letter to Teachers, in which Shalaby makes the case for classroom norms aimed at preparing children to live in an ideal world infused with love, kindness, and freedom. She offers specific suggestions for teachers to alter their classroom environment by encouraging questioning, creating more opportunities for breaks, and facilitating discussions about maintaining social relationships. As a former elementary school teacher, I found these goals for classroom reform to be insightful and inspirational. By placing these overarching values of love, kindness and freedom as pillars of the ideal classroom, Shalaby provided the kind of vision that I wish I had as I began my teaching career and struggled to navigate school expectations for “managing” students. Like the teachers in this book, I felt pressured to prepare my students in ways that administrators and their future educators valued. Thus, this book holds practical implications for administrators, as well as teachers, as they play important roles in facilitating school-wide conversations about the implementation of these goals and supporting teachers as they transform these goals into practice.

The conclusion of this book made it clear that educators were the intended audience. However, as a researcher, I wanted to know more about methodological and theoretical components of the study and the implication of this study for researchers and policymakers. For instance, what were the research questions that the study sought to examine? What theoretical framework informed the data collection and analysis process? While the research method is described as portraiture—a procedure aimed at uncovering positive attributes of student through ethnography—the book omits a discussion of author positionality with regard to the theoretical framework. Consequently, as researchers we are left to draw our own inferences about the context, the temporality and spatiality of students’ identities and the sources of influence on identity formation. From my own epistemological perspective as a linguistic anthropologist, I felt that the analysis needed to be situated in a historical and political context of schooling. One of the central aspects of the sociopolitical context over the last several decades has been the assessment and accountability policies under NCLB that have led to the standardization of learning. Although federal or state policies were not mentioned in this book, Shalaby emphasizes teacher prioritization of “covering” curricular material at the expense of opportunities to get to know the children in their class. This concern for testing material over other goals for schools (such as multilingualism for ELLs) has been a primary critique of NCLB. Thus, I argue that a
stronger theoretical and methodological aspect of this book would address the relationship between macro reform policies focused on standardized tests, classroom management policies, and the devaluing of social skills not evaluated on tests, such as regulating emotions and interacting with peers.

Finally, I argue for the need to focus more closely on the link between identity and the language resources that students are learning to use across home and school. Research in the field of linguistic anthropology and subfield of language socialization highlighted differences across home and school settings in dialects, registers, modes of communication, and ways of making meaning during routine activities (Heath, 1982; Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez, 1994). In classrooms, teachers and peers may negatively evaluate those forms of communication used by students from minoritized racial or ethnic group (Urciuoli, 2006) and reproduce raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Urciuoli, 2006). While Shalaby argues that classroom management policies are racialized, a language socialization approach provides a theoretically structured approach for examining how policies are racialized by analyzing patterns of socialization across activities and settings. Additionally, research on language socialization has shown that differences in language ideologies about “respect” and “politeness” in students’ families relate to this academic identity negotiation process. The work of Lo (2009), for instance, demonstrates how ideologies surrounding behaviors for politeness in schools contrasted with those of Korean immigrant families. This research suggests that ideologies of respect and politeness in schools may be related to classroom management policies. By further examining the link between classroom management and politeness ideologies, teachers, families, students can explore ways to co-construct politeness ideologies in schools without coercing students and families to acculturate to “white” values. We must continue to deconstruct the policies, discourses, and ideologies conveyed through language use during routine schooling practices that marginalize and disengage students from learning.

References


Deconstructing the “Troublemaker” Identity


**Author**

MEREDITH MCCONNOCHIE is a former elementary school teacher who recently completed her PhD in Education at Rutgers. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Multilingual/Multicultural Education at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, Connecticut.
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