### eJournal of

## Literacy and Social Responsibility

Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012



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Thank you Desiree and Luukas for supplying the *ejournal* with a cover photo.

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#### Literacy & Social Responsibility Mission Statement

The Literacy & Social Responsibility Special Interest Group (SIG) of the International Reading Association seeks to study, understand, and advocate for high-quality programs that integrate: community service, participatory citizenship, social responsibility, appreciation for diversity, environmental stewardship, character education, and/or caring behavior into the development of literacy across the curriculum.

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This Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association provides a forum for educators, authors, researchers, and the public to present their insights and to interact with others who share similar concerns at our annual meeting at the IRA convention as well as online on our website and through our eJournal.

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#### Literacy and Social Responsibility Ejournal

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#### **Message from the Editor**

#### **Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell**



Welcome readers, to the 2012 issue of the ejournal, *Literacy and Social Responsibility*, volume 5, number 1. This heartening issue provides readers with myriad opportunities for examining many contexts involving literacy and social responsibility. The articles in this issue alert, advise, and inform; authors motivate, encourage, and educate us. The Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group is fortunate to have such talented teachers, scholars, and researchers who considered the ejournal as an outlet for their work and their words. Peruse these pages and enjoy!

The **invited lead article** explores Rick Meyer's decision to take action against the corporatization of public education as he traces his involvement and leadership in the July 2011 Save Our Schools March in DC. Rick serves as an inspiration for all of us to take heart and take action. Rick Meyer's words give us encouragement to address the politics of literacy.

Jeonghee Choi and Mi-Hyun Chung provide readers with a powerful study of how educators can disrupt gender categories and acknowledge gender variance while making multiple gender identities visible. Choi and Chung prompt readers to examine their own practice.

Melissa Rome and Anna Ruiz, novice teachers, explore their own practices in a teacher research investigation against the backdrop of their educational experiences and district mandates. Guided by university mentor, Fasching-Varner, they examine how literacy, social responsibility, and social studies content comingle to inform practice and enhance instruction.

Working collaboratively, Tenafly (New Jersey) High School educators Dana Maloney, Janet Gould, Nicole Levine, Leigh Barker, and Stanley Flood are linked by a shared a common interest in nurturing social responsibility in their students and community stakeholders. In this piece, we learn how social responsibility in an affluent school community is enacted through a community read event. The authors remind us that educators, without formal, recognized leadership titles and positions, can enact change within a school district and community.

Careful selection of a critical text to serve as mentor for pre-service teachers is the focus of Anne Swenson Ticknor's provocative piece. Ticknor advocates teacher educators consider a mentor text as a guide and resource to interrupt assumptions about race, gender, and social strata and to encourage deeper connections to critical perspectives. She illustrates how she used such a text to disrupt stereotypes about learners and impact classroom literacy practices.

As stated in her bio, Robin Danzak values a collaborative, sociocultural framework in which classroom research aligns with engaging instruction and authentic assessment. Engaging in collaborative action research, Danzak exploring issues from multiple perspectives, a hallmark of critical literacy. In this piece she shares the story of middle school students identified as English Language Learners whose motivation and engagement in learning about migrant farmworker issues resulted in action to improve migrant conditions through persuasive letters.

Co-authors, M. Susan Burns, Angela Love, Martha Jane Buell, and Renée Casbergue, maintain that understanding family members' practice is essential to understanding children's cultural background. Their piece is an exploration of how such understanding can assist teachers in gaining an appreciation for the prior knowledge that children bring to the classroom.

Audra Wright provides a succinct yet comprehensive review of *The Assault on Public Education:*Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform by William H. Watkins.
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What Happens In DC
Should NOT Stay in DC:
One Story of the
Save Our Schools March
and National Call to Action

Richard J. Meyer

**Keywords:** activism, politics of schooling, educational reform, corporatization of public education, economy and education, autoethnography, phenomenology

#### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this invited lead article was to ask the author to recount the events that culminated in the save Our Schools March and National Call to Action, held in July of 2011. In an inspiring autoethnographic piece, Rick Meyer shares his story of talking back to authority, of gathering voices along the way, and not giving in to the corporatization of public education. In an intensely personal narrative, Meyer opens for further discussion the roles and positions of teachers in defining their professional lives, coaching educators to become activists. As author, scholar, teacher, parent, and grandparent, Meyer advocates that even as we scramble to do what we're told to do next, we can meet on the sidelines and in unofficial spaces in order to talk, challenge, and interrogate what we're being told in order to respond to the assault against children's imaginations, restore teachers' creativity, and safeguard the future of our eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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democratic experiment, public education.

The chronic pathologization (Walkderdine, 1990) of schools has demoralized teachers and communities (Meyer, 2010) and paved the way for self-serving reformers whose outward interests appear to be the improvement of schooling but more accurately work on the corporatization of one of the last remaining public institutions in the United States (US) (Altwerger, 2005). Schools have been effectively framed (Lakoff, 2002) as failing and, as such, in desperate need of improvement and outside assistance. The ubiquitous (in the popular press) presentation of schools as leaving children behind, carrying ineffective teachers, and not serving the future of our powerful yet declining and weakening country has resulted in a public that does not trust public schools. Yet consistently, year-after-year the surveys of school satisfaction completed by the Kappan (initially by Gerald Bracey, then Gallup Polls) reveal high satisfaction with local schools albeit decreasing satisfaction the farther one moves from the local.

The Carnegie report on the relationship between education and the economy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) helped to create, publicize, and sustain the connection between the economy and education. The entire economic future of the world and virtually every current social ill are construed as the responsibility of teachers and children. In my own state of New Mexico, during the 2012 legislative session, our governor proposed a bill that would retain third graders not proficient in reading and do so without input from families. The non-ending misrepresentation of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data (Schleicher, 2012) as suggesting that the US is low in this international comparison is another piece of the data set that is used to demonstrate that public education has failed. It has failed our eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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students and, most importantly, it fails our economy. We are led to believe that the banking failure, real estate failure, and large numbers of other collapses that have hurt the US and world economies would not have occurred if only all of our third graders were proficient readers.

#### A Brief Personal Recollection of Recent History

This section is a montage of events, legislation, policy, and actions that would probably be more accurately presented as many overlapping circles in a Venn diagram. Rather than provide exhaustive reviews of this history, which are already in the literature (Spring, 1991; Spring, 2004), I provide highlights of what influenced my decision to be instrumental in the Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action (SOS) that took place at the end of July 2011. I write with the understanding that this may read more like a confessional that it is solely my perspective, rather than a scholarly piece, and that pieces will be left out and reported differently by others. In that sense, this piece is phenomenological (Creswell, 2008; Van Manen, 1990).

Within the fields of study of anthropology, sociology, and education, ethnographers typically studies "others," while within autoethnography, self-study is included and provides a way to situate data in a sociocultural, historical, political, and personal contexts (Reed-Danahay, 1997). In autoethnography, research is reported in first person with the individual conducting the reporting becoming the focus of the research (Ellis, 2004; Ellingson, 1998; Jackson, 1989; Tedlock, 1991). "As a form of ethnography, autoethnography overlaps art and science; it is part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture" (Ellis, 2004, p. 31). Since I was both a researcher and a member of the team that created SOS, I became a subject and object of study. Using this eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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rationale, autoethnography seemed a particularly appropriate tool to interpret SOS and my involvement. This style or genre may seem to be a departure from the scholarly argument and tone with which I initiated this piece, but it is reflective of the disconnected and helpless (perhaps hopeless) place I'd reached as a researcher, teacher educator, father, and grandfather by the summer of 2010. I was considering quitting all professional organizations, withdrawing into my study, and writing theoretical pieces for the remaining years of my tenure as a professor. I'd become increasingly cranky, short tempered and intolerant as I read and saw depictions of public education in my local newspaper and national mainstream media. I wrote editorials to the local newspaper that were consistently rejected in which I attempted to present the fact that The Reading Excellence Act (which did not pass congress in the late 1990s; Taylor, 1998), the latest iteration of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), and the *Reading First* portion of ESEA were all attempts to corporatize public education, reduce teaching from a reflective profession to a technical career (Shannon, 1989), and create a national curriculum that would serve few and perpetuate the current obscene misdistribution of wealth in our country.

In these attempts to be heard, I refused to refer to the ESEA as *No Child Left Behind* (2001) because of the sarcasm with which that name was laced as well as the disservice it did to Marion Wright-Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund by coopting a phrase she has created. I attempted to explain a right wing agenda for education including who was served by it and who was not, and I worked to demonstrate that teaching reading is complicated and not something easily reduced to phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension as laid out eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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in the executive summary of the NICHD Report of the National Reading Panel (2000). Indeed, that summary reflected little of what was in the actual reports of the subgroups (Garan, 2002). I was fighting frames with facts, but such work is useless because "frames trump facts" (Lakoff, 2004). But the complexity of the attacks on public education would not stop as more related issues emerged (or, more accurately, were created). It became apparent that *The Reading Excellence Act* was a mere testing of the waters because shortly after its failure the 2001 iteration of ESEA gave birth to *Reading First* money being directly controlled by those with vested interests in one view of reading, a view that was uninformed by research while claiming to be rooted in reliable replicable scientific research. I was thrilled and relieved when the Office of the Inspector General at the federal level of our government revealed deep problems in its audit of *Reading First*. The report stated:

With regard to the RLAs [Reading Leadership Academies], we concluded that the Department did not have controls in place to ensure compliance with the Department of Education Organization Act (DEOA) and NCLB Act curriculum provisions. Specifically, we found that: 1) the "Theory to Practice" sessions at the RLAs focused on a select number of reading programs; and 2) the RLA Handbook and Guidebook appeared to promote the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Assessment Test. With regard to RMC Research Corporation's (RMC) technical proposal for the NCRFTA contract, we concluded that the Department did not adequately assess issues of bias and lack of objectivity when approving individuals to be technical assistance providers before and after the NCRFTA contract was awarded (2007, p. 1).

Prior to the release of this report there was a plethora of reading programs being sold to schools and after school reading tutoring programs, yet the programs were not scientifically tested in any systematic way. Indeed, the moniker "Scientifically-Based Reading Program/Instruction" appeared on many programs that were not researched at all. Rather, an author of the teachers' guides might refer to the report of the National eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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Reading Panel as information that guided the creation of the program. That's quite distant from actual research leading the OIG to include this in their report:

We also found that there is interest in placing more emphasis on a reading program's scientific evidence of effectiveness in determining its eligibility for Reading First funds. We suggest that the Department and Congress, during the next reauthorization of the law, clarify whether reading programs need to have scientific evidence of effectiveness in order to be eligible for funding under Reading First. This issue is discussed in the Other Matters section of the report (p. 2).

Perhaps, I thought, someone had read some of the many critiques of *Reading* First (e.g.: Goodman, 2006). I was thrilled at the appearance and circulation of the OIG report. I called a friend and colleague and almost danced through the phone, "We won! They're busted! It's time for some informed truths rather than manufactured lies to sell programs." But weeks, then months, and years passed and there was little impact, except for quite recently as the next iteration of the ESEA is being composed and definitions are supposedly being tightened. However, the renewed Act remains very tentative at this point in time as political pundits tell us it won't be brought up for serious discussion until after the November 2012 election in order to avoid an education 'win' for either party. In the interim, Race to the Top continues to rely upon the misinformed principles within the executive summary of the National Reading Panel. In other words, even though there was a delicate hint at corruption, it seems as though the renewal of ESEA will go forward as though nothing could interfere with or influence the misguided view of literacy, the punitive assessments, and other politically motivated and greedbased facets of the Act.

It seemed as though those non proficient third graders really were influencing the economy because they were implicated in the collapse of the real estate market and banking industry's fall into disarray that few but the loftiest economists can explain and even fewer predicted. Further we were at war again, now over ten years, in spite of few people understanding the significance of fighting in countries that were not related to the tragedy of 9/11. The war seeped across administrations as one of the gifts from the Bush administration to Obama's. The war, the banking and real estate 'messes,' and our troubled economy were all linked, all strained the national budget, and ultimately seemed to find education as one significant resting place for blame, outrage, and disappointment.

Education was being used as a smoke screen to blind the public, obfuscate the real players, and reframe (for the sake of finding someone to blame) the troubles our country was (and is) facing. Krashen (2005) writes about poverty as the root of the complex issues and he also explained that dealing with poverty remains the most difficult and urgent thing to do. The rich were and are continuing to amass extreme wealth as the quality of lives among the poor and middle class deteriorate even further. This fact can be confirmed at publicly available sources of information, such as the Annie E Casey Foundation (<a href="https://www.aecf.org">www.aecf.org</a>). The direct connections between poverty and educational achievement are clear when one studies the data presented at the Casey Foundation website. Street (1995) made the final and crucial connection: the belief that poor education is the cause of the poor economy is simply wrong headed; instead, it is the quality of the economic conditions in which one lives that is the best predictor of school success (by a variety of measures). By blaming schools, teachers, eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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children, and communities, wealthy entrepreneurs perpetuate their wealth and assume zero responsibility in being complicit with any of the causes or solutions. The discussions about preparing children for a global economy were, in reality, about corporate greed. Further, the global economy did not emerge from some mysterious place; it was manufactured by the very corporations that were and remain so vocal and supposedly worried about it. These same corporations began the practice of outsourcing, or exporting jobs for cheap labor and, quite frankly, had reached a point of simply having too many unnecessary laborers in the US; they had no use for these people anymore. Unions weakened as they had little with which to negotiate; their members were superfluous. This turned out to be the perfect time to point to the need for an extremely skilled workforce, one that the schools must provide. The catch-22 was that control of curriculum had been yielded to corporations and it was corporations that were placing the demands. Teacher and local control of the curriculum had been forcibly forfeited yet the failure of schools was placed squarely on teachers and their students. The call for skilled workers is also not accurate, as Wal-Mart remains the biggest employer in the US; there is no way to export retail (and related) work, at least not at the present time. In this era of 'frame and blame (an idea I derived from Lakoff, 2002)' there didn't seem to be a way out for teachers and children, at least not a way that would support schools as forums for authentic learning. No one was listening to the voices of progressive educators. Disheartened, in July 2010, I went to Indianapolis for the annual Literacies for All Summer Institute because it was one of my professional homes, and I'd attended yearly since 1990.

#### **Coalescing of Activists**

I met with Bess Altwerger during one of the breaks at the Institute, and she introduced me to Jesse Turner. I'd read some of his posts on various listservs but hadn't met him. Jesse initiated and sustains the "Children are More than Test Scores" (see http://childrenaremorethantestscores.blogspot.com/) blog. When I met him in July 2010, he was in the midst of a remarkable feat. Frustrated with the lack of attention to the implications and effects of high stakes testing, Jesse was walking from his home in Connecticut to Washington DC because he wanted to meet with President Obama personally to explain that the president's children were receiving a very different education from the children with whom Jesse grew up and the communities to which he remained dedicated. Jesse took breaks from his walk to attend the Literacies for All Summer Institute and other education-political events, but always resumed the walk from where he'd left off. I stared in marvel at this tall beret-capped gentle man as he discussed his trip, his blogging along the way, the support he received, the pairs of running shoes he wore through (which would total four), and the pounds he lost along the way (which would total 100).

Jumping ahead for a moment, when he arrived in Washington DC, Jesse would not meet with the US president, but the dean and some faculty in the college of education at American University hosted him. This was arranged by Bess and Vivian Vasquez. Jesse met with about 50 local and very concerned individuals and they discussed what they would do next; Jesse promised he'd be back in summer 2011 and the dean agreed to host him once again. Yet even in July, before he'd completed his journey, the *walking man* was planning ahead to July 2011.

"You're walking there again in 2011?" I asked.

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"Yes," he said. "I'll keep walking and talking until they hear me."

Jesse's dedication to the work evoked within me the deep sense of justice, decency and the need to act that I felt when protesting and acting upon various issues in my own past. Jesse also asked me about *Letters to Obama*, and I confessed that I knew nothing about them. This was where I learned about Anthony Cody's work:

In November, I accidentally launched a groundswell. I <u>posted an open letter</u> to President Barack Obama online and invited other teachers to join me in speaking out. I was amazed by the response. Other teacher bloggers joined in, and more than 600 signed up for a Facebook group called <u>Teachers' Letters to Obama</u>. Over 100 eloquent letters have been posted thus far, and more come in every day (Cody, 2010).

By July 2010, the number reached 3000 letters and was still growing. Jesse, Anthony, and people like them were talking back to authority (hooks, 1999), gathering voices along the way, and not giving up. I was rejuvenated but also confused as I wondered what we could do next.

Relationship formed/demands articulated/actions begun. I remained in touch with Jesse after the *Institute* and spoke often with Bess Altwerger, typically via email. In one phone call, Bess reported that she, Laurie Murphy, Sabrina Stevens Shupe, and a man named Chris, had met virtually and were ready to start national actions. Bess invited me to the next meeting and we began to dream about summer 2011. There was a growing synergy amongst us and I *think* it was Jesse that invited Anthony Cody to join our conversations. Chris wanted to call the work *The Million Teacher March*, a title that intimidated most of us because to claim that we could arouse to action that many teachers and supporters of public education seemed unrealistic (though it would have been fantastic). Although he eventually left our group, we did continue meeting virtually

and eventually arrived at the decision to return to American University for some yet-to-be defined event. It was ultimately Bess and Sabrina who came up with the idea of a Save Our Schools march. Only after hours of discussion had we agreed to name ourselves *Save Our Schools* (SOS) (for the most recent version, see <a href="http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/">http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/</a>) and referred to our proposed events (a conference, rally, march, and congress, all explained further, below) as a march and national call to action. By early fall, 2010, we began meeting every Sunday night in an online room for at least two hours. There was no shortage of ideas as we began to imagine what we'd like to happen in summer 2011 in Washington DC. We argued, fought, discussed, agreed, disagreed, and more, but almost always all of us returned. Although the specific reason escapes me, it was soon after Anthony joined that Chris left the group. I began to wonder about the dangerous mix of politics, agendas, and egos because he left quite angrily.

My mantra for this time was: *focus on the work, leave egos behind*. But the reality is, as I reflect on those online Sunday evening meetings, egos, politics, and agendas are inextricable. At times when I thought we were vying for voice (which seemed ego-driven), we were, more accurately, pushing our agendas. Those agendas were politically rooted and motivated and always included who we were (identity/ego), what we believed (agenda), and how we could get our beliefs to be central to the work at hand as well as broader goals (politics). Further, there were relationships each of us wanted to cultivate, maintain, and extend; some of the relationship work was rooted in politics and agendas. A lot less of it (than I thought at the time) was rooted in ego.

The work to articulate demands became extremely complicated because of the issues just discussed. After much discussion, including whether or not to use the word 'demands,' we agreed to these four demands:

- Equitable funding for all public school communities
- End to high stakes testing for student, teacher, and school evaluation
- Curriculum developed for and by local school communities
- Teacher, family and community leadership in forming public education policies

Concurrent with the articulation of the demands, we faced financial issues that led to much debate about how to raise money. All of the details of starting a grassroots movement collided with our progress every step of the way, sometimes seeming insurmountable but always yielding to our tenacious dedication as a group. We were going to be heard, yet the details can derail the work as, for example, when Bess spent hours figuring out how to belong to PayPal as a collector of money, which demands that we have an account where the money will be placed. This led to discussions of our status and how to become a nonprofit with an SOS bank account. Eventually, through a complicated string of relationships with different groups, we were taken on as a project by a group with 501.c3 status.

Early in our work, anytime one of us found a willing volunteer in our outside-of-SOS lives, they became a member of the executive committee. Kathryn Cox, one such member of the executive committee, took responsibility for organizing a national network of information coordinators. These folks were responsible for dissemination of information about our work, progress towards DC events, and other related events, eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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policies, laws, mandates, and issues that arose. The goal was to have an information coordinator in each state, which would have been quite an accomplishment. Kathryn worked tirelessly recruiting information coordinators, meeting virtually weekly with them, and helping them understand the importance of social media in the work we were doing. We also had a Facebook page, were tweeting, and our web presence became increasingly interactive as individuals could register for the conference, follow weekly updates, and more on that site. Someone worked on a weekly newsletter that was sent through a distribution network (Constant Contact), but I still felt that we were not reaching sufficient numbers of possible attendees, especially for the rally and march.

Laurie Murphy is a student of organizational structures, works for a non-profit, and is a member of a family rich in teachers. She was instrumental in organizing and charting the various committees, such information coordinators, endorsements and sponsors, rally, march, etc. She worked to have folks understand the various roles of a grassroots group and used her knowledge of organizational structures to try to divide some of the labors. The division of work was necessary and it also contributed to power struggles, misunderstandings of intentions, and distrust. Considering that our group never met face-to-face until the days of the conference, such strife is understandable, although living with and through it was wearisome at the very least. The tension reiterated that everything we say and do is political, saturated with agendas, and linked to egos.

Bess and eventually others worked to recruit 'endorsers' of our work; these were groups and individuals that agreed with us and would allow us to use their names in that regard. She and others reached out to any group we could think of via email, phone eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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calls, letters, and more. We eventually recruited many individuals and groups as endorsers, which meant that they believed in our work, although they may not have been able to donate any money.

The financial viability and vulnerability of a group such as ours was apparent to us each step of the way as we made decisions about what needed to be accomplished and faced the realities of the prices attached to our goals. Being heard is no simple (or cheap) task; although we could and did have a web presence, no one has figured out what makes a web event or site go viral and we were quite far from any viral presence. Still, money remained the vehicle upon which our future would ride, at least until some inertia within the movement was created. Some executive committee members made donations; Bess extended her work to include acquiring financial sponsors for our work. **Unions as a turning point.** We eventually formed relationships with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), two national teacher unions. This was no easy decision, but it did bring in considerable sums of money and provided some access to limited publicity. We paid a price, though, in that the unions made membership on the executive committee a condition of their contributions. The tone of our meetings shifted considerably as we moved from a consensus mode to more formal votes about many issues. Their presence and their relationships with other members of the executive committee gave them considerable power over what was accomplished. Put bluntly, the unions had and have relationships with the Department of Education, the White House and President Obama, and the Democratic party. One reason that Bess and I found their presence contentious was that they had already endorsed Obama, something SOS had not done because of his eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

punitive education platform, inherited from the Bush administration and continued. The unions' relationships cast a shadow over our work, and Bess and I were marginalized because we did not often agree with them. The unions worked to have SOS not insult or damage their positions with those in power. They accomplished this by questioning the use of the word 'demands,' challenging and being instrumental in defeating most radical motions made to the executive committee, and (just days prior to the events) ceasing control of the work Bess and I did for the rally.

The unions have access to national contacts, media, and teachers and we expected them to use that to publicize our events. That publicity was limited. Bess and I noticed and voiced the fact that the unions did not engage in robust advertising of their connections to our work. I felt silenced by the unions once they began attending our meetings. In those weekly meetings (online), I felt as though things had been discussed long before I showed up at our scheduled meeting time; decisions and the outcomes of votes seemed preplanned. I was left with very mixed feelings about the union affiliation because of the inconsistencies I experienced. At times, they were front and center, ready to fight, and at other times they seemed as though they were hesitant to upset extant relationships. Having been vice president of the union of the small school district in which I worked in New York, I had a sense of how unions operated. I believed in them as open, listening to members, and responsive. I felt much more mixed about these last three modifiers as we worked together during SOS, probably because I understood how they needed to balance their positions in order to maintain their relationships with us as well as a broad list of individuals and institutions that constituted their own coalitions for power, voice and presence.

Later in this piece, I will discuss this further and give credit to remarkable local unions for their work. But the work of the nationals to hold us back eventually led to Bess writing a 'save our movement' letter to the executive committee in which she urged us to hold our vision and not be swayed by union interests. The letter didn't change the constitution of the committee or the increasingly predictable ways in which votes went. Our work was being controlled and corralled.

#### Webinars ...because we couldn't wait!

As we grew increasingly excited about the events we were planning, we wanted to reach out to the public in some fashion prior to the summer. We decided to host a series of web-based seminars (webinars) with well-known individuals, some of whom would attend in the summer and some that could not. We held eleven webinars.

March 11, 2011	Diane Ravitch
March 18, 2011	Stan Karp & Bob Peterson
March 25, 2011	Yong Zhao
April 3, 2011	Stephen Krashen
April 10, 2011	John Kuhn
May 7, 2011	Michele Gray, Tim Slekar, & Rita Solnet
May 12, 2011	Plessy & Ferguson Foundation
May 19, 2011	Bruce Smith, Phillip & Joan Harris
July 7, 2011	Pedro Noguera
July 12, 2011	John Jackson
July 21, 2011	Diane Ravitch

Table 1. Webinars held by SOS during 2011.

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The virtual room in which we met for these allowed up to 100 people to attend; although we never reached that maximum, we did have representation from around the country and averaged about 60 attendees. The webinars were an opportunity to fund raise as well.

#### **DC Activities and Actions**

At the same time that we were dealing with the issues of money, planning, and organizational structure, we made decisions about activities in DC. We needed a date, time, place, forum, focus, talent, and much more. As we considered the weather in DC during late summer, which tends to be extremely hot and humid, we had to face the reality that teachers (especially those far from DC) might not attend if our actions were part of a weekend during the school year. We wanted the public to attend, especially those from beyond the greater DC-metro area and finally decided on July 30 as the day of a march and national call to action. Rereading that last sentence, as it flows so easily and appears so concise, I pause to reflect upon this as a momentous decision: we were going to have a march and a national call to action. Immediately, we began to articulate what such activities might look like, who would be included, how we would fund it and more. The further that we reached into discussions of transformational social actions, the more it became apparent that we needed multiple events, a decision that demanded the investment of much more time, effort, planning, money, connections, and location of spaces in which events could be held.

Over a period of weeks, our ideas blossomed into a series of events: a **conference** on Thursday and Friday (July 28 & 29), the **rally and march** (both on July 30), and a meeting on July 31, which we came to call a **congress**, at which future eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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actions would be discussed, planned, and organized. Sarah Irvine Belson was the Dean at American University and agreed to host the two-day conference and the congress. All of the painful and pragmatic details of the use of that space were taken on by Bess and me, with some help from the larger committee. These details included finding hotel deals, transportation to American University, snacks, and meals. The list goes on for pages and months of our lives. Concurrently, we worked to ensure that our events would focus on crossing borders and forming coalitions between groups for the sake of our four demands. Any tiny lead about a group or individual was followed up so that we could compose a diverse conference program that would change people's lives; and it did. Rather than have educators talk to each other, we wanted to enlarge the presence at the conference so we included: civil rights workers, parents, families, activists involved in fields that could connect to our demands, dignitaries, well knowns and little knowns, and more. At the same time, we worked on locating outstanding speakers for the podium on the day of the national call to action rally and march. I remain in awe of Anthony Cody's connectedness because he would casually mention that he spoke with someone and that they were interested in presenting at the conference or rally and then we'd work to secure the commitment of their attendance. Every speaker, presenter, singer, organizer, and participant understood that we had no money to support his or her transportation, lodging, or to provide an honorarium.

A film festival (plus). Other exciting ventures opened for us as offers were made to show films as part of the conference. We agreed to show some films during the conference and also found some folks to organize a film festival, showing films Monday through Friday of the week of the conference. I encourage readers to locate eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the films that were shown and show and discuss them locally. Our film schedule for films shown during the evening (not during conference times) is shown in Table 2.

Date	Movies Shown
Monday, July 25	The People Speak
	Granito de Arena
Tuesday, July 26	Speaking in Tongues
Wednesday, July 27	Race to Nowhere
Thursday, July 28	August to June
	TEACH
Friday, July 29	The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman
	(Brian Jones, who's in the movie and helped with its production, led a discussion after the showing.)

Table 2. Schedule of films shown during the week of the SOS activities in Washington DC, July 2011.

One other facet of movies, the 'plus,' involved high school students. Ceresta Smith led a national call to students to create a public service announcement of up to thirty seconds or a short documentary film that reflected or included our demands as their central themes. Although we only received a small number, the pieces were shown and the students were awarded cash prizes from our very limited budget.

**Dolls in a box**. One of Bess' colleagues at the university at which she works was Morna Mcdermott, a professor, artist and activist who convinced Bess and I of the importance of including the arts at the rally. After email discussions with Morna, **some** eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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of us fell in love with one of Morna's ideas, which she called Dolls in a Box. The Dolls in a Box project was an invitation by Morna to any willing and somewhat creative person to use a doll and a box to create a metaphor for the ways in which kids and teachers are boxed in by tests and scripted curriculum. Morna's excitement grew and was contagious; she took the idea to a conference where participants worked on dolls and boxes. Morna also wanted a specific arts-based action and arranged for the dolls in boxes to be displayed in the plaza outside of the Department of Education in DC on Wednesday, the day before the conference. Herein is the reason I emphasized 'some of us' a few lines up. There were disagreements about whether the Dolls were a sanctioned project of SOS, but Morna had committed to it, arranged for permits for us to be outside of the Department of Education, and assumed full responsibility for the installation. At one point, Bess and I invited Morna to an executive committee virtual meeting to explain the work, but her earlier emails had already convinced the union members on the committee that she was too radical. She might insult the relationships that the unions valued so dearly. Morna was actually disinvited when she showed up to the meeting, a moment that enraged a small number of us on the committee but was a majority decision.

Thankfully, Morna would not be stopped. An art installation is much more than people showing up; it demands thoughtful placement of pieces at the site and arrangement in ways that honor the artists' intentions. Morna's grace and energy were apparent when Bess and I arrived at the Department of Education (the only members of the executive committee to do so) in the late morning on Wednesday July 27, after spending the earlier part of the morning attending to final details of the conference, rally,

march, and congress. There were seven people, including Bess and me, at the installation. The number did not change throughout the day.

One of the individuals that worked for Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, had approached Morna earlier in the day after she sent a doll in a box into the building with a note that contained our demands for Secretary Duncan. As Bess and I approached Morna, she told us that a group from inside the Department was willing to meet with a small group of us; Morna negotiated for four of us to go in. We were excited about being able to talk to folks within the Department, but Bess (whose insights were and continue to be accurate and sharp) wasn't sure we should go. After a bit of intense discussion about the implications of us making a spontaneous decision without executive committee input and the possibility of the Department using our visit to defuse, obfuscate, damage, neutralize, or undermine the work of SOS, we went into the building and met in Peter Cunningham's office, although he was not there. Peter was one of the higher ups in the Department and had been at a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in November 2010, where he tried to tell those of us in attendance (about 150 people) that the Secretary was listening and heard our concerns about ESEA, testing, and more. Peter was not well received by this group of irate NCTE members and conference attendees. On the day that the four of us entered his office, the center of his desk was occupied by the box that Morna had sent in with the note resting on it. The doll and box had gone through the airport-style luggage security machine that our wallets and purses had to go through. Further, before we could enter through the body scanner, we had to provide identification, which was scanned, and await approval to enter.



Figure 1. "Doll in a box" on Peter Cunningham's desk at the Department of Education in DC on July 28, 2011.

We met with about six insiders at the Department, whose cards I've lost, but they were central in the Department; one was a teacher ambassador who apparently was in the role of an advisor to the Department as part of a year's leave from her district. This, we were told, was evidence that the Department wanted to hear teachers' perspectives on issues.

After meeting for about 40 minutes (with one person constantly texting and eventually leaving and returning at least once), Secretary Duncan joined the meeting.

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He remained standing the entire time, looked at us as we presented the demands (which were the only thing we would talk about with the group), and then told us that the Department and SOS were "on the same page," about many issues. We worked to explain the ways in which this was not accurate. Secretary Duncan told us that the new and pending assessments were 'better,' but we explained that high stakes and punishment were still embedded in the process. There was a series of exchanges about our demands and he, again, asserted that we were "on the same page," and we, again, disagreed. We didn't make an impact, I thought as we left; we'd talked to power but we'd been dismissed, unheard.

Upon returning to our hotel, Bess and I had emails from Tim Tutton at the Department of Education asking us if we wanted to meet with President Obama's chief education advisor. At this point we didn't know that the rest of the executive committee had received texts questioning the idea that SOS had met with Duncan. Apparently, the Department issued tweets and other electronic messages using the phrase 'on the same page' in reference to SOS and the Department. Bess and I met with the rest of the executive committee and most thought we'd used poor judgment by accepting the invitation to go into the building in the first place. After we learned that they had betrayed and misrepresented us, we told the Department of Education that we wanted to postpone the invitation and encouraged them to attend our events. The executive committee helped us decide to decline the invitation for the moment, although we have not been invited back since. I refer to this invitation as 'The White House Invitation,' even though we were asked to meet at a building adjacent to the White House.

Bess and I conferred after these events and reached the conclusion that if other members of the committee had been at the Department, they probably would have entered the building. We consoled ourselves, perhaps less than accurately, with the idea that they were upset at not being invited. I also think that they were worried because Bess and I were not in line with the union's perspectives on things. Ultimately, declining the invitation served us well as many press and web outlets heard about and popularized our decision. This declining went 'baby viral,' in that many people seemed to learn about it quite quickly.

The conference. Thursday's opening session began with a keynote by Jonathan Kozol to about 400 people; he presented and stayed through Sunday to participate at the podium on Saturday and in the congress on Sunday. Following Kozol's address on Thursday, participants chose workshops in which to participate. These were not sit-and-absorb presentations by talking heads; they were active and involved work and inquiry sessions into how we might individually and collectively deal with the attacks on public education that we were witnessing, again focusing on our demands. By this point in time, the executive committee had elaborated the demands, including having some white papers on the website. The original four demands remained the same, but some elaboration was agreed upon:

#### For the future of our children, we demand:

#### Equitable funding for all public school communities

- Equitable funding across all public schools and school systems
- Full public funding of family and community support services
- Full funding for 21<sup>st</sup> century school and neighborhood libraries
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End to economically and racially re-segregated schools

# End high stakes testing used for the purpose of student, teacher, and school evaluation

- Use multiple and varied assessments to evaluate students, teachers, and schools
- End pay per test performance for teachers and administrators
- End to public school closures based upon test performance

#### Teacher, family and community leadership in forming public education policies

- Educator and civic community leadership in drafting new ESEA legislation
- Federal support for local school programs free of punitive and competitive funding
- End political and corporate control of curriculum, instruction and assessment decisions for teachers and administrators

#### Curriculum developed for and by local school communities

- Support teacher and student access to a wide-range of instructional programs and technologies
- Well-rounded education that develops every student's intellectual, creative, and physical potential
- Opportunities for multicultural/multilingual curriculum for all students
- Small class sizes that foster caring, democratic learning communities
   Breakout sessions included presentations by: Pamela Grundy, Karran Harper

   Royal, and Rita Solnet, co-founders of Parents Across America; Taylor Mali, a teacher and spoken-word artist; Gary M. Ratner, the Founder and Executive Director of Citizens
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for Effective Schools, well-known educator and educationist, Deborah Meier; John Kuhn, the outspoken superintendent from Texas (Google: Alamo Letter); Laura Mannen, a bilingual teacher and unionist from Oregon with Betty Maloney, a NJ-AFT member, worked in Washington State, Detroit and Newark schools; and Ceresta Smith (teacher and union activist), Shanta Driver (attorney and chair of BAMN, By Any Means Necessary), Julianna Sarr (educator and activist), Tania Kappner (teacher and union activists), Larcenia Turner-Dixon (educator), LeRoy Lewis (leader of walkouts in protest of cuts to the arts programs in Detroit), Porsha Jackson (also led arts protests/walkouts), Ashley Matthews (from Catherine Ferguson High School, Detroit and leader of protests to save that school), Tiffini Baldwin (also of Catherine Ferguson High School), and Taybrian Joe (BAMN organizer). And that's just half of the list from the first day's morning workshops! There were: activists; scholars like Angela Valenzuela and her student, Patricia Lopez; calls for a *Declaration of Education Rights*; bilingual presentations about bilingual education; union presidents like Karen Lewis (Chicago teachers union president) discussing the initiation and sustaining of change; and artists like Morna Mcdermott, Mary Stone Hanley, B. Stephen Carpenter, and Louise Music talking about the arts and social action. Curtis Acosta and Sean Arce, whose struggles to maintain the ethnic studies program in Tucson are well known, showed the film *Precious Knowledge*, which documents their commitments and their students' learning.

Seema Ahmad (staff attorney at the Advancement Project), Bob Schaeffer (author and director of Fairtest), Monique Luse (who works for child welfare and juvenile justice issues), and David Lapp (Education Law Center) presented about dismantling eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the school-to-prison pipeline. Members of the Grassroots Education Movement (GEMs) presented as teachers, family members, and community members working to keep public schools local and democratic. One session was dedicated to *Lessons from the Real World*, a documentary about the mistakes we make when we base school lives on test score results. There were more sessions on Thursday and different groups represented; I apologize for omissions and do so only to keep the length of this piece somewhat manageable.

Friday's morning's keynote address was by Diane Ravitch and was followed by workshop sessions that were as equally remarkable as Thursday's. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS, yes they're still here) presented about attacks on anti-war activists and work done by the international student movement. There were workshops about the problems with *Teach For America* (TFA), attacks on public and higher education (by Teri Yamada, president of the California Faculty Association), and family/school partnerships, including work by Parents Across America. Amy Mizialko, Amy Daroszeski, and Judy Gundry came from Wisconsin and explained actions by teachers there, including the uprising at the state capitol building, in which they participated. The Center for Progressive Leadership presented strategies to get people elected who share our points of view, whether it be for local school board or Senate of the united States. Officers from the St. Paul Federation of Teachers led a session on crafting new narratives of the teaching profession. Members of the Rethinking Schools editorial board were on hand and led a session on bringing back life into the activist movements that were foundational to important shifts in our country. There was a session about the ways in which corporate reforms are hurting our children. One of the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

presenters in that session is a well-known early childhood scholar and also the mother of two sons, one of which is Matt Damon. She helped us secure Matt for the rally at which we would make a national call to action. We concluded the day with a presentation by *The New Freedom Riders*, one of the groups with whom Phoebe Ferguson works.

Phoebe Ferguson, whose history may not be common knowledge, is related to John Ferguson, who was named in the supreme court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*; John's name is affiliated with the idea of 'separate but equal' as a viable means for racial equality. These many generations after that ruling, Phoebe met Keith Plessy, who is related to Homer Plessy, the other name in that famous case. They have since formed a foundation rooted in the exact opposite of the ruling in that case; their foundation is devoted to human decency, access, reconciliation and education. The Plessy and Ferguson Foundation focuses on the **and** (people working together for common good) rather than "v" (for versus, i.e., people against each other). In other words, they believe in people getting along, doing what is just, and supporting that work with and among all humans. Phoebe traveled on a bus with a group of students ages 9-18 (the *New* Freedom Riders) and, as I wrote above, she and the group presented and closed the conference. The children spoke and performed about the work they were doing to reclaim New Orleans for those that have been disenfranchised and marginalized (even further) since Hurricane Katrina. Child activists, as signifiers of the ongoing and hopeful future of work towards justice, were a fine way to end our two days together. We ended the conference with a wonderful gathering for some time to socialize, talk, and plan.

As folks left the final session to attend the reception, someone stopped me to introduce me to a participant. "This is Mary Beth Tinker," the introducer said. "Oh, nice to meet you," I responded. And then I was reminded of who she was; Mary Beth Tinker was one of the plaintiffs in Tinker v. Des Moines, a Supreme Court case from the 1960s. Mary Beth and a small group of others wore black armbands to school to protest the war in Vietnam. The case, ultimately allowing them to wear the bands, went all the way to the US Supreme Court. My head was spinning as I walked to the reception with: parents, families, students, teachers, psychiatrists, professors, progressive organizers, fine artists, supreme court case representatives, the New Freedom Riders, members of By Any Means Necessary (which grew out of the Black Panther movement), community organizers, Deborah Meier, school superintendents, Radical Women (a women's arts and activists group), Michelle Fine, Diane Ravitch, and Jonathan Kozol., and many more, totaling over 400.

The press conference on Thursday. The more urgent our desire to be heard became, the more we realized the need for a presence in the popular press and online media. We hired Bob Schaeffer to handle this along with other executive committee (EC) members and Bob led a press conference on the Thursday of the conference following Kozol's address. A small group on the EC tried to exclude some other EC members from attending this and no other conference attendees were allowed to attend. Bess and I crashed the event. Of course, there's much to this story, but suffice it to say that the event led to further feelings of dissension in the group as the press conference took on the air of a secret meeting, open only to a select few who were in agreement with the union.

The rally and march. Saturday was the big day, numbers wise, as we witnessed the results of a year's work. Bess had worked with the National Park Service and other groups and individuals to secure permits for the Ellipse, which is the park south of and adjacent to the White House. She also worked to locate portable toilets, special grass protectors that went under the podium, the podium and sound companies and more. With the help of donations, we were able to rent a large monitor that would enable those distant from the podium to see the talent. We wanted some music on the podium and learned that if we had too much music, the event would be considered a concert, which would force us to deal with a whole different set of rules. We had to have people speaking a certain percent of the time in order to maintain our status as a rally so we decided to have someone talking the whole time that we were gone from the Ellipse marching around the White House, even though only a few stayed behind. By doing that, we were able to integrate more music into the program while people were present. This was, then, a strategy to stretch the rules in order to have a more diverse program.

Tension grew among members of the executive committee as the date of the rally approached and there were many discussions online about what we'd do about the growing list of podium participants under the guise of concern about the predicted heat. I think it's more accurate to report that some executive committee members did not want some of our invited speakers to speak for fear they would alienate the Democratic party and President Obama. Following a most disconcerting discussion and vote about ten days prior to the event, Bess and I were forced by a majority vote to yield control of the podium speaker list to the executive committee. We were quite shocked at this vote because of the work we'd done to have a robust, diverse, and inspiring list of presenters eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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and performers, honoring the many suggestions made by the executive committee. What had emerged was the politics of the podium. This was a politics that involved people planning to confiscate the podium and use the heat of the day as an added reason to limit who would speak. My take on it, and Bess agrees, is that the power play over the stage was all about making sure that what was said from the podium would not embarrass Obama or damage the union's relationship with the administration and the democratic party.

Tempers were short as the day approached, we all felt overworked, and the reality set in that grassroots movements are not for the faint of energy, hope, heart, and courage. The executive committee replaced the emcee that Bess found with one of the EC members using the excuse that our choice was an unknown. Ironically, the member they chose to emcee was also relatively unknown. The replacement attempted to block some speakers from the podium but one pushed by her and another got onto the podium while the emcee was distracted. In the end, everyone spoke whom Bess and I invited to speak.

By 10 a.m. on Saturday, July 30, Morna installed two art presentations. One was the *Dolls* exhibit, which she had moved home on Wednesday and to the Ellipse on Saturday; the other was *The NCLB Cemetery*, which was composed of headstones, with legs so they could stand. Nothing was allowed to penetrate the soil of the Ellipse; the wind kept blowing them over until Morna's husband rigged up more effective stands. On each headstone, Morna had inscribed what died: In Memory of Joy, Here Lies Meaningful Instruction, RIP Individuality, and more.



Figure 2. The NCLB Cemetery of great practices now dead in schools because of punitive policies and limited curriculum.

The day began quiet, somewhat cloudy and warm as Bess and I approached the Ellipse and saw the podium, huge monitor, and empty grassy area. The committee had hired an event organizer who'd worked with the podium and sound companies, which took some of the stress off of Bess. We had no idea how many people would show up; the weather was clear and not overly hot in the morning. There was a trickle at first, then groups approached, and then busloads arrived. The Wisconsin group had multiple buses and the cheers as they entered the area, wearing bright red shirts, motivated the

crowd with a jilt of the growing sense of what was about to happen. Groups and individuals claimed spots on the grass, spread out blankets and opened chairs, and began melding into a common voice supporting public schools as they greeted and celebrated the talent. At 10 a.m., various artists performed songs and slams. There were poets and a dance group followed by: Linda Darling-Hammond, Rita Solnet (of Parents Across America, a very supportive group), Taylor Mali, Jonathan Kozol, the New Freedom Riders and Phoebe Ferguson, Silky Carter (singing Lift Every Voice), Angela Valenzuela, Barry Lane, Kas Schwerdtfeger (of Students for a Democratic Society), John Kuhn (articulate superintendent, Google him to see his speech), José Vilson (poet), Nathan Saunders (DC-area teachers union), Amy Mizialko, Becca Levy (music), Radical Women (poetry), Sherick Hughes, Mary Cathryn Ricker (St Paul Federation of Teachers), Deborah Meier, Diane Ravitch, and Matt Damon (introduced by his mother). Matt's passionate speech is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqOub-heGQc. He was sincere, reflected his mom's teaching life, and provided a wonderful segue to our march. The Park Service estimated 8000 people in attendance.

After the rally, we marched around the block, past the White House, and continued back to the Ellipse where we disbanded. The heat was close to oppressive, but spirits were high, overall; some people complained about the heat, but we saw no viable alternative to our date. Most were so energized by the day that they didn't let the heat influence the spirit of the events.

The congress. Anthony Cody connected us with the Institute for Democratic

Education in America a few months before the Congress. We were all exhausted from

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dealing with details daily and found this group to be aligned with our demands as well as experienced in a process that would allow future goals to emerge from group thinking. About 150 people showed up on Sunday and we worked in small and large groups to articulate what we'd do next. The Congress was the most disappointing part of the weekend. If Bess and I had more energy, we would have planned and run a Freirian event, but we just could not. There were too many other details for us to address. The Congress was rich in dissension, including concerns about the direction of the day itself. We argued process, people straggled out early, and we were left with no real frame for future action, except for one. The executive committee would dissolve as soon as we could invent a process to elect a new executive committee, which is now called a steering committee. My concern, and the main reason for pushing this action, was that the executive committee had become too contentious a group to effect subsequent action; it seemed dominated by the union agenda and relationships.

We did leave the congress with clear plans to have a transitional leadership team lead the election of a new group, democratically elected, that would be called the steering committee. Hindsight offers a sad clarity that often hurts more than helps. Looking back, I think the call to reconfigure the executive committee was not a good one. We should have taken a month or two off and gotten right back together to decide what was next. Anthony Cody seemed to intuit this and asked me about our continued work, but I deferred to the idea of an election and decided not to run. That was another mistake, quite honestly. I was exhausted, but I wasn't done. After months of working on the process for an election and more time lost as the new group figured out who they were and what directions they would take, there is word that they are planning an event eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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in early August 2012 modeled after the Seneca Falls gathering of women organizing the suffragists.

### **Lessons Learned**

Upon returning home, weary and traumatized, I was immediately disappointed at the lack of presence in the local press about the events in DC. My neighbors and friends only found glimpses of our work on remote websites or in passing clips of Matt Damon responding to a reporter about the work of teachers. What happened in DC had, it seemed, remained in DC. My subsequent retreating away from continued work probably added some years to my life, but also detracted from continuity in the work. The reality is that a very small number of media giants own almost all the media and news outlets, magazines, and newspapers. As days and weeks passed, my mood shifted because Bob Schaeffer forwarded to us many links to articles in various newspapers and other outlets around the country that were challenging extant education policies. The star power of Matt Damon attracted interest in our group's demands and for the first time in what felt like a very long time stories began to appear about resistance to laws and policies, rather than a continuous litany of the ills of public schools, poor teachers, and underperforming students. CNN and other outlets helped initiate a year of more in-depth coverage of education rather than a constant flailing. We changed the national dialogue to some degree as evidenced by the increasing number of articles and stories about the problems with high stakes testing, funding, and mandated curriculum. The lessons learned remain tender, but I do find myself energized to be involved further.

Perpetual witness/perpetual victim. O'Loughlin (2009) describes certain family characteristics as 'transmitted,' meaning they are passed from generation to generation in a manner that parallels genetic transmission. He offers children of Holocaust victims and other victims as evidence of this transmission, noting that the pervasive sadness and expectation of wrong-doing, by others towards self, remain themes in children even generations after the horrific events that were perpetrated upon the parents and grandparents. O'Loughlin is a psychotherapist and works with families to help them find ways to deal with their pain, a pain that is so chronic as to seem as natural as the sunrise, the falling of leaves, or the death of the elderly. Transmitted pain is part of one's life and part of the fabric of functioning in family and society. It is quiet, present, and often difficult to tease out in order to interrogate and assuage. Transmitted across generations, the pain is as much a part of the family as their eye color, hair color, height, and athletic agility. This idea of transmission is applicable to many teachers' political activism and positions.

Although I know a handful of teacher activists, it seems that most teachers have assumed the position of perpetual witness or perpetual victim. These positions anger most teachers when I offer them as a description of their political stances on education issues, yet their silence and inaction support the premise. Further, this stance is not new; it is rooted in the large number of US teachers that make no "struggle to continue" a progressive tradition (Shannon, 1990) in education. Instead they comply with streams of constantly changing demands and remain vulnerable to these demands. Dewey (1904) explains well this phenomenon:

The tendency of educational development to proceed by reaction from one thing to another, to adopt for one year, or for a term of seven years, this or that new study or method of teaching, and then as abruptly to swing over to some new education gospel, is a result which would be impossible if teachers were adequately moved by their own independent intelligence. The willingness of teachers, especially of those occupying administrative positions, to become submerged in the routine detail of their callings, to expend the bulk of their energy upon forms and rules and regulations, and reports and percentages, is another evidence of the absence of intellectual vitality. If teachers were possessed by the spirit of an abiding student of education, this spirit would find some way of breaking through the mesh and coil of circumstance and would find expression for itself (pp. 29-30).

Teachers comply not only because the profession is reduced to a technical career, but also because of the transmitted view—across generations of teachers in the US—that teachers should be 'good' and that being good means being compliant. US teachers could not, in the past, be married; then, once allowed to be married, could not teach if they had children. Teaching has historically been a female profession with a tradition of never standing up for ourselves. Instead, we take the nurturer's role.

Teachers were constantly forced, coerced, and cajoled into positions of compliance about job responsibilities and curriculum fidelity based on the threat of losing their jobs. This is further complicated by the fact that for many teachers their profession has been the first step out of blue-collar work. Coming out of the working class may make it is difficult to conceive of self as a 'professional.' During the height of the whole language movement, teachers were being told and embracing the idea that they are professionals, but that movement was attacked with a vengeance, pushing teachers back to manual labor (think of the teachers *manual*) and complying with a program.

It is offensive that a term related to intimacy—fidelity—would be used to describe a teacher's use of a boxed set of curricular materials; one of the points Kozol made at eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the conference was that he was fired for "curriculum deviation." Still, teachers can't afford to be out of work; they need health insurance, steady income, and a sense of livelihood, yet increasingly they struggle with what they're told to do. They have a deep love of and commitment to children and live with a profound sense of guilt when forced to comply with policy and laws that are inconsistent with what they know about children (Meyer, 2001). Their struggles come with increased conscientization (Freire, 1970) of their position and sense of powerlessness; and it is that sense of powerlessness that I am suggesting has been transmitted across generations of teachers, rooted in the power that (mostly) men had (or thought they had) over women-as-teachers.

Conscious teachers may find themselves constructed as either witnesses or victims. They are witnesses when their consciousness leads them to a deep understanding of their current position, but they choose to objectify that position as they study it. They can report on it in great detail, but it is never allowed to be subjectified to the point of appropriation because such action might demand response, which is something they are not yet considering. If they subjectify their position and appropriate it in its totality, they may cast themselves as victims; they are victims of the system, the principal, laws, or policies. Although it may seem odd to suggest, the positions of victim and witness are active positions and may even be necessary as part of the background that will eventually result in proactive strategies. I do not mean to portray teachers, including those in higher education, as helpless, but suggest that these two positions may be part of the process of moving towards a more politically active professional life. Indeed, SOS was history in the making as teachers and supporters of public education rose up not for money, but, for the first time ever in the US, about curriculum. Activism eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

does not necessarily have a developmental trail that must be followed; women's epistemology (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) suggests there are many junctures at which a woman might enter, proceed from, and move towards the ways in which they know and are in the world. This article is not meant to be an epistemological treatise on teachers' lives (women or men); instead, it is intended to tentatively name—and perhaps open for further discussion—the roles and positions of teachers in defining their professional lives. Those definitions have deep roots, parallel to those O'Loughlin discusses, and we need to develop ways of bringing those roots to the surface for scrutiny, to understand how they are serving us as teachers, and to consider ways of (re)vitalizing the soil in which we are growing and from which our children will grow.

Conspicuously absent in the above discussion are the teachers' unions. It may be argued that unions are integral voices for silenced and marginalized teachers' voices. In light of what we experienced, I'm not convinced that this is the case, except for a few local and very active affiliates (some of whom were present and active at the DC events). Teachers from Madison, Milwaukee, and other cities know that their voices are heard by their unions and they feel an increased sense of safety because of that. My experiences with the executive committee have led me to the point of questioning the unions as I often felt silenced when attempting to engage with these questions during our meetings. I understand that unions need to work with certain powers as they negotiate, but their unwillingness to continuously, strategically, and vociferously talk back to power has weakened them and placed them in positions in which their representation of teachers is called into question. I certainly did learn that there is a difference between the rank and file member (many of which attended parts of SOS) eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility.

and the bureaucracy of the unions. Locals have been active, have struck, and often are in tension with their nationals when they disagree with the politics, agendas, and relationships in which the nationals are involved. This suggests that the positions of witness and victim may finally be dissolving into greater senses of agency and activism for some teachers.

Of course, a well-established and present voice for teachers has and continues to be *Rethinking Schools* (<a href="www.rethinkingschools.org">www.rethinkingschools.org</a>). Not only does this group talk back to power, but they are in the forefront of curriculum and policy materials, strategies, and thinking that put children, local communities, and teachers at the center. They also confront national and international issues such as immigration and globalization. Many of the members of this group attended and presented during our days in DC.

Legislated/policy-mandated malpractice. Since returning home, I have been reading about the LEARN Act and the New Mexico waiver application (from the stipulations of ESEA), reflected on Race to the Top grants that were awarded, and observed almost every state adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Witnessing (yes, as an inactive viewer in this case, sadly not knowing what to do), my own state of New Mexico fall prey to these, including the (thankfully failed, this year) bill that would demand that children not proficient in reading by third grade be retained in that grade without their parents' or guardians' permission, I realize that policy and law makers are responding to the frames I mentioned at the opening of this article, and they are allowing those frames to trump facts. We know retention is profoundly harmful and lacks a research base. We know that high stakes tests are merely a way to punish the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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economically poor for being poor. We know that grading schools with A-F letter grades further denigrates schools, children, teachers, and communities. Yet our policy and lawmakers continue to push for these options, which demand that teachers commit educational malpractice, turning their backs on what they know to be good for children in order to retain their jobs. I suggest that we refer to the laws and policies that are antichild and anti-teacher as what they truly are: *legislated (or policy-mandated) malpractice*.

It is getting more difficult for teachers to 'teach in the cracks' or to close their doors and teach as they know they should because of the increased amount of surveillance (Foucault, 1995) to which they are subjected. Professional development sessions are consumed by data analysis and manipulation, leaving many teachers disheartened at how they are spending that precious time when they could be discussing and learning from each other (Palmer, 1998). This is no longer limited to public school grades K-12; universities are being pushed to work to acculturate future teachers into the CCSS and to make those standards part of their graduate courses, grant work, and institutes that may be run in the summer, including the National Writing Project (see their website at <a href="https://www.nwp.org">www.nwp.org</a>). Most professional organizations have endorsed these standards or are working on ways to support teachers 'during the time of the common core standards' (for example, the National Council of Teacher of English offers four 'surviving' books at

https://secure.ncte.org/store/commoncorestandards/publications). These pushes towards compliance are, I suggest, rooted in the transmission of 'what a teacher is supposed to be' that is passed from generation to generation of teachers. In this case, eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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it is being exaggerated, distorted, deformed, and magnified, further complemented by a climate of punishment and fear as explained earlier in reference to our economic standing on the planet. Policies and laws that suggest that distant and uninvolved lawmakers know more about education and teaching than teachers at the local school site are, then, vehicles that manufacture, legislate, and demand malpractice. Since my return from DC, the press for compliance in schools has elevated and become more devious as teachers are being told that the CCSS involve teacher conversations. Indeed, teachers do get to meet and talk, but only about a pre-established agenda.

Tensions and stress at the grassroots. There were a few facets of this work that were quite taxing on me emotionally and physically. The latter is easier to explain because it reduces to a simple formula: take an ordinary day during which I worked 8-10 hours as a professor and add five to six hours (or more) onto it. Repeat each day of the week for six to seven days per week. Maintain the regimen for nine months. I lost weight, hair, sleep, and time with my family. My wife was an activist's widow, yet she was committed to supporting me in bringing the DC events to fruition. Financially, there was the trip to DC, donations to SOS and other costs. The stress and tension extended beyond my home. There was palpable tension around many of our decisions, such as the place of the unions in our group, the confusing nature of their involvement, and the uncertainty about their financial commitment. They did wind up contributing significant sums, although some amounts had contingencies (matching funds).

I believe the emotional toll was the result of our grassroots movements not having a single ideology or agenda. It took time to understand that the feelings of being blindsided were not simply manifestations of a wounded ego, but were, more eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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accurately, the result of energies expended to make sense of the complexities of working with a group of union loyalists that had an agenda (political) and the majority vote. Others on the executive committee had other agendas, most of which remained unstated, leading to the feeling of an undertow pulling away from our supposedly agreed upon direction (the four demands). These complexities led to the minority view (Bess' and mine) being silenced, marginalized, and disenfranchised while we undertook the bulk of the grunt work (most of the details, small and large). Part of the work we simply had no time to engage in was the establishment of a common agenda (beyond the demands) and vehicles and methods to which we all agreed to bring that agenda to fruition.

My growing consciousness of the undertow created by these differences helped me understand why the relationships between members of the executive committee often left me quite confused. Those times when I issued my call to focus on the work at hand, we were often driven into side discussions that took the focus off the work. I thought these were frustrating but necessary in order for us to clear the air, but now I think that these were times when control of the air was being actively contested, challenged, and, ultimately reaffirmed.

At times, information seemed to leak to other forums and the fear of a mole was brought up in side conversations that others and I had. This led to feelings of paranoia, doubt, and suspicion, which nagged at our relationships and our ability to get things done smoothly. The various crises that arose were, to state the obvious, frustrating and that frustration fermented in ways that were also disturbing because, again, the work was interrupted. Blame, disappointment, anger, and other emotions gave rise to long eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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convoluted conversations as we worked to uncover the subtexts that began to drive the work at times. This discussion is not meant to blame, but rather to help us understand that these are real feelings that we needed to address, yet we were living in a time/pressure cooker as July drew closer and closer. I (and perhaps we as a group) needed to interrogate those feelings more rigorously because it could have led to understanding that the conflicting agendas were creating the undertow. Union agendas, personal agendas for work after the summer, and the intensity of egos wrapped around political differences saturated each executive committee meeting making them fertile ground for unrest. Perhaps it's best I didn't understand this complexity during the year because it certainly would have derailed us from getting as much done as we did. We weren't afforded the luxury of many conservative groups that take years to develop goals, common agendas, and processes for working together.

Another stress was the work to initiate and maintain a sense of coalition building across individuals and groups. We invited and worked with outstanding educationists as well as the many groups mentioned earlier. This was often delicate work because of demands, interests, and needs that each had. The control of the podium for Saturday's rally is an important example of the stress we faced and also the delicate nature and complexity of relationships. As I worked to make sense of what occurred prior to and during the evening when, by majority vote, the podium was confiscated from Bess and me, I spoke quite a bit with Bess. She helped me understand (and, again, this is my understanding) that the hijacking (as we have come to call it) took place because most in the union feared what some speakers would say, specifically: sounding too radical, speaking against President Obama's views on education, and even suggesting that eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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union leadership was not representing what teachers wanted and needed. After we yielded control, an email was sent to all speakers requesting that they adhere to our demands as the focus of their speeches. On the day of the rally, one member of the executive committee tried to block some individuals from getting to the podium, again, I believe, for fear of what they might say. Ceresta Smith (a teacher from Florida and invited podium speaker, invited prior to the hijacking) had run for a union office on a platform that included critique of the union's growing relationships with the Department of Education and the Democratic party and other union positions and policies that she believed were not serving union membership. The executive committee majority wanted to uninvite her, but she did get to speak.

I began to wonder if the anger about the small group getting into the Department of Education was rooted in fear of what we might say. Perhaps Morna's *Dolls* were too in-your-face for the executive committee, leading to their non-presence at that event. This adds further stress as I reflect back and wonder how a group is supposed to coalesce, have shared decision-making, and deal with the varying levels of radicalness across groups and individuals.

Our inability to deeply agree on process, content, and relationships (individual and group) may be at the root of my fear that the work evaporated after the events of July 2011. Even though a convention is planned by the new steering committee, the dissolution of our impact and inertia may actually be a byproduct of the decision to redesign leadership.

Coalitions are tentative, and groups and individuals need a sense of the importance of sustaining the relationships. I'm not sure how to do this because so eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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many of these folks were already working at their limit of finances and energies; we needed to harness the July energy in a way that could have made our work systemic—meaning part of the regular work of each individual or group. The congress was a hopeful forum for that systematization, but it failed. Sustained coalitions remain a goal not yet accomplished by our work, but one rich in potential for ultimate impact upon issues that we hold in common.

Coalitions or not? From dualities to many groups. A few weeks after my return home, I found myself thinking that coalitions were the only vehicle for effective action in response to greed-based and profit-based policies and laws that ultimately hurt children, communities and futures. I thought that we all needed to coalesce into one vehicle to address our demands and concerns, based on the idea of common ground as the point of origin for the work. I remain convinced of the power of melding our resources together into one in order to cut through and change polices and laws. But I also realize the power of the pieces of common ground maintaining their individual identities— parallel and perhaps never meeting, but actually part of a grander instrument. Belenky, Bond and Weistock (1997) discuss these separate entities as nurturing spaces that have no name, but contribute to the greater good of the underserved and misrepresented.

I considered coalitions as constituted of 'donations' that partners contribute to a specific activity, one with which all partners agree and, concomitantly, agreeing to have a sense of separateness within the work. I imagined groups having to give some of their essence to the common good and also preserving enough of their raw materials (energy, ideas, money, other capital, talent) to construct other tools they needed. I eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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continue to wonder about the groups that chose to give nothing to SOS, choosing to neither endorse nor sponsor our work, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (see <a href="http://www.naacp.org/">http://www.naacp.org/</a>). The local DC branch did, however, endorse us. Interestingly, the national branch has since come out against standardized testing, something we may have helped precipitate. Initially, I was disappointed but upon subsequent reflection have realized that their work—the work of any justice-based group that chose not to affiliate with us—still provides energy to move us to a better place. We certainly benefit from coalescing, and we also benefit when we don't coalesce because our groups are pushing back and doing so in two ways, united and individually. Both united and individual efforts count, matter, and help to make a difference. This realization of the duality of grassroots work has helped me reach enhanced senses of hopefulness and peace. The hopefulness rests in the knowledge of sustained effort, which might include various coalition groups over time –or not—that will exist in every-changing and organic ways as long as there is suffering and inequity. This is not a simple hopefulness, but one rooted in understanding that ideologies, agendas, interests, relationships, and every-growing consciousness may lead to work that makes an impact. The peace rests in knowing that even when groups are not at a specific event together, we are united in our hopes and committed to using the energies that our work demands. The simplistic duality of you're either with us or against us has, in my mind, dissolved into multiple points of the work, each emitting energy to sustain the challenges we face in education, poverty, women's rights, LGBTQI rights, workers' rights, occupy movements, citizenship and immigration, and much more. Each of these

sources of energy, strong in their own right, contributes to the challenges we are issuing to the status quo.

Grassroots efforts and decision-making. I remain quite haunted by the decision to enter the Department of Education during the *Dolls* installation, which I've come to call the *Dolls' Occupation* as I recall dolls in boxes spread across the plaza at the Department of Education. The *Dolls* was one in a series of disagreements about our decision making processes and my support of the installation's message may have provided me with an intuitive (at the time) inclination towards ignoring our decision-making process as an executive committee, most probably because we didn't appear to have such a process.

This suggests the importance of establishing a decision making process that thrives at the nexus at which individuality and group ideologies, varying politics, relationships, and agendas meet. We never actually did that. I'm not sure how much individuality, politics, and agenda must be sacrificed for the good of the whole or how that good is determined, but grassroots groups need processes that work under the pressures of events and moments that arise in the midst of the work. We never agreed to a process, especially once formal voting seemed to arrive with the unions and replace consensus. In the case of the dolls and ensuing entrance into the Department and events that followed, we certainly did garner some publicity that helped us when we declined The White House invitation. But a viable decision making process for the executive committee as a whole group—a process that each of us appropriated and used in all of our decision-making, whether alone, in small groups, or together as a whole—was never established.

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In a best-case scenario, such a process would be arrived at in a normative and consensual way as a group is confronted with and deals with issues and events. But it's just not that simple as conflicting ideologies penetrate and disrupt norm building. I suppose that's where handbooks like Roberts Rules of Order and others emerged, although those are intended for larger groups, not groups that could work by consensus. In our case, voices and multiple perspectives were bracketed by a voting majority that was afraid to offend a political party and a president. Instead of coming to consensus around a core set of ideas, a larger body appropriated our planning and potential actions, directions, and public perceptions. The unions created a delicate balance in which they appeared to support us, offered us money, but limited publicizing the events. The minority voice was dismissed when we begged the unions to spread the word about the rally and march up and down the eastern seaboard and to mobilize members to come. Yet locals did respond once they heard the word as, for example, one Long Island, NY local provided free train tickets to DC for members and another offered a free bus. The Wisconsin locals also arrived by bus. Decisions to not broadcast the events and help teachers and others to get there was confusing at the time, but I know now that the decisions were about controlling the reach of SOS. Grassroots groups face these complexities and more because every group is part of a web of relationships, agendas, and egos.

**Teacher/scholar activists.** If you Google 'intellectuals murdered,' you will arrive at lists of brilliant and articulate voices for progressive ideas and authentic democracies that were killed in order to silence them. I do not advocate murder as the measure by which we decide if we are sufficiently threatening to the status quo. My concern, in eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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hindsight, is that we were dismissed as being integral and vital voices in naming and taking actions in response to the crimes being committed against children's imaginations, teachers' creativity, and the future of our democratic experiment. When one knows that atrocities are being committed, particularly those undertaken in order for the few to maintain disproportionate power and wealth over many, there are options for ways to respond. Too often we hear about violence when such clashes reach the surface as deeply angered groups rise up and the push to suppress them is often swift and extreme. We, hopefully, will never reach such a state. Yet the more intense the pressure, the more cracks seem to open as points for response. These are scary points, especially for teachers. Knowing that we are victims and witnesses may suffice for a while as we almost celebrate our raised consciousnesses, but that may ultimately be a vehicle of isolation and loneliness. Here, then, is the most important lesson I learned from the year's work: talk and listen.

Talking and listening are the most powerful beginnings of activism. When we listen to the teacher, educational assistant, parent, family member, child, or professor in the hallway or next classroom or office, when we sit and truly engage about our states of mind, consciousness, and willingness to act up, we have initiated some of the most powerful activism tools we will ever have. It is when we are pushed into or assume a position of silence that we have been shut down and shut out of processes for decision-making. That position of silence was the most painful upon my return home after the DC events because I screamed as loudly as I could, but I was not heard by people two houses over, or downtown at the school district office, or in Santa Fe at my state capital.

I am convinced and committed to the idea that there is remarkable genius amongst us and that it lies in the collective mind that we can form as we speak and listen to each other and consider what we will do next. The use of standards that are common makes perfect sense when the issue at hand is automobile safety because we want every vehicle produced by the industry to be as safe as possible. But when the focus is on children and teachers, standardization is a danger that we cannot risk. Pollan (2002) presents four amazing examples from botany in which the push towards standardization is problematic. In one, the study of potatoes, he points out that the call for one standard potato in Ireland led to a famine that devastated a country for generations. That example, seemingly simple but profoundly impactful, serves as an explicit metaphorical warning that we need to cultivate true diversities of thinking and study in schools. The push by corporations and lawmakers is towards the more dangerous monoculture that, Pollan warns, puts our very existence at risk. The push towards standards is a push for two things: 1) more profit for corporations, and 2) for us to the brink of our intellectual, creative, technological, and scientific survival.

Put simply: we just cannot stop being activists. Even as we scramble to do what we're told to do next, we have to scramble to meet on the sides, in unofficial spaces, in order to talk, challenge, and interrogate what we're being told. We need to initiate and sustain processes of talking and listening as the fertile ground from which our next actions will grow. We cannot stop until we can serve children the ways they need and deserve to be served. Bess sent email invitations to many of the critical theorists we know in education asking that they attend the DC events; only Peter McLaren sent regrets about not being able to attend and also sent a contribution. We were

disappointed that the many others neither attended nor sent word of support. In my mind, many of them are reduced to armchair theorists. Many community activists, whose names are not well known, did attend many of the events, underscoring the distinction between theorizing and acting upon beliefs.

#### The Work Goes On

There is much inertia that emerged from the SOS march and national call to action. Morna Mcdermott and Peggy Robertson organized United Opt Out and their group occupied the Department of Education over the March 30-April 2, 2012 weekend. I was there and presented a slam poem I'd written, composed as a test for policy makers. Over the four-day period, we modeled ourselves after the Occupy Wall Street movement and had teach-ins, open microphones, mic checks, and more. The event was sparsely attended, but it was live streamed and motivational.

I've previously mentioned the convention planned for August, an event that promises to be quite fruitful. This will mark the first time in US history that a people's platform for education will be composed and ultimately presented to our policy designers, members of congress, and potential next presidents.

At the time of this writing, the Occupy Wall Street movement is planning spring events as are other groups (e.g., <a href="http://the99spring.com/">http://the99spring.com/</a>). Coalitions and individual groups all over the world have had quite enough of the educational, economic, environmental, and other conditions that large corporations have systematically and intentionally inflicted upon the rest of humanity and our planet. My hope is for a peaceful shift to more sensitive and enlightened governments, non-governmental

organizations, corporations, and individuals who will work together for the good of all human beings and the health of the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual spaces we inhabit.

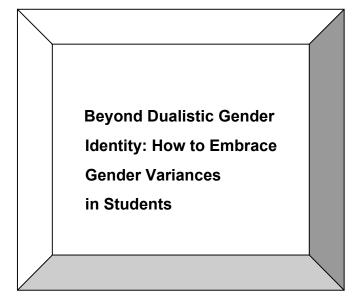
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#### Abstract

This ethnographic case-study, part of a larger study, examines a boy and girl who demonstrate atypical gender behaviors in a third grade classroom and explores how educators can disrupt gender categories and acknowledge gender variance while making multiple gender identities visible. Results indicate that the teacher and a majority of students in the classroom drew upon gender discourse where expected images of being masculine and feminine were coherent with typical expectations of the norm. Such confined construction of idealized gender images rewards persons who exhibit gender identity in gender-expected ways and marginalizes others who fail to perform similarly. Implications include opening up gendered boundaries so that differing version of "boyness" and "girlness" exhibited by students are accepted and respected by others. Teachers need to explicitly and actively intervene using classroom practices

and pedagogy that engages students and equips then with more choices and information that can help them see multiple possibilities of gender identity.

# A Girl Criticized for Finding Her Voice

"You should work with others in your group. You can't decide what to do for others. You need to learn to give others a chance."

Mrs. Benson, the classroom teacher, said to Tasha, who was a very smart girl and who tried to assume a leadership role in a small-group literature discussion. During our observation in a third grade classroom, we often witnessed Tasha keeping other students on task and instructing them on what was right or not for the discussion (pseudonyms used). Evans, Albermann, and Anders, (1998; also see Evans, 2002) studied peer-led literature discussion groups to illustrate how gender shaped the dynamic of group relations in which boys confronted girls who assumed leadership roles because they interpreted girls taking on that role as "being bossy." However, in our observation, it was the teacher who intervened, and it was another girl challenging Tasha's position that ultimately drew the teacher's attention. When boys in the class displayed the same traits as Tasha, they were not labeled bossy by the teacher, as these traits in males were associated with the accepted masculine characteristic of assertiveness.

This is a scene in a third grade classroom where we studied two focal students whose actions were at variance from gender norms. This study, part of a larger ethnographic study, was conducted in order to report on the culture of an elementary school, focusing on the students' reading and writing practices. We included other

members of the classroom, the teacher and focal students' peers, to observe how they reacted toward and responded to the two students' behaviors. We found that as the members of the classroom enacted gender identity across their writings, conversations, and interactions with others, they had idealized gender images and rewarded persons who performed the expected gender roles in appropriate or accepted ways but marginalized others who failed to perform accordingly.

### Methods

This ethnographic case-study employed observation and resultant field notes as a primary data source. The study site was third grade classroom. Observation took place two to three times a week with an average of three hours per visit over a four month (mid-August to mid-December) time period. Besides observation and field notes, we used formal interview and informal conversation with the students and teacher, which are recorded and fully transcribed, audio and videotaping of participants' interaction and examination of students' works (such as their writing) as data sources. We analyzed data following ethnographic research methods that bounded a generalizable case around the focal participants, Tasha and Joseph. One of the main principles of ethnographic research is not to analyze data through a prescriptive hypothesis to prove, but to also let data guide the interpretation of recurrent and emerging patters and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to find recurrent patterns, we read through all of the field notes and transcriptions and categorized the contents by initially labeling them as "crossing gender norm" and "bossy girl and immature boy?" which developed into key themes. The process of triangulation helped to gather as much data as possible and to find strong relationships among each data eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

set to develop a highly textured and reliable explanation for prominent theme. We also did "member checking," which is another way of improving the validity and credibility of the ethnographic case study, by sharing our finding with participants to detect any misinterpretation.

#### Results

This is what happened to Tasha who appeared smart and tried to be a leader; the teacher and other students criticized her because she didn't show her feminine side (i.e., caring about others' feelings or being quiet) and they sometimes characterized her as bossy. In spite of her reputation of being smart and influential, Tasha was not a popular girl. Gilligan (1982), in her renowned work on female perspective in the maledominated field of psychology and moral development, differentiated "ethic of care" which emphasizes the importance of relationship from "ethic of justice" in which universal principles and rules become the basis of decision making, and argued that, the ethic of care is more commonly found in females. Another classic work by Belenky, McVicker Clinchy, Rule Goldberger, and Martuch Tarule (1986) found the metaphors of silence of women. Other researchers have found the same or similar traits in girls who were silenced by boys and teachers (Blair, 2000; Sitler, 2008). Those who do not fit these portraits of women, in particular gifted or very smart girls, are sometimes rejected by peers because the others view them as being too competitive (Healy, 1992). While Tasha socialized with others and had a few close friends, her visible assertiveness and competitiveness made her less popular. When she ran for student council, Tasha was the only student who did not get a single vote from peers. Additionally, in an informal survey in which we asked the students to choose an ideal work partner from the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

opposite gender, only one boy picked Tasha because she was "smart and can help my work." Interestingly, an overwhelming majority of the boys (eight out of twelve) chose another girl who was also perceived as smart but rather quiet. The teacher described this girl as the opposite of Tasha.

We cannot predict what will happen with Tasha as she advances to the upper grades, but we know that it is not uncommon for smart girls to try to downplay their intelligence. A similar example of this kind of perception is in the report of a 14-year-old girl who described the insecurity of her position as a smart girl in an accelerated learning program for gifted students. However, unlike Tasha in our investigation, a female science teacher guided her through the difficult phase and she eventually became confident and learned not to be afraid of how people judged her because of her intelligence (Seligman, 1991).

# A Boy Who Wants to Write a Story about a Baby

"Joseph, interestingly, was not afraid of saying he would willingly have a doll, wants to have a doll, like that. So, that was nice. He is different."

Tasha and Joseph's teacher made this comment after the class wherein she led a discussion on *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow (1972), which depicts a boy who wants to have a baby doll. Joseph, whom the teacher often described as immature, did not verbally participate in the discussion. However, based on our observations, Joseph's non-verbal responses clearly demonstrated that he was very sympathetic toward William. For example, when the teacher asked the students, "Why do you think they are calling William a sissy?" and one of the boys responded, "That's an insult

because boys can play with a doll," Joseph visibly nodded to express his agreement with his classmate. The teacher further stated, "If they really want, can boys play with a doll." And the inquired, "If your grandmother gave you a doll like what William was given, raise your hand up if you would like it." Joseph was the first student to respond to these questions, raising his hand high, while only a few other students reluctantly raised their hands and replied with a noncommittal, "Maybe."

Joseph caught our attention after only a couple of observations in the classroom. We recorded many incidents that made us describe him as being different from other boys in the field notes. Joseph placed pictures of his family on his desk during the class and carried them with him whenever he went out for recess and lunch. While he was a struggling reader, he loved listening to stories when others read and often pleaded with girls to read books to him. Joseph liked to physically lean on his friends and often hugged his teacher when he greeted her. In addition to habitually carrying his family photos, Joseph very often expressed his affection for his family, especially for his mom, in class. One time, Joseph started a story about his sister's baby, and presented each family member in a simple and repetitive, but affectionate words and illustrations that differed from that of other boys, who described their families in a more objective manner. Through his writing, Joseph was constructing his gendered identity, not as a masculine or tough man, but as a loving and caring son and brother. However, Joseph was hesitant about sharing his writings with others: "I don't want to read it to the whole class. It's disgusting to write about a baby." He added, "Will you [one of us] be here when I share the story? If you are not here, it will be a bummer." Joseph appeared to be clearly aware that he was writing about a topic that was different from what other eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

boys were writing, and his hesitation to share was expressed through his fear of the rejection he might face by sharing his story in the classroom. More importantly, Joseph knew that, with strong support from an adult, he would not face the same level of rejection.

Although many students, especially girls, accepted Joseph as a member of this classroom society for his babyish antics and comic behavior, Zucker, Wilson-Smith, Kurita, and Stern(1995), who examined children's evaluation of peers' sex-typed behaviors, argue that feminine boys do not appear to be rejected by peers until around grade three, and rejection is significantly higher for older groups. Therefore, we cannot disregard the possibility that as he advances through the upper grades, peers may challenge Joseph because of his behavior and he may exhibit his gender identity differently (see GLSEN report, 2012 for students' remarks related to not conforming to traditional gender norms).

Dominant gender discourse, as promoted by society and media, encourages males to prove themselves as strong, self-reliant, and tough (Panayiotou, 2010; Richardson, 2010). Foucault (1977, 1978) argues that society and school are sites that normalize gender duality through surveillance and regulations. Accordingly, society pathologizes people who do not conform to societal rules, such as heterosexual gender binary, and so, naturalizes gender as a binary construction and marginalizes people who do not conform to expected gender norms. Therefore, we postulate that in order to mediate peer pressure and social pressure, Joseph may have to repress his sensitive and emotional disposition, and practice being a strong and aggressive male, without support from adults or the system.

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## The Danger of Taken-for-Granted Gender Norms and Stereotypes

As we have seen in these brief case studies of two children, gender-related expectations or assumptions do affect and influence learning. The classroom teacher and peers did not encourage Tasha to be a leader but instead, criticized her for being bossy. And, while Joseph could not freely express what he liked in his writing, he expr4essed his reluctance and was hesitant to share his work with his peers.

These kinds of classroom and school incidents may seem trivial, but when examined in connection with broader social issues, such occurrences take on greater significance. As we look back on past male presidential candidacies in the United States (US), we can observe a strong emphasis on the candidates' masculinity, resulting from the fact that most of us unconsciously equate masculine traits with the good qualities of leadership. Male candidates are aware of this tendency and portray themselves as tough men who hunt, wear cowboy hats or boots, play sports, or eat like a man (e.g., hamburger or steak). However, when it comes to female candidates, the idea of what makes a good leader becomes complex. In recent US elections, the few female candidates whom we were fortunate to have considered, were criticized either for being too aggressive or for being too feminine. For example, in 2008, Hillary Clinton, an aspirant to the nomination of the Democratic Party in 2008, had to fight against her image as a smart girl with an Ivy League Gloss (see Baird, 2008), which was not necessarily viewed as attractive or in line with perceived notions of leadership. In the meantime, Sara Palin, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, had to face significant criticism: she looked and sounded rather different, did not know enough about current social issues, and more importantly, her "wardrobe" and her girly hair style Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012 eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

were deemed unserious (Isikoff & Smalley, 2008). In short, presidential candidates have to be mindful of the media portraying them as not masculine enough or, in the case of women, fearful of being dismissed either as too feminine for a leader or too aggressive for a woman. Additionally, we must consider and not dismiss the few homosexual politicians who disguised themselves as 'typical' married men to maintain their political careers.

When we discuss gender, we should not forget that it is a social construction in which the roles and responsibilities for males and females are culturally construed and therefore, unlike sex which is determined at birth, it could change over time (Bennet, 2011). Like any other culturally constructed concepts, people often take expected gender identity and gender performance for granted. Gee (2005), additionally presents more information and considerations on taken-for-granted assumptions. Consequently, we posit that often, individuals do not make an issue out of such expectations and assumptions unless the possible inequity or injustice in our assumptions and expectations can be brought to light. Therefore, what adults such as teachers believe and promote regarding gender identities and roles is important, as what teachers believe affects student learning through their curricular decisions and ways of approaching pertinent topics (Garrahy, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

# Importance of the Teacher's Role: Reading Social Issues from Our Classrooms

Gender identity is considered one of the most defining factors in determining who a person is, and as such, it has been the focus of many debates in education, including language arts education and English education (Butler, 1990; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Foucault, 1978; Martille, Labadie, & Reese, 2009). However, one drawback of gender eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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related assumptions is that individuals who do not necessarily perform according to expected and accepted gender norms can experience disparate treatment or even discrimination. Of special concern is that education-based discrimination could ultimately lead to a disconnection with academics. For example, research on a group of African American young adolescents illustrated how perceptions of peer acceptance affected their bond with the school and, ultimately, their academic achievement (Eisele, Zand, & Thomson 2009). Another example of the old gender-based stereotypes related to academic achievement is the expectation that boys will excel in math or science classes and girls will do well in reading. Surprisingly, research still shows that some teachers continue to hold this kind of belief based on gender stereotypes (Tiedemann, 2002).

Recent research indicates that gender bias is already common in late childhood even before adolescence, and children from both genders have either witnessed or experienced discrimination (Brown, Alabi, Huynh, & Masten, 2011; also see Carlile, 2009). More importantly, by fourth grade, the majority of children start thinking about social group identities, including gender. We therefore believe that educators have to make some efforts before early adolescences to prevent possible aggression due to differentness/divergence from the gender norm.

Such efforts can be made through <u>critical literacy pedagogy</u> as structured by Lewison, Seely-Flint, & Sluys (2002) or, via multicultural social-justice education practice as described by <u>Sleeter & Grant (2007)</u>. In particular, the aforementioned critical literacy pedagogy has four steps of a pedagogical framework, which encourages students to explore issues of social justice and democratic principles: 1) disrupting the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice. Using this framework, a teacher and students can examine multiple texts such as classic or trade books, children's literature, or pop culture to question whether these texts represent females and males in stereotypical manners. The students can also question how these selective images of femininity and masculinity differ from actual gendered practices of their classmates, their families, or other people they know. Students can identify not only gender stereotypes but also variances within one gender by examining the ways people perform a variety of activities in the media, magazine, or sports. After deconstructing existing social texts, a teacher can invite students to write alternative texts so that they can experiment with more choices and information which help students see other possibilities of doing gender (see

http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cte/docs/NTO/Gender Equity.pdf for classroom activities to promote critical thinking and gender equity, also see <a href="Serafini">Serafini</a>, 2007).

In our investigation, we planned *Williams' Doll* and *Oliver Button is a Sissy* by

Tomie dePaola (1979) as the read aloud books hoping that these books would help the students understand how to deconstruct unquestioned assumptions of gender differences and reconstruct new gender relations. While it may be true that such reading of non-traditional gender roles cannot change the gender discourse pervasive in the classroom as evidenced by many students who were not convinced by the "effeminate" characters saying, "I don't like [these stories]...not real," we asked specific questions that highlighted how societal pressure imposes certain gender roles.

By using such titles, we made visible to students these pressures and were able to eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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observe that some of students' perspectives of gender relations shifted as the following conversation illustrates:

Author: Do you think, after the talent show, some of the boys will call [Oliver] a sissy?

Robert: No, I don't think so. Because [other boys] never thought dancing would be a boy thing, but now they know [Oliver] is that good, they had never thought about that.

While there is no guarantee that such gradual exposure to alternative gender constructions will bring a sudden change in students' perception of what is the ideal images of boys and girls, we believe that the public reading and discussion of this topic can give students the opportunities to hear other students' opinions and to reflect on why her/his way of thinking gender might not be the same as those of others.

Not unlike critical literacy pedagogy, advocates for multicultural education also criticizes the practice of assimilation and strive for a more just society for all learners (Banks, 2008; Sleeter and Grant, 2007). Multicultural Education includes different levels of approaches to race, class, and gender and proposes reconstructing curriculum with diverse perspectives. At the highest level, teachers will invite social issues to the classroom so that students can discuss, make decisions, and take actions on the issues. According to these approaches, one important step is to observe and learn who our students are, as we did in this study, and see what kind of images they themselves bring to the classroom. Then, we can start to expose them to various types of texts which portray different roles and models for them. We argue that if multicultural

literature is to be used in this kind of practice, it has to be implemented in such a way as to prevent stereotypes or misrepresentations of a gender or other social constructs, using both traditional and contemporary literature and diverse genres. Reading and discussing children's literature should invite students to question the dominant discourses that shape their experiences and to challenge cultural assumptions (see <a href="http://genderequalbooks.com/">http://genderequalbooks.com/</a> for the list of children's books to foster equality).

These practices can help educators, and students look at students' performance beyond dualistic construction and understand the struggle students like Tasha and Joseph experience within the dominant gender discourse. Tasha made herself visible in public as a smart and active girl and challenged restricted images imposed on girls in a male dominant society. We see Joseph, rather than being "immature," as providing a counter-example of stereotyped masculine images of boys by being a sensitive and emotional. We need to make alternative ways of being boys and girls available to students and create spaces where we can discuss and share different possibilities of constructing identities. While we expect both teachers and students to feel uncomfortable and there might be conflict among different interpretations of gender norms, such discomfort and conflict are an inevitable passage in order to provide students with new ways to think about gender and other social constructs.

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On the road to engagement:
Teacher action research
and student engagement in
socially responsible literacy
and social studies instruction

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**Key words**: action research, social responsibility, elementary level literacy, social studies, engagement, regional diversity

### **ABSTRACT**

Social studies instruction has traditionally meant educating students through the use of textbooks and teacher's guides and is rarely focused on promoting social responsibility and literacy skills in authentic and meaningful ways. This article links how pre-service teachers' engagement in graduate level action research fostered embedded social responsibility and literacy in elementary social studies instruction. This research highlights the inextricable connection between teachers' pedagogical approach, authentic practices and powerful instructional. Specifically, this article is an examination of an action research study of social studies instruction in South Louisiana that "brought" students on a cross-country simulated journey. Using reflective journals, document analysis, pedagogical reflection, and evaluation of student feedback, our eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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findings suggest that social interaction helps to develop students' literacy, civic engagement, and overall enthusiasm for learning.

# Importance of Students' Involvement in Social Responsibility and Literacy

Reflecting on our own educational experiences, we are reminded of the seemingly endless amounts of time spent copying notes from overhead projectors along with unending cycles of round-robin reading from Social Studies textbooks. These experiences ring true both for authors Ruiz and Rome, Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) graduates, as well as for Fasching-Varner, the major professor in the MAT program in which Ruiz and Rome were enrolled. Unfortunately, from what we all recall, our teachers rarely took the opportunity to venture out of the textbook to spend time on literacy or discuss social responsibility, despite the natural ways in which engaging students in meaningful and authentic curriculum lends itself to of those ideas. For the purposes of this article we define literacy in its most basic form as the ability to read, write, listen, and speak. We align with the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Associations positions that visual representation is also significant to understandings literacy. We are also influenced by the notion that literacy is context driven and consequently influenced by axiological considerations consistent with the context (Goody, 1986). In terms of social responsibility, we feel that at its most basic level we expect individuals and organizations to act with an ethic of care in terms of their responsibilities towards others and the society at large.

Ruiz and Rome recall that most of our social studies instruction felt monotonous and disconnected from our lives as curious learners. In trying to understand our own eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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pedagogical development as teachers, it became clear that ideas associated with literacy and social responsibility were important to our approaches for teaching and learning the Social Studies. For Fasching-Varner, a former classroom teacher and now teacher educator, civic engagement represents the ideal of a free and public education, and through the courses he teaches in a MAT program in South Louisiana; modeling emancipatory and civic-oriented engagement is emphasized. At the time of the research, Ruiz and Rome were practicing interns and are now novice teachers who have developed a strong pedagogical orientation that emphasizes the significance of informing students of his or her role as a member of society.

# **Ruiz and Rome's Perspectives**

Part of the requirements of our graduate program included conducting an intensive action research project, and using findings to study, understand, and enhance our own pedagogical trajectory, and more importantly the educational outcomes for the elementary students in the classroom. In particular, through action research, we sought areas in our pedagogy that would benefit from examination. Midway through our semester in a fourth grade classroom, our mentor teacher, Anne Johnson, approached us wanting us to teach an instructional unit on the regions of United States (US), giving us a letter from a fourth-grade class in Arizona inviting our class to participate in "The Great Mail Race". The Great Mail Race (TGMR) is an opportunity to connect students to other fourth grade classes in each of the fifty US by describing their school and state community in their writing while learning about various communities and cultures through this writing engagement. Ms. Johnson encouraged us to take risks in the planning and delivery of the unit to break from traditional textbook-based approaches.

We knew this unit was a wonderful way to incorporate literacy and social responsibility. Yet we were also hesitant to journey into this unfamiliar territory. As K-12 students, we had only been taught social studies using the textbook as the sole pedagogical tool. The approach we ultimately drew from was reflective of what we had been taught as pre-service teachers in our teacher preparation program, yet we had no personal experience ourselves, consequently we were hesitant initially about how to execute an approach we had only read and discussed but never actually observed or in which we had participated. Being committed to moving past the ways we were taught in our own K-12 settings, we wanted to create a unit that would be both educational and memorable to our students and ourselves, provide a basis for our action research. In particular, we were eager to move beyond orientations to teaching students about regions of the US, pedagogy that appeared two-dimensional or flat in nature. We wanted to make instruction authentic, driven by student inquiry, and promoting social responsibility with literacy embedded throughout. We decided, consequently, to take our students on a cross-country tour of the five regions of the **United States**. Realistically, we did not have the resources or ability to take the entire class all over the country, but we were able to create a simulation journey across the US, which allowed our students to vicariously experience various regions that they may never have the chance to otherwise, while still adhering to the district's curricular requirement that students learn about regions. We began researching pedagogical approaches to find ideas on how to facilitate this simulation based-learning. Dunkel Chilcott (n.d) advocates that, "classroom simulations motivate students by keeping them actively engaged in the learning process...as the simulation runs, it is modeling a dynamic

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system in which the learner is involved" (Dunkel Chilcott, n.d.,p. 2). Integrating literacy into the Social Studies curriculum through the simulation was a method we believed would enhance students' learning while generating enthusiasm for experiences that had never been encountered previously.

# **Purpose**

Our desire to engage in this regional tour was to establish an instructional approach that countered previous instructional approaches in order to enhance the students' learning experiences with meaningful, relatable, and authentic contexts that would simultaneously promoting literacy and civic responsibility. Simulating travel by having students engage in a journey where they could be active participants and model citizenship was a critical approach toward learning; we are not, however, suggesting that simulation is the only or best method of engaging in critical approaches. By creating a simulation, rather than following the textbook, we believed that students would get a better sense of what the nation is like as it exists beyond textbook covers and classroom walls; similarly we believed that students would be afforded the opportunity to be participants in their own learning as opposed to merely recipients. We used this simulation to model high expectations for ourselves and our students, consistent with a culturally relevant approach to learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Fasching-Varner, 2009, 2012). Nieto's (2004) Affirming Diversity additionally upholds our perspective of challenging students suggesting that,

all children can benefit from high expectations and a challenging curriculum, but some students are regularly subjected to diluted, undemanding, and boring educational programs because teachers and

schools do not tap into their strengths and talents. Typically what students want are more demands rather than fewer" (p. 103).

Along with articulating high expectations for student achievement, we anticipated that developing more interactive and project-based activities would further engage the students in our lessons by tapping into the rich cultural perspectives our students already possessed. This would allow us, as a class of learners, to consider larger socio-political questions about the organization of the U.S. Consequently the intention of our unit centered on cultural competence, sociopolitical commitments, and high expectations for student learning, fully addressing the three principal tents of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Fasching-Varner, 2012).

An additional purpose of our unit was our desire to remove what we believed was the blindfold placed on students based on what appeared to be left out of the state's <a href="Social Studies Grade Level Expectations">Social Studies Grade Level Expectations</a>. Given our desire to have student learning embedded within a social responsibility framework, we further connected with Nieto (2004) who posits that certain realities should not be excluded from the curriculum, and as teachers we must include both the positive and negative events in our nation. Nieto (2004) asserts,

"Teaching our students well means teaching them not only the glorious and heroic parts of U.S. history, but the complicated and unfair and disturbing parts of it as well. If we don't do this, how will they ever learn? Yet unless we do this, we end up with young people who get to college—those fortunate enough to even get there—uninformed of their history" (Nieto, p. 4).

We intentionally went beyond the teacher's manual guidelines and included discussions that we deemed essential for our students to better prepare them for their civic responsibilities. Some of these conversations included how laws have at times worked against subgroups within the larger population (tyranny of the majority principal) and how the socio-economic climate of a region affects how its citizens experience their lives. Some other controversial topics that teachers often avoid, but that were a part of our thinking about the realities of touring the US include immigration, US-Mexico border, citizenship, and events of September 11, 2001. We recognized that to engage in civic and social responsibility means that we cannot simply address topics that are easy to discuss but had to also move into more controversial topics. Never did we imagine how welcoming and captivated the students would be in these discussions. What had originally been planned for a couple days ended up lasting several weeks, resulting in critical questioning and deep, elaborate discussions on topics the students had barely been introduced to in the past.

# Methodology

# **Participant Demographics**

We conducted our research in South Louisiana in the Capital Region of the state at an elementary school in a large urban district. Recognizing the challenges of our context, we wanted to ensure that we understood how demographics considerations may have played out in our work. Statistics show that the racial enrollment in public schools in the US is 24.2% students of Color and 75.8% White. Louisiana public schools' racial breakdown is divided into 52.2% students of Color and 47.8% White, while the large district we worked with consists of 89.1% students of Color and 10.9% eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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White students (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). As a state, the percentage of students qualifying for federally assisted free and reduced lunch (FRL) in Louisiana is 67.2% whereas the percentage increases to 82.2% in the district we worked. Conversely, the teachers in our building were primarily White and middle-class. The demographic realities of a school like the one in which we conducted our research have often been used to discredit the value of students creating an atmosphere of "free and reduced pedagogy" as described by Fasching-Varner and Dodo-Seriki (2012). We provide the demographic breakdown to help paint a picture of where our research was conducted, but we also wish to articulate that we saw the demographic reality of our work as an opportunity to engage with students who may not otherwise have had the opportunities to travel throughout the country, while simultaneously recognizing that our students brought a wealth of cultural capital to the unit.

Looking at who our students were and what would work best for them was the essential factor to consider when developing this cross-country tour. In considering pedagogically appropriate approaches, and to frame our methodology for studying our instruction, we also considered how action research could help to guide our inquiry to developing social responsibility through literacy with students. Since we planned to conduct our research in a large urban district in South Louisiana, we explored what the literature tells us about the specific area we conducted our work. In particular we were drawn to Sulentic Dowell's (2012) Addressing the complexities of literacy and urban teaching in the USA: strategic professional development as intervention which stresses the challenges of teaching in urban school settings in the US, particularly in south Louisiana where we were teaching, which include "overcrowded classrooms; decaying eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

campuses; insufficient supplies; and cultural and economic dissonance between teachers and students... low-income African-Americans residing in closed segregated neighborhoods within the Greater Baton Rouge metroplex" (Sulentic Dowell, 2012, p. 3; see also Ayers & Ford, 1996; Parenti, 2003).

#### The Classroom Instruction

Prior to sharing the particular methods for our research we wish to provide a brief instructional orientation to our approach. On the first day of our journey, when the students reentered the classroom from afternoon recess, they were each given a plane ticket with the first destination of the Northeast Region, West Quoddy Head, Maine. Students were also given a folder that would become their travel journal to hold souvenirs, writing assignments, tickets, flyers, and maps from all the places we would visit along our tour. Throughout our journey, we utilized a variety of strategies to develop a simulation, such as passing out airplane, train, riverboat, or subway tickets, using Microsoft PowerPoint for visual and auditory effects, initiating class discussions, acting out plays in Reader's Theatre, presenting individual and group assignments, <u>crafting an assortment of art projects</u>, and especially writing activities including constructing postcards, flyers, laws, and letters. We continued these various activities for Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West Regions, while still incorporating a writing assessment that was unique to the region we were visiting at the time. Examples include constructing a flyer to encourage visitors to come to the Southeast region and sending a postcard to a friend that explained their visit to the Northeast Region, both to be discussed in further detail. At each stop, we held classroom discussions about the culture of each region and how some basic municipal laws varied from state to state. eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

After visiting each region, as a group, students would use an atlas to complete a regional chart that highlighted the individuality of each state in that region. To assess their understanding of the material, students were given a short comprehension test and a map quiz on each state they learned up to that point of instruction.

#### **Data Collection Methods**

Prior to beginning research, we sought approval from the Louisiana State

University Institutional Review Board as well as seeking research approval of the school district. With permission to proceed, we distributed consent forms to our cooperating teacher and the students' parents. For the parents who consented for their child to participate in the research we sought each child's assent, following the IRB-approved protocol. With permission, consents, and assents in place, we proceeded with our research, asking the following two questions:

- How do students experience simulated learning in Social Studies where social responsibility and literacy are corner-stones of teaching and learning?
- 2) How do pre-service teachers experience teaching units of instruction centered on simulated learning in Social Studies where social responsibility and literacy are corner-stones of teaching and learning?

We triangulated data for this research. For participants, we drew from autoethnographic data as we experienced the unit. From students we collected work
samples as representative data as they experienced the unit, and from the classroom
teacher, we collected reflective anecdotal data as she experienced the unit. In terms of
data sources we kept reflective researcher journals in addition to our observations of
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classroom instruction, we collected student work samples throughout the unit, invited students to complete and submit reflective journal/feedback papers, and interacted through conversation with the classroom mentor teacher. Having triangulated data allowed for a wider representative sample of data along with increased variability of perspectives that could help shape emergent themes and findings.

# **Data Analysis**

Recognizing that student engagement in literacy and civic responsibility was our purpose, we allotted significant time and effort to analyze how the students experienced our instructional methods. We situate our work within the interpretivist/constructivist <u>paradigm.</u> Aligned with the work of Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, and Hayes (2009) within this paradigm, we were interested in instructional interactions and how student learning was being constructed within the course of the unit. In analyzing data, we also recognize that our interpretation of student data was mediated by our knowledge and understanding of the students as participants. We collected student work samples for each activity and experience throughout the unit, including their travel journals. Additionally, we distributed confidential evaluations to each student in which they wrote about what they enjoyed most about the journey, what they disliked most about the journey, any questions they may have had, and any other recommendations to make the journey more fulfilling. To begin analyzing data we first assigned each participant a pseudonym, including our mentor teacher (those pseudonyms are used throughout). We then reviewed each student's work sample, the evaluations, reflective writing, as well as our lesson plans and other data sources, including our own reflective notebooks, each day of the unit. We coded all data initially using a color coding scheme eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

to highlight what appeared to be important ideas expressed or exhibited using Creswell's constant comparative method (1998) involving a continuous cycle of conception and categorization. With initial codes in place we began to organize like codes, eventually grouping all of the data into three larger themes that represent our findings for the study. As this was action research we were also concerned as much with the research process as with our instructional approach. Thus, we drew from student data to make changes in our instruction approach, and we had deliberate conversations with students based on data that emerged throughout the unit not only as a means of member-checking but also as a means of ensuring pedagogical approaches that were driven through our in-vivo data.

### Realities

Researchers often discuss limitations of their studies, but as authors of this paper being participants of action-based research, and as a faculty member charged with assigning pre-service teacher interns, we frame what others might suggest are limitations as our realities. By framing these ideas as our realities, we moved toward a paradigmatic perspective that values any and all research as capable of addressing some question, even when the research is modest in terms of time, scope, and reach. Our realities inherently limit the scope of our investigation, but this does not mean that our work is itself, limited. We wanted to emphasize that our realities shaped the way we conducted our unit and the consequent research. As teachers we had a certain district-mandated timeline that we followed to make sure all grade level expectations were addressed by the end of the school year. With that in mind, we knew that limiting our time frame would be difficult, but required. In retrospect, we reflected that if time was eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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not a restrictive factor, we would have been able to spend a day at each of the fifty states, instead of visiting a few states every day.

## **Initial Planning**

As we began planning our unit, we contacted many state tourism sites in hopes they would send flyers and pamphlets we could pass out during our visits. We found many businesses willing to share and help, however the shipping of materials was estimated to take at least one month to arrive. We soon realized these sorts of authentic materials would not be a widely available option for our students. If we anticipated teaching this unit again, we would connect with these sources in advance to provide our students with as many authentic materials as possible. Another reality that surfaced was the extensive time it took for our students to write their letters for "TGMR." Our students were dedicated to writing with their best efforts and would not settle for anything less. An authentic audiences heightened awareness of correctness. While seeing their devotion was gratifying, unfortunately we were unable to mail out the letters as early as planned. Consequently, we were not able to be present at the time when most of the states replied, due to graduate school scheduling and our end time as interns. We were fortunate that letters from at least several states did arrive within the context of our time teaching the unit.

### **Findings**

During data analysis three main themes that emerged. Ultimately our discoveries were the following: using literacy to engage the larger community,

establishing civic responsibility, and celebrating regional diversity and its contribution to our nation. We present each theme in turn.

# Finding 1: Using literacy to engage the larger community

Reminiscing on Ruiz and Rome's educational background and the sense of being disconnected from our community, we wanted to instill the importance of community involvement in our students. To meet this goal, we decided to enter TGMR as explained earlier in the purpose section of the article. Through TGMR, each student was assigned to write a letter to two states in our country. After each student was given their two addresses, we were able to communicate with all of the 50 states. We explained to our students that this was not just a writing assignment, but that it was the ability to share our culture with other fourth grade students all over the country. The race consequently allowed students to see the purpose and imagine the audience of their writing rather than writing to imaginary people. While we know that students may learn to write letters using either approach, we were committed to not engaging in literacy practices with the students that lacked authentic purpose. The recipients of the letters were in fact, able to send letters back to the students, which created a living learning community where the literacy practice of letter writing served a real social purpose as opposed to a merely academic purpose, tying in with Heath's (1982) concept of literacy events as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 93). We found that literacy was not only emphasized, but students discovered their literacy skills were being used to engage larger communities beyond the classroom.

During the mail race we employed reflective journal/feedback papers to ask our students the following questions to get a better understanding of their writing preferences:

How do you feel about writing?

Would you rather write to a real or imaginary reader?

Are you enjoying "The Great Mail Race" so far?

Students generally indicated that they not only enjoyed the writing but were able to connect the writing to larger social purposes of the writing. Amanda for example stated, "I really enjoy the fact that I am writing to someone that is my age." Similarly Peter stated, "I think it's cool that we can talk to people who don't live in Louisiana." Katherine reported, "I would rather do this than write something that only my teacher will read." These comments from students are representative and indicative of how students responded throughout the process to writing. In analyzing our students' writing samples, it became evident that social responsibility was at the heart of their work as well as it related to engaging in authentic literacy practices to larger communities. We define social responsibility in part, as learning how to dialogue with others and as well as how to use authentic means of communication and literacy to foster interaction as productive members of society. From students' responses we concluded that our students were beginning to become more aware of their societal duties how while enjoying it at the same time.

Once the schools began writing back, we were able to analyze how our letters impacted other classes across the nation, just as the letter from Arizona inspired us.

Many schools were motivated from our letters and did not hesitate to join in the mail eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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race. A prime example of our class inspiring others comes from as school in West Virginia. The classroom teacher, Mr. Donaldson, who is also an author, wrote in a letter to our class,

I am so grateful to have been chosen to join in The Great Mail Race. I think it is a wonderful opportunity for my students and cannot wait to begin writing with them. Your class has inspired me to expand my unit on cultural diversity and provide my students with a deeper understanding of their social role in society.

Along with his letter, Mr. Donaldson provided a copy of each book he has written to add to the classroom library. This interaction in the mail race was a prime example of how the pedagogical approach of interacting with 'real others' added to an increased awareness of literacy, one of our primary goals. Mr. Donaldson's response to our letter was one example, of many, where generating excitement in our classroom was based on students being engaged in a literacy practice that was authentic in nature. A great sense of excitement continued each time a letter was received. For instance, each day Bobby, a student in the class, came to school, he immediately asked if any of his letters had arrived because he could not wait to hear back from his schools. Bobby's enthusiasm, along with the rest of the class's, was infectious and made it impossible to overlook the enjoyment from participating in a literacy event that had such real meaning and real-life engagement. Following "TGMR," students' attitudes toward writing shifted from viewing writing as a task or assignment to something fun and enjoyable. Another plus of this activity was the apparent confidence that our students gained in their writing. As pre-service teachers, we discovered when you provide students with a purpose for writing, such as "TGMR," one result can be increased commitment to the social responsibility of simply engaging with other citizens to share and communicate

information for meaningful practices. Although many educators use writing as a means of assessment in decontextualized or non-authentic ways to simply meet he grade level expectations, we discovered that authentic writing as part of a literacy event, is a wonderful opportunity to connect and communicate with others. Obtaining this connection with the community can be very rewarding to students because it offers them a sense of purpose.

# Finding 2: Establishing civic responsibility

Along with engaging the larger community, knowing one's civic responsibility emerged as essential in the students experience in our unit. Through our interactive tour, we were able to introduce our students to US laws and duties while practicing literacy skills articulated in the standard curriculum of the district we student taught in. Prior to our unit, students and the mentor teacher reported that the students knew little about American laws and responsibilities. To augment our goal of creating students who are socially responsible, we felt that it was our job to teach our students their civil duties as Americans. During our time in Washington D.C., we partook in an interactive tour of the White House while learning about the past and current presidents. Touring D.C. led us to a discussion on the <u>three branches of government</u>. Students then went on to make their own laws that they believed should be passed. A class debate was held to determine which laws should be executed for our country, organized as a town hall meeting using this popular context for civic engagement in political discourse to engage our students. A field trip had been planned to the courthouse where students were able to see how part of the judicial branch is run. Being full participants in a model of the civic process, rather than reading from a textbook, made for high assessment eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

scores, which we believe to be due from active learning. During our visit in the southwest region, we discussed citizenship while at the United States-Mexico border, drawing from the then current political discourse about immigration, particularly as it has manifested in Arizona. To assess their prior knowledge of citizenship, we handed out a model citizenship test. Following the test, we reviewed the answers and found that none of our students passed. The results of this test indicated that whatever information they learned about this topic had not been internalized; this prompted us to extend our lesson on citizenship and immigration for another day in order to reinforce concepts and assure ourselves that the students had full comprehension of the material. We were able to re-valuate students' understanding and found that with the additional instruction, all the students were able to pass the citizenship test, a valuable lesson for us as pre-service teachers. Out of our entire tour, citizenship stimulated the highest level of inquiry from our students. An example of a critical examination of our country came from Sarah, who asked, "What if someone snuck across the Mexican border into America and didn't get caught?" This question sparked a robust debate among our students on illegal immigrants and social justice. This aided in our objective of uncovering the more inglorious aspects of our nation's history and sense of policy. We felt it was unfair to keep our students sheltered from these conversations because, immigration for example, is not only significant in national discourse but also affects our students as citizens. Our lesson on immigration quickly turned into a critical questioning session where the students entered meaningful dialogue and debate on their views of immigration, articulating perspectives and challenging peers to support their ideas. One of the students, Rebecca, even went so far as to question the legitimacy of her

citizenship status due to the fact that she was not born in the US. A fellow classmate went on to question the fairness of why Rebecca can be a citizen of the U.S. when she was born outside of the US, although her parents are US citizens, but those who want to live in The US have to go through a more rigorous process of obtaining their citizenship. These differing perspectives on social justice led us to inform our students that the citizenship process is not perfect, and the student mused about how they may contribute as citizens to refining the process of immigration and citizenship. From the strong reactions to this subject and high level of engagement with the learning, we were able to confirm that our students' interest and understanding of the civic process was enhanced through our pedagogical approach. For a final activity to assess student knowledge of what it means to be a respectable member of society, each student reflected on how they would become a better citizen. Students were given a scroll template to write three sentences on how they would actively become a good citizen, another opportunity to incorporate literacy into the curriculum. We expected our students to list several generic examples of how they can be a better citizen, such as, "I will be a good citizen by not littering" or "I will be a caring person." In doing this activity, students demonstrated that they wholeheartedly understood their social obligations as citizens, personalizing their civic duties to fit their personalities and environment. For example, Sandra wrote, "I will be a good citizen by planning a food drive in my community for the poor." By having the students list their civic promises and sign a contract of sorts, their personal roles as citizens were highlighted and consequently become meaningful for the students. As stated earlier, literacy practices like writing laws, fostering debate on immigration, taking and reflection upon the citizenship test,

and writing for authentic purposes can help enhance students understanding their civic responsibility.

# Finding 3: Celebrating regional diversity

The United States of America has been commonly referred to as a "tossed salad," a melting pot metaphor (we use gumbo in South Louisiana) in which a variety of cultures come together to make one large community where everyone has their own role to play in creating a collective whole. A finding that emerged from our data is that engaging in simulations which "move" students outside of the classroom or textbooks helped students to celebrate and experience our country's diversity. Although we worked in an urban setting with limited resources to be able to get far beyond our community, we used our creativity to find ways to best represent each region as authentically as possible, while always keeping literacy practices at the forefront of our instructional approach. Through our virtual exploration of the regions, we were able to visit many of the beautiful and unique places that make up our nation. By varying the regions, we were able to focus on specific features that make each area unique such as the swamps and wetlands of the Southeast region where we live and work.

In order to be socially responsible, it is important for students to know that there are areas in the US that are different than their own culture and what the students actually experience in his/her own region. Our hope was for students to celebrate all individualities that define regions, state, cities, and communities in order to truly appreciate the US as a whole. Focusing on appreciating difference and similarity gave us the opportunity to make the tour fun and entertaining while highlighting the benefits of difference. We began each lesson with fun facts about the states we were visiting for eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the day. From these conversations, students became naturally curious about the various regions and sought out their own information. Students also took part in several literacy activities to focus on each region's unique qualities. Activities to explore regional diversity included designing persuasive flyers, projects, letters, scenery paintings, postcards, and regional charts. When writing their persuasive flyers, students' attempted to encourage tourists from all different areas to come to the region. This was a chance for students to use their creativity, literacy skills, and knowledge of that region to convince others to visit the sense. The focus on persuasive writing also fostered the development of analytical argumentation, an advanced literacy skill.

We incorporated hands-on, artistic activities to enrich the students' perspectives on cultural diversity. Creating a hand-held fan titled "I'm a fan of the Northeast Region because" was another activity students participated in to celebrate regional diversity. Students had to pick their favorite state in the Northeast region and write three complete sentences explaining why the state is his or her favorite. Again, this assignment utilized writing in a nontraditional way; students thoroughly enjoyed it. Painting a scenery of the Hawaiian beaches may have been fun, but more importantly, the activity highlighted the uniqueness of the region in terms of its natural resources, and students wrote descriptions as if they were really present in the region. A process we continued throughout our entire journey was having the students write postcards home describing the vast features of all the destinations they visited along the way. Although celebrating regional diversity, students lacked enthusiasm when completing the region chart, which included using an atlas to find information on landforms, agriculture, bodies of water, and state capitals for every state in the region being studied. While noticing this was eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

not a class favorite, we still deemed it important for students to learn this material and be familiar with using an atlas. On the other hand, the most beloved activity was the "Region-in-a-Box," where students collaborated in small groups to construct a model of an assigned region. Using a large cardboard box, students used their ingenuity to represent specific landmarks, bodies of water, and other special features that are unique to their region. Upon reflecting on our lesson, both the chart and the box achieved similar goals and as teachers, we became open to seeing how a variety of instructional approaches and product requirements can influence the way students experience their learning. Students used various resources such as, textbooks, magazines, atlases, the Internet, and knowledge gained from the unit. Following the construction of the box, students led a group presentation to the class describing their region. Students took much pride in their work, and it was evident that they were learning significantly from each other. Students willing chose to stay in from recess to complete and extend work from this unit, demonstrating that when engaged, students can commit to their learning above and beyond the time we have allocated for a particular assignment in class. Speaking about cultural diversity stimulated most of our students to unassigned, outside research about the regions, including internet research, checking out library books, and reading magazine articles. There were many instances when students would come to school unprompted by us with information they had found and were able to share with the class.

Learning about the diversity of each region enables students to be socially responsible, by understanding how you are unique, yet connected to the community at large. In turn, this fulfilled our initial goal of having students see themselves as part of eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the larger society. Through all of the pedagogical methods used in the unit, it was evident that our students, as well as ourselves, had formed a newfound respect for the diversity of our country.

### **Implications**

Prior to beginning the tour, authors Rome and Ruiz as student teachers, and in conversation with Fasching-Varner, reflected on our own educational past and remembered simply copying notes, memorizing them, and regurgitating what the textbook said on tests. As student teachers, Rome and Ruiz felt a duty to develop a US Regional unit that would regenerate the most engagement possible within the walls of our classroom, while also including a particular focus on social responsibility and literacy. Students understood their social role in society by being an active participant through the widespread activities conducted throughout our journey. To our surprise, a little effort, time, and creativity went a long way, because while on tour the general vibe felt by all in our classroom was one of excitement, curiosity, and eagerness. All these emotions were exuberated the moment our students walked in the door. A common statement that was restated everyday by many students in our class was, "Where are we going today?"

Enthusiasm over the daily tour increased until the students re-entered the classroom following afternoon recess once it was time for Social Studies. Following several days on the virtual tour, we noticed a correlated increase of scores on tests, projects, writing assignments, and map quizzes in Social Studies. In addition, we noticed students fully recognized their role as societal members due to the fact that eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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bettered their community. Andrea, for example, initiated a recycling system at her house and explained to her family the importance of recycling as a means of preserving the beauty of the region for others to share and experience. Our assumption was that our students' increased engagement during the tour resulted in their desire to truly try their very best because they respected our teaching styles and would give much more of themselves in response to the effort we displayed during the tour. We also noted that in math, science, and English language arts, students applied literacy skills learned in the unit to aid in their work in the other subject areas. This carryover was exciting.

Participation in TGMR also led to widespread interest in the process of writing because students fully understood the meaning behind writing the letters. As a result, we observed a general upsurge of confidence in our students' writing ability and increased understanding in the importance of becoming socially responsible citizens that went far beyond the Social Studies block of time. Not only did our students learn so much throughout this process, but as pre-service teacher interns, we learned more than we imagined was possible about ourselves and about teaching and learning.

#### Conclusion

First, our students brought questions to the surface that we did not even consider ourselves, such as critically examining the citizenship process, comparing and contrasting the differing states' laws, and questioning the immigration procedures. In addition, we discovered that writing can be fun and meaningful when an overall purpose is established, something that we feel is important to emphasize in the course of teacher education programs; it is not simply enough to share interesting methods or eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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ideas about the teaching of writing if teacher education programs do not help preservice teachers connect to the social function of the literacy event. Lastly, we realized that students are brilliant and always wanting to learn; it is up to the teacher and the students to work together to make learning happen. In having classrooms of our own, we want to bring to our classrooms a sense of purpose for students to understand the essentialness of social responsibility and literacy and how they are interwoven and cannot be overlooked in their everyday lives.

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The Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group (IRA CSR SIG) is a nonprofit organization chartered by the International Reading Association (IRA).

The Community Read
as a Vehicle for
Infusing Social Responsibility
into the Curriculum

Dana Maloney,
Janet Gould,
Nicole Levine,
Leigh Barker, and
Stanley Flood

**Key words**: action-based research, community literacy, privilege, community read events, curriculum, social responsibility

#### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, the authors, educators in an affluent New Jersey suburb, discuss their action research based on a community read of *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* by psychologist Madeline Levine (2006). The educators asked, what happens when a teacher study group tries to impact district interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum via a community read? This article explores: the rationale for infusing social responsibility into the curriculum; how community literacy activities – and specifically a community read – can promote thinking, discussion and activity related to social responsibility; and why a teacher study group should try to make an impact. Results indicate a community read can spark community engagement and involvement, leads to reflection and discussion related to community values/behaviors and student needs; and can promote interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum when the selected text raises awareness of how social eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

responsibility meets community needs and/or interests. The members of the study group also report on their exercise of teacher leadership via the community read.

"...the needs of the group are at least as important as the needs of the individual, ... those who are more fortunate have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate, and ... progress is often best accomplished by communal effort" (Levine, 2006, p. 48).

### Introduction

In September 2007, a group of educators in the affluent town of <u>Tenafly</u>, <u>New Jersey</u> decided to form a teacher study group focused on social responsibility. The educators – classroom teachers as well as social workers, guidance counselors, a school psychologist and others – shared a common interest in nurturing social responsibility in their students and in deepening the learning associated with social responsibility. In subsequent years, this study group continued and has expanded its purpose to include an effort to increase district interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum. This article, written by a team of Tenafly educators, examines the impact of the group's efforts to increase interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum via a community read of <u>The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids by psychologist Madeline Levine (2006).</u>

Over the years, as members of the <u>Social Responsibility Study Group (SRSG)</u>, we have questioned our social responsibility as educators in a community of affluence – and our role in guiding students who will potentially wield financial power and cultural capital to behave with a sense of social responsibility. One of the initial questions we as study group members asked ourselves was: In a democracy, what are the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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responsibilities of privilege? Our inquiry has prompted us to consider many ways in which social responsibility can be conceptualized in a school setting. Over the years, our group members have read various articles and books together, including Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Madeline Levine's *The Price of Privilege*, and we have found great benefits in our shared reading (Maloney et al., 2011). Our study group's inquiry has always included considerations of the links between happiness and social responsibility, and we appreciate how Levine's book discusses the positive affective impact of social responsibility on students; and the negative impact of a lack of social responsibility. We also appreciate Levine's ethical rationale for social responsibility among the affluent:

No matter how worried we are about our child's future we must always emphasize integrity over prerogative. Children of privilege frequently grow into positions of authority and philanthropy. They are likely to be our doctors, lawyers, CEOs, government officials, and policy-makers, not to mention our caretakers. A sturdy, moral, internally motivate sense of self is in their best interest, but it is also in ours (2006, p. 45).

During the 2009-2010 school year, community interest in *The Price of Privilege* grew organically, especially because of the concerns raised in the book about children's emotional health; these concerns were shared by both community members and district educators. One powerful group behind this discussion was the <a href="Parent Guidance">Parent Guidance</a>
<a href="Committee (PGC)">Committee (PGC)</a>, whose members (community parents) focus on issues of student wellness. Discussion about the book reached a point at which the idea of an author visit was suggested. With the involvement of our study group and based on our own shared eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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literacy experiences, members of our group were able to help route interest toward the idea of a community read event, the community's first-ever such event. None of us had ever been involved in such an event, but our experience with shared reading and discussion had helped us consider this possibility.

Three of the authors of this article (Dana, Janet, and Nicole) became founding members of the Community Read Planning Committee, which formed in February 2010 and which over time designed and implemented plans and a <u>campaign</u> that culminated with a community event in October 2010. Our group's goal was to involve as many people as possible within our community in reading and discussing the same book. Target readers for the community read were community members and district staff members, none of whom were required to read the book. Beginning in the spring, the planning committee focused on drawing an audience to the book; promoting reflection during and after reading; and planning a culminating event that would bring readers together for a productive community discussion. For publicity, our committee members distributed <u>press releases</u>, <u>posters</u> and <u>bookmarks</u> (<u>with reading questions on the back side</u>); we also relied on e-mail, electronic message boards, social media and word-of-mouth.

As key members of the planning committee, Dana, Janet, and Nicole were able to shape much of the campaign to infuse into it the specific focus on reading the book with questions of social responsibility in mind. Through the read, and especially through targeted reading questions we designed and communicated widely, town residents and staff members were encouraged – and prompted – to read this book and to consider how social responsibility might serve as a solution to some of the problems raised by

the author. Dana, Janet, and Nicole ended up serving, along with three members of the Parent Guidance Committee, as leaders of the community read.

With encouragement from Monica Taylor, a professor at Montclair State

University (MSU) who had worked with our teacher study group for years, we decided to apply for a Dodge Action Research Grant, offered by the Montclair State University

Network for Educational Renewal (MSUNER), a member of the National Network for

Educational Renewal (NNER). At that point MSUNER had already supported and encouraged us for three years, including via teacher study group grants and opportunities to work with MSU faculty and staff. The action research grant offered us not only a small amount (\$2,000) of grant money but also instruction and guidance over the course of a school year, which included a few full-day workshops. Our members have found the support and opportunities offered by MSUNER to be invaluable; we believe that without the school-university partnership, we would not have been motivated, nor guided to do the work we have done (Maloney et al., 2011).

Once we secured the action research grant, we invited two colleagues, Leigh and Stanley, to join us in our research as we collected and analyzed data in response to our overarching research question: What happens when a teacher study group tries to impact district interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum via a community read?

Our action research team consists of three classroom teachers and two non-classroom teachers. Two of our members work outside the classroom, one as a Student Assistance Counselor (SAC) and one as a school psychologist. All members work in the same high school building. Dana Maloney is a high school English teacher; eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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Janet Gould is the district Student Assistance Coordinator (SAC); Nicole Levine is the school psychologist; Leigh Barker is a Social Studies teacher; and Stanley Flood is an English teacher.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

# Shared reading can make a strong impact upon a community

We started to plan the community read with the understanding that the shared reading of a text by a community of people creates an occasion to recognize the connections between text and setting. Specifically, we found strong rationale for the idea of a community read in Freire: "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected." We appreciated the idea that a text can prompt examination of the context in which the reading takes place: "The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context" (1987, p. 29).

By bringing together multiple sectors of the school community, we sought to deepen the learning experience for all involved. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the community role in learning; his "zone of proximal development" emphasizes social activity as a source of thinking and learning (p. 86). He regards education "not only as central to cognitive development but as the quintessential sociocultural activity" (Moll, 1990, p. 1).

We hoped that shared reading could prompt not just reflection but also action.

Peck, Flower and Higgins (1995) assert that "the aim of community literacy is to build a discourse in which people not only acknowledge difference . . . but in which people do eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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productive work together" (p. 203). Peck et al specifically define community literacy as "a search for an alternative discourse" and claim that its four "aims" are to support: "social change" and "genuine, intercultural communication"; to "bring a strategic approach to this conversation and to support people in developing new strategies for decision-making"; and "inquiry" (p. 205). For years prior to our action research, our study group had questioned the role of social responsibility in a democracy. Our inquiry had been deepened by our involvement with MSUNER and its Agenda for Education in a Democracy, which is built upon the thinking of John I. Goodlad:

A central purpose of the work of John I. Goodlad, his colleagues at the Center for Educational Renewal and the Institute for Educational Inquiry, and the hundreds of participants at the various settings of the National Network for Educational Renewal is to restore the links between education and democracy, and to ground the work of the public schools in the moral and political ideals of democratic life. The overarching purpose of the endeavor is to strengthen the voice of democracy in the ongoing discussion of the purpose and future of public education in the United States (*Agenda for Education in a Democracy*).

While thinking about the community read, we were drawn to Bomer's (2007) use of the phrase "civic literacy" to explain why literacy is a powerful vehicle for ensuring democracy: "Our literate activity may . . . serve civic purposes – our participation in a democracy, our actions to make the world better for themselves and others, our testimony to fellow citizens about our own lives and our empathic concerns for the interests of others and of the earth" (p. 303).

Through shared reading, we attempted to implement what Freire (1987) calls an "emancipatory ideology, where readers become 'subjects' rather than mere 'objects'"; and to follow Freire's assertion that "the new literacy program needs to move away from traditional approaches, which emphasize the acquisition of mechanical skills while divorcing reading from its ideological and historical contexts" (p. 156).

The infusion of social responsibility into the curriculum is in the best interest of students

In an affluent, academically competitive school district such as the one in which we teach, students might engage in community service simply for their transcripts and to win admission to a competitive university. We share a concern that the absence of curricular support for such service can reduce its meaning of the service, that "although it can be a powerful learning event for students, service is not simply about engaging our students in productive work"; and that we "need to help them reflect on why it is important to take responsibility for the school community and to take care of those who are less fortunate than they are" (Ryan & Bohlin, 2000, p. 314). By infusing social responsibility into the curriculum, we hope students can build bridges between the classroom and the world and find deeper meaning in their learning, thus avoiding what Dewey (1990) calls the "isolation of the school" and "its isolation from life" (p. 75). We believe in moving toward what Freire (1987) calls a "radical pedagogy, which would make concrete such values as solidarity, social responsibility, creativity, discipline in the service of the common good, vigilance, and critical spirit" (p. 156). As public school educators, we seek to realize our function in producing democratic citizens, and we believe that the purposeful infusion of social responsibility into the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

curriculum is essential to this goal. As <u>Kahne & Westheimer (2003)</u> state, "Young people need to be taught to make democracy work, to engage civically, socially, and politically." We recognize that "making democracy work requires that schools take this goal seriously: to educate and nurture engaged and informed democratic citizens" (pp. 35-36). Bomer (2007) says that "civic literacy is especially suited to schools, because the public school system exists to create publics – to make of every student a citizen" (p. 303).

On a developmental level, social responsibility also promotes positive emotional health. In the book that was the focus of our community read, psychologist Levine (2006) notes many affective dangers of lives focused on materialism versus social responsibility. She writes, "Meanness of spirit, hoarding, and self-preoccupation all bode poorly for the development of loving relationships" (p. 85) and says, "There is more to be learned from becoming a contributing member of a group (the ability to cooperate, the values of good deeds, the satisfaction of contribution, the advancement of daily living skills) than from an hour of cramming" (p.111).

In our own classroom work, we have seen the benefits of the infusion of social responsibility into the curriculum. Inspired and supported by her membership in the SRSG, Dana has over the last five years re-designed the curricula for her Senior English classes so as to infuse social responsibility into her own curriculum. Her students design year-long inquiry projects on global issues of personal concern and read literature as a way of understanding issues in the world and problem-solving. Extended inquiry leads to the writing of a college-level term paper and, in the spring, to action research projects and public sharing of inquiry. Dana notes academic and

affective outcomes of this learning, including high levels of engagement, motivation and cooperation; along with high levels of achievement (Maloney and Taylor, 2010; Maloney 2010).

Educators, even without formal leadership positions, can create change within a school district or community

As study group members, we have found that we can create change within our district (Maloney, Moore & Taylor, 2011). Our leadership in the community read was in fact an outgrowth of the growing impact we had made within our district over four years. Our belief in our abilities to be change agents draws inspiration from Freire (1987), who encourages educators to be visionary and offers a belief in all educators' abilities to lead, even without formal leadership positions. He says, "The progressive educator rejects the dominant values imposed on the school because he or she has a different dream, because he or she wants to transform the status quo." He accepts that "Naturally, transforming the status quo is much more difficult to do than maintaining it" but says that "it is possible within educational institutions to contradict imposed dominant values" (p. 126).

Freire (1987) explains that a group of like-minded individuals can make impact within a school system; through shared beliefs these educators can work collaboratively and creatively to make impact within a school community, even without formal leadership roles. Doing so requires the educators to move beyond the professional definitions set for them, to embrace larger concepts and dreams: "These educators cannot reduce themselves to being pure education specialists. . . Educators must become conscious individuals who live part of their dreams within their educational

space" (p. 126).

Freire (1987) further explains that collaborative effort is key in leading others to change through reflection on, and awareness of, the cultural context in which they live:

Educators cannot work successfully by themselves; they have to work collaboratively in order to succeed in integrating the cultural elements produced by the subordinate students in their educational process. Finally, these educators have to invent and create methods in which they maximize the limited space for possible change that is available to them. They need to use their students' cultural universe as a point of departure . . . (p. 126).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Research on community reads is relatively limited, with some research on library systems leading programs in order to increase literacy, to promote reading and/or to build community. Shared reading appears to be a growing phenomenon at schools and universities, sometimes with curricular connections or at least opportunities for shared discussion and reflection, but we found little research on such efforts. For these reasons, our community research seems to explore new territory, due not just to our attempt to impact a community relative to a curricular goal, specifically that of social responsibility..

Our community research involved data collection from a variety of constituents, including community residents (mostly parents of school-aged children), district staff members and district students. In order to assess the impact of our group's efforts to impact district interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum, we relied

primarily on qualitative data collected across the span of six months, from the spring when we started to publicize the community read to the fall when we held the evening event – and for a couple weeks after the event. We used some quantitative data to determine levels of participation in the community read and to tabulate post-event survey responses. Our qualitative data collection was driven largely by the questions we printed on our widely distributed bookmarks (our study group used some of our grant money to print 5,000 of the bookmarks). Specifically, as seen on the back of the bookmarks, we asked readers and discussion participants to think about and respond to the following questions:

- To what extent do you see in Tenafly what Dr. Levine calls a "culture of affluence"?
- Why is social responsibility beneficial to young people?
- How can we as a community help our youth find happiness and satisfaction?
  We asked participants in our evening event to allow these questions to guide the discussion and to share within both small and large groups the issues they found to be the most salient. We collected this data through notes taken in each group and easel paper and notecards where group members brainstormed and shared ideas. We collected this data from a variety of shareholders, including community parents, other residents, staff and students.

Prior to the evening event, we kept records of communication and by tracking book distribution, registration for the event. We also collected responses to a survey we linked to the registration page. Records and responses were viewed as additional data sources. At the evening event, we collected data based including number of attendees eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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and discussions within small groups. Post-event surveys, contact sheets, and feedback were also analyzed. Students in two high school courses – Peer Leadership and Child Development – provided response, including discussion notes from the Peer Leadership class following the viewing of <u>an author interview about the book</u>; and papers written by students in the Child Development class who read portions of the book. Notes and surveys from a staff development session on October 18<sup>th</sup> were also collected.

# **Data Analysis**

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) indicate that triangulation, meaning the use of different sources of data or different methods of data gathering, is a "very commonly used step in establishing the validity of a study" (pp.152-153). Throughout our action research process, we collected electronic and print data from a variety of sources and stakeholders.

In preparation for data analysis, we assembled print folders of the various types of data we collected and then distributed these folders to members of our group for close analysis. With a focus on our action research question and particularly "what happens (a when teacher study group tries to impact interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum via a community read)?" each of our group members coded raw data to identify patterns within his/her data sources; we used color coding and margin notes to identify the patterns. Upon later review, each of us noted how often certain types of responses were coded, with what variations, and also when/where minority opinions/experiences emerged.

When our group met again to share reports on patterns and other observations each of us had noted individually, we as a group were able to see how and where the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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patterns deepened. Anderson et al. (2007) say that it is here "that you begin to match, contrast, and compare the patterns or constructs in the data in earnest" (p. 215).

From the time when we began data collection in June 2010, we had over seven months to discuss informally the patterns we noticed before triangulating across data sources. Team members have in some cases shared data electronically, but we formally triangulated across data sources at the all-day retreat offered by MSUNER as part of the Dodge Action Research Project Grant. Anderson et al. (2007) suggested that "a comprehensive scanning of all the data in one or two long sittings [would] provide some emerging patterns with which to begin the process of analysis" (p.215).

Later meetings, as we planned a <u>presentation at the NNER Annual Conference</u> and as we drafted this article, allowed us to refine further our findings and conclusions.

# **Data Findings**

When we began this project, we did not know what type of response we would receive from our community members. In our worst case scenario, we imagined only a handful of people showing up the night of our event. When we began the process of publicizing the read and offering to share copies of the book, we were overwhelmed, surprised, and overjoyed by the response of both parents and staff. We found that not only did people share an interest in a topic very important to all of us, but they also shared many of the same fears and concerns for today's youth. Among our findings for this project, we discovered a high level of interest in the topic of social responsibility, a desire for collaboration between parents and staff members, and common themes, such as fears regarding parental and student pressures and academic competition. Our findings support Peck's notions of community literacy as providing opportunities to "build"

discourse in which people not only acknowledge difference . . . but in which people do productive work together" (1995, p. 203).

# **Opportunities to Identify Problems Affecting Students**

Across data sources, parents, faculty and students expressed concern about a common overall problem: the pressure that students in our district feel. This message is a central idea of *The Price of Privilege* and was the focus of one of the <u>reading questions</u> we posed via the bookmarks and other publicity. Community members recognized the harm of a culture of affluence; and of the benefits of a culture of social responsibility: Among the major themes explored in the night-time discussions were academic pressures, fear connected to academics and college admissions, the competitive nature of the academic community and making sure the children "keep up" with what others are doing, and the importance of acknowledging how these issues impact children.

In small-group discussions, one group member at the evening discussion said, "students are tense, secretive, and competitive." As the students in the Peer Leadership class indicated, there is a component of secrecy based on the pressure that students feel. Both parents and students want to appear as if everything is going well, when in actuality students may be struggling, either academically or emotionally. As one of the high school teachers at the professional development hour noted, students "seem fine in class, but they are empty/depressed inside." One student Peer Leader said, "This is supposed to be a good time, but it sucks." Another student noted that, "There is not enough high priority on happiness." Several students bemoaned the fact that the pressure to do well prevents them from learning what they want and from eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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enjoying learning. A student stated frankly, "I am 18 years old and school has been a means to an end."

Group participants also expressed concern that students are drinking coffee and smoking to stay awake to get good grades, and parents are supporting this pressure; and that students feel that they "need to get into a certain college" because "my mom and dad went there."

For educators in the district, reading the book also raised and deepened awareness of the pressure students in our district feel. Via <u>questionnaires</u>, educators expressed the effect of reading: An elementary school secretary who is herself a district parent noted: "It answered a lot of questions about why our kids behave the way they do and what is causing them to have such emotional problems." A middle school science teacher wrote, "I realize now that this is a prevalent problem in many affluent communities" and said that she had become "even more conscious of pressure put on students to perform and excel." She said she would be "more mindful of students' schedules."

## **Exploration of Parents' Role in Educating Their Children**

The themes of the book and discussion resonated with parents and prompted reflection upon the roles parents play in the education of their children. Additionally, the questions we posed regarding how we can help our community's youth find happiness and the impact that the "culture of affluence" has on the community led to discussion where parents shared their views and opinions. While most parents seemed to embrace the introspection that resulted from their reading, the sensitive nature of the topics discussed also provoked fears and worries which many other parents, students and

staff members related to as well

We identified some fear and wariness among parents, with a certain amount of resistance to the initial encounter with the book. This seemed to be connected to competition and secrecy among parents. We found two types of fear: fear of inadequacies -- that the child you are raising is a reflection of you; and fear of competition – of not being able to keep up in an affluent society. The evening discussion allowed parents to admit to these feelings and to discuss possible changes in behavior.

One of the parents with whom we planned the evening event collated notes from parent book group discussions of *The Price of Privilege* and then provided those notes to us. From these notes, we learned that some parents were very concerned that teachers had chosen this book. One mother had asked, "Is this the way they see us?" Wow! Some found the book too sensational and said that "Levine threw mom under the bus." Some "moms were a little miffed that the book did not highlight enough of the things we are doing RIGHT" and asked "our child-rearing style isn't all bad, is it?" For parents of elementary-aged students, "the book raised a certain level of anxiety . . . about all the possible problems with teen development."

Perhaps some of the parents' fears were well-founded; many of the students, and also some teachers, attributed parents with promoting the negative aspects of the "culture of affluence." A Child Development student wrote: "Sometimes, I feel that my mom's main concern is my grade and that if I don't succeed in high school, I will not get into the college that will take me to the places that I most desire. Even though I understand that this concern comes from a loving aspect, all this pressure drives me

crazy sometimes!"

Across the two different Peer Leadership discussion groups, student reactions to the <u>film clip</u> supported the messages of the book, including the pressure students feel comes from parents. One student said that the pressure to be "super-accomplished" and to make that look "effortless" causes students to "internalize everything," which is "all-consuming." Another student said "parents who don't work live through their children, which creates pressure on their children." Students said that parents expect things to happen, although pressure is not openly discussed.

A student in the Child Development class said, "Looking around, I see parents that try and plan their children's lives while not staying emotionally connected with their kids. By living according to their parents' plan, teenagers lose a sense of their own identity...Some parents live through their children... Parents are too focused on achieving the goals society portrays to be successful that they forget the mail goal as a parent, developing an emotional connection with their children."

According to the Peer Leadership students, that "untalked-about pressure" is to be "elite." The students noted that parents are "teaching the wrong values: that only money is the key to happiness and success."

On another teacher <u>questionnaire</u>, a high school Spanish teacher (and parent herself) wrote: ". . . we are robbing a generation of their humanity. You have a generation of parents who are trying to be too much and do too much and accomplish too much and losing themselves somewhere along the way. When this group then tries 'to parent,' they end up doing it in a way that puts a dangerous amount of weight on outward expressions of accomplishment and not enough time on being happy with

yourself. I know there used to be a book called *I'm OK, You're OK* . . . – it's almost as if the popular mindset is 'I have more stuff/awards/money, and for that reason I am OK' when I find the reality is the total opposite."

In notes from discussion groups, community members expressed concern about competition and their own mistakes. One parent worried of her children: "Are they going to be tormented because they don't have enough?" Participants discussed worries about the pressure of labels such as "Tiffany" and "Coach" and the "need to have the latest and greatest." A participant also spoke of her friends not telling her "how to get the best teachers" in order to preserve her own child's advantages. Others spoke of parents and students, out of competition, not telling one another about where they apply to college. Some parents spoke of the frustration in trying to find a balance between involving students in sports and over-scheduling them.

Based on the reaction papers that were turned in, many of these students were greatly impacted by what they read and discussed and genuinely felt special that they were able to know the information early enough so that they would have it in their recall when they became parents. They all addressed the issues of combining social responsibility and childrearing. "Most kids are unaware of how detrimental some parenting can be. In Child Development I saw firsthand how every little thing we do, the way we say a word or walk too quickly can affect a child. I can only imagine the affect that parenting would have...We never realize the impact of our words and actions until it is too late. I am grateful that I am able to have these discussions and learn from others' mistakes."

# **Desire to Improve the Culture**

Our reading questions focused not just on problem identification but also on solutions, which allowed members of the community to explore commonly held beliefs. As Freire (1987) says, "In the final analysis, consciousness is socially bred. In this sense, I think my subjectivity is important. But I cannot separate my subjectivity from its social objectivity" (p. 47). This, in turn, paved the way to discuss ways to improve the culture of the community. Levine (2006) notes that "When a subculture is heading in the wrong direction, it is up to the adults of the larger culture to steer it back in the right direction. If the adolescent subculture pushes crime, then parents need to push safety; if it pushes materialism and self-absorption, then parents need to push altruism and generosity (p. 49). Working together, parents and faculty were able to not only support each other in the common goal of helping our youth, but also discuss collaboratively the ways this could take place.

One of the frequent reactions as a result of this event was that parents, staff, and students wanted more opportunities to discuss and share their ideas and concerns, whether that take the form of sharing collaboratively, sharing in the classroom setting, or in group discussions with other parents. Staff members at the professional development activity also suggested parent groups and suggested that parents discuss issues with their children. On a faculty questionnaire, one high school Spanish teacher wrote: "This kind of issue is not something that gets fixed in a short period of time, but perhaps the district may want to consider parenting workshops (i.e., maybe for parents of younger children so that this kind of mindset is nipped in the bud at an early stage)."

In one group's summary of its nighttime discussion, the "salient point" it chose to eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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share with the large group focused on "teachable moments." The group advised using those moments to "make your children more understanding, sympathetic, and eventually empathetic" and said, "We overly identify with our children – want them to avoid the pain we experienced, but we end up cheating them from learning through exploration."

Perhaps because of the content of *The Price of Privilege* and because of the challenges in thinking about how to infuse social responsibility into the curriculum, we did not find that many educators generated concrete ideas or activities for such infusion as much as they were able to comment on the existing culture. In further activities, we plan to push educators to learn, and to reflect, further on their role in countering cultural beliefs: Freire (1987) notes that "We perceive the impossibility of a neutral education to the extent that we understand education—on the one hand, reproducing the dominant ideology, but, on the other, independent of the intentions of one who has power, offering the negation of that ideology (or of its unveiling)." He reminds us, "Education accomplishes this through the actual, not the rhetorical, confrontation between it and reality, a reality lived by those being educated and by educators" (p. 39).

## **Desire for Social Responsibility**

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Our community read accomplished our group's goal of generating increased interest in the topic of social responsibility. People expressed interest in social responsibility as an antidote to a culture of affluence, in line with the warning of Levine: "Not only does a materialistic value orientation bode poorly for our society – materialists are unlikely to be philanthropist – it also bodes poorly for kids themselves. Materialistic kids have lower grades and higher rates of both depression and substance abuse than

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nonmaterialistic kids." (2006, p. 48).

In <u>post-event surveys</u>, we asked both the community group and the high school professional development group: "Do you feel social responsibility is an important topic to infuse into school curriculum?" An astounding 90% of the community responded "very." Of the staff group, 80% of participants selected the response of "very."

We acknowledge that the audience we drew to both our community and staff events might very well have selected to attend out of a prior interest in social responsibility. Still, when asked "how has this information changed your thinking about social responsibility?" only "20%" of community respondents selected the response of "not at all." Additionally, 10% chose "very," while 44% responded "somewhat" and 26% selected "not very." Our staff numbers were even higher, with 20% selecting "very," and 55% selecting "somewhat," while 20% chose "not very," and 5% responded "not at all."

Summary points from discussion groups at the evening event emphasized the importance also of teaching social responsibility at home. One group wrote, "Reach out to neighbors – connecting with your community – connect home to community to society. If we each try at our homes, then maybe we can also influence the 'other parents' who don't set the example. Another group said, "Social responsibility should be taught at home and at school . . .it is community involvement, parent involvement and authoritative parenting – defining limits – not permissiveness.

Members of the staff also expressed continued interest in social responsibility as a topic for professional development. In response to the question, "How interested would you be to participate in future discussions?" 65% of participants selected "very."

Feedback from participating students similarly reflected growing awareness, and

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commitment to, social responsibility and: "All of our discussions in class lead me to a new conclusion as to what it means to be socially responsible....Social responsibility is doing what is right for those around you, not only yourself. Being this way means you have to care for the future as well as the present. It is our duty to take to insure that children of today have the upbringing and resources to become socially responsible citizens themselves."

## Interested Audience for the Read and the Culminating Event

Our community read generated a great deal of interest from parents, teachers and even students and offered an opportunity for parents, teachers and students to voice their concerns about the experiences of students in our district. Our audience found importance in both the book and the topics covered by the book. Our initial indication of the interest in this event was the large number of community members who acquired the book. Many community and faculty members secured copies of the book through various methods, including local and school libraries, as well as a town bookstore, which offered shoppers the book at a discounted price. Faculty members were also able to borrow books from our study group as well.

Not only did we want people to take the important first step of reading the book, we also wanted them to attend our evening event and participate in our discussions. Even with poor weather conditions, our evening event drew an audience of over 120 people. Following the discussion, we had participants complete a <u>survey</u> to gauge their reactions to the evening and its value to them. The majority of participants found some value in their attendance as 54% of our audience members noted that they found their participation "very valuable" and 41% reported their experience as "somewhat valuable."

Faculty members also indicated that it was worthwhile to participate in the professional development activities as 60% found it to be "very valuable"; and 40% of faculty who responded determined it was "somewhat valuable."

We also found that both adults and students find value in this topic. The students may have had even more powerful reactions than the adults did. Gould, the leader of our senior Peer Leadership program, said that her students reacted intensely to the viewing of the short film clip. Gould said, "I heard things I never heard before" and said that "kids really opened up." The students shared information about the high level of competition in the district, including the ideas of some parents within the Asian community securing "secret tutoring" or not letting others know that their children are sometimes achieving very high grades with the support of tutors.

Many people expressed appreciation for, and enjoyment of, the forum offered by the evening event – including the opportunity to participate in small- and large-group discussion. While our district tries to frequently have relevant and impactful speakers that many community members come to see, it seemed that our event provided a different type of event as it allowed for true audience participation, discussion, and input, rather than only attending and listening to someone speak on a topic. Post-event survey included such comments as ". . . this was a terrific start" and "It would be wonderful to have more sessions like this." Many parents also commented that they would like to participate in ongoing parent discussion groups and the majority of participants (82%) would want to participate in future discussions.

Another element of the evening that was unique to our event was the true collaboration among staff members, parents, students, and community members.

Immediately following the event, many participants approached us telling us how wonderful the experience was to engage in discussion that included both faculty and parents. Some staff members even indicated that they were initially worried about how it would go but found their participation very rewarding and were interested in helping with any future events. Both evening participants (87%) and staff who participated in the professional development activity (75%) found that there is value in increased collaboration between parents and staff. Additionally, the community audience (82%) and the staff audience (65%) indicated that they would be "very" interested in participating in future discussions.

# **Desire for Community and Collaboration**

Many members of the community audience liked the idea of collaboration so much that they expressed interest in increasing shared community activities. One group suggested having "community days when everyone does the same thing." Two separate small groups came up with the same idea of a "forced black-out day" when families would be forced to withdraw from electronics. These same groups also talked about ideas of community days at school, including days without homework, "play days," and family days. Similarly, it seemed that parents really liked the opportunity to share with each other and engage in this type of conversation with other parents.

Many parents seemed to feel that this provides them an outlet as parents want to be "on the same page" and not feel isolated. One teacher wrote on a faculty questionnaire: "When I spoke to parents about it at the elementary school level, they were all shifting in their seats and could not wait to volunteer information about how they were experiencing this 'affluenza.' I think people are DYING to 'buck the tide' but need

an outlet to open up the conversation. I know I'm searching for this in the town where I am raising my own kids." In group discussions, community members expressed an interest in needing to, and wanting to, talk to other parents. Small-group notes indicated an interest in "a continued forum for parents" and "more heterogeneous parent meetings, like a community read." Separately, one group noted that "you are not alone in this."

### Conclusions

We set out to ask what happens when a group of educators try to impact a district's interest in infusing social responsibility in the curriculum via a community read, and we found that we were able to deeply impact the district's interests. More importantly, we found that a community read event can be a powerful method for engaging a community of people in reflection and discussion – and for impacting thinking on a community level. Our community read engaged participants in identifying problems and considering solutions to those problems; the infusion of social responsibility into the curriculum was recognized as an important part of the solution to problems in our community.

The process of a community read activity can serve as a powerful type of community curriculum, not unlike a teaching unit. As educators, we found that we could design reading and discussion questions in the same way we would in the classroom, just on a much larger scale, with a very different notion of classroom, and over a longer period of time. This type of curriculum can focus on parents and other community members in order to provoke changes in community culture.

The selection of text was essential to our purpose to increase district interest in a eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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particular topic – in our case social responsibility – and infusing social responsibility into the curriculum. We found that a teacher study group can increase a community's interest in a topic when the topic addresses, and helps solve, perceived needs or problems within the community. *The Price of Privilege* is a book that marries district interest and need with our agenda to increase interest in the social responsibility. For others who might consider a community read, we encourage similar planning.

If designing a community read specifically to encourage social responsibility, one might consider, how and why does social responsibility help address or solve problems in our society? Our selected text presents social responsibility as an antidote to some social/emotional issues of children. A community read can create positive impact on students by increasing interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum. What we discovered through our community read is that there already was a strong interest in social responsibility, there was a feeling that this was an important topic, and this was also a topic that community members wanted to discuss more in the future. As evidenced by our event turn-out, and the variety of emotional and personal responses we received from many staff, parents, and students, this was a topic that resonated with them. We found that participants are strongly invested in the emotional well-being of our community's children which may be why the notion of incorporating social responsibility into curriculum as a method of bolstering happiness and satisfaction may have been appealing to all.

The power of a shared reading – and shared reflection and discussion activities – can prompt strong community engagement. We found that our community members deeply appreciated the opportunity to discuss a topic of shared and great concern to eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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them: the well-being of the young people in our community. The fact that this concern is shared by both town residents and staff members allowed for collaborations and participation we could not have predicted. A community read can provide common ground for parents and teachers to discuss, and to solve, problems/issues of share concern; and can help strengthen relations between the groups

The community read did raise concerns, and did force some painful reflection on the part of some of our community members, particularly concerns about the role parents play in their children's problems. However, the fears and concerns that emerged, particularly fears about inadequacies and fears regarding competition, were born out of concern for the well-being of children. We discovered that a community read can be an effective means for a cultural reflection: to raise awareness of certain issues; to problem-solve; and to create action in a desired direction. We found a strong desire in participants to keep this dialogue going, whether that be through future collaboration of parents and staff, discussions specifically aimed at parents, or simply the act of speaking to one's own children about these issues.

Our action research group was deeply impacted by our experiences with designing and implementing curriculum on a community level. Through our experiences with the community read, we found that the members of a teacher study group can make a powerful impact on district interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum. Beyond that, we also found that we can serve as leaders, as well as agents of change, in the community in which we teach.

The read added to the momentum of our study group's efforts to increase community effort in social responsibility. Once this momentum was created, we were eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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exhausted by the process (planning the read involved a great deal of work) but also energized by the results: we had produced interest in infusing social responsibility into the curriculum. People immediately started to ask us, "What's next?"

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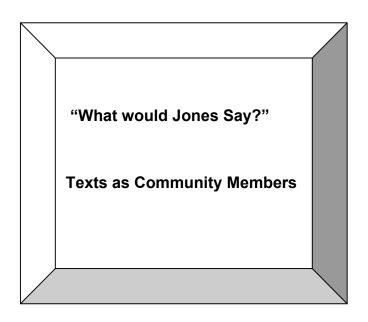
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**Key words**: critical literacy, teacher education curriculum, mentor text

### **ABSTRACT**

Critical literacy is an effective tool to engage pre-service teachers in deconstructing dominant ideologies that typically oppress certain groups of people based on gender, race, or economic status in educational settings. Pre-service teachers can be scaffold into a more critical perspective to interrupt literacy practices that perpetuate damaging stereotypes by including texts as community members in teacher education curricula. This article presents data from a longitudinal study illustrating how three pre-service teachers built a community with a critical text, which consequently influenced their professional identities and their expectations for future teacher education curricula. Findings indicate texts can act as a continuous mentor for pre-service teachers and prolong a critical voice often absent in teacher education curricula. Implications for teacher educators include suggestions for incorporating critical texts as community members into teacher education curricula.

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Early in the fall semester strawberry blonde Emily, a pre-service teacher in my literacy methods course, shared a recent conversation with her elementary-aged literacy buddy Tiffany. While brainstorming ideas to write in their "Where I'm from" poems, Tiffany, a dark skinned second grader at a local school, shared that she too had recently moved to State City from a large Midwest city. Emily was excited she shared a common experience with Tiffany, and quickly told her about waterskiing when she returned to the city. Emily said Tiffany cocked her head and responded, "Your city doesn't sound like my city."

In the opening vignette, young Tiffany directly questioned pre-service teacher, Emily's, assumptions about their lives in the city, which caused Emily to consider previously unexamined stereotypes of social class, race, and gender in her work with children. With the support of a critical text that meaningfully analyzed stereotypes of working class and poor families, pre-service teachers like Emily actively questioned and deconstructed damaging stereotypes of lives lived on the margins guided by the text and in-class discussions during my literacy methods course. As a teacher educator and literacy methods instructor, I purposefully engaged my literacy methods students in challenging conversations centered on issues of identity, literacy, and stereotypes presented in Girls, Social Class, and Literacy (Jones, 2006). Often times, these conversations encouraged passionate debates and reflective observations by preservice teachers about their personal lives and their work with children. (See http://books.google.com/books/about/Girls social class and literacy.html?id=23buAAA <u>AMAAJ</u>.) For teacher education students, like my participants, who meet recent demographic statistics that report 84% of United States (US) public school teachers are White and female (Feistritzer, 2011, p. 11), engaging in critical literacy activities can create tensions, feelings of frustration and unease due to their own memories of

successful school experiences (Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010). (See <a href="www.ncei.com">www.ncei.com</a>
or <a href="http://www.edweek.org/media/pot2011final-blog.pdf">http://www.edweek.org/media/pot2011final-blog.pdf</a>
or visit the following website
<a href="http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/">http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/</a>) However, with guidance from a mentor text,
pre-service teachers can be scaffold into a more critical perspective of classroom
literacy practices. The "Jones' book," as it was quickly referred to in class, served as an additional voice in discussions and led to reflecting about interactions with elementary-aged students whose experiences differed from their own, and analyze educational practices to disrupt power relations in classrooms. With the "Jones' book" as a guide into thinking about the teachers they wanted to become, students began to deconstruct previous beliefs of "good teachers" to rewrite their professional identities and question teacher education curricula.

In this article, I present data from a longitudinal multiple case study to illustrate how three pre-service teachers built a community with a text focused on social justice, which in turn, influenced their perception of effective literacy practices with elementaryaged students and their expectations for teacher education curricula. I argue that when teacher educators include critical texts as community members, the text can act as a catalyst into conversations about race, social class, and gender that endures throughout teacher education experiences. Using texts in this way offers an additional resource to create dissonance by including voices and perspectives into teacher education conversations that are otherwise absent. In the following section, I offer a brief review of how teacher educators use critical literacy with pre-service teachers then I present examples of the "Jones' book" acting as a resource to navigate dissonance in teacher education experiences.

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# **Critical Literacy and Pre-service Literacy Teachers**

Critical literacy is one way to engage pre-service teachers in deconstructing dominant ideologies that oppress certain groups of people based on gender, race, or economic strata. Lee (2011) argues that critical literacy was originally intended to empower marginalized groups of people to transform literacy practices by deconstructing and reconstructing written words in meaningful ways to marginalized people (Freire, 1993). Much in the same way as Lee and Freire call for transformative literacy practices, Jones (2006) calls for teachers to engage in similar practices in their classrooms. However, for many pre-service teachers, transformative literacy practices are either seen as risky or unnecessary for elementary students. In a recent study by Smith and Lennon (2011), middle grade student teachers reported that they were generally unwilling to discuss controversial topics with their middle grade students. Similarly, Jones (2006) states that classroom teachers "protect" themselves by silencing student stories that may not fit within expected student stories and consequently "makes their lives seem worthless" (p. 43). Instead, Jones argues for teachers to go beyond the familiar and comfortable to validate students' experiences. Lee (2011) argues that teacher educators need to dispel myths or misconceptions about what critical literacy is and who should engage in these practices before pre-service teachers enter classrooms.

Many teacher educators take up Lee's charge to engage their students in critical literacy activities in literacy methods courses (Hughes & Robertson, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Reidel & Draper, 2011) with the hopes of impacting classroom practices. For example, Hughes and Robertson (2011) lead their teacher education students through a digital eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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book talk assignment that encouraged their students to deconstruct a children's literature text and plan a literacy lesson specifically focused on social justice. Hughes and Robertson argue that the book talk assignment aided previously reticent pre-service teachers to report feelings of confidence when discussing sensitive or more risky issues with young students. Similarly, Mosley (2010) argues for teacher education students to engage in literacy practica where approximations with critical literacy are supported by peers and literacy educators to foster critical and reflective teaching practices that build confidence as socially justice educators.

Engaging in critical literacy that promotes and sustains social action takes deliberate effort by teacher educators (Lee, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Mosely, 2010; Reidel & Draper, 2011). Hughes and Robertson (2011) report that teacher education students can be resistant to go beyond experiences in their own lives to analyze how they have both been oppressed and privileged. However, Lee (2011) argues that critical literacy practice is crucial for White students before entering schools with diverse student populations. For teacher education students, like my participants, who meet demographic statistics engaging in critical literacy activities can create feelings of frustration and unease.

Often times, teacher education students are placed in classrooms purposefully selected for their diverse populations or in schools away from the university student's home community to offer new perspectives and experiences (Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009). This can disrupt notions of "good teacher" practices for teacher education students who are White and middle-income since they may have progressed through school as a successful student and yet are unprepared to work with eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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students with different life experiences and cultural backgrounds (Florio-Ruane & Lensmire, 1990; Ng, et al., 2010). Disrupting narratives of school success can cause teacher education students to reevaluate their definitions of "good teachers" to include a more critical stance as suggested by Jones and provoke dissonance necessary for learning and professional identity growth (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Galman, 2009). As memories of past classroom experiences are replaced by current teaching activities, pre-service teachers' professional identities can be constructed to include social justice practices. For the pre-service teachers in this study, the ideas presented and discussed in the "Jones' book" became more prevalent as evidenced in our in-class conversations, their weekly field journals, and during later interviews.

#### Methods

# **Context of the Study**

In the fall of 2007, I was an elementary literacy methods instructor and a doctoral student at a large university in the Midwest. During this particular semester, the literacy methods instructors chose to add *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (Jones, 2006) to the course reading syllabus, and I was particularly excited to use the text in my section since I had an interest in teacher identity and social justice education. In the text, Jones describes the critical literacy practices she and eight young girls from working-class or poor families in an Ohio elementary school engaged in to validate the students' lived experiences in classroom literacy practices. Additionally, Jones lays a convincing argument for teachers to deconstruct their own "normalized" experiences and make more space to validate students' lived experiences in elementary classrooms.

I closed the first class meeting by reading aloud the short four-page introduction of Girls, Social Class, and Literacy (Jones, 2006) as a way to introduce the concepts associated with social justice education and to set the tone for the course. According to my course field notes, there was a marked silence when I asked literacy methods students to respond to the reading. After a few moments of silence a few students shared that they were intrigued and anxious to begin reading the text, and in particular, to learn more about the eight young participants or "the Jones' girls." In each subsequent course meeting, literacy methods students engaged in serious discussions centered on social justice, issues of student and teacher identities, and "normalized" stereotypes in society. Often times the discussions were passionate with various perspectives shared from students' personal experiences. However, I made a conscious effort to ensure that our discussions were constructive and connected to socially-just literacy practices by acting as a mediator and facilitator. An additional component of the course partnered each literacy methods student with an elementaryaged child in a weekly practicum field experience at a local elementary school with a diverse student population. Each week, pre-service teachers would implement planned literacy activities and write a reflective field journal connecting their experiences with course readings. Often times, literacy methods students shared practicum field experiences during in-class conversations as evidenced in the opening vignette.

The following semester I began my study to explore how pre-service elementary teachers' professional identities were embedded in relationships and bolstered agency in an elementary teacher education program. Since my former literacy methods students had begun discussions about identity and built relationships within our course eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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community, I chose to recruit participants from my course section. I anticipated that data would be generative since I had already built rapport as their instructor and in-class conversations were rich with reflective sharing.

# **Participants**

Four participants completed the study from the 26 literacy methods students in my course section. Each participant identified as White, female, in her early twenties, which demographically mirrors current statistics of the majority of the US teaching force (Feistritzer, 2011). Although each participant was demographically representative of the majority of US teachers, participants varied in religious, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. All participants provided rich and generative data, however I chose to highlight Mikayla, Katy, and Ava in this article to illustrate the code of text as mentor in the data. Mikayla was a laid back student who listened and participated in class activities, but rarely spoke in large group discussions. She often disagreed with her peers in written assignments or in later interviews, but remained silent in class. Mikayla went along with each method presented in class and viewed teaching as a job. Mikayla grew up in a small rural community approximately one hour from the university, and did not identify her religious background. Mikayla is currently an elementary teacher in a small city near the university in the Midwest.

Katy was a social student who was talkative in class discussions and wanted to be friends with everyone. She listened intently to both her instructors and her peers and self-reflected on her own learning experiences as a student. Katy identified with struggling school-aged students and often connected her struggles as a student with her teacher education experiences. Katy identified as Jewish and often discussed her eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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observations of Christian religious representations in local elementary classrooms.

After graduation Katy returned to her home community, an upper-class suburb of a large Midwest city 300 miles from the university, and is currently teaching.

Ava was a studious, hard-working student who attended each literacy methods class despite having mononucleosis for two weeks of the semester. She sacrificed her health for her acquired content knowledge, grades, and attendance record. Ava's mother was a special education teacher, and Ava returned to her home community, also a suburb of a large Midwest city 300 miles from the university. Ava also did not disclose her religious affiliation during the study. Ava is currently employed as a reading interventionist near her home community.

#### **Data Collection and Sources**

This was a longitudinal study in which data collection proceeded in four phases from August 2007 to February 2009. This report comes primarily from the analysis of phase one course field notes and written course assignments, and phase two interview data. Phase one occurred from August 2007 to December 2007 while participants were students in my literacy methods course, and phase two spanned from January 2008 to June 2008. During phase two data collection, participants were enrolled in two courses, an additional literacy course and a classroom management course, significant in their teacher education program experiences and impacted the code of text as mentor in the data.

Since I was particularly interested in how pre-service teachers used language to construct identities, build relationships, and rehearse agency in the larger study, my

data sources were language based. My primary data source was in-depth interviews conducted from April 2008-February 2009 with a total of 22 participant interviews. Indepth interviews were mostly participant guided since I was interested in "understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9) as relayed in talk. Much in the same way Seidman (2006) advocates for interviews as a tool for participants to tell their stories, I was interested in my participants as meaning makers of their lived experiences in teacher education settings, and how they used language to mediate meaning making and identity building (Gee, 2005) as pre-service teachers. Each conversation was audio-recorded and transcribed. Secondary data sources included participant generated written course documents, such as weekly field journals, one observation of each participant teaching in her student teaching classroom, interviews with program faculty members, and reflective field notes from my literacy methods course, interviews, and observations. Secondary data sources were collected using theoretical sampling since they were collected simultaneously with data analysis (Merriam, 1998) in an effort to collect data perceived as relevant by participants.

#### **Data Analysis**

Since my primary data source was transcribed interviews, data analysis began with recursively reading each transcript for emerging themes. In the larger study, I created case studies to highlight each participant's particular experiences through the teacher education program. Then, I read across cases for patterns to strengthen the external validity (Merriam, 1998) of the findings in my study. I used N\*6 computer software to code the conversation transcripts, and assigned categories based on the eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility.

emerging themes and patterns in the data. As data collection progressed, I continued to record reflective ethnographic field notes about emerging themes and patterns to be followed-up with participants, in documents, and interviews with program faculty members for triangulation purposes. I also continually looked for contradictions and tensions that did not fit the categories in the data sets by reviewing the entire data corpus with constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1975). Final categories included changes in professional identity confidence, changes in learning relationships, changes in Discourses of "good" teachers, and changes in expected teacher education curricula. The following section will focus on examples from the data to illustrate the final 2 themes.

# **Findings**

In this section I present language data from Mikayla, Katy, and Ava to exemplify how each pre-service teacher used language to represent changes in the themes of changes in Discourses of "good" teachers and changes in expected teacher education curricula. I present Mikalya's language to illuminate the theme of changes in Discourses of "good" teacher, and Katy and Ava together to represent changes in expected teacher education practices. I present Katy and Ava together since they often chose to meet together and shared complementary perceptions of their experiences.

# **Becoming "Good Teachers"**

According to Jones (2006), if we are, "to be good teachers, we had better be good learners" (p. 11-12) by learning from our students about what matters in their lives. For this reason, many teacher educators establish partnerships with schools so their

students can learn from elementary-aged children in classrooms settings. My literacy methods course was no exception. For many of my students, the practicum field experience was both exciting and frustrating. It was exciting because they were able to plan and implement literacy activities with children, and frustrating because many of my students encountered dissonance when their elementary-aged student did not meet their plans with enthusiasm and this caused tension. For Mikayla, frustration came when she selected and read *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972) to her student Markell, and he did not react to the book as she expected. Mikayla wrote about the experience in her weekly field journal and connected her experience with Markell to Jones' assertion that "good teachers...[are] good learners."

I finished the session by reading to him Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No. Good, Very Bad Day. When I decided to bring this book to Markell I thought he would really enjoy it because it was very funny, but I couldn't have been more wrong. As I began reading it, I thought to myself, "What was I thinking? This is a story about a middle to upper class White boy that has trivial things go wrong throughout his day and I am reading this to a lower class Black boy that has 10 brothers and sisters stuck in a small house." A good teacher would have thought of this prior to reading this book to this individual. Markell didn't understand the book at all and didn't find it very funny. I was so disappointed in myself, but it was such a good learning experience for me. When choosing this book, all I thought about was how much I enjoyed it when we read it in class, I didn't think about the setting or characters. But, I know that times like this is what will help me grow into what I consider to be a good teacher, because I know that I will never make that same mistake again. I am disappointed that I didn't think about the Jones' book before I decided to read this to Markell. Many times Jones stresses the importance of relating to your students' lives through literacy, which I seemed to let slip my mind completely. But like I said, this mistake will only make me a better teacher in the long run.

Mikayla's field journal excerpt is an example of how working with Markell was instrumental in connecting what she read in *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (Jones, 2006) with the real practice of selecting reading materials for students and how difficult this process can be for teachers. With Jones as a guide into thinking about "good teachers" and experienced dissonance when working with diverse elementary-aged students, my teacher education students, like Mikayla, began constructing professional identities that included learning from students and disrupted preconceived notions of effective literacy practices by "good" teachers.

In-class conversations created an opportunity for literacy methods students to build meaning with each other by connecting their experiences with school-aged children, relevant personal experiences, and course readings. One such conversation, as remembered by Mikalya in a later interview, centered on a VISA television commercial aired during the fall of 2007. The commercial was based in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana, and primarily focused on New Orleans Saints football fans using their VISA cards to quickly purchase merchandise, while non-Saints fans used cash to slowly purchase goods. The commercial aired just 2 short years after Hurricane Katrina devastated much of the Gulf Coast and depicted happy football fans presumably living in New Orleans. According to my field notes, we used the tools of critical literacy to analyze how the recent poverty that struck New Orleans citizens in the wake of Hurricane Katrina was represented in the commercial. The commercial failed to represent poverty or any related events to Hurricane Katrina. The conversation lingered in Mikayla's memory because "it really opened my eyes to a lot of" unnoticed stereotypes represented in popular culture, such as television commercials, and in eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

children's books such as Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (Viorst, 1972). Mikayla credited the "Jones' book" as a catalyst for many of our in-class conversations due to its focus on social justice issues. Mikayla confided "reading [the Jones' book] scared me at first...because it was an eye opener and I guess I was closed-minded before. Reading the [Jones'] book opened my eyes to a lot of unexamined stereotypes in educational practices." Mikayla concluded the lingering conversation by stating "I thought school was like my school [growing up] and that isn't true. It's an eye opener, and I wanted to have it before I got into the classroom." Mikayla's "eye opener" statements highlight the importance of being prepared to learn from her future students, their lived experiences, and her previously unexamined perspectives of "normal." Being "scared" by reading the "Jones' book" disrupts Mikyala's nostalgic memories of her own school experiences as an elementary student in a rural Midwestern community and complicates her professional identity to reexamine her definition of a "good teacher." Finally, Mikayla points out the importance of engaging in critical literacy work in teacher education courses, and having experiences with students who have different lived experiences as herself before entering the classroom as a teacher. By "open[ing her] eyes to a lot" through reading and engaging with a critical text in her teacher education program, Mikayla will be more prepared to learn from her future students.

### What Are We Going to Do About It?

In the final pages of *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (2006), Jones urges teachers to "(d)o one tiny thing. And then do another. And another. And suddenly you will find yourself habitually reading and rewriting the world in new and powerful ways—eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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but the first step must be taken" (p. 162). The first step for many of my literacy methods students was to start thinking differently about their future students and critically read "the world in new and powerful ways." For Ava and Katy, this meant that in their later teacher education courses they wanted to critically engage with their course readings and yearned for their instructors to challenge them as future teachers in the same way the "Jones' book" challenged them to think critically about "(d)o[ing] one tiny thing." However, their two current courses failed to meet their expectations.

Katy and Ava both took an additional literacy course after my literacy methods course to fulfill their reading concentrations. Katy and Ava did not enjoy the course, and Katy suggested that "it could be great if [the instructor] took a different spin." The "spin" Katy suggested included more instructor enthusiasm and invitations to challenge Katy and her peers to engage in a particular course text. Katy confided, "I started [the book], but I just read parts of it." Ava shared that she finished the book and really enjoyed it, but she too wanted her instructor to provide more purpose for reading the text. Ava stated that more enthusiasm for her peers to read and discuss the text would have occurred "if we started out like we did the Jones' book. We looked at it like, 'How are we going to [work with students from different lived experiences than our own]?" Instead, Ava and Katy were left unchallenged and unmotivated. For both Katy and Ava, setting a purpose for reading a course text mattered in how they engaged with the text, and how they viewed their course instructor. Katy and Ava referred to the "Jones' book" as a professional challenge to them as future educators to validate their students' lives within classrooms. Instead of passively reading their teacher education texts, Katy and Ava engaged with the "Jones' book" on a personal and professional level to challenge eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility Volume 5 Number 1 Fall 2012

themselves as pre-service teachers to "do one tiny thing" in their future classrooms.

Motivated reading and deep engagement with the "Jones' book" impacted how we discussed both the author and the participants in our literacy methods in-class discussions. Often times I would insert the author, Stephanie Jones, into our conversations by asking my literacy methods students "How would Jones respond to that question?" or "What would Jones say?" I would also ask these questions when responding to my students' written assignments in an attempt to encourage deeper connections to the critical perspective Jones presents in her text to disrupt stereotypes in classroom literacy practices and assumptions about learners. My questions and references to Jones invoked a critical lens of thinking and quickly permeated how my students would reference the text in their own words to encourage literal connections between educational practices and a critical perspective. Not only did we create an imagined persona for the author, but we also animated the "Jones' girls" to describe the eight young girls who were participants in Jones' study and text.

In another interview with Katy and Ava, Katy compared a recently read classroom management text about working with students from working-class or poor families with the "Jones' girls" participants. Jones (2006) argues for teachers to sanction all "topics and valu(e) many ways of living" (p. 43) as a way to validate students' lives in classroom spaces. By sanctioning all student experiences as valid, Jones encourages teachers to use class discussions as a way to deconstruct stereotypes associated with being poor in the United States. Instead, the classroom management offered a stagnant unilateral strategy to present poverty and homelessness to elementary-aged students. Katy believed her classroom management eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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text stance on homelessness and poverty was too fixed and "was so different [from the Jones' book] and next to it I wrote, 'Their answer is so different than the Jones' girls'" perspective. Jones (2006) offers an account of a literature discussion centered on poverty in which the young participants offer various definitions of poverty based on lived experiences. Each participant relates a definition that is relative to other information to decide whether the main character of the read aloud text is poor. For instance. Candence states that the character in the text has crackers in her house and "poor people don't have food" (Jones, 2006, p. 26). Therefore, Candence concludes that the character is not poor. Katy yearned for the critical perspective provided by the "Jones' girls" and invited them into her reading of the text to provide it. Ava echoed Katy's disappointment in the course reading by declaring a critical perspective, such as that provided by Jones, "should be another part of our classroom management course." Then almost in unison, Katy and Ava rhetorically asked themselves and their peers, "What are you going to do about [validating various perspectives in your classroom]?" Katy added a further challenge to herself and her peers by adding, "And they are both in your class." Instead of waiting until they were in the classroom to take up Jones' (2006) challenge for teachers to begin "reading and rewriting the world in new and powerful ways" (p. 162), Katy and Ava sought to be challenged by their current teacher education courses and readings. When the challenge was absent, Katy and Ava returned to a mentor text that offered the guidance they craved.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Each pre-service teacher relied on the support offered by the "Jones' book" as a trustworthy source to navigate dissonance and discontent in her teacher education eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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experiences. Mikayla relied on Jones to support her changing definition of "good" teachers to extend to learning from students and to capitalizing on lived experiences through literacy. Ava and Katy found support by animating both Jones and the "Jones' girls" as real people with perspectives not always found in teacher education courses and texts. With the "Jones' book" as a guide and resource, pre-service teachers were supported in their efforts to validate student lives and imagine social action in their educational practices. Mikayla, Ava, and Katy took up the "Jones' book" as an embodiment of critical literacy practices to disrupt stereotypes based on social class, race, and gender in their teacher education experiences and to provide support when teacher education courses failed to provide a critical perspective.

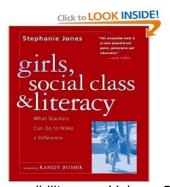
To facilitate approximations with critical literacy perspectives in teacher education experiences as revealed by my data and suggested by Mosely (2010), pre-service teachers should have multiple opportunities to talk with their peers, write reflectively about their experiences, and be guided by supportive teacher educators committed to social action in education. Teacher educators should support pre-service teacher approximations with critical literacy through the careful selection of critical texts to serve as mentors to guide in-class conversations and written assignments. Deliberate incorporation of the text through setting purposes for reading, encouraging deep reading with in-class discussions of text topics, and attempts to include the text into conversations in class and in written assignments can include texts as community members to offer an alternative voice or perspective when absent.

In-class discussions should be facilitated and mediated by knowledgeable teacher educators committed to social justice education to ensure pre-service teacher eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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sharing remains productive and considerate to allow for disagreement without hurt feelings. For participants in this study, in-class discussions served as lingering conversations, or influential discussions that continued their learning, when critical perspectives were absent in subsequent teacher education curricula. Feistritzer reported a similar finding that 75% of teachers noted "discussions with fellow teachers" as the most effective aspect of their teacher education programs (2011, p. 30).

Teacher educators should combine in-class discussions with field experience placements to counteract a stable perspective presented in published texts. Field experience placements should be purposefully selected to encourage multiple and fluid perspectives about linguistically and culturally diverse students (Lopez, 2011) and encourage diverse classroom experiences (Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009) for pre-service teachers. In-class discussions should link field experiences with readings, such as the "Jones' book," to continually interrupt assumptions about social class, race, and gender. With teacher educators and mentor texts providing scaffolding, pre-service teachers could take up Jones' (2006) challenge to "reflect on yourself as a reader, a writer, and as a literacy educator" to work collaboratively with colleagues to "imagine what might be possible for you and the children and families you serve" (p. xvi).



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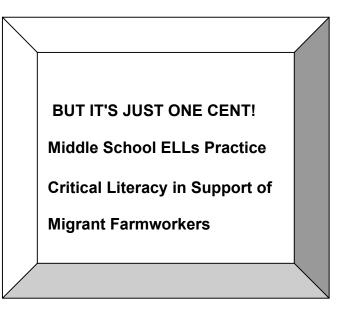
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**Key words**: English language learners, critical literacy, academic language, persuasive writing, adolescent literacy

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article reports on a portion of a larger, mixed methods study on critical literacy and persuasive writing for English language learners (ELLs) in middle school. For six-weeks, ELLs attending grades 6-8 were instructed in persuasive text composition strategies (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008). Using critical literacy (Behrman, 2006), the students also engaged with multiple texts to learn about local migrant farmworker issues. Students then composed letters persuading a major supermarket to sign the Fair Food Agreement. Letters were assessed using an adapted persuasive letter rubric (NCTE/IRA, 2005). Findings revealed that students applied persuasive text strategies with varying levels of success. They demonstrated some competence in composing topic sentences and conclusions, but required further scaffolding in sentence and paragraph structure, as well as argumentation. Overall, middle school ELLs in this study were eager to engage and were effective in academic text composition when writing for an authentic audience and valued purpose.

Dear CEO,

I urge you to sign the Fair Food Agreement to help the farm workers in our community.

You are one the most powerful corporations in our state and also one of the few ones that didn't sign this agreement yet. ... (Mariana, grade 8)

It all started when a former student appeared in the film, *The Harvest/La*Cosecha (Romano & O'Connor, 2011), a documentary that gives voice to the approximately 400,000 children laboring as migrant farmworkers in the United States (US). The film profiles the lives of three children, including Victor, a student that I worked with in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program a few years ago. Shortly after we met, Victor's family moved away, and his teacher and I always wondered what had happened to the quiet boy from Mexico who struggled with English language and literacy. Just this year, we found him, in the film, 16 years old and harvesting tomatoes in north Florida. He stated, "On a slow day, I carry 1,500 pounds of tomatoes".

Discovering the reality of Victor's life as a tomato picker prompted an inquiry into migrant farmworker issues as part of a larger, mixed methods study on critical literacy and persuasive writing for middle school English language learners (ELLs). After learning about the lives and challenges of local farmworkers, a current group of students applied persuasive writing strategies to compose letters in their support. This article outlines the implementation of the farmworker segment of the project, and

applies a preliminary analysis of the students' persuasive letters to explore their text composition and academic language skills in an authentic writing context.

# The Setting

Both culturally and economically, Florida is a very diverse state. The 2010 U.S. Census cited a 23% Hispanic/Latino population in Florida as compared to 17% nationally. Nearly 27% of Floridians speak a language other than English, compared to the national average of 20% (<u>US Census Bureau, 2012</u>). Florida schools represent this rich cultural and linguistic diversity.

With respect to the economy, agriculture is an important contributor. In addition to citrus and other produce, Florida supplies up to 90% of the country's tomatoes (Estabrook, 2009). Approximately 33,000 farmworkers arrive in Florida each year to harvest tomatoes (Ríos, 2011), and they often live and work in precarious conditions. Workers are paid an average of \$.50 per 32-pound bucket of tomatoes picked –the same rate as 30 years ago (Estabrook, 2009). The annual per capita income in Immokalee, Florida's tomato capital is \$9,700, one-fourth the national average (Estabrook, 2011).

For the past decade, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) has been pressuring major corporate buyers (e.g., fast food chains, supermarkets) to sign the Fair Food Agreement. Supporting buyers pay farmworkers one cent more per pound of tomatoes picked, substantially raising the per-bucket rate. The agreement also improves working conditions by requiring growers to provide workers with shade, water, breaks, and protection from sexual harassment. To date, 10 corporations have signed

the Fair Food Agreement.

# The Study

Currently, literacy instruction is often decontextualized and focused on the passive transmission of content and skills, especially for "at risk" students, including ELLs (Cummins, Early, & Stille, 2011). In contrast, critical literacy encourages "learning through activism; ... the need to use vital academic skills for social justice motivates their acquisition" (Cowhey, 2006, p. 103). An example of this is persuasive writing for a cause.

Persuasive text composition represents part of the repertoire of academic language capabilities required for school success (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Wilkinson & Silliman, 2008). For ELLs, challenges with academic English remain obstacles for developing more robust composition strategies (Danzak, 2011a). Persuasive writing can support ELLs in acquiring both academic language and writing skills. Additionally, because middle school ELLs are motivated to produce personally meaningful texts (Danzak, 2011b), critical literacy can serve to engage these students in persuasive text composition for an authentic audience and purpose.

#### **Review of the Literature**

#### Critical Literacy and ELLs

Critical literacy encourages students to examine power structures expressed in texts, explore the voices of those often absent from mainstream literature, and create their own texts to inspire social change (Shor, 1999). Behrman (2006) reviewed multiple studies exploring critical literacy in classrooms. Although practices were

diverse, it was found that teachers and students generally: 1) interacted with multiple texts; 2) read from a resistant perspective and considered varying perspectives; 3) produced countertexts; 4) engaged in research projects addressing local issues; and finally, 5) took social action to make a real difference in the community.

There are few inquiries into the use of critical literacy with ELLs. In one such example, Jennings (2010) reported on an ethnographic inquiry of a Spanish-English bilingual, fifth grade class that used critical literacy to study the Holocaust. As a culminating project, the class visited a local tolerance museum and composed essays promoting a more just and tolerant community. They also created a class video to summarize their learning and build awareness. Jennings concluded that the critical experiences with multiple texts allowed the bilingual students to comprehend and produce complex language and ideas in a highly engaging, academic context.

Chun (2009) applied a framework of multiliteracies and critical literacy in another exploration of the Holocaust in which advanced ELLs in grades 9-12 engaged with the graphic novel, *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1973; 1986). The students reflected and wrote about personal connections to racism and migration, examined multiple interpretations, and researched contemporary issues of human rights and social justice. Chun reported benefits to students' literacy development, including increased engagement with literacy and history.

While Jennings (2010) and Chun (2009) incorporated critical literacy into the ELL classroom, neither researcher emphasized composition instruction or systematically examined writing outcomes. Like these inquiries, the present study aimed to maximize student engagement by implementing a critical literacy context to explore migrant eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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farmworker issues. Additionally, this application involved explicit instruction of persuasive writing strategies (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008) and the assessment of the students' written persuasive texts.

# **Persuasive Writing Strategies**

Persuasive writing can be considered part of the expository "macrogenre" (Berman & Nir, 2010, p. 100); however, it extends beyond explanation, requiring the writer to state a claim and develop logical supporting arguments (Lenski & Verbruggen, 2010). These skills are not only essential for achievement in language arts, but are also critical for effective participation in mathematics (Schleppegrell, 2007), science (Yore et al., 2004), and social studies (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011). Thus, persuasive text comprehension and production lie at the heart of school success. For ELLs, persuasive writing instruction offers the opportunity and challenge to integrate academic language, composition skills, and logical reasoning, as well as, importantly, the possible transfer of these skills into diverse content areas.

One way that teachers can support ELLs' persuasive text composition is through self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), (Harris & Graham, 1996). The SRSD involves the mastery and application of specific text planning, organization, and development strategies. Graham and Harris (2005) suggested several benefits of SRSD instruction for children with learning disabilities, including: 1) a clear and specific course of action for the writing task; 2) metacognitive development through explicit modeling and practice; and, 3) increased understanding of the writing process and students' own capabilities and progress. The advantages of SRSD can certainly extend beyond the realm of students with special needs; in this case, ELLs can benefit from tools to eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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support their metalinguistic awareness and writing development, as well as skills that will serve them across academic disciplines.

#### Method

The migrant farmworker project represents part of a larger, mixed methods investigation of critical literacy and persuasive writing of middle school ELLs. The study's conceptual framework was based on collaborative action research (Hendricks, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This paradigm has been described as a practice in which educators purposefully and systematically engage in "an inquiry and reflective-based process" to improve their teaching (Llewellyn & van Zee, 2010, p. 10). Ultimately, action research can be viewed as a recursive process in which teachers actively plan, investigate, analyze, and question (Saul, 2010).

The study took place in the ESL classroom of a diverse, public middle school on the west coast of Florida. The Institutional Review Board of the author's university approved this research, and all names have been changed to maintain confidentiality of the participants. In line with a participatory research framework, the author and ESL teacher, Ms. Taris, collaborated to develop and implement the critical literacy curriculum and persuasive writing instruction, as well as to conduct data collection and analyses. The purposes of the study were: 1) through critical literacy, to engage middle school ELLs in the acquisition of persuasive text composition strategies; and 2) to explore how students' applied persuasive writing strategies and academic language in texts composed for an authentic audience and purpose.

# **Participants**

ESL teacher. The school's ESL program serviced 54 students in grades 6-8. Ms. Taris is the school's only ESL teacher, and meets with each grade level daily for two class periods of 50 minutes each. Ms. Taris has been teaching middle school ESL for 10 years, and considers herself not only a teacher, but also a mentor and an advocate for her students and their families. She is eager to research and implement effective strategies for her ELL students, especially in the area of writing, which offers multiple opportunities for academic language instruction and authentic production. Her ESL curriculum is generally structured around projects that pique student engagement with meaningful topics and final products that offer varied choices and celebrate students' learning and creativity. Both Ms. Taris and the author are English-Spanish bilinguals.

**Students.** Of the 54 ESL students invited to participate, 35 submitted consent forms. Thus, while the overall project was carried out with all ESL students, data were collected from 35 (5 in grade 6, 15 in grade 7, and 15 in grade 8). The participants' level of English language proficiency varied considerably. Nine students had arrived in the U.S. within two years; ten had been educated exclusively in the U.S. The majority (28) spoke Spanish at home; other home languages included Albanian, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Turkish, and Vietnamese.

### The Experience

Learning about migrant farmworkers through critical literacy. The overall project was structured around Behrman's (2006) characteristics of critical literacy

instruction. The exploration of migrant farmworker issues comprised two weeks of the full study and included various resources and instructional activities leading up to persuasive letter composition. For example, Ms. Taris read the book, *First day in grapes* (Pérez & Casilla, 2002), a personal narrative of the first day of school of boy from a migrant farmworker family, and students composed written responses to the text. Students viewed the film, *The Harvest/La Cosecha* (Romano & O'Connor, 2011), and reflected on the teens profiled in the film both in writing and oral discussion. Students also explored and discussed the <u>CIW website</u>, which includes videos, photographs, and information about the organization's history of farmworker advocacy.

Of the various instructional activities, the experience that had the greatest impact on the students was a visit from a member of the CIW and an organizer from the <a href="Student-Farmworker Alliance">Student-Farmworker Alliance (SFA)</a>. In an interactive format, the presenters described the lives of Florida's tomato pickers, including impoverished housing, job insecurity, low wages, and physically demanding to dangerous working conditions. The speakers outlined the agricultural power structure in a pyramid that positioned farmworkers at the bottom and corporations at the top, explaining how the <a href="Fair Food Agreement">Fair Food Agreement</a> affects all levels. The students calculated the cost of tomatoes as compared to farmworker earnings, and several attempted to lift a 32-pound tomato bucket. Students took notes and summarized key points in a group discussion the next day.

Persuasive writing strategy instruction. As part of the larger study, the students were instructed for a period of six weeks with two SRSD persuasive writing strategies: STOP and DARE, both of which are included in Graham and Harris' (2005) list of "scientifically validated writing strategies" (pp. 2-4). Like most SRSD tools, STOP eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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and DARE are acronyms representing the various steps writers might take in composing a certain type of text –in this case, persuasive: STOP (a planning strategy) = **S**uspend judgment; **T**ake a side; **O**rganize ideas; and **P**lan more as you write. DARE (a text organization and development strategy) = **D**evelop your topic sentence; **A**dd supporting ideas; **R**eject arguments for the other side; and **E**nd with a conclusion.

As prescribed by Harris, Graham, Mason, and Friedlander (2008), Ms. Taris and I applied the following steps to teach STOP and DARE over the six week period. We employed the following: 1) develop background knowledge and preskills; 2) discuss the strategies, including significance and benefits; 3) model the strategies using a thinkaloud protocol; 4) help the students memorize the strategies by using mnemonics, visual cues, and gestures; 5) support and scaffold students' use of the strategies in their writing; and 6) shift to students' independent application.

Composition of persuasive letters. The final week of SRSD instruction coincided with the visit from the CIW and SFA members. The day after the presentation, the students composed persuasive letters using the strategies STOP and DARE. After summarizing the previous day's learning in a classroom conversation, two prompts were presented and students had the choice to either write a letter to a major supermarket chain urging them to sign the Fair Food Agreement, or write a letter to the local school board persuading them to continue to offer foreign language classes in the face of budget cuts. The second prompt, hypothetical in nature, was provided to offer the students an alternative if, for whatever reason, they did not want to compose a letter to the supermarket. Due to the students' personal experiences and the additive, language-learning environment of Ms. Taris' classroom, it was assumed students would eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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have sufficient understanding of the benefits of bilingualism to address the second prompt if they chose to do so (only three did). Per the DARE strategy, both prompts instructed students to include at least two supporting ideas and reject at least one argument from the other side.

The students had approximately 20 minutes to plan their letters, during which time they applied the strategy, STOP, which involves brainstorming supporting ideas for each side in a two-column list, then prioritizing and ordering ideas to include in the text. Immediately after planning, the students had one, full class period (50 minutes) to compose their letters, using the strategy, DARE to organize and construct their texts. During the following two days, the students typed their handwritten letters, revising and editing independently. After being reviewed by Ms. Taris, the final letters were printed, signed, and mailed to their designated recipients.

# **Analysis**

Of the 35 participants, three composed only 1-2 sentences and their texts were excluded. Of the remaining students, 22 completed the task of typing and revising their letters. These 22 texts were utilized for the present analysis. Of these, 19 letters were addressed to the supermarket (14 in English, 5 in Spanish). Only three letters were written to the school board (all in English).

The 22 letters were scored using an analytic, <u>persuasive letter rubric</u> adapted from <u>readwritethink.org</u> (NCTE/IRA, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the elements of DARE were associated with items already present in the rubric (e.g., *Goal/thesis* relates to "<u>D</u>evelop a topic sentence"; *Reasons & Support* corresponds to "<u>A</u>dd

supporting ideas"), some criteria were adjusted based on the writing prompts, and a new item, *Reject arguments for the other side* (part of DARE), and related criteria were added. Thus, the complete rubric addressed seven items and provided scoring criteria for each item on a 4-point scale for a total possible score of 28.

# Findings

Of the 28 points possible on the persuasive letter rubric, students' total scores ranged from 10-23, mean = 16.9. Scores on the individual items (each scored 1-4) varied, with means ranging from 1.6-3.0. Original spellings and structures are maintained in the examples below.

As a group, the students performed fairly well on *Goal/thesis* (mean = 3.0). Competent topic sentences included: "please work with the coalition of Immokalee workers to ensure fair wages and condition for the immigrant's farm workers who pick your tomatoes every day," (Gabriel, grade 7); "I am writing this letter for you to help migrant farm workers. This is a really big deal. You can do that by signing the Food Fair Agreement," (Mateo, grade 8).

Students were also somewhat successful in composing the *Conclusion* (mean = 2.6). An examples of capable concluding statement in English was: "It's all in your hands; you can provide them a longer and healthier life just by giving them an extra cent" (Mariana, grade 8). An equally successful Spanish sample was: "Porfavor firmen el contrato para las personas que recogen el tomate tenga una vida major," (Please sign the contract so the people who pick tomatoes can have a better life) (Antonio, grade 8).

Finally, the group demonstrated some level of competence on the item, *Word choice/tone* (mean = 2.8), by incorporating clear, descriptive words and maintaining a persuasive tone in their letters. Although the item, *Reasons and support* (mean = 2.3) requires further scaffolding, the students' emerging supporting ideas often included relevant vocabulary and a passionate, persuasive tone: "A bucket of tomatoes weighs 32 pounds; they run through the fields with those buckets. What if it was you? I bet you couldn't last 2 hours in the sun picking all those fruits and vegetables," (Claudia, grade 8). "Los trabajadores trabajan en condiciones demasiado extremas y muchas de las veces sufren maltrato y su sueldo es demasiado bajo," (the workers work in extreme conditions and often suffer mistreatment and their salary is too low), (Edith, grade 8).

While some errors in the *Mechanics and grammar* item (including spelling) were expected (mean = 2.5), these ELLs faced even more challenges in the area of *Organization* (sentence and paragraph structure; mean = 2.0). Although eight letters earned a score of three (i.e., "sentence and paragraph structure are generally correct"), seven students received a score of one ("little or no evidence of sentence or paragraph structure") on this item.

A particular challenge for this group of students was the item, *Reject arguments* from the other side (mean = 1.6), part of the DARE strategy. Despite being specifically requested by the prompts, in 14 of the 22 letters, this element was completely absent. Some students, however, did attempt to reject an opposing argument. For instance, "Okay, there is 1 reason you shouldn't sign it. That is you are going to lose money. However you have a lot money anyway it's only 1 penny more," (Emir, grade 8); "You might think you will lose a lot of money, but I'm sure you won't it would be backwards eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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you would win [earn] more. ... Look at it from the bright side you could win [earn] more money because you would have more to sell," (Sara, grade 7).

#### **Discussion**

Overall, the outcomes on the exploratory rubric indicated that, as might be expected, participating ELLs applied the SRSD strategies with variable success. For example, explicit instruction in developing a topic sentence and ending with a conclusion (components of DARE) may have supported the students' emerging effectiveness on the items *Goal/thesis* and *Conclusion*. On the other hand, lower scores in the area of *Organization* (sentence and paragraph structure) suggest that more instruction and practice are needed to scaffold not only students' continued growth in persuasive text composition, but also in academic English language development (e.g., syntax). The SRSD approach focuses on discourse level skills: planning and text structure. However, many students, especially ELLs, require additional support in the more micro levels of the English language, e.g., spelling, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Similar to building a house, students may have acquired the frame, but need the bricks to fill it in.

The ELLs in this study especially faced difficulty on the item, *Reject arguments* from the other side. Identifying and contradicting an opposing argument requires students to take the perspective contrary to their own and negate it with logical reasons. This sort of argumentation is a key component of the academic language of math (Schleppegrell, 2007), science (Yore et al., 2004), and social studies (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011) and is, thus, essential for school success. This skill was incorporated into the STOP strategy, in which writers brainstorm supporting ideas for eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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both sides of the issue. During practice opportunities with STOP, it was easy for students to enumerate support for what they agreed with, but many had difficulty doing the same from the opposing perspective. While it may be challenging for children and teens to see a controversial situation from a different point of view, exploring issues from multiple perspectives is a goal of critical literacy. Thus, although outcomes on this particular task suggested that the participating ELLs require additional scaffolding in this area, it is expected that continued practice with persuasive text strategies within a critical literacy context should build the sort of mental flexibility students need to develop weighty arguments within and beyond the ESL classroom.

# **Looking Ahead**

It is important to note that the migrant farmworker project represents one piece of a larger investigation that is still underway. The full study involves an analysis of persuasive essays (apart from the letters described here) composed by the students before writing instruction, after six weeks of SRSD instruction, and again after an additional six weeks of instruction in word and sentence combining (to build vocabulary and syntactic skills) and continued practice with SRSD. In addition to an analytic or holistic score, other measures will be applied to these texts to provide further insight into the diverse ways that middle school ELLs may express linguistic complexity in academic texts. For example, an examination of the use of elaborated noun phrases can reveal variation in literate sentence formulation, especially in the case of written expository texts (Ravid & Berman, 2010). Syntactic complexity might also be explored with a measure appropriate for adolescents, such as level of embedding of subordinate clauses (Tuller, Henry, Sizaret, & Barthez, 2012). At a more micro level, the systematic eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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assessment of students' spelling errors with a tool presented by Bahr and colleagues could address ELLs' developing relationships among phonological, orthographic, and morphological systems in academic English writing (Bahr, Silliman, Berninger, & Dow, in press).

# The Synthesis of Critical Literacy and Persuasive Writing

An important outcome of the critical literacy framework was the students' motivation and engagement in learning about migrant farmworker issues and seeking to take action to improve their conditions by composing persuasive letters. It was clear from the content of their texts that, as a group, these ELLs understood the issues and took them to heart. This was reflected by their emerging competence on the rubric item, *Word choice and tone*, indicating that the students maintained a persuasive mood and employed relevant vocabulary, also revealing the knowledge they had acquired about the lives of migrant farmworkers and the Fair Food Agreement.

In the case of the migrant farmworker project, critical literacy and persuasive writing complimented each other, empowering students to produce their own authentic texts to achieve instrumental goals. This outcome represents a small step in the direction of meeting the demands of increasing motivation and engagement while also developing the academic language skills necessary to ensure the school success of middle school ELLs.

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What do you wanna write to Grandma? Richness and Variety in Shared Writing of Prekindergarten Children and Parents

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**Key words**: preschool children, writing, family interaction, family members' practice, cultural background, prior knowledge

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines parents' and their preschool children's interactions during a writing task to identify support for early literacy. Families were predominantly African American and from low-income backgrounds. Discussions focused on dyads describing the writing, conventions of writing, spelling, and the conceptual meaning of writing. Both parents and children initiated discussions, interaction dynamics varying. Resulting writing samples were expressions of meaning and included various forms of writing appropriate for young children. Understanding family members' practice is critical to understanding children's cultural background and can assist teachers in gaining an appreciation for the prior knowledge that children bring to the classroom.

From the Harlem Children Zone® (http://www.hcz.org/) to the work of Noble prize winning economist James Heckman (http://www.heckmanequation.org/) the importance of the family and the family's ability to support educational success is becoming ever clearer. If we are to support schools in delivering on the promise of education for all, then we must support schools in gaining an understanding of the importance of family. Valuing family and family educational supports and practices is an acknowledgement of the importance of children's cultural background as well as enhancing the appreciation for the prior knowledge that children bring to the classroom (Delpit, 1995, 2002; Heath, 1983). When schools take a strengths-based approach to learning more about the families they serve, the process can support efforts to gain families' trust by demonstrating that the school and the school personnel value the knowledge and strengths the children and parents come to school ready to share (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Moll's <u>funds of knowledge approach</u> is a strengths-based perspective influencing our thinking in this work (<u>Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005</u>; <u>Moll et al, 1992</u>; <u>Moll & González, 2004</u>). We propose that all families provide particular early writing experiences that are a valuable source of knowledge to be shared with young children. <u>Moll, et al</u> state, "Our analysis of funds of knowledge represents a positive (and, we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, *potential* utility for classroom instruction (1992, p. 134)." It should be noted that this view of households contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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education and elsewhere.

Researchers have devoted increasing attention to the emergence of literacy among preschool children, recognizing that most children engage in meaningful literacy events long before they receive direct, school-based literacy instruction (National Institute for Literacy, 2008; Manz, Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, & Ginsburg-Block, 2010). A focus on the literacy development of preschoolers has heightened awareness of the importance of the home as a literacy context, in which family members and their young children share experiences involving reading, writing, and talking in their daily lives (Cummins, 2004; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Vygotsky's sociocultural and historical theory suggests that learning is coconstructed between the learner and adult or more knowledgeable peers in a social and
cultural context (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). A number of studies have found this to
be the case when addressing literacy in a broad sense in examination of adults reading
and writing with young children (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Farver, Xu,
Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Hammett, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; Haney & Hill, 2004;
Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Weigel, Martin, &
Bennett, 2005).

In general, the studies of family support for literacy highlight the skills that the adults impart to children (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006); however, this is not always the case when the studies address families living in poverty (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Indeed most studies of families living in poverty maintain a deficit view of the family and their support for eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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education (<u>Dudley-Marling</u>, 2007; <u>Hollis</u>, 2004; <u>Prins & Schafft</u>, 2009; <u>Vernon-Feagans</u>, <u>Head-Reeves</u>, <u>& Kainz</u>, 2004). In a deficit view, families' early literacy practices are examined in order to determine what practices families lack when compared to middle and upper income families rather than examining their actual literacy practices (<u>Hart & Risley</u>, 1995). While there is value in educational programs knowing the types of supports children may need, there is danger in substituting social address for true assessment information. Likewise, a deficit view neglects the examination of the strengths that families may have and that children may develop. We reject a deficit view in the current study.

What do we know about parental influences on emergent literacy, especially parents from low-income backgrounds? As previously noted we know quite a bit about parents' and children's book reading (e.g., Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Bus, van ljzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Hammett, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Other researchers have broadened their investigation of parent–child literacy interactions to examine engagement of children in literacy-related activities such as reciting rhymes, singing, drawing, and direct teaching of letters (e.g., Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Haney & Hill, 2004; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). And a few researchers have examined shared writing experiences of preschool children within family contexts (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988, Teale, 1986).

The works of <u>Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988)</u> and <u>Teale (1986)</u> addressed the uses of written language in young children's homes. These studies of low-income families illustrated that adults provided many sources of written language and that eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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opportunities exist for children to observe others' daily use of print. Neither study, however, explored the types of information about writing that the parents and children discussed, nor the interaction dynamics. Burns & Casbergue (1992) examined more precisely the nature of interactions around the early writing of 4-year-old middle- and upper-income children within a parent-child shared writing activity and found that the literacy focus of the discussion and the degree to which parents directed the activity influenced the nature of children's writing. Other studies of parent-child interactions focusing on writing included older children in the study group (Aram & Levin, 2002; DeBaryshe, Buell, & Binder, 1996; Gutman & Sulzby, 2000; Korat & Levin, 2001). Thus, there is a lack of information about the specific nature of shared writing interactions among low-income families of preschoolers.

Prekindergarten children know a great deal about writing before they receive formal literacy instruction (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky, 2003; Yaden & Tardibuono, 2004). They know, for example, that certain letter strings can be read and others cannot be when presented with contrasting letter strings, such as "BOOK" and "TTTT," and that "BOOK" is a word and "8965" is a number. Also, when asked to write a sentence, young children make longer scribbles (undifferentiated writing) than when asked to write one word (Tolchinsky, 2003). Although they have a rudimentary understanding of written language before schooling, preschoolers gradually learn to understand the orthographic and graphophonic systems of their native language, so that what one "writes is readable (both at the time of writing and in the future)" (Tolchinsky 2003, p. 71). They learn this from much exposure to print, including reading and writing experiences with family members and teachers early in their initial formal education.

As part of learning orthographic and graphophonic systems children often pretend to write in different forms for different purposes (Gadsden 1993; McGee, Richgels, & Charlesworth, 1986; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2008). Early writing behaviors that are not conventional include, for example, strings of letters or letter-like forms and invented spelling that may follow the directional principle of English. Writing, too, includes meaning. Rowe (2008) has examined meaning in early writing as children interacted with adults in an early education and care program. Her work with young children (two-year-olds) highlights children's rich representation of meaning in their writing.

Young children acquire their beginning knowledge about written language through interactions with literacy objects and tools in their environment and especially through interactions with family members and other significant individuals. We suspect that much of this knowledge may be conveyed through joint and consistent exposure to writing activities, however brief, in addition to joint reading experiences. When children are just a little older than those in our research, they begin to align the association between print and speech and display more sophisticated written work (Cardoso-Martins, Corrêa, Lemos, & Napoleão, 2006; Ehri, 1998).

This study assumes that young children come to understand and appreciate writing when it is part of their social context. We highlight the strengths the families bring to the interactions. We chose to replicate the letter-writing task used in previous research (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; DeBaryshe et al, 1996) because young children are aware of writing as a means of communication (Dyson, 2002; McGee et al., 1986). Writing to someone familiar, whether fictitious or real, can be a pleasurable shared eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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experience. It is an activity that young children are likely to have some knowledge of, particularly because notes are regularly sent back and forth between home and preschool and letter-writing is a component of the curriculum used in most school systems' prekindergarten programs. Even with the more frequent use of email among teachers and parents, low-income children are as likely to have experience with paper and marker as with electronic forms, especially prekindergarten children. This task was chosen also because of the variety of topics about which children could write, the different recipients (ranging from fantasy characters to real people) to whom the children could address their letters, and the easy incorporation of drawing and text that can be a part of a friendly letter. We were interested also in how much the child verbalized ideas that were represented in the final written product. Last, a letter-writing task afforded us the opportunity to examine the extent to which the final product reflected emergent or conventional writing.

In our efforts to understand low-income families' strengths and the dynamics of their interactions, we addressed the following questions:

- 1. What sorts of information about writing do parents and children talk about and/or exchange with each other as they write a friendly letter?
- 2. How do the parent and child interact, who initiates ideas, what are the forms of those initiations, and what types of nonverbal exchanges take place?
- 3. How does their resulting letter look, regarding writing conventions and age-appropriate writing, and what specifically do the children contribute, regarding ideas and written content?

#### Method

#### **Participant Characteristics**

The sample in this study consisted of 59 prekindergarten children and their parents (or primary caretakers) who volunteered to participate. We asked that the person most responsible for the child's daily care participate in this writing activity, resulting in mothers, fathers, and other caretakers (primarily grandparents) as children's writing partners. For ease of discussion, we will henceforth refer to all the adult writing partners as "parents." In Table 1 we present characteristics of parents and children who volunteered for this study.

Table 1 Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Percentage
Primary Caretakers (Parents)	
Gender	
Female	95%
Male	5%
Ethnic Group	
African American	96%
European American	4%
Children	
Gender	
Female	36%
Male	66%
Ethnic Group	
African American	96%
European American	4%

The prekindergarten program was situated in a major urban public school system in the southeast, and served primarily 4-year-old children with a few entering as older 3-year-old children and some as exiting 5-year-old children. Low socioeconomic status was the primary factor used by the school system to determine eligibility for the program. No children with known disabilities participated in the study. The sample was from an archival data set established by the authors, selection of sample based on completeness of measures of interest in this study.

#### **Procedures**

The observations of parents and children took place in a room at the child's school. Many researchers have noted that writing interactions between parents and children in the home are often fleeting and hard to capture (Bissex, 1980; Taylor, 1983). The more controlled school setting afforded the opportunity for extended intentional writing interaction (Burns & Casbergue, 1992), although concerns regarding impact of school culture and expectations exist.

Parents and children sat at a table where writing materials for the activity were located, including eight thick and eight thin primary color markers and several pieces of unlined white letter-size paper. We set up a video camera to record the interaction, to which both parent and child paid little attention even though they were aware of it.

We asked parents (before their children entered the session) to engage in a writing activity during which, together with their children, they were to write a letter to someone. Consistent with prior studies (<u>Burns & Casbergue, 1992</u>; <u>DeBaryshe et al, 1996</u>), we instructed the participants to write a letter to someone whom they or their child could choose, and told them that they could write what their child told them or their eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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child could do the writing. We informed parents that others had written to relatives, friends, or make-believe characters and that letters have included drawings, pretend letters, and writing.

The activity lasted 10 minutes, the time frame based on prior research (<u>Burns & Casbergue</u>, 1992; <u>DeBaryshe et al</u>, 1996). Ten minutes represents a relatively long period for a sustained writing activity with a preschool-age child. We encouraged caregivers to try and draw the child back in, if he or she lost interest, but not to force the child to participate. The average duration of the session's focus on literacy was eight minutes.

#### Measures

Our primary source of data for this study was the video recordings of the parent-child writing activity. We transcribed all video recordings and examined interactions while viewing video recordings, transcripts, and the children's writing samples. We developed a coding scheme for the parent-child writing activity that would address our questions regarding (a) the content of the pairs' discussions in terms of the writing, or literacy, focus; (b) how the pair interacted, thus the verbal and nonverbal exchanges between them; and (c) what the writing samples indicate of the child's input, in terms of both ideas and written work. The coding scheme and the reliability measured can be found in the appendix.

#### Results

Our analyses are descriptive accounts of the literacy foci of parent and child discussions, the nature of the interactions of the children and parents, examination of patterns of interactions within those with different literacy foci, and the characteristics of eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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the children's writing samples. We begin with excerpts from two pairs because they illustrate the range of types of interactions in our sample. We follow those examples with detailed analysis of all pairs considered as a whole data set.

#### **Example Parent-Child Interactions and Written Samples**

We provide two pairs that exemplify our sample. The transcripts are verbatim, preserving the authenticity of the interaction due to the nature of families' conversational familiarity. One has a great deal of the child's ideas included in what became the final written product, which is characterized by more emergent than conventional writing. The second interaction is more parent-directed, and resulted in the child's writing that was more conventional.

In the first example the child and parent spent most of the time talking almost exclusively about the message in the writing. In addition, this child demonstrated a keen sense of the conceptual meaning of writing, including ongoing awareness of his audience and overt statements of his intentions to communicate with his sick friend. The finished writing sample is emergent in nature, but has some conventional aspects. For example, his use of many non-phonemic letter strings is an emergent form of writing, yet his use of actual letters rather than made-up symbols or scribbles and his use of left to right directionality reflect some awareness of convention. Following is an example of the dialogue:

Parent (P) — What we gonna do today is, we gonna write a letter, um to someone, um to a friend. Uh, who you want to write to?

Child (C) — I write it. I wanna write it to Ryan \_\_\_\_\_ [last name was included with first name in all instances where first name was mentioned]

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P — To who?
C — Ryan
P — Ryan? Ok. What you gonna write to Ryan?
C — I'm gonna draw him happy face.
P — A happy face?
C — I'm gonna make him feel happy.
P — Make him happy? Is he sad?
$\mathrm{C}-\mathrm{No}.$ He's been lying on the floor all day so I'm making him. And I am, write
the words a different color, different color is blue. I know he's gonna know who
write this letter for him. Smiley face. And Dear. Ryan I hope you feel
better. (Stops and looks at parent)
P — Ok, go ahead.
C — You my friend, Ryan There's Ryan
P — What you want to tell Ryan?
C — You been a nice friend to me. And I a nice friend to you. Ryan
remember, I miss you. Dear Ryan

In this interaction, the parent asked open-ended questions inviting the child to select the audience, content, and form of the letter. The child told what he wanted to write in the letter; he initiated discussion. When the child responded to his parent's initiations he typically elaborated on his own response. The first page of the writing sample is presented in <a href="Figure 1">Figure 1</a>. As the discussion proceeded beyond that portion of the transcript provided above, he initiated discussion of how to form letters and how to spell his friend's as well as his own name, although the letters the child refers to are not

necessarily the ones he actually wrote. As compared to many other children, this child's utterances were quite long. The writing sample is rich in meaning, and is mostly emergent in nature.



Figure 1: First Writing Sample

In the second example the pair produced a conventional-looking letter product characterized by conventional mark-making, correct use of directional principles, and conventional word-making or spelling (Figure 2). A primary caretaker other than the parent completed the activity with the child. Recall we asked that the person most responsible for the child's daily care participate in this activity. In this exchange the child did not verbally initiate and contributed little meaning to the writing, or few ideas to

the message. The child wrote on her own paper while the a primary caretaker either observed, wrote on the child's paper, or guided the child's hand while writing. A sample of the dialogue follows:

Primary Caretaker (PC) — Who do you wanna write to?

Child (C) — Mom.

PC — You want to write to your mommy?

C — (nods yes)

PC — Ok. Which one do you want write with? Which one do you want to use? (referring to markers from which child may choose.) Ok. Write here ... To mommy. "T" "T" write here "T." Ok. You wanna write your name first?

C — Yeah.

PC — Put your name up at the top. Ok. "R" Make the "R."

C — What "R"? What's a "R"?

PC — "R". Like this is an "R". See? Yeah, like that and you gotta make a little ... there ... ok. Then you gotta make your "I."

C — Gonna make a stick.

PC — "I" You know how. "I" right here. A little stick with a little ...

C — A little stick

PC — Dot on top. Like this one. Ok, a little dot on top. Now write the "S". (The remainder of the interaction continues in this manner with the primary caretaker deciding on content and dictating it letter by letter to the child.)

This primary caretaker began with an open-ended question that allowed the child to decide the audience for her letter. However, she soon began to direct the child as to eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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how to write the letter. The child made one verbal initiation and the rest of her utterances were brief verbal responses to the adult. The focus of the literacy talk was much about letter formation and spelling than it was about meaning or broad conceptual information about writing in general. The resulting writing sample is fairly conventional looking.

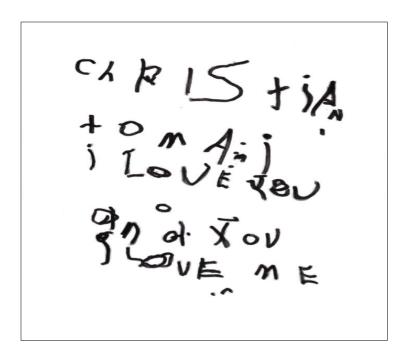


Figure 2: Second Writing Sample

While these two pairs illustrate the very different approaches to the task taken by parents and children, we want to look beyond these examples to examine how the group as a whole approached the task. What follows is more detailed analysis of the literacy focus of discussion between parents and children, the nature of the parent-child interactions, the dynamics of interactions and literacy focus, and the nature of children's writing.

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#### **Literacy Focus of Discussion**

As children and parents wrote the letter together their discussions took many forms. Foci included description of what was being written, conventions of the writing system itself (including how to form letters, directionality, spelling, and use of space on a page), and conceptual meaning of writing (what it means to be a writer, purposes for writing, awareness of audience, or impact of the writing on the recipient). We do not include in our results other non-literacy discussion that occurred, for example talk that was off-task.

Description of what was being written accounted for an average of 6.11 minutes (SD=1.76) ranging from 2.38 to 9.25 minutes. Talk centered on the conventions of writing averaged 0.64 minutes (SD=0.97), ranging from 0 to 4.40 minutes, while talk about spelling accounted for an average of 0.62 minutes (SD=0.87), ranging from 0 to 3.83 minutes. Discussion related to the conceptual meaning of writing was much less frequent, accounting for an average of only 0.03 minutes (SD=0.06), ranging from 0 to .35 minutes.

Most of the discussion focused on verbal descriptions of what the child or parent was putting on paper regardless of the form that the writing took (i.e., drawing, nonphonemic letter strings, letter-like forms, scribbling, or conventional writing). When the pair's focus moved to an emphasis on letter identification/formation or spelling, we categorized it as *conventions of writing or spelling* respectively. On the average these later two categories of discussion lasted a short time. Even shorter was discussion on the conceptual meaning of writing. Note the large variability between pairs in literacy discussion as evident in the high standard deviations and ranges, especially in the later eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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three literacy discussion foci. Nonetheless, this analysis illustrates the wide variety of types of literacy information parents and preschool children were able to share during this brief joint writing experience.

#### **Parent and Child Interactions**

In addition to analysis of the literacy focus of the interaction, we were also interested in the nature of the interactions themselves. Parent-child interactions are described across three subcategories: (a) initiations and responses, (b) child verbal input, and (c) nonverbal exchanges. These categories offer insight into parents' encouragement for their preschoolers' language and conceptual development, as well as children's own tendencies to assert themselves as knowledgeable participants in the writing task.

**Initiations and responses.** We counted initiations of parents and children. These frequencies are presented in Table 2. The amount of parent initiations was 66.77, on average, ranging from 24 to 130, with the majority directive instruction. Children, on average, initiated 37.03 times with a range from 7 to 88.

Table 2 Frequency of Parent and Child Initiations

Initiations	Mean (SD)	Range
Total Parent Initiation	66.77 (3.33)	24 - 130
Parent Directive Instruction	47.39 (19.39)	14 – 102
Parent Open-Ended Questions	19 69 (11 60)	1 – 51
Parent Limited-Choice	18.68 (11.60)	1-51
Questions	1.51 (4.34)	0 – 32
Child Initiation	37.03 (19.93)	7 – 88

The frequency of parent and child responses was also counted. Both parents and children were responsive to each other's initiations (see Table 3).

Table 3 Frequency of Parent and Child Responses

Responses	Mean (SD)	Range
Parent Response	44.47 (21.82)	4 – 86
Child Response	35.22 (17.68)	2 – 81

When comparing parents' and children's initiations and responses, recall that, on average, parents initiated (67.58, on average ranging from 0 to 185) more than responded (44.47, ranging from 4 to 86) while children initiated (37.03, ranging from 7 to 88) and responded (35.22, ranging from 2 to 81) almost equivalently. Children's verbal input into the pairs' exchanges, on average, was 249.06 words (SD = 120.27, ranging from 55 to 520 words) within the entire time frame of their interaction.

Nonverbal interactions. We time-sampled (each minute) instances of nonverbal interaction and these are presented in Table 4. These non-verbal interactions occurred simultaneously with the verbal interactions previously discussed. Parents observing children and children observing parents, as well as children writing on their own paper, account for most of the nonverbal interaction. Parents spent less time writing on their own paper (typically to demonstrate how to form a letter or spell a word at the request of the child) and writing hand-over-hand with the child on the child's paper. Both parents and children selected materials for the activity. Most infrequently, parents wrote

independently on children's papers.

Table 4 Number of Non-Verbal Interactions

Type of Non-Verbal Interaction	Mean (SD)	Range
Parent observes child	21.43 (6.30)	9 – 30
Child observes parent	19.41 (6.45)	4 – 28
Child writes alone on own paper	11.87 (7.09)	0 – 26
Parent writes alone on own paper	5.60 (6.54)	0 – 26
Hand-over-hand writing	4.95 (6.30)	0 – 19
Child selects materials	2.45 (2.60)	0 – 11
Parent selects materials	2.09 (1.63)	0 – 7
Parent writes on child's work	1.62 (3.07)	0 – 16

#### **Dynamics of Interactions and Literacy Talk**

Because an earlier study (Burns & Casbergue, 1992) suggested a relationship between the specific dynamics of parent and child interactions, and the amount of time focused on discussing conventional aspects of writing versus the conceptual meaning of writing, we examined these dynamics in light of the literacy foci. For this analysis, we selected pairs with the highest durations of each of the literacy focus categories. This analysis included the top 25% of pairs in each of the following categories: (a) describing the content of the letter they wrote to someone, (b) conventions of writing (including letter formation), (c) spelling, and (d) conceptual meaning of writing. There were 15 pairs in each category, overall N = 45, as some pairs were ranked in the top 25% in more than eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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one category. These descriptions highlight the richness and variability of parentchild exchanges. These data are depicted in Figures 3 through 6. Several patterns of interest emerged.

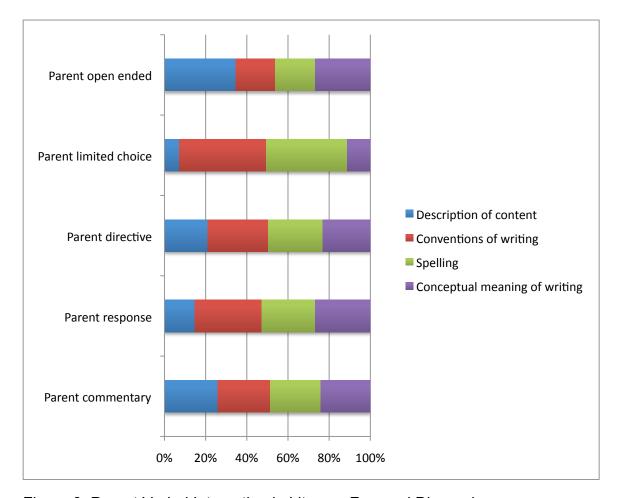


Figure 3: Parent Verbal Interaction in Literacy Focused Discussions

As seen in Figure 3 parents' directives were fairly evenly distributed across types of literacy discussion. Parent's limited choice questions however were most often used when addressing conventional aspects of writing and spelling. In contrast, parents' open-ended questions were most often associated with discussion focused on describing either the content of what they were writing or the conceptual meaning of writing. Parent responses were fairly evenly eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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distributed across types of literacy discussion with the exception of discussions focused on descriptions of content.

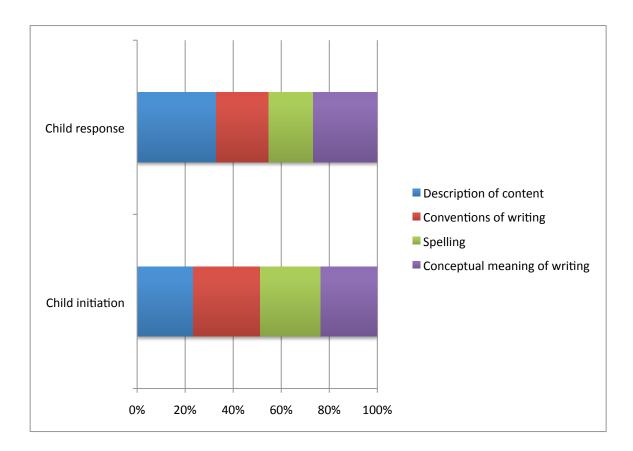


Figure 4: Child Verbal Interaction in Literacy Focused Discussions

As seen in Figure 4 children's initiations were fairly evenly distributed across types of literacy discussion. Children's responses focused more describing either the content of what they were writing or the conceptual meaning of writing.

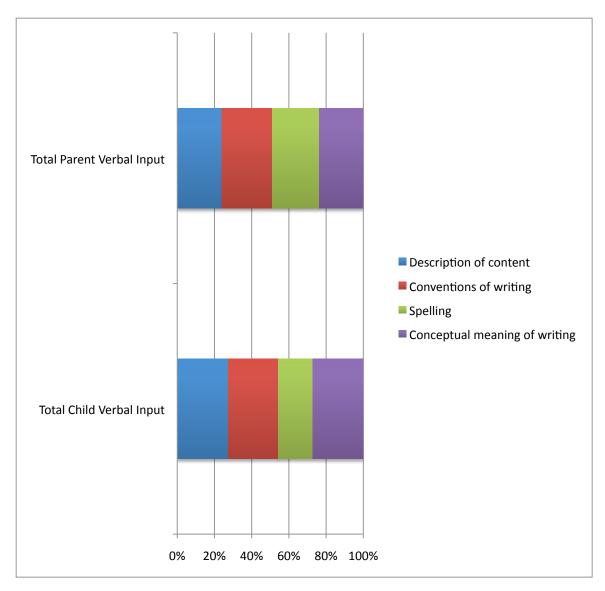


Figure 5: Total Parent and Child Verbal Input in Literacy Focused Discussions

Parent verbal input was fairly evenly distributed across discussions. Children, however, had more verbal input when discussions focused on the content of the letter, conventions of writing, and the conceptual meaning of writing; and the least verbal input when discussions were about spelling. Nonverbal patterns are depicted in Figure 6.

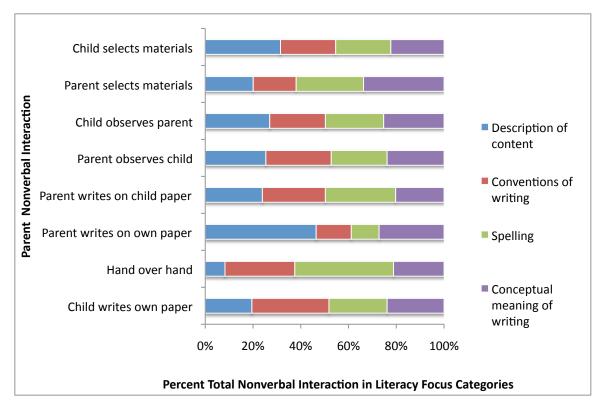


Figure 6: Parent-Child Nonverbal Interaction in Literacy Focused Discussions

The literacy discussion had different foci depending on whether the child or parent selected materials while doing the writing activity, whether they were observing each other or the parent or child was writing on each of their own papers, or whether the parent was writing on the child's paper or guiding the child's hand (writing hand over hand). Instances of children observing parents or parents observing children were fairly evenly distributed across literacy discussion. Parent and child writing actions, whether writing on their own paper and whether the parent held the child's hand while the child wrote were marked by differences in literacy discussion foci. When parents were writing on the child's paper the focus seemed fairly evenly distributed across literacy discussion foci. When parents were writing on their own paper the literacy discussion focus eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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was on describing either the content of what they were writing or the conceptual meaning of writing. When parents were putting their hand over the child's hand while the child wrote, the literacy focus was on conventions of writing and spelling. When the child was writing on her or his own paper the focus was more on discussing the conventions of writing, though other discussions on spelling, content, and the conceptual meaning of writing were present as well.

#### Children's Writing

Recall that the representations of the message in the writing sample could take many forms, including alphabetic letters, pictures, symbols or scribbling, and so on. Sixty-four percent of the children initiated ideas that were included in the message. On the average there were 3 such unique ideas (SD = 3.5) per pair. Twenty-seven percent of children contributed more than 5 unique ideas, 10% of children contributed 4 or 5, 15% of children contributed 2 or 3, 15% of children contributed 1, and 36% of children contributed no ideas.

The Emergent writing (EW) scales used in past studies were employed to measure the forms of children's writing (see Appendix). Fourteen percent of children's writing samples included drawing and scribbling only; otherwise, 15% included some letters or non-phonemic letter strings, 24% included some words (distinguished from letter strings by phonemic or conventional spelling), 8% included word groups, and 20% included at least one sentence, with an additional 17% that included more than one sentence.

To describe children's contributions related to the <u>message</u> and to the writing (using EW) we examined the co-occurrences of the two. Children's contribution of eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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ideas to the message was fairly evenly distributed across different categories of EW with one exception, those with very high levels (> 5) of the child's ideas contributed to the message. In this case, the EW scores tended to reflect more emergent, less conventional, writing.

Note that many of the "words" and "word phrases" used include previously memorized words and phrases, such as a child's name or a phrase such as "I love you." Also, recall that this is a shared writing task with parents. Across emergent writing categories there is the possibility that parents took an active role in guiding the child's writing, such as using more conventional text as when they wrote hand-over-hand with their child.

#### **Discussion**

In the present study, the task of writing a letter elicited a natural exchange in a context in which the parents and children seemed quite comfortable. We found rich and varied discussions between these parents and children and the dynamics of interactions were multifaceted. As children and parents wrote the letter together their discussion focused on describing what was being written, conventions of the writing system itself, and what it means to be a writer (conceptual meaning of writing). Nearly two-thirds of the friendly letters that were produced included writing that reflected meaning that the children chose to represent in their letter, marked by what Rowe (2008) reported as young children striving to communicate and express themselves in their writing and enlisting adults in that endeavor. Discussions of conventions of writing (e.g., letter formation, spelling) afforded less opportunity for exploration on the part of the child, but served to provide practice with conventional forms of writing and intentional support for eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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alphabet letter learning, described by the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) as an important skill for later literacy development. Focus on the conceptual meaning of writing (e.g., broad statements about the nature of writing and how it works, such as its purposes, its distinctions from oral language, the notion of authorship, and audience awareness)accounted for the least amount of time in these exchanges. Examples of audience awareness include a parent telling a child, "If you sign your name at the end, Daddy will know who sent him the letter." "Writing a letter to Daddy can let him know how much you love him." These types of interactions mirror those recognized by many researchers as most supportive of children's cognitive and language development (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008).

The variety in the pairs' discussions with the dynamics of the interactions each point to the strengths that families bring to the child's knowledge of writing before formal schooling (Manz, Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, & Ginsburg-Block, 2010; National Institute for Literacy, 2008; Tolchinsky, 2003). School personnel, including both teachers and administrators, must attribute much of the children's skills and skill development to families as children begin formal schooling, and beyond (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009).

Our findings indicate families from low-income backgrounds support their child's writing in ways that produce emergent as well as more adult-assisted, conventional writing through shared writing activities. Families in our study resemble families' strengths and support noted in shared activities in other studies of writing, reading, and talking (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Cummins, 2004; DeBaryshe et al, 1996; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-

Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986). Our findings support the view that low-income families do have "funds of knowledge" that can be tapped as children enter school settings.

Families provide rich, early writing support, which is vital to children's success in school. Families' use of varied scaffolding strategies should be acknowledged as teachers provide culturally sensitive support for young children in prekindergarten. This acknowledgement can ultimately impact the school's success in the community.

#### Limitations

This is an exploratory study and causal inferences cannot be made. In addition, we do not know the expectations of the children or the adults who participated, nor do we know how those expectations may have affected their interactions and writing samples. It is likely that different children have varying perspectives regarding their own and adults' roles in writing. Some may expect to write using emergent forms to express their own ideas, whereas others may believe that production of conventional letters and words is of ultimate importance. Further, given that parents volunteered for this study they might be different in important ways from the population of study. Lastly, as these are archival data, new and varied forms of family centered literacy, such as texting with cell phones and computer oriented writing/gaming opportunities may expand the many and varied ways families support writing in their young children.

#### Conclusion

Families' support for their children's education is underestimated as a resource in low-income neighborhoods and schools. Our study supports the need to value family educational practices and acknowledge the importance of children's cultural

background. The prior knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and the knowledge and strengths the children and parents come to school ready to share (Delpit, 1995, 2002; Heath, 1983; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009), further strengthen the children's (and subsequently the school's) success. Families are able, with their strengths, to support their children's literacy development in the area of early writing.

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#### **Appendix**

#### **Literacy Focus**

We coded the parent and child's dialog for the types of information about writing that was discussed. Codes were based on the work of <u>Teale and Sulzby (1986)</u> and definitions of codes are available in <u>Burns & Casbergue (1992)</u>. The four mutually exclusive codes were description of content, conventions of writing, spelling, and conceptual meaning of writing. We established reliability initially with two observers

who each independently coded the videos from five parent-child pairs. We accounted for observer drift by having both observers independently code and then compare ratings for an additional set of five videos after coding a set of 10 video segments each independently. We continued this procedure until all videos were coded. In order to assess agreement between observers we ran a correlation for these measures. The mean of the correlations for the *literacy focus* categories was 0.93, with a range from 0.82 to 1.00. We chose Pearson product moment correlations, a common reliability measure, and are aware that in doing so we did not demonstrate the continuous turn-by-turn or minute-by-minute reliability that Cohen's Kappa would have provided. Our results demonstrate high reliability (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

#### Verbal and Nonverbal Interaction

We collected information on verbal and nonverbal behavior. We were interested in types of initiations and responses between parents and children during this shared literacy task and the types of strategies parents use to guide their children on this task. These codes were parent directive instruction, parent open-ended questions, parent limited-choice questions, child initiation, child oral fluency, parent response, child response, parent observes child, child observes parent, child writes alone on own paper, parent writes alone on own paper, parent writes on child's work, hand-over-hand writing, child selects materials and parent selects materials. We independently coded the occurrence of each behavior every 10 seconds, using a time-sampling procedure, in each parent and child verbal and nonverbal category. We established and assessed reliability in the same manner as used for literacy focus. Mean reliability (Pearson product moment correlations) for the verbal interaction categories was 0.94, with a

range from 0.73 to 0.98.

#### Children's Contribution to the Final Written Product

We focused on two dimensions of the children's written contributions (writing and drawing) to the final written product: meaning and emergent writing. When looking for meaning, we assessed the amount of written content the child produced and to which the child verbally ascribed meaning. With emergent writing we scored the child generated written work in terms of how closely it approximated conventional writing in terms of form and spelling. Below are details about the dimensions and the coding used.

Meaning. When the child made marks (either writing or drawing) and at the same time said their idea we gave a score of 1 for each unique bit of meaning.

Agreement was established on this measure and was 100%. This code enabled us to capture the extent to which a focus on meaning characterized the shared literacy interaction. While much of the research on emergent writing focuses on children's developing understanding of the use of print, the development of composition ability begins as children connect writing to meaning they wish to convey (Schickedanz & Casberque, 2008). Children must develop the "sign concept" — awareness that all printed messages carry meaning (Clay, 1993). Thus, the extent to which children showed awareness of meaning provided important insight into their understanding of writing.

**Emergent Writing**. When the child made marks (either writing or drawing) we coded them for mark making ranging from scribbles to conventional letters and including

drawings (<u>Clay, 1975, 1993</u>; <u>Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2008</u>). These writing categories included:

Drawing/scribbling only

Letters and non-phonemic letter strings

**Words**. Any recognizable words (can include phonemic spelling)

**Word groups**. Any 2 word phrases (can include phonemic spelling)

**Sentence** (can include phonemic spelling)

**More than 1 sentence**. Includes punctuation (can include phonemic spelling)

These categories were well established in the early literacy field. See for example the <u>Test of Early Written Language</u> (3rd ed.; <u>Hresko, Herron, Peak, & Hicks,</u> 2012) that has acceptable internal consistency, test-retest, and interscorer reliabilities.



**M. Susan Burns** is a member of the Early Childhood Education faculty at George Mason University. Her research centers on the development and learning of young children (birth through Grade 3). Her work includes all children: those with diverse abilities (children with disabilities), those living in poverty, and those from multi-lingual and multi-cultural backgrounds. Of particular interest are young children's approaches to learning, cognition, and language. Her recent text, *Preschool education in today's world: Teaching children with diverse backgrounds and abilities*, integrates her research and scholarship with

practice in early childhood education. She can be reached at: mburns2@qmu.edu.



Angela Love is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching and Program Coordinator of Early Childhood Education at Auburn University. Her research focuses on teaching and learning in the early years, particularly with low-income children. Among her research interests are adult/child interaction during literacy events with young prekindergarten and kindergarten learners; use of the arts and aesthetic education in early oral language and literacy learning, in developing critical thinking, and in teacher education and pedagogical practices; and teachers' beliefs regarding culturally-responsive teaching. Angela can be reached at: <a href="mailto:angela.love@auburn.edu">angela.love@auburn.edu</a>



Martha Jane Buell is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware, where she is a member of the Early Childhood Education faculty. Her research centers on improving early care and education programs in an effort to support positive outcomes for all children especially those with diverse abilities (children with disabilities), those living in poverty, and those from multi-lingual and multi-cultural backgrounds. Of particular interest are ways the adults in their lives can support young children's learning, cognition, and language. Currently Martha is the director of the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC).

Located at the University of Delaware, DIEEC provides quality assured professional development and the professional registry for the state's early care and education workforce as well as administering the state's Quality Rating and improvement system, Delaware Stars www.dieec.udel.edu. Contact Martha Jane at: mjbuell@UDel.Edu



Renée Casbergue is Interim Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research at Louisiana State University where she holds the Vira Franklin and James R. Eagle Professorship in the College of Human Sciences and Education. Her research interests focus on early literacy, with an emphasis on: 1) children's writing development as supported at home and in early childhood educational settings, and 2) the influence of professional development on preschool teachers' ability to impact children's early language and literacy development. She is director of an Early Reading First project funded by the U. S. Department of Education to support the development of centers of early literacy excellence in preschool classrooms serving high poverty families in New Orleans. Correspond with Renée at: rcasberg@lsu.edu

Deadline for next issue of the

eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility is May 1, 2013;

publication September 2013. Submit electronically, attaching Word

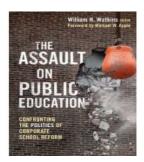
file to:

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell @ sdowell@lsu.edu

For more information about Literacy and Social Responsibility SIG of IRA, visit our website @ <a href="http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/">http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/</a>

#### **BOOK REVIEW**

The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform
by William H. Watkins



New York: Teachers College Press., 208 pp., ISBN 9780807752548 (paper). \$33.02 Reviewed by **Audra Y. Wright**, Graduate Student, Florida International University, USA

This book is an up-to-date resource on current issues affecting public education. A global effort is converging to diminish public education, springing from within the corporate world. This book would be beneficial to education majors, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Watkins offers a blueprint on what is occurring through education "reform" to aggressively privatize public education.

Watkins addresses the following questions: How is America changing? Why is America Changing? Who is making these changes? How will public education be impacted?

This book was written to provide a comprehensive overview on what is happening behind the scenes in public education. Funding is limited to public education giving corporations access to invest and change educational policies. This is important to understand as corporations and organizations are writing policies for schools to meet criteria without adequate resources, weakening the structure of universal education. The corporations and organizations that donate billions of dollars to education have a eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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strong influence on how the system is operated.

In his book, Watkins provides a thorough explanation of venture philanthropy and the underlying intensions to push privatization and deregulation (Harvey, 2005) by promoting charter schools. Many charter schools are corporate run franchises, achieving education through a business perspective. Schools are competing for monies donated to survive the transition taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Educational institutions may achieve the same goal successfully if competition was not the emphasis.

To set this agenda in motion, gentrification has to take place in order to lay the ground work for business to be profitable. Money is the bottom line in this plan to infiltrate public education and diminish it. Families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, generally Blacks and Latinos, are often displaced through this transition. The charter takeover renders these populations powerless by taking away their voice to stand up for education. Watkins examines how corporations analyze and purchase land located in low socioeconomic areas because of its hidden value. Corporations are allegedly inventing policies and procedures that are error proof; however there is no 'one size fits all approach'. The achievement gap will always exist, because students learn differently.

The book makes a point of how the focus in the media is on what is wrong with public education and the need to urgently reform it. The fact is, our current public education system can be resurrected and strengthened if the intention is to save it.

The book addresses multiple disciplinary policies, such as school uniforms, zero tolerance policies for expelling students, vast expansion of surveillance technologies, surprise searches, and police invasion. The assumption is these policies were adopted to keep schools safe (Robbins, 2008). Zero Tolerance has been a growing epidemic within our schools affecting primarily non White students. A high percentage of students enter the juvenile justice system through this policy at alarming rates. The author wants readers to understand how critical it is to invest in early intervention and implement strategies to protect students from this dilemma. The rules are different for students who reside in low socioeconomic areas. Moreover, the author asserts that if there is no improvement, those affected by the Zero Tolerance Policy will continue along a destructive path.

Watkins offers information on the initiative of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 to provide parents and students with test score information. There is a method to this phenomenon; specifically, test scores are analyzed and used to create "Schools of Choice" which result in privatization. Corporations and organizations are creating software, standardized tests, and scripts for schools to follow since it has been transmitted that public education has too many problems.

The author explains educational "reform" and policies by outlining terms used to execute the challenge of making the grade through competition and accountability. He discussed that a 'divide and conquer' method is often used. The word "reform" is misleading and generally translates into privatization. Make no mistake, public education is unraveling around us through a well-orchestrated strategic plan.

To reiterate, setting policies for public education without adequately funding them is venture philanthropy. Accountability is a component being used to keep schools under a stronghold to qualify for funding. NCLB was written in broad language without a clear understanding. As a result, businesses have taken the opportunity for profit.

To summarize, *The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform* is on the cutting edge of what is needed today to inform educators and the pubic about the efforts behind 'educational reform.' The illusion presented about public education has to be rectified. While corporations and organizations claim be the answer for educational problems, education professionals need to think strategically, like corporations, to divide and conquer. Children are not commodities and should be educated to become critical thinkers with access to a free an appropriate education to meet their needs.

This provocative and inspiring book could be used to further research and broaden the knowledge base of universities and colleges' understanding of what future educators may face. Educators can turn opposition into opportunity by finding ways to turn a positive light on public education.

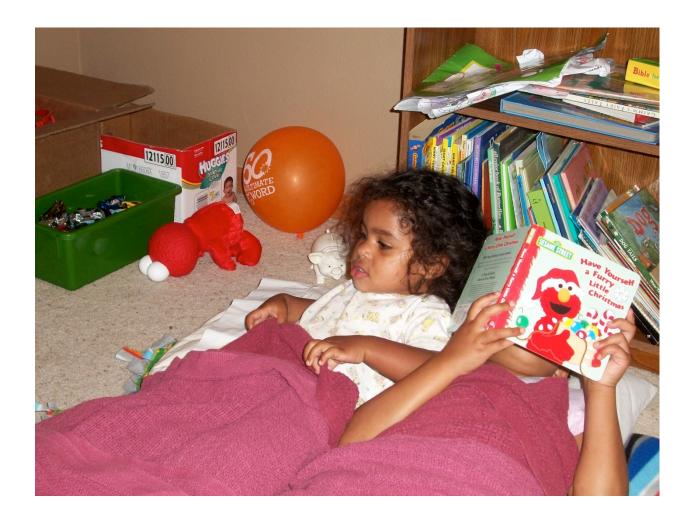
In my opinion, it should be recognized that business and politics do not have a place in education. The war on public education has been created to place doubt in the minds of parents by taking away the security that once existed in public education. Corporations have honed in on poverty, crime, and punishment to segregate certain groups from obtaining an adequate education. I agree with Watkins for the need to reveal the truth of what is taking place in public education and the hidden agenda of eJournal of Literacy and Social Responsibility

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corporations and organizations. This book can bring awareness to students, parents, and the community. Public education is not perfect; however it has the potential to offer every student access.

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### A little lagniappe



# Literacy and Social Responsibility, an electronic journal of the Literacy and Social Responsibility SIG of the IRA Submission Requirements

Independent, peer-reviewed ejournal providing an international forum for educators, authors, and researchers at all levels presenting practices promoting literacy development that reflects social responsibility among all learners. Manuscript focus should highlight quality programs advocating community engagement, service-learning, informed and participatory citizenship, social responsibility, activism, and stewardship reflecting an appreciation for all forms of diversity. As an electronic journal, interactive submissions with active links are particularly sought.

Full-length manuscripts should not exceed 5,000 words including all references, figures and appendices (approximately 20 pages). Submissions should be blinded 1) remove author names and affiliations from bylines, 2) replace references to your own and to coauthors' published work simply with "Author (year)" in text and in reference list [delete all publication titles], 3) mask any city, state, institutional affiliation, or links to personal websites. All submissions should conform to the style outlined in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Text should be presented double-spaced in 12 point font, in Microsoft Word; images should be submitted in jpg format. Authors of accepted manuscripts must also provide written permission releases for use of material from another source (including student's writing samples, text or figures excerpted from another published work, etc.). Releases must also be provided for use of any person's words, likeness or images.

Book reviews of professional literature and children's literature are typically 1,500 words and can focus on a single text or multiple, related texts. Reviews of children's literature should suggest themes relating literacy instruction to community engagement, service-learning, informed and participatory citizenship, social responsibility, activism, and stewardship, reflecting an appreciation for all forms of diversity.

Relevant poetry submissions will be considered.

Submit electronically, attaching file to:
Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell @ <a href="mailto:sdowell@lsu.edu">sdowell@lsu.edu</a>



For more information about Literacy and Social Responsibility SIG of IRA, visit our website @ http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/

#### **CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**



**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS** 

Literacy and Social Responsibility, a special interest group of the International Reading Association, is accepting submissions for their electronic journal, *Literacy and Social Responsibility*.

This independent, peer-reviewed ejournal provides an open forum presenting practices promoting literacy development that reflects social responsibility among all learners. Editor seeks manuscripts highlighting quality programs advocating community engagement, service-learning, informed and participatory citizenship, social responsibility, activism, and stewardship reflecting an appreciation for diversity. Book reviews of professional literature and children's literature and relevant poetry submissions will also be considered.

Deadline for next issue is May 1, 2013; publication September 2013.

Submit electronically, attaching Word file to:

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell @ sdowell@lsu.edu

For more information about Literacy and Social Responsibility SIG of IRA, visit our website @ <a href="http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/">http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/</a>

### The Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group Announces the:

### Literacy and Service Recognition Award

# CELEBRATE THE WORK OF OUR YOUTH ACTIVELY SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES. NOMINATE YOUR STUDENTS!!

<u>WHAT IS IT?</u> Given annually, this award will honor students for exemplary service that addresses the purpose of the Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group (L-SR SIG) of the International Reading Association (IRA). A presentation will be made at the L-SR SIG session of the IRA annual convention announcing and featuring the award winners.

<u>L-SR SIG Purpose</u>: To study, understand, and promote high-quality programs which foster community service, participatory citizenship, social responsibility, appreciation for diversity, environmental stewardship, and caring behavior that occurs within the development of literacy across the curriculum.

Service projects might relate to: Literacy & Respecting Diverse Cultures

Classroom Communities of Inquiry Literacy and Character Education & Service Learning Community-Based Writing Fostering Social, Emotional, & Academic Growth

Language Arts & the Natural World Literacy & Civic/Social/Environmental Engagement

HOW DO I APPLY FOR IT? Guidelines for submission for the Literacy and Service Recognition Award can be found at our website: <a href="http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/">http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/</a>
You will be asked to submit contact and program information, including as essay that describes the program and particularly the impact the nominee has made. Visit our website where you can learn about us, view the newsletter and e-journal, access resources, peruse our programs and consider ways to get involved.



\*\*\*\*Many thanks to Alma Flor
Ada and Isabel Campoy for
generously providing seed funds to
launch this award.

# Guidelines for submission for the Literacy and Service Recognition Award

#### WHAT IS IT?

This recognition is awarded annually to students for exemplary community service that relates to the purposes of the Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group (L-SR SIG) of the International Reading Association (IRA):

To study, understand, and promote high-quality programs which foster community service, participatory citizenship, social responsibility, appreciation for diversity, environmental stewardship, and caring behavior that occurs within the development of literacy across the curriculum.

Service projects might relate but are not limited to the following areas.

**Classroom Communities of Inquiry** 

Literacy, Character Education & Service Learning

Language Arts & the Natural World

Community-based Writing

Fostering Social, Emotional & Academic Growth

Literacy & Civic/Social/environmental Engagement

Literacy & Respecting Diverse Cultures

#### HOW WILL AWARD WINNERS BE RECOGNIZED?

- First prize winners receive an engraved plaque (name of award, name of project and student leader/s, year) and certificate of recognition; second and third place winners receive certificates of recognition.
- Award winning student leaders are recognized and invited to present their work (live or through video) at the L-SR SIG meeting at the annual convention of the International Reading Association and are included in the printed program.
- Information about the award and winning programs are available publicly on the L-SR SIG website <a href="http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/">http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/</a> and reported in our e-Journal.

#### WHO CAN SUBMIT FOR THE AWARD AND HOW?

A teacher/librarian (sponsor) may nominate individual students for the *Literacy and Service Recognition Award*. Submit a packet of application that includes the following (I) contact information and (II) project information:

#### I. Contact Information for

- 1. Sponsor/nominator (name, address, phone number, email address) (Note: Each sponsor may nominate only ONE project/program per year.)
- 2. Student leader/s (name/s, address/es, phone number/s, email address/es, name/s of school/s, age/s of student/s)
- 3. Parent/guardian (name, address, phone number, email address) for each student leader
- 4. Other **key** individuals involved in the program/project (name, address, phone number, email address, ages if college age or younger)
- 5. Name, address, phone number, and email address for: principal, superintendent, local newspaper, local radio station, local TV station

#### Guidelines for submission for the Literacy and Service Recognition Award continued

#### **II. Project information**

- 1. Name of project/program (please create a name if it did not have one previously)
- 2. A brief essay (written by the student leader/s, if possible) describing the project/program including numbers of students involved and individuals served and how, why and when the project/program got started. Tell how it relates to literacy and to an area of interest of our group (L-SR SIG). Tell the specific contributions the student leader/s made to the quality of the program.
- 3. Validating evidence of the extent and impact of the program how do you know a difference was made (e.g., testimonials, letters of support from partners, letters of commendation, newspaper articles about the project and/or student leader/s, website URL, if one exists, which provides information about the program and the results of the program). Include photographs or a short video of the "project in action." Please identify each person in the pictures and provide *Release Information* for each which includes: a statement that the photo may be used publicly (on our website, eJournal, etc.), with signatures for each individual (also include signatures for each guardian for those 18 years of age and younger).
- 4. Strongly recommended: A short video clip in digital format on a CD or DVD (maximum of 5 minutes) which involves the student leader/s and information about the project (such as the students describing the program and its impact on the community and themselves). Also provide *Release Information* (see #3) indicating permission to use the video on our website if selected for the award.
- 5. Also please indicate the willingness of the student leader/s with their sponsor/guardians to attend the annual IRA convention, if selected, to receive the award in person and to describe the program to the audience in a 5-minute presentation. The videotape or a *Skype* correspondence may serve in lieu of attendance.

LSR Awards will be presented at the SIG presentation at IRA in Chicago, IL.

Send all materials (via email and/or regular mail) to the Award Chair of the IRA Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group by <u>December 1, 2012</u> for the 2013 *Literacy and Service Recognition Award*. You will receive confirmation of receipt of materials via email. You will be notified about results of committee review by January 30, 2012. If you have questions, please contact the chair of awards via email.

Denise Stuart, LSR Award Chair <a href="mailto:dstuart@uakron.edu">dstuart@uakron.edu</a>
Zook 10, The University of Akron
Akron, OH 44325-4205