

Professional Voices/Classroom Portrait

MAKING REAL-WORLD ISSUES OUR BUSINESS: CRITICAL LITERACY IN A THIRD-GRADE CLASSROOM

Over the past year, Lee has been working to implement a critical literacy curriculum in her third-grade classroom, and Mitzi has been observing Lee's students as they negotiate this new terrain. We meet regularly to make sense of what's happening with individual students and the classroom curriculum using fieldnotes, student artifacts, and observations. This process has caused us to interrogate our assumptions about children's interests, student learning, and what is appropriate curriculum in a third-grade classroom.

While listening to *The Bobbin Girl* (McCully, 1996), a picture book, Lee's third-grade students heard about how one of the Lowell girls, a mill worker, had to leave her loom because she is coughing. Later in the book, another worker is hit by a moving spindle and is removed from the factory. At this point, students interrupted the reading:

MARK: This reminds me of *A Lion to Guard Us* (Bulla, 1989), when the kids had to work all the time.

BETH: And it's like *The Ballot Box Battle* (McCully, 1998), when the girls couldn't learn the same things as the boys!

JESSE: They don't even care that she's sick?

LEE: Does it remind you at all of *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1998)? Remember when we talked about the fact that slavery was a business and the plantation owners wanted to make as much money as they could?

The kids talk among themselves. It's time to go to lunch and the children are very disappointed at not being able to finish the book.

While observing many such lively discussions in this third-grade classroom, we are struck by the insightful interpretations, the powerful connections to other books, and the thoughtful ideas that these students share. Absent in this classroom is coaxing students to read and discuss books, basal-type comprehension checks, and the uninspired conversation that Villaume and Worden (1993) have observed in many literature discussions in whole language classrooms. What is happening in this classroom that has transformed third graders into serious interpreters of the books they're reading? How is it that they have become so interested in significant social and political issues?

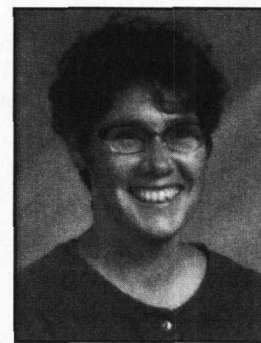
In this article, we reflect on the events that occurred during a six-month period in this suburban classroom. We document the transformation that took place in learning and teaching as students took part in a critical literacy curriculum. Through this journey, we examine the significant curricular changes that can occur when the "real world" is allowed to enter classroom discussions and events.

First Steps—Interrogating Curriculum

At the beginning of the school year, the school librarian recommended reading the book *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1998). With its striking illustrations and wrenching text, the book seemed to be too upsetting for third graders. Lee kept the book for months, too uncomfortable with its content to read it aloud. Then she read

Lee Heffernan

Third-grade teacher,
Childs Elementary
School,
Bloomington,
Indiana



Mitzi Lewison

Assistant professor,
Indiana University,
Bloomington



But as we struggle to keep our opinions to ourselves, we may be excluding important cultural issues from the curriculum.

Luke and Freebody's (1997) position that some kind of "fit" should exist between the delivery of literacy instruction and the "everyday beliefs and activities" of learners (p. 198). After reading these words, Lee sadly suspected that there might be little connection or crossover between her whole language curriculum and the lives and beliefs of her students.

Luke and Freebody call for a new model of reading education, one that:

... shifts our classroom focus to the particular texts, discourses, and practices to which students have access and to the different kinds of social activities and cultural action that instruction can shape, encourage and yield. To circle back to our claims about social epistemology, teaching and learning to read is about teaching and learning standpoints, cultural expectations, norms of social actions and consequences (p. 208).

These words pushed Lee to reassess why the book *Slave Ship to Freedom Road* made her so uncomfortable. She began thinking about her reluctance to teach "standpoints." As teachers, we are frequently discouraged from using our position of power to persuade kids to adhere to certain beliefs. But as we struggle to keep our opinions to ourselves, we may be excluding important cultural issues from the curriculum.

In the project we discuss here, students discussed a selection of social issues books from a bibliography entitled, "Supporting Critical Conversations in Classrooms" (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ocepka, & Vasquez, 2000). Social issues books are those that enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized. They make visible the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequities. These books show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road: A Nervous Beginning

Students reacted to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* in a disturbing, but fairly typical way at first. A few kids smiled at the pictures of slave bodies in the sea and they giggled nervously when they heard that sharks would follow the boats and eat the slaves who were thrown over if they were sick. Others tried to put a positive spin on the topic:

- JESSE: If a slave was sick, he might make others sick, so it's better if he's thrown overboard.
- ALEC: (looking at a picture of slaves waiting to be sold) They look like they're in pretty good shape to me.

In the past, we have noticed students taking similar cavalier stances when discussing characters with problems, those who live in poverty, or are homeless. Students tend to make comments like, "Well, if they stayed in school, this wouldn't have happened." Perhaps this is not a desire to blame the victim so much as a desire for all problems to have quick and easy solutions. Would using these social issues books have an impact on these unsympathetic stances toward those in circumstances unlike our own?

In the lunch line that day, Jesse and Charlotte talked about *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. Charlotte said, "I had tears in my eyes when you read that book." Jesse added, "Yeah, get another book!" When asked if the book might be too upsetting for third graders, Charlotte replied, "No, it's good to know about what happened."

The next day, the kids worked with partners and wrote responses to what surprised them about the book or what they wanted to remember. Sample responses include:

We were surprised that when the slaves were able to leave, they would not go because they had no place to go. Now that's surprising!

It surprised us that they were chained up on the slave ships and couldn't move.

We want to remember that they threw the slaves overboard if the slaves were sick.

These written comments were very different from students' initial discussion about the book. They focused on what had upset them and their responses did not contain the denial statements that had surfaced the day before. Despite our initial discomfort with the book, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* had a big impact on the class. Students referred back to this book many times during the semester. It became clear that students could discuss this powerful story without the roof caving in. Not only did they show no signs of being traumatized, but they displayed an amazing eagerness to talk about the book.

Whitewash: Beginning to Take a Critical Stance

The next book that students discussed was *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997), a picture book based on a series of true incidents. Helen-Angel, an African American preschooler, walks home from school with her brother, Mauricio, who isn't thrilled with this task. One day, a gang of white kids surrounds them, giving Mauricio a black eye and painting Helen-Angel's face white as they show her how to be a "true American" and "how to be white."

Books and other media on the topics of racism, gender, and class issues are often presented as "information" on a subject and are not used as beginning places for critical inquiry (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 199). With this in mind, *Whitewash* was chosen as a follow-up to *Slave Ship* to illus-

trate to students that racism is not a historical relic, something that was "fixed" long ago. This "it's no longer a problem" stance was evident in several students' responses to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, where the ill treatment of others was viewed as only an incident from the past.

The conversations around *Whitewash* made it clear that students had many questions about the book. They especially wanted to know why someone would do such a horrible thing to another person. Conversations focused on issues of citizenship. The kids made connections to an event in Bloomington, Indiana, that had happened several months earlier. Hate literature with racist and anti-Semitic comments had been distributed in many neighborhoods. An anti-hate speech rally took place, and many people in the town placed signs in their front yards that read "No Hate Speech." The class wrote a petition against hate speech and gathered the names from every student and adult in the building. They then posted their petition in the front hallway.

Because of this school-wide petition, issues of "hate speech" came up many times during the school year. Kids often adamantly pointed out, "That's hate speech!" if they heard insults or teasing. When they discussed *Whitewash*, the kids had many comments about the divisive power of language. Here is an excerpt from one such conversation:

- LEE: Many of you wrote this question on your response sheets, "Why did those people do that to her [Helen-Angel]?" Do you have any ideas about that now?
- ANN: They called them mud people.
- SEAN: They said, "Do you speak English?"
- LEE: Right. They also said that they were doing her a good deed—that now she could be American.

Despite our initial discomfort with the book, From Slave Ship to Freedom Road had a big impact on the class. Students referred back to this book many times during the semester.

At this point, they are beginning to realize that tough issues like racism and hate speech are legitimate topics for discussion in their third-grade classroom and that they have important things to say about them.

- HILARY: That's hate speech.
CONRAD: But she *is* American.
BLAINE: She's African American.
LEE: Right. So are Americans only white?
ALL: A chorus of "no."
LEE: Well, so why do you think they did this to her?
CHARLES: They're mean.
BRENT: They probably are stupid and don't know that people who aren't white are still American.

Although students are discussing serious topics here, they are not yet hitting issues of racism head-on in their conversations. At this point, they are beginning to realize that tough issues like racism and hate speech are legitimate topics for discussion in their third-grade classroom and that they have important things to say about them. As the semester progressed, students discussed many other books and some articles from the newspaper that focused on racism. The students were beginning to understand that racism and prejudice were alive and well in our world today.

Students wrote essays for the Bloomington Human Rights Commission annual essay contest. The essay topic was "Where Does Hate Come From?" The contest required that students examine how they could improve the atmosphere in their community. Rather than seeing hatred as "out there," they were to write about ways in which we all position ourselves against others. Kids wrote comments like, "We all have a little hate in us," and "I've spoken to people in a mean way before and I'm going to try not to do that anymore." It was certainly atypical for children to be willing to risk making negative statements about themselves. Reading social issues books as a regular part of the curriculum laid the groundwork for this type of reflective thinking. It became "okay" to admit that prejudice was part of our culture, that it had affected all of us, and we all had probably participated in it.

Ian's Walk: From the Personal to the Political

Lee's classroom is directly across the hall from a special education classroom. An autistic boy named Evan ran into the classroom each morning for many months, touching the computers and playing with the water fountain until one of the teachers in the special education room would come for him. One day his teacher asked if he could sit in the beanbag chairs in the morning and look at books.

After several months of short daily visits from Evan, he gradually became a member of the class and stayed for longer periods of time. The students' interactions with Evan varied, but all seemed to enjoy having him there. Because of the kids' interest in Evan, *Ian's Walk* (Lears, 1998) was read and discussed. *Ian's Walk* is a book about an autistic boy and his sisters. This book explores not only the range of emotions Ian's sister Julie feels as a sibling of an autistic brother, but also the ways in which Ian himself experiences and senses the world "differently." On the journey to a park, Ian wants to smell bricks, not flowers, and once there, he lies with his cheek on the concrete instead of feeding the ducks. The book captures not only Julie's positive feelings toward Ian, but also her frustration and embarrassment.

The kids made many connections with Evan as they listened to *Ian's Walk*. Rather than relating to the sister, many of them related to Ian. The foreword in the book makes it clear that a main purpose of the book is to explore the feelings of frustration that can come with having a disabled sibling. The kids had little to say about this issue. They instead wrote about Ian's feelings of frustration at not being allowed to do things his way. Michelle made a connection between Ian and Evan, "Evan loves to smell the chalkboard just like Ian liked to smell the bricks." When asked why she liked working with Evan so much, Michelle

answered, "Because he is really fun to work with and a real fun guy."

A series of conversations and literacy events focusing on disabilities followed the reading of *Ian's Walk*. The kids had many questions about disabilities and offered stories about their own disabilities, ranging from bow legs when they were young, to hernias, to one classmate's blood disease. It became clear to the class that almost everyone had something that made them different—that people are never exactly the same.

This conversational strand continued as the kids discussed a narrative written by a young boy with leukemia, "Anthony's Story" (in Fleitas, 1999). A few of the kids laughed at a part of the story where Anthony recalls some of the questions he endured at school, "Why is your face so fat?" and "Why don't you have hair?" Their reactions were reminiscent of their first conversations about *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. After the reading, the kids made sketches of the ideas that stood out for them in "Anthony's Story." They seemed to rush through the sketches, seemingly having little to say about the themes in this piece.

The next day, when asked to share their sketches with classmates, the kids were able to sustain these conversations for a surprising length of time. Their sketches, though quickly drawn, did appear to contain many important ideas about how difficult it is for all of us to deal with illness and differences at school. When the class came back together, their conversation was animated and emotional:

BRAD: Why did they ask Anthony those stupid questions?

ALEC: Well, did they even know he had leukemia?

DREW: I don't think they knew it. That's why they asked about it.

LEE: Do you think the teacher should have talked to the kids about Anthony's disease or should she have given Anthony a chance to talk about it?

ALL: (in shouting tones) Yes!

LEE: Do you think it's a teacher's job to tell her students about this kind of information?

JESSE: Yes. The teacher just didn't get involved. Maybe she thought it wasn't any of her business.

Soon after this conversation, the students listened to an editorial from the local paper about a bill in the state legislature that would provide funding for services for people with developmental disabilities. The editorial quoted a spokesperson for "The ARC," a national organization on mental retardation, saying that Indiana had "one of the poorest records of any state when it comes to serving people with mental retardation and related developmental disabilities." Indiana had been placed on a "Hall of Shame" list along with 12 other states. The kids were upset about this. "They don't have to put us down!" Jesse protested. Because of their connection with Evan, the kids felt very strongly about this issue. They wrote letters to their state senator.

Dear Senator,
I want you to please vote yes on this bill because we have a kid who comes to our class. His name is Evan and we want him to get services.
Kay

Dear Senator,
I support House Bill 1114. I want to get out of the Hall of Shame. We have a kid in our class. He is handicapped. I hope he gets the support he needs. Please help us.
R.J.

Dear Senator,
We support House bill 1114. We want to be on the Hall of Fame, not the Hall of Shame. Please, they need the money.
Eliot

In this set of conversations and events, we see these third graders making significant connections between books, personal narratives, news editorials, and their experiences with Evan. When they took the step of writing letters to their senator, the stu-

In this set of conversations and events, we see these third graders making significant connections between books, personal narratives, news editorials, and their experiences with Evan.

The students in Lee's classroom were allowed to be caring, involved people who help others, who speak out, who have some power over the issues that confuse and trouble them.

dents were using literacy in a powerful way—one that not only communicated their feelings about a significant issue, but one that used writing as a political tool to potentially make community changes.

In his description of critical literacy, Shannon (1995) writes about using literacy for liberation and activism with an emphasis on making students' lives and the lives of others more just, equal, and free (p. 88). Students in this classroom were certainly engaged in moving toward an emancipatory curriculum along with their teacher. Students and teacher together began to see how empowering it was to open up conversations about real-life issues in the classroom.

Reflections on Books and Beyond

Reading and discussing social issues books affected the classroom environment far beyond the regular reading time. Group meetings, for example, changed dramatically. Typically, prior to the project, students shared personal comments about their new glasses or weekend outings. After reading several of the social issues picture books, they began to share more stories from the news. At one meeting in particular, Brad reminded the class about our plan for organizing a bake sale for Posoltega, Nicaragua, Bloomington's sister city. Posoltega had been nearly wiped out by Hurricane Mitch, and the local paper had many articles about the catastrophic conditions there. Erica told us about an oil spill that had happened in the Middle East. She had made a connection to an article the class had read about the animals that were killed by the Exxon Valdez spill. Angie shared about a man who was interviewed on the TV news the night before. She said, "He has Down's Syndrome, and he's an artist. They showed some of his art. He made a really great wolf. But he did say that some people make fun of him."

At another group meeting, the kids talked about a new proposed development in town that had been the subject of several articles in the local paper. They talked about how they hoped they wouldn't develop this site because deer grazed there, and they liked watching them. Many decided to write letters to the newspaper expressing their hopes that the land would remain undeveloped. It was surprising to see the way group meetings frequently became places to discuss political and social, rather than personal, events. The literacy events in the classroom did appear to be filtering into "the everyday beliefs and activities" of students.

Perhaps the most important thing about bringing social issues books into the classroom is the enthusiasm the students have for these very different kinds of literacy events. Researcher Barbara Comber noted that: "When given the opportunity for this kind of work, students demonstrated great energy and commitment, . . . which left me as an observer with a great sense of optimism about the possibilities of working for social justice with students in school contexts" (1997, p. 26). The students in Lee's classroom were allowed to be caring, involved people who help others, who speak out, who have some power over the issues that confuse and trouble them. While teachers often fear that parents may object to students engaging in "controversial" issues, the parents of these children only made positive comments about the project. It was clear that many parents were actually discussing these topics at home with their kids, causing us to rethink assumptions about parental expectations.

We were able to learn so much from the children—to see what they could do when presented with challenging, real-world issues. Neither of us could have predicted their enthusiasm, their insightful connections between books and other texts, or their intellectual engagement in social

and political issues. The books and the children's responses to them interrupted many of our long-held assumptions about what third graders are capable of achieving and what is an appropriate curriculum for young children. When Jesse criticized the teacher in "Anthony's Story" for not getting involved in Anthony's school problems, she said, "Maybe she thinks it's none of her business." We are convinced that enacting a critical literacy/social justice curriculum in elementary classrooms is definitely "our business."

References

- Comber, B. (1997, April). *Pleasure, productivity, and power: Contradictory discourses of literacy*. Paper presented at the Australian Literacy Educators and Australian Association of Teachers of English combined national conference, Darwin.
- Harste, J. C., Breau, A., Leland, C., Lewison, M., Ocepka, A., & Vasquez, V. (2000). Supporting critical conversations. In K. M. Pierce (Ed.), *Adventuring with books* (4th Edition) (pp. 507-554). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). Shaping the social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies* (pp. 185-225). Cresshill, NJ: Hampton.
- Shannon, P. (1995). *Text, lies, and videotape*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Sumara, D., & Davis, B. (1999). Interrupting heteronormativity: Toward a queer curriculum theory. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29 (2), 191-208.
- Villaume, S., & Worden, T. (1993). Developing literate voices: The challenge of whole language. *Language Arts*, 70, 462-468.

Children's Books and Articles

- Browne, A. (1998). *Voices in the park*. New York: DK.
- Bulla, C. R. (1989). *A lion to guard us*. Illus. Michele Chessare. NY: HarperTrophy.
- Fleitas, J. (1999). Anthony's story in RX for sore thumbs. *Teaching Tolerance*, Spring Issue, 52-55.
- Lears, L. (1998). *Ian's walk: A story about autism*. Illus. Karen Ritz. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.
- Lester, J. (1998). *From slave ship to freedom road*. Illus. Rod Brown. New York: Dial.
- McCully, E. (1998). *The ballot box battle*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- McCully, E. (1996). *The bobbin girl*. New York: Dial.
- Shange, N. (1997). *Whitewash*. Illus. Michael Sporn. New York: Walker.

Conference on Computers and Writing

The Conference on Computers and Writing invites proposals for its seventeenth annual conference, May 17-20, 2001. Hosted by Ball State University, the conference features the theme "2001: A Cyber Odyssey." Drawing on Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's 1968 landmark film that investigates the arc of human evolution, "2001: A Cyber Odyssey" invites inquiry into such questions as: what technologies have

we adopted out of necessity, what are our current choices, which directions should we follow, and which pitfalls should we avoid? We solicit proposals for individual presentations, panels, roundtables, and hands-on workshops that extend and explore issues of technology and teaching. Please submit proposals via the conference Web site (www.bsu.edu/cw2001) by **October 17, 2000**.

BRIDGING THE THEME

In the previous article, Lee and Mitzi explored what happened when Lee began to act on her belief that critical literacy and social justice should be a cornerstone of the curriculum. The third graders in Lee's class developed more sophisticated thinking about the nature of difficult issues and an interest in weighing the value of alternative perspectives. In the next article, the students in Denice's classroom are also challenged to think critically, but in her classroom, the curriculum focuses specifically on the health of the environment.

Denice discovered that her own convictions about the importance of stewardship for the environment stood in stark contrast to the competitive, consumer-oriented values of the preadolescents in her urban classroom. Much like Vivian, who recognized that her children's learning was being shaped by the cultural norms communicated through the Power Rangers, Denice came to believe that she was working with children programmed to resist critical thinking and personal initiative. In her situation, Denice realized that written texts were not going to be enough to change the interactions and learning in her classroom. She had to introduce alternative perspectives via "lived-through" engagements and tolerate the students' complaining and resistance.

In their introduction to this issue about critical pedagogy, Jerry and Chris extol the importance of "enlarging the space of the possible." They describe a kind of research that changes the way things are. Denice has been involved in just this kind of teaching, and in between the lines of her story, readers will sense a bit of the anguish that comes with being an agent of change. Teaching that interrupts the status quo requires intellect, courage, and patience. It requires a teacher to be uncertain most of the time, to be different from other teachers, to learn from failed attempts, and to recognize and value the smallest increments of change—all despite a personal sense of urgency.