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## Power without honor is indeed a dangerous thing: Constructing critical literacy in elementary teacher education

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*“Power Without Honor Is Indeed A Dangerous Thing”:  
The Social Construction of Critical Literacy in Elementary Teacher  
Education*

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AMY FAVANO, KATHLEEN MAHIEU, DAN MCNEILL,  
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**Carolyn:** *I will want my learners to grasp that power without honor is indeed a dangerous thing.*

As they begin to spend time in local classrooms, prospective elementary teachers can discover that sometimes classroom teachers evade opportunities for developing the habits and strategies of critical literacy and of social consciousness among the children they teach. This puzzles at first, and the reconciliation of what they observe of everyday practice with what they learn and believe about socially responsible, critically active education begins. For some, the evasions have appeal, for they have not latched on happily to the prospect of becoming critical educators (Harste, Leland, Schmidt, Vasquez & Ociepka, 2004; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005). For others, though, the reconciliation does not lead down the smoothed path of apolitical, uncritical schooling. They resist, and stubbornly take the rockier road. They build, as best they can, a critical practice, and support critical literacy development for their students.

Elsewhere, my students and I have written about their construction of themselves in a professional community grounded in a commitment to critical pedagogy and social justice (Calderwood & D’Amico, 2008; Calderwood, Mazza, Ruel, Favano, Jean-Guilluame, McNeill & Stenerson, 2008). Their successful construction of this professional community required that they engage in the practices of their community of educators in authentic and meaningful ways. In order to practice critical pedagogy, they needed first to explore critical literacy as readers and as educators. In this paper, with the concurrence of Carolyn and her classmates, I share examples of how they took it upon themselves to elucidate, to encourage and exhort, to advise and model how to engage in critical literacy practices, how to reflect deeply and conscientiously upon their responsibilities as elementary teachers, and how to teach with passion and commitment.

This essay will draw substantially upon an electronic conversation that captures their thoughtful reflections and conversations, providing an authentic picture of the power of collective, collegial, critically reflective practice as it is constructed by women and men who are determined not to evade their responsibilities to educate rather than to merely school. We will glimpse their own critically literate engagements with text, and witness how they weave this experience into their understandings of critical literacy and critical literacy pedagogy. Nine teacher candidates, whose voices shaped the electronic conversation from which the evidence for this paper is drawn, share second authorship of this essay. Their passionate conversation itself is the heart of this paper.

In the spring of 2005, 14 elementary education teacher candidates and I, a middle-aged white female teacher educator, began our work together in the second of the linked duo of literacy courses they were required to take for their teaching certification. As is common in elementary teaching preparation, most of the candidates were white, female and middle-class, ranging in age from their early twenties to late fifties. Two were male, one white and one Afro-

Caribbean; one of the women was African American, another was a Korean national, and a third was Vietnamese American. One of the students in the class had extensive experience as a curriculum specialist.

The course requirements were ambitious. The candidates were expected to carry out fieldwork in third through sixth grade classrooms in local public elementary schools, designing, teaching and reflecting upon language arts and interdisciplinary lessons. We read novels. They designed differentiated reading guides and author studies. As the tasks were complex and new to the candidates, much of our class time was structured as workshop time, so that I could individualize my instruction and guidance, and so that the teacher candidates had multiple opportunities for consultation and collaboration with each other. By the second class meeting, I was demonstrating how to support student critical stance (through modeling of critical questions and comments about power, voice, inclusion and marginalization) partly in prelude to our literature circles the following week, but more pointedly as a foundation for the assigned reading guides task that would follow.

Before our third class meeting, a spontaneous email conversation, prompted in part by the conversation-limiting time constraints of our scheduled face to face meeting times, had begun among the class. Approximately 3 months and 300 postings later, it concluded. In April, as the e-conversation began winding down, I eliminated one of the minor course assignments still due, a reflection on fieldwork teaching, and increased the value of participation in my grading schema, in recognition that the richness of the e-conversation made the assignment redundant. During our final class meeting in early May, I asked the candidates in the course if they were willing to allow me to analyze the conversation and to co-author an article or two for possible publication. With their assent, analysis began, and three co-authored manuscripts were crafted for submission to journals (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2008; Calderwood et al., 2008).

### *Modes of Inquiry and Data Sources*

As I reflected upon the electronic conversation, I was guided by the frameworks of reflective practice and self-study in teacher education (Feldman, 2003; Fendler, 2003; Loughran, 2007), discourse analysis (Han & Hill, 2006; Luke, 1995/96; Swan & Shih, 2005), ethnographic research and grounded theory (Ellen, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and research on online conversation and online journals (Garrison, 2007; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer & O'Connor, 2003; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006). All illuminated my examination of the structure, content and purposes of the conversation.

As a preliminary analytic move, after putting all the postings in chronological order by the time posted in their headers, I sorted the approximately 300 entries roughly into 4 topical categories. One category contained prosaic queries and negotiations about course requirements, a second contained the more "professorial" postings, a third was formed by the teacher candidates' engagement as readers of the 3 novels under discussion, and the fourth was comprised of their discussion of critical literacy and its role in pedagogy. As one can see from the postings included later in this paper, these were not cleanly delineated categories, for many of the postings could appear in more than one category. Analysis of the structure of the conversation as a whole made its rules of engagement visible, which prompted the recognition of several processes in play, such as the social construction of professional community (Calderwood et al., 2008), and the negotiation of authority and authenticity (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2008). In this paper, I demonstrate the teacher candidates' construction of the manifest function of the conversation, the exploration of the role that critical literacy could play in their development as teachers practicing

critical literacy pedagogy. Drawing primarily from postings to the third and fourth topical categories, mentioned above, I illustrate first, their social construction of critical reading, and second, their use of this as a foundation to imagine their stance as critical literacy educators. Drawing from across the categories, I also note the structural, normative rules for engagement in the meta-conversation that facilitated the prolonged electronic conversation.

### *Critical Literacy and Teacher Candidates*

Critical literacy differs from critical reading and from transactional reading (Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978; Serafini, 2003). Critical reading assumes that readers accurately decipher meaning from a text, thus locating a text's authority in the intended meanings of its author. Transactional theories of reading unmoor the meaning of a text from the fixed grip of the author, locating constructions of meaning within transactions between the reader, the author and the text, which makes each transaction and construction of meaning unique (Rosenblatt, 1978). Critical literacy, however, frames reading not as a deciphering of meaning, nor as a personal interpretation, but as an exercise in critical consciousness of contested meanings. It demands conscious contextualization of a text (and thus, of the reader and the author) within historical, social, political and cultural contexts (Kanpol, 1998).

Schooling bureaucracies, through the efforts of their curriculum experts, have sought to infuse these and other insights about literacy into their expectations for student learning. In keeping with their mandates to monitor student learning, insights about literacy become bulleted lists of observable and measurable attributes or actions. In the context of our course, my students were introduced to our state department of education's curricular conceptualization of a three-tiered structure of attributes of reading comprehension (initial understanding, interpretation, critical stance) that we would address through the lenses of critical literacy and social justice concerns. Although superficially these three levels of reading comprehension could be imagined to approximate, in ascending order, critical reading, transactional reading and critical literacy, this is not accurate. For example, critical stance, an element of reading comprehension that necessarily requires initial understanding and interpretation, does not demand that readers interrogate sociocultural or political contexts, but only that they recognize that texts can reflect values, customs and beliefs. There is no mandate for critical consciousness and social action, but there is considerable resonance with critical and transactional reading experiences. Further, as a critically conscious lens will inform one's reading of a text at even the most basic level of initial understanding, critical literacy's imperatives toward critique and action might have to be actively ignored or evaded in order to engage in literate activities, including literacy pedagogy, as innocuous events.

Our focus on social justice as a foundation for pedagogical choices led the teacher candidates in this course toward a critical literacy stance. However, as their conversation indicates elsewhere (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2008; Calderwood et al., 2008), they found resistance to this stance in the local classrooms in which they were doing their literacy fieldwork. Researchers have demonstrated that my students' observations about the absence of critical literacy work by teachers make sad sense within a schooling framework that, in its focus on more basic reading and writing skills, and on its apolitical conceptualization of reading comprehension, leaves little room for the work of critical literacy (Comber & Kamler, 2003; Henk, Mallette & Waggoner, 2005; Legard Larson & Kalmbach Phillips, 2005; Long, 2004; Stevens, 2003). Top-down, mandated attention to the basic skills and strategies associated with reading and writing is but part of the picture, however. For example, Henk, Mallette &

Waggoner, 2005) and Hagood (2002) learned that the teachers they surveyed did not place as high a value on students' out of school literacies and cultural knowledge as they did on school-based literacy; thus they missed or shunned opportunities to bring in outside literacies and cultural knowledge into classroom-based learning opportunities.

There has been much research published (see e.g., Beyer, 2001; Britzman, 2001; Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001; Givens Generett & Hicks, 2004; Hammerness, 2003; McDaniel, 2004; McDonald, 2007; Ross & Yeager, 1999; Tillema & Kremer-Hayon, 2005; Toll, Nierstheimer, Lenski & Kolloff, 2004) offering elucidation about the resistant processes that work against developing critical readers of the word and the world, and encouraging and exhorting teachers and teacher educators to teach for social conscience and consciousness. Educators and researchers urge pedagogical choices that increase student voice, enhance democratic participation, and nudge students toward a critical stance (Au, 1998, Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Christensen, 1999; Edelsky, 1999; Fairbanks, 1998; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Turner, 1997; Lensmire, 1998; Lewison, Seely Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). Yet, the teacher candidates in this course saw little of such pedagogical choices in practice in the classrooms in which they did their literacy fieldwork (Calderwood et al., 2008).

Teacher educators are urged to extend their support of their teacher candidates through at least the first years of teaching, so that they implement and sustain pedagogical choices that support critical literacy (Anagnostopoulos, Smith & Basmadjian, 2007; Long, 2004). Collaborative reflective and problem solving discussions are common strategies teacher educators use to promote critically conscious approaches to pre-service teaching (Alger, 2007; DeShon Hamlin, 2004; Jewett & Smith, 2003; Laman, Legan & Van Sluys, 2005; Rogers, Kramer, Mosley, Fuller, Light, Nehart, Jones, Beaman-Jones, DePasquale, Hobson & Thomas, 2005; Stevens & Mitchell, 2006). Online conversations and online journaling are two increasingly popular vehicles for prompting such reflective and problem solving discussions. Online journals and discussions have been promoted as tools to increase student learning (Davis, Lennox, Walker & Walsh, 2007; Garrison, 2007; Pewewardy, 2005; Ruan & Beach, 2005; Woods & Ebersole, 2003). They have been shown to promote reflective practice and critical consciousness (Alterio, 2004; Barnett, Dickinson, McDonagh, Merchant, Myers & Wilkinson 2003; Pewewardy, 2005), to promote a sense of community and connection (Anderson, 2004; Bikowski, 2007; Black, 2005; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Picciano, 2002; Russo & Campbell, 2004), and to enhance traditional course designs (DeWert, Babinski & Jones 2003; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2002; Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer & O'Connor, 2003; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006).

### *Structuring the Conversation*

The freefall of the conversational entries that fell into our inboxes was exhilarating and seductive in ways that pre-planned conversational events might not be. The unpredictable progression of the conversation, freed from the imposition of automatic threading patterns found in more structured online discussions, made it necessary for the participants to read all the postings, rather than only those in particular threads. This may account for the multiple threads visible in many of the individual postings. Further, from the first entries of the conversation, the participants set an inviting tone. Through the use of affiliative greetings and affectionate closings, the participants deliberately created a sense of a caring community that constructed a safe space for conversation. The pattern of warm greetings and closings evident in the excerpts included below was maintained throughout the longer conversation, appearing in all but a

handful of the 300+ postings. Alone, however, such polite bookends to postings were insufficient to encourage extended and thoughtful conversation. Comments of appreciation for the conversation appear early during the turn taking, and continue with regularity throughout the conversation. These comments occur in two main variations, stand-alone and lead-in expressions of appreciation. The stand-alone appreciation marks the conversation as unique and valuable; the lead-in appreciation alerts the participants that the contributor is about to share significant thoughts, questions and/or observations that are directly connected to the appreciated posting. Both variants also bring definition to the e-conversation's nature as a tool with which the participants could accomplish several tasks: a) the critical reading of a text, b) enhancement of that critical reading with a critical stance as they variously made text-to-self, to text, and to world connections, c) the connection of these readings to their work as teachers, d) the framing of that teaching in terms of socially conscious inquiry and action, which is the heart of critical literacy, and e) the establishment of a collective professional identity as educators for social justice (discussed at length in Calderwood et al., 2008).

The structure of the e-conversation was established early, with implicit rules for participation emerging fairly rapidly. A few of the rules had a significant impact on what could and could not be said and by whom. Once such implicit rule was that the conversation content and its development belonged to the students. Early on, for example, it became clear that the teacher candidates did not want the conversation to devolve into a lecture from the instructor about author's craft. This explains why my early attempts to explicitly teach (through labeling strategies or through drawing attention to author's craft, for example) were not built upon by the students, while my contributions that were more authentic to the conversation, such as affirmations and a mid-conversation personal revelation, were used to further develop the path of the conversation.

The participants established a second significant conversational rule, which was that discordance and confrontation were to be avoided in the threading of the postings. This was managed in two distinct ways. The first was through the liberal use of lead-in affirmations prefacing postings that then might complicate or gently interrogate or insightfully develop a stated position. Participants could question each other about the opinions cited in the postings, but only after affirming the questioned postings' value to the conversation and to the questioner's own thinking. Such exchanges were fruitful in generating a string of exchanges that maintained a modicum of nuanced opinion even as they precluded the expression of outright contradictions or strong disagreements among the teacher candidates. The second method, a combination of cajoling, exhortation and personal revelations, was used more selectively as an antidote to postings that plaintively or angrily expressed feelings of being overwhelmed or frustrated by their observations in local elementary schools (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2008). It is interesting that, among this group of conversationalists, the censorship was used to facilitate courage to continue in the intellectual stretching that was occurring. Although Sharkey (2004) remarks on the normative, censoring power of such conversational rulings, Luna, Botelho, Fontaine, French, Iverson and Matos (2004) emphasize that the building of trusting relations among group members makes it possible to challenge the normative parameters of professional conversations and to thus move the conversation about literacy to a conversation that is itself an exercise in critical literacy. Rogers et al., (2005) further note that normative authority can become diffused by problem posing and problem solving informed by multiple perspectives drawn from personal experience. In the following abridged excerpts from the conversation, we can see the structure

and rules of the conversation build a space within which, with respect and affection for each other, the teacher candidates talk their way toward critical literacy pedagogy.

### *The Literature Discussion: Reading Critically*

Early in the course, the candidates were required to read and discuss a linked trio of novels by Lois Lowry (*The Giver*, 1993; *Gathering Blue*, 2002; and *Messenger*, 2006), and then to design differentiated reading guides for 6<sup>th</sup> graders that supported the students to move from an initial understanding of the texts toward a critical stance. Researchers have noted the evocative qualities of the first of these texts, and I have found that asking my pre-service teachers to read and work through the trio substantially increases their abilities to read critically and to translate their enjoyment of the texts into pedagogical thoughts and actions (Enriquez, 2001; Latham, 2004; Menexas, 1997). The plot lines, major characters and central themes of *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue* intersect and develop powerfully in *Messenger*, providing rich opportunities for readers to note and analyze text to text, text to self and text to world connections. The repeated themes (the notion of community, power, inclusion, marginalization, dignity, human rights, sacrifice/redemption, and so on) unfold in strikingly different settings connected primarily through the emotional and moral development of the central characters.

As Sharkey (2004) notes, when pre-service teachers begin to think about and enact their own literacy practices, they begin to construct a theoretical map of what counts as literacy. Yet, Van Sluys, Legan, Tropp Laman and Lewison (2005) noted that pre-service teachers often “did school,” that is, read in the most appropriate task oriented ways they knew, rather than rise to the challenge of reading critically. Like the pre-service teachers in the Van Sluys et al. study, the teacher candidates began the e-conversation dutifully “doing school,” reading carefully to discern significant themes and concepts in the novels. As they more deeply engaged in the conversation, the teacher candidates in this course became immersed as discerning readers of these novels. The pleasurable work of discovering, constructing and deconstructing the texts conjured up a conversation worth sustaining (Calderwood, 2005).

**Catherine:** *I had something to say in class, but I did not raise my hand high enough. I just wanted to comment on how everyone defined release in an ominous or negative way, but to me it could be taken in a different context as well. For example, when he leaves and gives his memories to the community, that could be considered a form of release because he is leaving the community. Therefore it is a release for the community in the sense that they are being rid of the sameness and the lack of freedom. It is a release for Jonas because he no longer carries the burden, but also he leaves to encounter a new world.*

**Morgan:** *Catherine, Good point :- ) I agree that release has so many connotations. As we were talking last night, I was also thinking of the idea of release from prison, which Jonas was essentially in within that community...*

**Dan:** *Catherine, very good point. I think that Lowry purposely used a neutral word such as release so that it would be left up for interpretation. If, as you suggest, they might not be happy with their lives, then release is indeed a positive occurrence, much like parole for prisoners. The possibility also exists that they ARE happy with their lives and that release is just one more aspect of their lives that they look forward to. Just because it seems cruel to us does not make it so for them. For the most part the adults who knew what release was didn't seem to have a problem with it and Jonas only objected to it when he had memories to use as a reference point for judging release. So it is an interesting point that you make, because the whole concept of*



*release in The Giver seems so negative to us, we automatically assume that it is negative, and that might not actually be so.*

**Linda:** *Dear Dr. C and classmates, I have to say that I am benefiting immensely from our in-class and our on-line discussions. Everyone seems to have a lot of insights to share. I feel fortunate to be in a class with such a knowledgeable and articulate group...*

Catherine's opening comment created a space in which to continue a whole class discussion, begun in class the previous day in which she was a relatively silent participant. In a series of affirmative moves, Morgan validates Catherine's comment, Dan modifies Morgan's model by providing a more complexly nuanced musing, Linda notes the value of the ongoing conversations and expresses solidarity with the group. The conversational rules are set into place, and the scaffolding for socially constructed critical reading of a text becomes visible.

In the continuation of the conversation below, Kathy weaves in her contribution, adding the theme of power to the textual analysis, and explicitly suggests making text-to-world connections. She offers three loci of power, and then suggests that books and literacy were accoutrements of power in the books. In response, Carolyn's powerful words connect the themes of power and honor, citing the text. She explicitly speaks of her learners, and what she wants them to learn. Here we see not only the enactment of critical reading by discerning readers, but explicitly critical literacy practices and pedagogical threads emerging, as Carolyn and Kathy identify the study of power as an element they would encourage for their students.

**Kathy:** *Dr. C and Friends! Thanks for such great e-conversations. To add to the discussion about the books, though, I think there is an overwhelming theme of power in the books. Power of a select group within the community, struggles for power within the community (Gathering Blue, for example), and the power of one. I also thought it was interesting that the author seemed to use books and reading as a symbol for power -- only the leaders in the community had books, and only the men (as I recall) were permitted to read. This would be a great discussion with parallels to our own community and society.*

**Carolyn:** *Kathy, I was interested in how you brought up the concept of power. In The Giver (p.85), Jonas says to the Giver, "But sir, since you have so much power..." "The man corrected him. 'Honor,' he said firmly. 'I have great honor. So will you. But you will find that that is not the same as power."*

*I will want to engage my learners in a discussion of the relationship between power and honor--especially in light of something else the Giver says on p. 156 when he talks about how he and Jonas needed to care about the Community: "Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything."*

*I will want my learners to grasp that power without honor is indeed a dangerous thing.*

Like the pre-service teachers in the Van Sluys et al. study (2005), the teacher candidates, during the conversation above, began the conversation dutifully "doing school," reading carefully to discern significant themes and concepts in the novels. As the early exchanges of the conversation unfolded, one and then another employed, but did not struggle against, their knowledge of how to be successful in such tasks. After just a few exchanges, however, Carolyn broke through the polite and thoughtful displays of engaged reading and introduced an urgent purposefulness to the conversation. As the conversation continues, Abiah returns to the concept of freedom first introduced by Catherine and Morgan, threading the connection between books.

**Abiah:** *Hi Guys ...If we look at Messenger, we find that not only do the people have the power of choice, but it seems Village and Forest make choices as well. Forest and Village have human characteristics like being able to judge and choose those who can go through and those who*

can't. Furthermore, has anyone ever thought that the Forest may not even exist; perhaps it is just some type of figment of the imagination that the people of the Village created, maybe a way to keep people in Village?

So, who wants to talk about freedom next class? It seems in *The Giver* there is no real freedom since all the townspeople are made to follow certain protocol. Similarly, in *Gathering Blue* the people in the town (and Kira, Thomas and Jo) are really slaves to the Council. In *Messenger*, the people in the town do not even have the freedom to leave, because Forest might kill them if they tried to travel through.

Or, we could talk about bonds created which change the balance within the communities. The bond between the Giver and The Receiver, the bond between Matty and Kira in *Messenger*, and the bond between Matt, Kira and Thomas and Kira. All these friendships in some way change their communities.

**Morgan:** I agree, Abiah. I think freedom is a huge theme in the book. ...We talked a little bit about democracy and freedom, but what struck me, as well, is that in *Messenger* it was the force of the people that were changing the whole community for the worse...perhaps a statement on too much power in the wrong or misguided people's hands. As Carolyn commented, people without honor but with power can be dangerous. This power was in the form of the mass of the community. On the other hand it seemed that a select few in *The Giver* had "power" and used it to control the community. It took the power of individuals (Jonas & Receiver) to make the change. I think we often think about change being driven by groups of people. I know there is a strong emphasis in our world how each one of us can make a difference, which is true, but usually change occurs when there is a force in the form of large quantities of people. As Abiah mentioned in these books it seems that change happens as a result of bonds between just a few select people (heroes?), and not whole community movements...

While responding directly to Abiah's words about freedom, Morgan connects Carolyn's earlier comments about the relationship between power and honor to Abiah's thoughts about how bonds between people can change a larger community. She introduces the notion of hero.

**Dan:** Morgan and Abiah, I see your point about the change brought about in these books is done so by a small group of people, and yes they are possibly heroes. Despite their "powers" though, they all did start off as "regular people" in the book before discovering that they could in fact be heroes. I think that is the way it happens... perhaps the use of their "powers" was a metaphor for the power that we have to create change. On another note, it seems that recent comments have tied the themes of the book into the real world and issues that we face. Specifically regarding the subject of freedom it is interesting to note the "evolution" of Village in *Messenger* from a society that openly embraces people of all backgrounds to an exclusionary society unwilling to share the fruits of their success. What seems somewhat hypocritical is the fact that a large portion of the residents of Village were not born there, meaning that had Village come to this conclusion earlier, **THEY** would be the ones shut out.

I can't help but see an eerie parallel between the history of Village and the history of The United States. I always thought that our immigration policy was necessary and relatively fair. However, I clearly disagreed with the movement to close Village in *Messenger*, which is a clear contradiction with what I thought my views were pertaining to immigration and this country. I wonder if Lois Lowry meant to draw this parallel or if it is there by coincidence waiting to be interpreted. I would also be interested to hear other points of view on this topic, among others... P.S. Abiah, interesting point about Forest being a figment of collective imaginations. On page 169, referring to Matty, Lowry writes

*"He saw Forest and understood what Seer had meant. It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything..."*

*It was my interpretation that the deterioration of Forest was a manifestation of the negative energy of Village, but until now I never considered that Forest itself could be as well.*

**Hillary:** *Dan: I also couldn't help but think about our own immigration policies while reading the Messenger. It seems such an obvious parallel that it's hard to imagine it's a coincidence. There were some very blatant statements from the people of Village about outsiders speaking differently and not having enough resources to feed or school the children, etc. Good point about the connections we make between real life and literature... sometimes our hearts and minds are pulled in one direction while reading something, but we may have different views about real issues in our every day lives.*

As Dan thinks about the concept of hero, he notes that the special, magical "powers" of the protagonists are a metaphor for the more realistic power we all have to create change. He continues his text-to-world and text to self connections as he parallels the proposed walling off of Village to his own understanding of current US immigration policy, a topic that the classmates had focused on in depth in a previous course. His question, "I wonder if Lois Lowry meant to draw this parallel or if it is there by coincidence waiting to be interpreted" invites the classmates to think further about not only author's craft, but about the transactions between author, reader, and text (Rosenblatt, 1978) that are available to be made. Dan has also found supporting evidence in the text for Abiah's musing about whether Forest is real, imaginary, or a metaphor. His investigation has led him to an insightful interpretation – that Forest might be a manifestation of the energy of Village. Hillary responds with empathy to Dan's acknowledgment that the xenophobia exhibited by the Villagers caused him to question his own assumptions about US policies toward immigrants. In so doing, she sets a non-confrontational and non-judgmental tone for dealing with such confidences. The gentleness of her response encourages further sharing of discomfiting questions and admissions.

**Kathy:** *I just saw this article that was labeled as a "free speech" topic. I think this is an interesting addition to our discussion of the Lowry books. The statements a professor made about 9/11 and the terrorists have caused an apparent outrage, and action is being taken to have him fired. Brings up an interesting point about freedom in our society -- is it really true freedom? We talk about the oppression in the Lowry books and lack of freedom (or at least what we perceive freedom to be). But, although we say we have freedom of speech, isn't this individual being punished for expressing his views? Should we "release" him from our community because his views don't agree with ours? Not sure we want to get into a discussion about freedom of speech or this individual's particular statements, but I thought it was a timely and relevant article in light of what we read in the Lowry books.*

The conversation takes a significant turn as Morgan and Carolyn ponder the power of social action, first in the texts, and then, tentatively, in their teaching. Their concerns for their students resonate with Catherine.

**Morgan:** *I did not mean to give the impression that I don't believe that one person can incite change. I do believe that that is where it most often begins. And I also strongly believe (as Carolyn pointed out) that one voice can have a huge impact. I was actually drawing attention to that fact, and that it was more of a force of one or two people as opposed to a community wide change. Perhaps that did not come across...I do think Lowry was emphasizing that point. I feel she purposely pitted the few against the masses...or better yet, the "wiser" few versus*

*the commonly accepted "way" of things. Catherine and I were talking about the great discussions we have been having, but it is good to keep in mind, as Dr. C mentioned, we are all adults with certain experiences but our students will be children with a different set/type of experiences...and I would also like to constantly consider how to portray these bigger ideas to students. Thinking of the way they will personally relate to it, as was mentioned Good and Evil, choice, friendship, etc. while stretching them further.*

**Catherine:** *I agree with Morgan, especially since we were discussing this issue earlier, but our discussions have been evoked from our prior knowledge and experiences. But students who are in fifth grade do not have all this knowledge to interpret it as we have. I noticed this in the paper this boy, whose mother I work with, had written. It was very insightful how he understood from reading *The Giver* that as humans we need to know fear, hunger, cold, love, and death, etc. to be truly alive. However, he was not able to go further because of his lack of knowledge. I was discussing this with my cooperating teacher at (B) School who deals with this with literature and writing. (B) School is an urban school where many of the students are very poor and have not experienced such things as sledding (as in Jonas' memory) nor have access to historical knowledge or other concepts. As a teacher, how would I teach them to go beyond what is just written?*

Catherine had earlier shared an essay about *The Giver* written by a fifth-grader with her classmates, who had noted that it was insightful and well-written. Now, in the midst of a sustained examination of the book, she could envision the developmental trajectory of critical reading. As she realizes the importance of cultural capital, she raises an important question about teaching. Although she naively over-generalizes about the cultural capital of students who live in poverty, she identifies the teacher's responsibility to educate for equity. Catherine, daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, was once a student in this poor urban district and has considerable empathy for the students with whom she works. Her concerns are appreciated by Linda and, in turn, by Amy.

**Linda:** *Catherine's concluding question has been on my mind all week. My own understanding of the Lowry books has increased measurably as a result of the ongoing dialogue. But how does this knowledge translate to the classroom?*

*My thought is to focus on the big messages and provide thinking questions that help the students consider themes such as the rights of the community vs. the individual, conformity vs. individuality, freedom and responsibility, control and powerlessness, initiating social change. It is clear from Catherine's description of the fifth grade essay that the student grasped one of the book's important messages. Maybe an explicit discussion about what is valued in the society described in the book and a discussion about what we value in our school community would be helpful. Would completing a chart that compares the rules and conventions in each society help the students think about the existing rules and conventions in our world? What about providing students with a list of important quotes and asking them to talk about one of those or to offer their own suggestion for notable quotes? I would share with the students that each time I read this book and discussed it with other readers I gained new insights. Even if the students fail to understand every nuance of every theme, the students will draw additional meaning from their reading through the active process of discussing literature with other readers. I look forward to our discussion tomorrow.*

**Amy:** *I was most personally affected in the reading of the three stories by how I felt when Village voted to shut its borders to other people. I so desperately wanted a place where people were accepted and welcomed regardless of skin color, deformity, skill, talent etc. Where the*

*power of the people was used for what was good for all- especially after watching the societies that Jonas and Kira grew up in. I asked myself how could they do it, and in that same instant realized that that is what we do here in the United States, as you mentioned. I hope I have developed sensitivity to the issue of immigration due to the efforts of Dr. C, but I was so moved by my own personal reaction that it was a real awakening for me. I do think that Lowry used this situation to provoke thoughtful discussions and increase people's awareness of border issues and tolerance. But that's just my thought.*

*I think the evolution of the Committee of Elders in *The Giver*, to the Council of Guardians in *Gathering Blue*, and the "election" if you will of Jonas as Leader in *Messenger* has some interesting parallels to various societal structures throughout the world. I was also interested in the use of fear and how it is used in conjunction with those who have power vs. honor. In *The Giver*, the Stream was a sign of freedom yet they were warned to stay away based on the drowning of Caleb. You hear about the beasts in *Gathering Blue* that would drag you off into the woods etc. Finally there was Jonas who acted based on the will of the people, not by fear and intimidation, and eventually it was certain people in Village who succumbed to fear and voted to keep others out. I think fear is a powerful motivator.*

**Patricia:** *Amy, you and your classmates have shown how we respond to literature in deeply personal ways- and that, as authors, we write from our personal history. We are adults, all of us, who have experienced love and pain and fear and transformation and courage and cowardice- and so read and are moved through the lenses of our own experiences. We also have had considerable experience in learning from the lives of others and in having others learn from us. That has a great deal to do with this sustained conversation- we are threading out our worlds together.*

This message moves this phase of the conversation to a close, through a redirection from the text to the community of learners. Summative in tone, Patricia's words note that the knowledge and experience of all the participants has threaded the conversation.

#### *Moving From Reading Critically To Teaching For Critical Literacy*

After a breather, during which the e-communications meandered away from the reading of the novels and onto more mundane matters concerned with class assignments, Dan, eager to share his thoughts about an assigned text (Vasquez, 2004) reconvened the discussion with a posting to the class, in which he wrestles with the notion of critical literacy.

**Dan:** *... Is it enough that we explore how people with disabilities are treated in "Gathering Blue" and why we think it is unfair or should we look for similarities in our own environment and address them? At what level are you engaging in rhetoric and at what level are you engaging in meaningful activity?*

Dan's pointed query encouraged the teacher candidates to examine the implications of a deliberate, critically tinged activist stance toward pedagogy. Catherine, below, grounds the continuing conversation with a concrete example from her fieldwork that illustrates the deep concern with which the aspiring teachers wrestle: how to work against the strong normative forces that encourage teachers to evade critical literacy pedagogy.

**Catherine:** *On Friday, when I was doing my fieldwork, the teacher read them a legend: In *The Time of the Drum* by Kim Siegelson (1999). It is about slavery and how African-Americans had been chained and brought to Spanish-colonized islands. One of the students listened to her read, and said "You mean they were chained. Why? What happened?" And she just said, 'we will read on.' Perfect opportunity! Although she missed this opportunity, I cannot criticize her because as*

*a teacher there are so many things in your mind that you need to accomplish. Being in a district that uses paced instruction, it is difficult to veer off topic. However, with such situations, I am sure there must be a way to incorporate critical instruction.*

For a few days, there ensued a volley of discussion about similar observations, during which the teacher candidates moved from sharing their mixed feelings about how far, really, they would be able to stray from the norms they had been noticing about classroom discussions to more active problem-solving. They found themselves thinking through the notion of power relations, particularly the power of a teacher to influence the thinking of her or his students.

**Linda:** *Dear All, I'm sorry I missed the classroom discussion but I'm glad I've had a chance to read the ongoing conversation about critical literacy...I do feel that raising questions, even ones that we have no answers to, is integral in the development of critical thinking. Once I read Nell Noddings' book *The Challenge to Care in Schools*... I realized that I had found an approach that I could be comfortable with...The caring context helped me envision a way to raise questions of social justice and fairness without the baggage of politics. In the absence of ready role models in the classroom (with the exception of Vasquez), I think each of us has to find the approach that makes sense before we undertake critical literacy in the classroom.*

**Kathy:** *Hi everyone, It's been very interesting to read all you have to say about this topic. I think the one thing that I was struggling with when we began discussing this topic is the potential to impose our ideas onto others. I think this is a big risk when we get into critical thinking. Are we directing students to think the way we do? Or, are we guiding students to learn how to think critically?*

*...The thing I find interesting about this whole topic is that we are viewing it as a very distinct "thing," when in actuality it is a reality of our everyday life. We as citizens should be developing our own ability to analyze, think, and question what goes on in our world. And, we as teachers need to help our students learn how to do that.*

**Amy:** *I think I can pinpoint my concern - I completely embrace and support "student driven inquiry" that guide us, and our students, to explore and become critical thinkers. I caution against "teacher directed monologues" where one promotes their own opinions and points of view... Maybe as teachers we also have a responsibility to introduce the alternate point of view, even if no one else in the classroom has. The opportunities have to be given in the classroom, whether we agree with them or not.*

**Hillary:** *I have been particularly drawn in by the comments concerning "student driven" versus "teacher directed." Amy, I share your concerns. As teachers I think we need to help our students achieve the critical stance suggested by Bomer and Bomer (2004). As others have said, we want our students to think, to care, to want to learn and to want to make a difference. But for me, this should be student driven... We of course need to be prepared to help direct conversations and it is our responsibility to give our students information they can then use or help in how to find information they want/need to further their learning, but I don't know that we need to give them all opposing views. I would rather further their thinking abilities so that they are the ones who suggest that there might be an opposing view. ... Again, I think it is all about being "student driven." I believe that if we create "safe" places where students feel valued and cared for (as suggested by Abiah, Catherine and others), they will be more open to asking questions and to thinking more deeply about certain subjects.*

**Morgan:** *Everything we've been talking about has been so great! I suppose we will all have to start a new wave, holding onto the core values of it all while organizing our own classrooms. I think we all know that it will be harder to teach everything with an eye towards critical*

*literacy...much harder than teaching the cookie-cutter variety of curriculum I mostly see...but I think we're all up for the challenge. But I will be honest and say that I'd really love to see it all in action somewhere...*

The problem solving discussion, excerpted above, swiftly moved the conversation from the uncertain, disconcerting pedagogical space that Dan and Catherine had made explicit. The group spent scant time explicitly imagining themselves as evaders of critical literacy opportunities after Dan and Catherine implied that there was a choice to be made. The conversational rules, noted earlier, would not support such a turn in the conversation. It was too far outside the implicitly agreed upon purposes of the discussion. Their empathy for the classroom teachers who had chosen to ignore critical literacy opportunities was not going to be allowed to seduce this group away from their desires to bring a critical lens into their literacy curricula. Linda offered a viable alternative, a caring stance (Noddings, 2005) that could support critical literacy pedagogy. Her entry was a relief to the conversationalists, who had suddenly found that the wrestling match between their empathy and disdain for the avoidance tactics used by some classroom teachers was mirroring their personal wrestles with their own emerging identities as educators. Kathy and Hillary together demonstrated an integration of caring and sensitivity to students' concerns and needs into critical literacy pedagogy. In a summative turn, Morgan rallies the group with a mixture of powerful certainty and hesitant wistfulness. Her posting is evocative of the truth that this conversation is far from over.

#### *The Value of the Conversation*

In a related paper, student authors and I noted how their critique of observed teaching practices and decisions, specifically the evasion of allowing student concerns into the curriculum (Calderwood et al., 2008), moved them to ally in a professional community. Here, in the early exchanges of the e-conversation, we have seen the incubation of that resolve and the emergence of a compelling shared project for their professional community- the support of critical literacy through intentional pedagogical decisions. In the later exchanges, we are privy to their explicit construction of a mutual zone of proximal development in their roles as teachers who practice critical literacy. In the conversation's closing passages, we see the declarations, both wistful and courageous, of their resolve to continue their alliance as critical literacy teachers.

The structure of the conversation was well designed to facilitate its most important function, the exploration and establishment of the candidate's identity as critical literacy educators. The implicit rules of engagement facilitated mutual trust, respect and appreciation. This was instrumental in creating a safe space in which to engage in a discussion that rendered them particularly vulnerable to self-doubts about critical literacy pedagogy, even as it showcased their intellectual strengths as critical readers.

Their own constructions of critical and transactional reading were delightful to the candidates, who supported each other to deepen their readings of the novels. Beyond its intrinsic delightfulness, the sustained discussion about the novels was a building block toward critical literacy and critical pedagogy for these pre-service teachers. In a sense, it was a rehearsal of teaching. Although the reading of the novels was linked to a task to design reading guides for students, that task did not require that the candidates engage in their readings with such passion and excitement, nor does it explain away the extent, depth or evolution of the e-conversation. The conversation was always about their roles as teachers, even when the candidates were not explicitly referring to that role or to their responsibilities.

### *Implications for Teacher Education*

I am not the first teacher educator to have been privileged to overhear the conversations of pre-service teachers intent on radicalizing elementary curriculum through critical literacy work. It is heartening to know that this is not an isolated phenomenon. Each of the conversations we overhear has its own character, and each of us hears something special in our own students' conversations. But as this conversation has particular implications for supporting pre-service teachers to embrace the transformation of critical and transactional literacy into critical literacy and critical pedagogy, I offer some observations specific to supporting our future literacy educators.

1. Pre-service teachers are chameleons of identity. They are, as are all educators, students and teachers both. But as neophytes in our professional community, their nuanced shadings of situationally influenced identity are at once bolder and more tentative than they will manifest as they mature as educators. As they mature, they will find ways to avoid or confront the struggle to infuse or maintain critical literacy practices in their work as educators, creating a subtler set of shadings to their identity and practices as teachers and learners. As teacher educators, we can help them to maintain a sense of coherence, if not consistency, as they construct their necessarily fluid identities and practices. If we value critical education and critical literacy practices, the coherence should be evident in our approach to facilitating our candidates' opportunities to engage as critical literacy educators. Our continued presence in their professional lives, including our presence in their schools and classrooms, should be one of continued empathy and alliance. This could mean greater scrutiny of field and student teaching placements so that our candidates are placed in schools and with teachers who are open to critical literacy practices. We must also increase collegiality and collaboration between teacher educators and classroom teachers, produce more visible engagement within the communities in which our candidates teach, and engage in increased political work with those whose policies turn teachers away from critical literacy practices.
2. The sustained engagement as readers that the teacher candidates so enjoyed is, for many teachers, a rarely indulged pleasure. Yet the experience itself of engaging deeply and publicly with text, particularly when such engagement drifts toward the vulnerable spaces of our identities as educators, allows us to teach and learn with our students with more sensitivity and courage (Calderwood, 2005). Within our own university-based classrooms, we can carve out space and time to allow our candidates the necessary luxury of sustained engagement with generative texts such as the novels that so captured my teacher candidates. Once they are practicing teachers, we can continue to invite our new colleagues into similar sustained conversations, electronic and face-to-face. Like the conversation we have glimpsed in this paper, these continued conversations might explore great literature and other generative texts, so as to provide opportunities for the luxurious and risky dives into shared readings. As we enjoy and risk, we will engage as educators and learners as well as readers.
3. We might trust that their own aspirations for their future as critical literacy educators will lead our candidates to make critically informed pedagogical connections to their own experiences as readers of the texts and the world, but we ought not to count on the serendipitous emergence of the deep engagement and sense of purpose that these candidates demonstrated. Particularly in their first years, many will experience the dislocating, disorienting forces of imposed curriculum and conflicting mandates. It will be



easier for them to lose sight of their calling as critical literacy educators than to follow it. Sadly, it might also be a logical pragmatic choice for new teachers to downplay the infusion of critical literacy into their pedagogy, in that the curricular choices that follow from focusing on critical literacy might flout what is conventional and accepted in a school, school district, or local community. As we know, schools, particularly elementary schools, are more normative than transformative. If we want to support critical literacy educators, we must ourselves be critical literacy educators, and we must model this in ways that our candidates can recognize. We can be both stealthy and obvious, but we cannot be absent. For example, we can establish partnerships with our alums, their colleagues and administrators through school-based faculty learning communities and reading groups. As group members, we can model asking critical questions and making connections; as university-based experts we can also guide an extended meta-conversation that explores strategies to support students' development as critically engaged readers and writers. We can extend these learning/reading communities outward, including parents, caregivers and school board members, inviting discussions about, for example, the recently proposed common core standards for language arts, which privilege the development of critical literacy practices (National Governors' Association, 2010). For each of us, that decision to engage visibly and extensively with children, teachers, administrators and community members is ever present and ever possible.

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I am a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions at Fairfield University. I teach courses in the cultural foundations of education and in elementary education. More to the point, I work with my students to develop their commitment to advocate as social justice educators. My teaching and research are bridged by a personal and scholarly interest in the social construction of community. I am the author of *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference* and of several articles that explore how students and faculty construct community

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I graduated from Fairfield University with a Master of Arts degree in elementary education. I also obtained my undergraduate degree at Fairfield University in International Studies with minors in politics and Asian studies. Currently, I am a fourth grade teacher at Six to Six Interdistrict Magnet School in Bridgeport, CT. I enjoy bridging my knowledge of cultures into the lessons I teach so that students are more aware and cognizant of their local, national, and world community and become advocates of social justice. In addition, I have collaborated with other teachers at my school to develop literacy curriculum. For the last 2 years, I've help run Mighty Math Kids Club, an afterschool program that links mathematics with real-life scenarios within our communities and connect it to the arts.

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I earned a Master's degree in Elementary Education at Fairfield University. I received my undergraduate degree from Boston College with a B.A. in Marketing. I have enjoyed many fruitful teaching experiences



while substitute teaching for a school in Norwalk, Connecticut over the past 2 years. I am also very active in my children's school, and in the Southwestern Connecticut Council of the Girl Scouts of America. The greatest areas of interest to me in the teaching arena are the obstacles faced by English language learners in the classroom, and the need for more varied types of educational assessment.

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I am a graduate of Fairfield University's elementary education masters program. Prior to pursuing my degree in education, I obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater from Adelphi University. I am currently in my fifth year of teaching fourth grade at Marvin Elementary School in the Norwalk Public School District (Connecticut). I particularly enjoy bringing science to life through hands-on investigations, as well as inspiring children's love of books through Reader's Workshop. My belief is that my students' varied needs can be met through the use of fresh and creative differentiated instruction, thereby helping all learners to succeed at the highest levels possible.

**Daniel McNeill** [mcneilldm@yahoo.com](mailto:mcneilldm@yahoo.com)

I hold a Bachelor's degree in Marketing and a Master's degree in Elementary Education, both from Fairfield University. After working for several years as an elementary special education paraprofessional in Norwalk, Connecticut, I now teach 2nd grade at Hurlbutt Elementary School in Weston, Connecticut. I have studied the Responsive Classroom model of education and emphasize developing community in the classroom as I strive to integrate the social and academic curricula. I am constantly looking for ways to strengthen the home-school connection for the benefit of my students. I am an avid writer and am currently developing a book detailing the journey taken during my first year of teaching as examined through the lens of electronic newsletters to parents.

**Linda Pryde** [prydelect@aol.com](mailto:prydelect@aol.com)

My undergraduate degree was awarded by Cornell University in Consumer Economics and Public Policy. After an eighteen year career on Wall Street, analyzing and selling municipal bonds, I decided to seek a different career path and found my calling. I completed my masters in elementary teaching and instruction in 2007 at Fairfield University. I taught fourth grade for two years in Fairfield, CT and am presently teaching third grade in Naples, FL. The guiding principle for my practice is caring. Students are taught to care for themselves, each other, the school community and the earth. It is through this context that children can address the questions of fairness and justice.

**Abiah Clarke Ruel** [abiahclarke@yahoo.com](mailto:abiahclarke@yahoo.com)

I obtained my Bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado with a major in English and a minor in History. My Master's degree in Elementary Education was received from Fairfield University in Connecticut. At present I work in the West Hartford, Connecticut public schools.

I work in the ESOL program at Conard High School during the day and then lead the after school program at Duffy Elementary School. I am most interested in finding ways to integrate students from other countries into our school systems as painlessly as possible. Currently, I am working with students to raise their reading scores through a free voluntary reading program (FVR) based on the research of Stephen Krashen.

**Carolyn Stenerson** [vsp123@sbcglobal.net](mailto:vsp123@sbcglobal.net)

Presently, I teach fourth grade at Pear Tree Point School in Darien, Connecticut. This current vocation is a late career change after varied academic pursuits. I received a master's degree in Elementary Education from Fairfield University in 2006. I was recognized as "Passing with Distinction" the Comprehensive Examination requirement for that degree. Previous to this I had received a master's degree in American Civilization from Brown University and a Bachelor's Degree in the same field from Middlebury College. In between my two master's degrees, I acquired a substantial number of credits in science from the University of New Mexico. Because of the intrinsic hands-on, experiential nature of teaching science, that is the area that currently interests me most. I am developing science curricula for my students now, in the areas of electricity, states of matter, energy, and rocks and minerals.