Boys will be boys?

Bridging the Great Gendered Literacy Divide

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This book addresses the issue of preadolescent boys literacy practices and the social construction of their identities as they navigate multiple classroom literacies. Exploring the role of the teacher, the role of multiple literacies and the way they “count” or do not count in the classroom curriculum through qualitative and quantitative findings, allows educators to rethink and reflect upon current instructional beliefs and practices. As educators align their curriculum with the Common Core Standards it is imperative for them to consider how they will meet each students’ individual learning styles. Demonstrating growth across time through artifact collection, and analysis and teacher research inquiries, will demand that teachers release pre-conceived notions concerning gender and literacy practices. At the end of each chapter there is a self-reflection as transformative practice, teacher research questionnaire that invites the opportunity to take what is shared in each chapter and apply it immediately to instructional practices and classroom environment decisions.
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To my husband Jeff, our sons, Jeff, Bryan, and Tim, our daughter-in-law Christine and our grandson, Connor Jeffrey, you are my heart, my soul, my loves.
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INTRODUCTION

This book is part theoretical analysis and part practical application. It grew from a wide variety of personal experiences: as a teacher of elementary and high school students, a literacy specialist, a consultant in districts across the United States, as the parent of three boys, and from my doctoral studies. My question was what are boys doing in the classroom? I studied, pondered, and researched this question for over five years.

This book is not intended to divide the literary sexes, and it is not intended to make the claim that the education system is failing boys more so than girls. It is also not intended to lay blame that boys need more male teachers at the elementary level or more boy books in the classroom. My goal is not to blame the schools, the teachers, the materials, or gender differences to explain why some boys experience literacy challenges in schools. There are many extraordinary texts out there that address all of these issues (Dobson, 2001; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw 1998; Gurian, 1998; Gurian & Stevens, 2004, 2005; Habib, Gayraud, Oiva, Regis, Salamon & Khalil (1991); Iggulden & Iggulden, 2007; Kimmel, 1996; Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sax, 2005; Sommers, 2000b, et.al) in brilliant, thought provoking and eloquent ways.

Specifically, this text has two definitive strands. The first is the research aspect of my work where I examine a group of boys’ literacy practices and investigate the curricula and instructional facet of what counts as literacy in the classroom. The second strand addresses personal self-reflection that leads to transformative practice. I am exploring the role of the teacher as well as the concept of multiple literacies and the way it “counts” or does not count in the classroom curriculum. I will share vignettes where upon first blush it would appear that the boys are ‘off task’, when in fact my research shows that the boys are often doing the assigned work, but the results are very different from teacher expectations. For this reason I end each chapter with open-ended questions that address reflective practice to help us get better at having these discussions and to determine where action needs to be taken. This is where you will have the chance to reflect and consider how and why the concept of gendered literacy learning and teaching is far bigger than text choice, writing opportunities, and the inclusion of the technological world.

Looking closely at what counts as literacy involves looking at ourselves as educators, as readers, writers, and thinkers and examining the preconceived notions we bring to our instructional practices. We examine the ways in which these practices inform and influence our own conceptions of what counts in our classrooms.
OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1, I introduce myself and share a brief history of my experiences. I present the conceptual tools and theoretical lenses that began to shape the analytic study of the social and ideological dynamics of the boys composing text.

Chapter 2 will introduce the school district, classroom, the teacher and the boys who graciously participated.

Chapter 3 addresses the epistemological foundation of this work through the literature review, which addresses the complexity of literacy practices and events (Barton, 2000) shaped by the social construction of gender. I will explain my methodological processes as I unpack the data that drove the ongoing inquiry.

Chapter 4 investigates the writing forms the boys utilized in order to align themselves socially with each other. These writing examples will demonstrate not only that they were abiding by the curriculum requirements, but they will also show the current and aspired social alignments.

Chapter 5 explores the boy’s individual writing entries in their writer’s notebooks. The melding of fiction and nonfiction, the inclusion of peers as characters, monsters, and friends, and the perceptions of what kinds of writing counts in the classroom will become evident through the boys conversations.

Chapter 6 considers the specific identity constructions and the concept of the self-initiated social divisions in the reading workshop structure. Explicit and implicit rules emerged within and across the literacy clubs and ‘lines in the sand’ were drawn for members and non-members.

Chapter 7 concludes the book and invites the reader to re-look, re-think, and re-envision their literacy expectations, programs, instructional strategies and materials.
PROLOGUE: “IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE A CLIFFHANGER!”

Bryan was in the 5th grade. This was pre No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and New York State English Language Arts Tests (ELA, 2004). During this innocent time there was only preparation for the 5th grade writing test. Teachers sent home preparatory writing work and practice sheets with testing prompts that would help the students become familiar with the examination format. Practicing for the test became a daily dedicated period, or two, until the day of the test. Thesis statements, three detail-supporting paragraphs and the conclusion were the text-practice norm. The students practiced for it, they studied it, teachers graded it, and they practiced some more.

Bryan took the test. He came home and felt good about it. He said his hand hurt from all of the writing. We sighed with relief. It was over. He felt he had done well. Life could go on. A few days later the first scores were released. Bryan did not do well. In fact, he barely passed. His teacher called him up to her desk. She showed him his score. Shock registered on both their faces. So much practice, so little reward. After a few moments Bryan looked at the teacher and asked what had he gotten wrong? She flipped through the pages toward the end of his packet. In big letters was written, WHAT HAPPENED? NO CONCLUSION! and the minus points were listed. Bryan’s eyes widened. He said, “I concluded it. I wrote the ending just like Goosebumps (1992). I left a cliffhanger.”

Yes, my son Bryan wrote his essay in the structure of one of his touchstone texts written by his mentor author, R.L. Stein. He was a voracious Goosebumps reader. This book series was just scary enough and cool enough to be an acceptable part of his 11-year-old life. His older brother read them and his friends read them. The characters are identifiable as people Bryan might know and the situations just terrifying enough to make him almost not want to read on, all the while being propelled forward to the end.

One of the formulas of the Goosebumps series is that each book ends with a cliffhanger. The reader is always left with the idea that the horror that just occurred in this book will continue on because one more character will walk into the situation one more time and would think it was a good idea, just this once, to pick up the scary mask, or open the old wooden creaky door, or walk down that one hallway where the crooked Do Not Enter sign is hanging. Yes, the cliffhanger leaves the reader with a multitude of new thoughts spinning around in his head. And yes, this is exactly what Bryan’s intention was when he began crafting his 5th grade writing test conclusion. He thought the teacher would love it.

Of course I do realize that at that time the writing purpose and the intended audience appeared to be a little confused by my son. Both his teacher and myself spoke to him about academic writing, test taking writing, and the kinds of writing he
was interested in. What became clear to all of us is that this 11 year old’s reading and writing passion really had no place in the testing genre of 5th grade.

A LITERACY MIS-MATCH

It is clear that the literacy functions and uses (Taylor, 1983) that Bryan had encountered in his life were the resources he was bringing to his schooling experiences. He came from a home where reading and writing were centered in personal interests and choice. Reading was an enjoyable and individualized pastime. His parents and his brothers read, he was read to on a regular basis, he had developed particular likes and dislikes and he had an ever evolving passion for particular popular genres. As Bryan had learned his language and literacies in his home, as he developed his knowledge of how language worked and what it is used for, these literacy practices (Barton, 1994, 2000; Street, 1997) translated into observable behaviors. Bryan’s oral and written literacy practices testified to these experiences. These behaviors informed his expectations of what reading and writing is and how they work in our culture. Apparently, what wasn’t clear was that particular cultural communities, such as school, did not value the same kinds of reading and writing that Bryan did. There existed a “mis-match” between what Dyson (1993) calls the official and unofficial sphere of Bryan’s literacy development. It is this mismatch, this perception of what counts as literacy, that has fueled my passion to explore what counts as literacy for the students, the curriculum, and my instructional practices. But, I needed to think about what counts as literacy to me philosophically, theoretically, and personally. It has caused me to reflect on the ways it informed my instructional practices and interactions with all my students.
CHAPTER 1

WHAT COUNTS AS LITERACY?

To an adult much of the folklore of childhood may sound trivial or even meaningless. This is to make the same kind of mistake that early explorers made when they couldn’t understand the stories and jokes told in other cultures. Later on, anthropologists who took the time to study these societies understood their folklore—indeed, studying the folklore was one of the ways they came to understand the society. (Lurie, 1990, p. 194)

Seth entered my school at the beginning of his 5th grade year. He was from Utah and had moved to the community due to his father’s employment. I had heard of Seth before I met him. He was one of the first children in the school’s history to be given detention on his first day in class. He was already named a “bad” boy and a “trouble-maker” by lunchtime. By the end of the day his name was met with the rolling of eyes and a sympathetic pat on the shoulder of his classroom teacher. Within a week Seth was referred to me as someone with a possible learning disability, ADHD (Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity) and as a boy who “needed reading!.”

When I met lanky, 12 year old brown-haired, brown eyed Seth, he was dressed in the requisite baggy jeans, large T-shirt and big black sneakers, with his forbidden-to-be-worn in school baseball hat clutched in his hand. Our first conversation was one-sided, me asking the questions and Seth answering in one-word grunts. He did not make eye contact. He did scan my room though, shelves of books labeled by genre, baskets and bins filled with magazines on the floor, and scattered pillows placed in different parts of the room. He eyed the prized big cushion-y reading chair and proceeded to squarely place himself in it. After our quick conversation Seth returned to his classroom. To my surprise he told his teacher he liked me and that he wanted to go back to “that room” again. Seth was in reading.

As long as we didn’t try to read or do schoolwork (“I don’t do school”) Seth and I got along famously. During the first month of reading support services Seth and I talked. Having three boys of my own, and having grown up with brothers and many male cousins, I spoke to Seth about my sons’ lives and my childhood. He looked through my sports magazines, made fun of some of my books calling them “girly books” or “books for babies,” and oftentimes would open random ones he would grab off shelves. He would read a page or two, make a ‘Humph’ sound, place it back on the shelf and walk away. We talked about his life in Utah, (he missed it) his new community (he didn’t think it was so bad) and sports (lacrosse was his sport of choice and football was his TV passion). He asked about my life and he asked about my boys’ lives since they were close in age.
As our relationship developed I found Seth to be humorous, interested in others, informed about newsworthy events (usually the more sensational types), and willing to do a bit of his assigned work. The more we met the more Seth’s work ethic grew. He completed assignments; kept track of due dates, and began to take some ownership of his learning. He didn’t become the “smart kid” in class but he did begin to hand in acceptable work somewhere within, or slightly past due dates.

WATCHING SETH-TEACHING ME

Since Seth was beginning to warm up to loosely participating in school he and I began to talk about designing a reading and writing project that would interest him and one he could share with his peers. My goal was to help “add the dominant literacy practices to his linguistic repertoire” (Street, 1997, p. 50). In other words, if I could get Seth to study something of interest to him, then I would be able to get Seth to participate in, and be successful with, what counted in school and he would be a good student. What I didn’t realize, as I embarked on this orchestrated journey with Seth, is that I would be getting what counted in school as literacy.

Seth’s topic of choice was the Columbine shootings (1999), a horrific act of violence, by students to students that had sent the country reeling. Seth read every newspaper, journal, and magazine article he could get his hands on. He came to my room during his lunch period to type and read. When she needed a break because he was “antsy” in class, his teacher sent Seth to me. He read the sensationalist stories and discussed how they were invoking fear by harping on the violent aspects of the attack. He compared news magazines and the information presented. He found newspapers lacking in both writing and information gathering. He talked about this topic incessantly. The boy who was thought of as having a “reading problem,” in the classroom, was reading and understanding the sophisticated materials usually read by adults. Seth became an expert on gun laws, the accessibility of guns on the Internet, and the lives of the two boys who had attacked the school.

Then Seth began to write. He read and reread his notes and data. He scanned pictures and studied maps. He plotted out the timeline of violence. I watched him, fear niggling in my brain; was he learning ‘how to’ from this topic immersion? Was I feeding some dark violence that lived within him? I watched him closely. I read what he wrote. I spoke with my administrator and I sought the school psychologist’s counsel. We monitored Seth and we let him write.

When he finished his thirty page paper, complete with illustrations, news photos, captions, and editorials, Seth asked to share his work at Assembly. This is a weekly whole school, community-building meeting where students had the opportunity to share hobbies, perform dance or gymnastic routines, and take part in presentations such as reader’s theater.

As we discussed his work and what he hoped to accomplish, Seth said that he felt his work was only appropriate for fourth and fifth graders. He felt the topic was too
upsetting for “little kids.” He believed he had something important to say and for his peers to hear. He signed up for the next Assembly. Before his presentation date, he asked permission to go and speak with each second and third grade teacher. As he met with each one he explained his project, showed them his work, shared his concerns and then left the teachers with the option to leave assembly when it was his turn. He had made sure that he was scheduled last. Every primary teacher opted to leave, but thanked Seth for his mature attitude and for caring about their students. Seth beamed.

It was time. Seth walked up to the front of the auditorium. He carried his paper, but did not refer to it. He paced back and forth and began talking to the students sitting in the auditorium. The fidgeting and whispers stopped. All eyes were on Seth. The audience was mesmerized. When he was finished he put his paper down. He stood still and began to discuss what this paper meant:

“You know, these guys left a lot of clues around that they were going to do this. There were bomb materials in the bedrooms, letters on their websites, and they talked about it…to a lot of people. No one stopped them. No one listened. No one heard them. They were made fun of by the jocks. They weren’t even welcome in their own groups. You know, no one is alone. If you’re feeling like you’re going crazy, talk to someone. If you can’t talk to your parents or they won’t listen, talk to a teacher, or your friends. And if your friend tells you that he’s going to do something stupid, then you have to tell someone. Columbine didn’t have to happen. There were grownups who didn’t listen. There were grownups who didn’t hear. There’s this gun store guy who’s in trouble because he gave Dylan and Klebolt the guns, and he’s going to jail, and it didn’t have to happen…Seth looked around the gymnasium, he did not smile…. It didn’t have to happen...That’s all I have to say.”

He received a standing ovation from his peers and the teachers.

Seth’s work left me breathless. Here was a fifth grader who delved deeply into a disturbing subject and came out a member of ‘the literacy club’ (Smith, 1986). But, beyond the work he accomplished, I was more amazed by what Seth and I learned and shared throughout his journey. Seth, viewed as a “behavior problem,” was placed in reading. Despite this, from home, school, local libraries and from Internet searches he brought in, read, referenced, and synthesized sophisticated materials to research the Columbine tragedy. Seth immersed himself in literacy genres in order to gather information central to a topic he was passionate about. Yet, within his classroom his teacher did not see this work ethic and in fact, Seth’s more lackadaisical behaviors took precedent over all of his academics. I was left with these facts:

Seth was an enigma.
Seth was a 5th grade student.
Seth was a ‘struggling’ reader and writer.
Seth was a boy.
CHAPTER 1

WHAT COUNTS AS LITERACY?

I realized important questions were being raised from these experiences. If both Bryan and Seth were viewed as having trouble with literacy, then:

- Why were they able to negotiate the materials they read?
- Where did they learn the literacy strategies that enabled them to comprehend an author or research a topic?
- Why was this ability not translating into the classroom?

And finally:

- Did the literacy conflict exist within the behaviors of Bryan, Seth and the other students I have worked with, or is it within the dynamics of the classroom, or the curriculum? Is it within us, the educators?

WHERE IS THE MISMATCH?

The contradiction between what Bryan and Seth could do when given a choice, and how they responded to school-based literacy assignments, was central to my questions about boys’ literacy practices. From my own experiences as a teacher and a parent, the dominant school-based view of literacy, referred to as “traditional schooling,” oftentimes looks for what the student cannot do, rather than what the students can do. Even in well-meaning, strength-focused classrooms, certain literacies are privileged and consequently other literacies are negated. The unspoken message students may be hearing is that what counts as literacy is not their “outside of school” literacies, such as horror stories and sensational news, but the school sanctioned “inside of school” literacies. Ira Shor (1992) explains that people begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings and that children naturally join the world around them: “Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us” (p.1). These experiences, and others like them, have led me to look at reading and writing as the meeting and negotiation of the multiple worlds of the students - the school world and their worlds outside of school. My first step was to lean in and listen to understand what the boys were doing during the reading and writing blocks throughout the day.

WHERE IT BEGAN

I have been the reading, remedial reading, supportive reading, and literacy teacher in various public schools. This has led me to work with students between the ages of six through sixteen who, according to standardized tests, teacher observations, and data collected from their daily classroom work, have been deemed to be reading “below grade level expectations.” More often than not, whatever my title was, wherever I was working, and whatever grade levels were deemed as my responsibility, the one thing I noticed is that the majority of my students were boys. It’s not that I didn’t see
WHAT COUNTS AS LITERACY?

girls and support them in their reading lives. It just seemed that they would meet the
criteria to “graduate” from the supportive reading programs and they would move
on. I found that the boys might graduate but by the next year, as they moved up in
grades, the teacher would become concerned that they weren’t keeping up with the
curriculum and back to the reading room they would come.

MY OBSERVATIONS

As the building literacy specialist I began to work with many of the boys when they
entered second grade in the Smith Street Elementary School. Many were receiving
literacy support services in the district’s primary school and the services were to be
continued upon entering the elementary school. My reading room was called the
“Reading Club” by the second graders. Many times these young boys would stop by
and wave to me, ask when they were coming again, and visit during lunch to pick out
and the *Treehouse Mysteries* (2001) were favorites. Reading was considered to be
something we all did in second grade and the excitement of new learning was palpable.
It wasn’t unusual for students who did not receive reading support to come to my room
to share books they had read, to ask if we could read together, or to pick out books that
they wanted to read. I had an “open door” policy that reflected how our school worked.

In early September as my second graders morphed into third graders they, for
the most part, continued to look forward to seeing me for reading support. Some
tastes had changed but in general both boys and girls were still members of the
reading club. However, As the year moved on and fall turned to winter and winter to
spring, the boys also began to change. I began to notice transformations in the boys’
behaviors, attitudes, and for many, dress. Whereas it was fun to come to the “reading
club” in second grade, by mid third grade it wasn’t such a ‘fun’ thing to do. It’s not
that the work changed, they still had hundreds of books to choose from, comfortable
places to sit, pillows, games, and computer access at their fingertips. No, the room
didn’t change but it seemed that their self-awareness did. The boys wanted to be with
other boys, they wanted to go on the computers, and they wanted to read magazines
with incredible and/or shocking pictures.

Their clothing began to change. Whereas superheroes emblazoned on tee shirts
was the second grade norm, baggier pants, bigger tee shirts with sports logos and
music references became the new standard. Some boys wore chains around their
necks. The popular culture of music and athletics began to take hold. Furthermore,
they didn’t seem to think reading was “cool” and they definitely didn’t want to be
seen as someone who *couldn’t* read, it seemed more likely they wanted to be viewed
as readers who *chose* not to read.

When these same boys entered my room they wanted to play games, not find
comfortable places to read and settle down with a book. They spoke of sports teams
and statistics, studied plays given to them by their coaches and repeated dialogue,
verbatim, from videos and TV shows they watched. They talked about newspaper
headlines they read, and playoff scores they memorized. They spoke of musical
groups and repeated lyrics to each other. They described adventures they had after
school and on the playing fields and they shared (complained) about the amount of
homework they had to do “after the game.” They talked and reacted, they showed
they knew a lot about various topics, yet this knowledge was not translating into the
classroom. These third grade boys were growing up and away. But, away from what?

I noticed that in addition to the boys’ verbal and physical resistance to reading, I
began to hear the term “boy books” and “girl books” peppered in their talk. Literature
choices, which were deemed acceptable in September, became “gendered” by April;
“That’s a girl book!”, “Do you have Sports Illustrated?”, and “There’s no boy books
here.” were comments I heard. It seemed that sitting down to read rather than draw,
play a game, talk or just “hang out” became a thing they “had to do” rather than a
personal option. Groans, pleas, “Do I have to?” and behaviors I viewed as being
“avoidance strategies” (not finding a book, continuing to talk when it was quiet reading
and writing time, and just sitting until direction was offered) became more prevalent as
the year continued. I felt our conversations were becoming one sided. I would initiate
a conference with my usual, “So, how’s it going?” or “What are you thinking?” and
the responses were often noncommittal, “It’s going O.K.,” “I’m not thinking much,”
and “Can I stop now?” The boys were distant, disengaged, and now I realized,
disenfranchised. They were sitting in their classrooms, wandering into my reading
room, doing what was expected of them, yet they weren’t connected and they weren’t
comfortable. I realized that changes needed to be made; changes in my thinking, my
planning and my ways of doing literacy. It wasn’t a me versus them situation, in my
mind it had become a me and them equation where the sum of this work would equal
a new way of knowing and being in an equitable literacy community.

RETHINKING MY LITERACY WORLD

In my teaching life I recognize reading as a social practice; to learn to read is to
learn sets of language practices which allow us to make social sense of the vastly
different forms of printed materials we encounter daily. Reading is not always
the same. We make different reading decisions, dependent upon the text and our
purpose for reading it. Undoubtedly our gendered histories play a significant role
in defining what positions we do take up in relation to various texts (Gilbert, 1993).

I understand that the literacy experiences my students encountered in their
lives are the resources they bring to their schooling experiences. They may learn
their languages in their home or see or don’t see texts such as newspapers, books,
magazines, and journals being read. They may or may not experience how writing
brings meaning to a particular situation or emotion. These literacy practices (Barton
1994; Street 1984, 1997) translate into observable literate behaviors showing me
what they understand about how reading and writing works in their lives.

Developing this new social and language learning context in my teaching life
compelled me to regenerate the theories and practices I had relied upon in the past. In
addition I had to create a personal praxis that informed and empowered my teaching and learning. I began to lean in and listen to the boys as they read, wrote and spoke. I began to reflect upon what it means to be a boy and a reader, a boy and a writer and how that self-knowledge, culled from instructional and social learning, evolves into the boys’ literate identities.

CHRIS

Allow me to share one more story from my college teaching that articulates the disconnect that may begin in elementary school and grow through an educational career until it is a habit of mind that becomes the method for ‘doing’ school:

Chris was an undergraduate education student, pursuing his Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education, and a star lacrosse player. He was in my literacy methods class and was often puzzled about the process of teaching reading and writing to young students. One day we were having a conversation about favorite books and the importance of bringing our reading lives into the classroom. Being the model of what a reader does is key in inviting all of the students into the reading club (Smith, 1986). Chris told the class he doesn’t read. In fact he stopped reading years ago, other than the assignments that were required for college classes, and even those were more of a skimming than a read:

I mean, no disrespect intended, but seriously, I stopped reading in elementary school. I ran out of time. There wasn’t anything to read. In 5th grade I was placed in the low group. Thank goodness some of my traveling [lacrosse] teammates were with me. It became a place where we could hang out and not read. Chris chuckles.

Chris’s understanding of reading fascinated me. I asked him to tell us when reading was good and when it became something he didn’t want to do anymore:

I used to love to be read to. Every night I would ask my mom to read me The Princess and the Pea (1985) (the students smiled, some chuckled). No, seriously, when I was in grade school that was my favorite story. I mean, come on, how could that Princess feel that pea?? It’s impossible!!! (Chris is laughing, as are some of the students, who are also nodding in apparent agreement). I guess it was in 4th grade first. All of a sudden I couldn’t remember information when we took tests. We were reading textbooks by then and there would be chapter tests. I would do the homework, you know read and answer the questions. Then the test would come, I would fail it. I couldn’t remember anything. All of a sudden I wasn’t a reader anymore.

Chris is sharing a classic example of when the reading demands change, when the kinds of processes that are required are no longer familiar the breakdown of comprehension occurs. Chris is also addressing how easily and painfully a young reader’s self-conception can turn from positive to negative. Chris asked his mother
to stop reading to him. The content area texts were difficult to comprehend and relegated him to the ‘low group.’ Reading, which was once enjoyable and a shared process, was now the enemy. It was where his alleged weakness became public.

Our conversation continued and we discussed that what counts as reading can be interpreted in many ways. Reading lacrosse magazines and journals, studying game plays, memorizing statistics are all important literacies in which we participate. But, as Chris succinctly put it, “Yeah, but that kind of reading doesn’t help you pass the test.”

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: CRITICAL TEACHING

I believe that being a critical researcher means studying how decisions are made, how a climate is created, how interactions take place, and the ways we teach either perpetuate or disrupt hierarchies based on race, class, or gender. Reflecting on Bryan, Seth, and Chris’ experiences, I see an internal belief system about what ‘counts’ as literacy in their lives. For Bryan it was writing like a favorite author. For Seth it was the ability to focus his attention and energies on his project because of his passion about a newsworthy topic. Chris clearly articulated what happened to him as a reader and learner. His self-reflection speaks volumes as to what he experienced and understood about being a reader throughout school. The male students who entered and exited my classroom had preconceived notions of what counted as literacy and also what counted for them in the social realm of their lives. Aligning themselves as readers of specific texts, knowing scores and plays for various sports, and making sure that those around them knew that they knew what counted as literacy was seen and heard in their interactions with texts and each other. As Gallas (1998, p. 13-14) so eloquently writes,

“(children) are experimenting in the laboratory of the classroom … These children provide us with a mirror within which to contemplate both how they approach and negotiate the murky world of social relations, and how we, as adults, are approaching it. It is sometimes a disturbing reflection for us to consider, but it is always a provocative one” (p. 13-14).

My research was emerging in response to a need I had as a teacher to discover more just and equitable ways of teaching all my students, and specifically to explore the perpetuation of the “boys will be boys” illusion.

I decided to focus on third grade boys because that was the age where I noticed not only changes in their literacy choices but also in the ways they interacted with each other and with me as their literacy teacher. My research question emerged as “In what ways are the third grade boys identities as readers and writers co-constructed, sustained, maintained and at times constrained in classroom environments?”

By examining how knowledge, language, experience, and power are central to society and the classroom and by bringing a critical theoretical analysis to the study site, I hoped to be able to look from multiple perspectives at the boys’ relationships to
WHAT COUNTS AS LITERACY?

texts, peers, and teachers. According to McLaren (1989, p. 169) “Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not.”

It was time to begin to explore these questions.

TEACHER REFLECTION SECTION: WHAT COUNTS AS LITERACY?

These experiences have led me to think about what counts as literacy. As I’ve pondered this question I found that the more I thought about literacy, the more I found that my definition broadened. It began to encompass literacy as a book, a story, a painting, a song, a poem, a dance, a slide under a microscope, a mathematical formula.

I thought of text as dialogue and conversation around the texts (Gallas, 1998). Text in all its forms reflects the concept of “worldmaking,” (Cobb, 1994), the place where the child attempts to reconcile the outer (textual) worlds of their reality with the inner worlds of reflection and imagination. What better place to meet a student but at the crossroads of these worlds?

When considering the broad definition of literacy as the starting point toward rethinking your teaching/classroom world, consider the following questions:

1. How do you envision literacy? How do you live your literacy?
   a. What kind of a reader are you?
   b. Who are you as a writer? When do you write? Why do you write?
   c. What books count as literature to you? Brainstorm a list of favorite books in your life and in the life of your classroom. What does the list tell you about yourself and your literacies? What genres are you most passionate about? Think about why you chose them? What do you hope to accomplish by reading these books and with, or to, your students?

2. Look around your classroom, what books are on display, what titles are available for all of your students? What are your invitations to your students? How are the invitations connected to the curriculum? Connected to the students?

3. Reread your reflections. Circle some of the key words, sentences, phrases that seem to be the heartbeat of your literacy beliefs. What have you learned about yourself as a reader, writer, thinker, and teacher? What is one issue or opinion that you want to think more deeply about? Write a brief response in your notebook.

NOTES

1 Previous school record annotations
2 Audio/video transcriptions
CHAPTER 1

TEACHER REFLECTION SECTION NOTES
CHAPTER 2

“DOING SCHOOL”: WHAT COUNTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Anyone who has spent time around children and observed them carefully, or really remembers what it was to be a child, knows that childhood is a separate culture, with its own, largely oral, literature. Childhood, in this sense, is a primitive society—or rather, several primitive societies leading into the other (Lurie, 1990, p. 194).

THE SETTING: THE SMITH STREET ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The Smith Street Elementary School, a second through fifth grade building, is located on the residential streets of a middle class community on Long Island. It is part of a district that has a primary and two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school. In order to “encourage, expose, and deliberately teach literacy” (Bausch, 1996), teachers in the Smith Street Elementary School primarily use authentic literature, sometimes called “trade books,” as opposed to relying only on text books for their content area instruction. Their classroom libraries include picture books, chapter books, poetry anthologies, and a wide variety of content area materials (journals, non-fiction texts, and magazines) that emphasize the integration of subjects and the use of reading and writing for a variety of real and functional purposes (Bausch, 1996). The hallways are filled with the work of the children. One bulletin board is covered with diagrams created by the class after they completed their dinosaur dig as part of their unit of study. Another one has shadow images of the students’ profiles with “Guess Who I Am?” riddles next to each one. The hallways are carpeted, as are sections of the classrooms. Some rooms boast couches and easy chairs and pillows and plants. Books are stored in bins, shelves, and on windowsills. Students will often be seen working collaboratively in the hallways, sitting in cozy corners of the classroom, and sprawled on pillows, chairs, and desks.

Posters and bulletin boards fill the three wings of the school. There is the second grade wing, third grade wing and fourth and fifth grade wing. Two additional second grade classrooms had been built onto the school to meet the increasing enrollment of this district. A fifth grade class has moved into the second grade wing in order to encourage collaborative “big buddy” work between the two grades. The school has an all purpose room used for assemblies and special presentations, a gymnasium with a stage, an award winning library, a music room, and an instrument instruction room.
CHAPTER 2

THE TEACHER

This third grade classroom was selected because Ms. Garret (Liz) had more than 20 years of experience in this school and maintained a balanced literacy approach across her instructional practices. Furthermore, she possessed a strong philosophical stance that evinced an equitable and respectful community-based learning environment that maximized collaboration and conversation. Much of the curriculum was executed in a workshop format (Graves, 1982) to encourage this cooperative community. The literacy program included multiple opportunities for reading and writing individually, within groups, and with teacher direction. Multiple literacy practices were integrated across the curriculum in thematic units of study.

THE CLASSROOM

I have counted more than twenty-five lists on Liz’s walls. There are charts of numbers, mathematical processes, science vocabulary, author share lists, “specials” (instrument lessons, supportive services, health office visits) calendars, computer use directions. “All About Me” posters, student names, birthdays, the alphabet, book advertisements, logo directions, bus routes, word study anomalies written in a “Do you believe….?” format, and a quilt made by a previous class cover doors, cabinets and bulletin boards. The desks are sometimes set up as tables where four or five students are grouped together, other times the children create a big square around the classroom. The only person who does not have a desk in the classroom is Liz because it “took up too much room.”

Liz begins each day with a morning meeting where she reviews the days’ schedule, student responsibilities, and content area work. Liz is intentional about establishing particular social practices during her morning meeting. She slowly transformed her classroom into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), taking the time to reflect on learning experiences with the students, verbalizing her own learning processes and “noticing” out loud what she saw the students doing as a method of validating their talk, collaboration, and inquiries. She intentionally highlights student strengths and makes sure everyone knows who the experts are – experts at using technology, drawing pictures, telling stories, dramatizing stories, reading, writing, illustrating, and organizing routines. Inquiry groups are another way students collaborated, problem-solved, and took responsibility for making learning decisions based on their interests, needs, and teacher expectations. What I found provocative about this structure were the ways in which Liz always made spaces for the children to contribute to the classroom community. The goal was to develop and construct a safe place where learning, stretching, attempting, and nurturing prevailed.

There is a daily read aloud of a text that is connected to their units of study, or an upcoming holiday, read with great enthusiasm by Liz. While Liz had a schedule she was very flexible and made the most of impromptu visits from pets brought in from home, family members who were visiting, surprise visits from families moving
into the district, and teachers coming in to observe. With each new experience and event there was the accompanying talking, reading, drawing, and writing about the particular subject at hand.

**LIZ’S DIALOGIC CURRICULUM: VOICES HEARD**

To make sense of the social and language filled nature of Liz’s classroom I turn to the complex landscape of discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dyson, 1990) where students have many opportunities to shape the curriculum and contribute to the social life of the classroom by positioning themselves as literacy and language practitioners in various contexts. Gee (1989) describes (capital D) Discourse as an “identity kit” which comes “complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p.1). In Liz’s classroom the students are encouraged to take responsibility for the organization of classroom resources, resolution of interpersonal disputes, planning of field trips, as well as curriculum-based activities. Every classroom event is approached in the same open-ended and exploratory way in this inquiry-oriented classroom.

Equally important is the dialogic mode of interaction pervasive in the life of such a community. Dialogue plays a central mediating role since it is the principal means of arriving at a common understanding of whatever question is at issue (Well, 2000). It is a method through which the students are able to share their conceptions, verify or test their understandings, and identify areas of common knowledge or of difference. This is particularly true when “dialogue” is understood to include a range of communicative acts, gestures, or facial expressions, and not only or always spoken words. Dialogic concept building is evident in Liz’s interaction with Evan in the computer lab:

**COMPUTER LAB: WRITING WORKSHOP**

*Computer lab time is over and it is time for the class to save their work, turn off the computers, and gather up their notebooks, pencils, and other writing tools. Liz claps her hands in rhythm and all of the children repeat the pattern. When they are all looking at her she begins to speak in her soft voice:*

Liz: “O.K. third graders, it’s time to gather your things because another class is coming in. Let’s think about what we have to do.”

*She pauses a few seconds giving the class time to think about their responsibilities.*

*As she lists what steps need to be taken Liz raises her fingers in order of the count.*

“You have to save your work. Take out your discs. Place them in your folders. Gather your notebooks and writing tools and get on line. I will come around to see if anyone needs help.”
Liz walks around the computer lab classroom pausing to speak to a child, answer a question, or to encourage them to finish what they are doing. She usually places her hand on their shoulder as they are speaking to her and lowers her head or crouches down so she is even with the speaker. Evan has come over to her because he cannot save his work. It continues to disappear when he types in save. Liz listens to his explanation and then walks with him back toward his computer:

**Liz:** “O.K. walk me through what you have done so far.”

**Evan:** “See, I hit this [the keys] and nothing happens. I took out my disc and then I put it back in and see (he is performing the steps again as he is explaining to Liz) it doesn’t work.” The screen is blank.

**Liz:** “Hmmm, so it looks like you have done all of the steps.”

**Evan:** “Yep.”

**Liz:** “Well, what do you think you should do?”

Through this simple question Liz is handing over responsibility to Evan and giving him the space to be able to problem-solve on his own.

**Evan:** “I don’t know……..maybe I should see if I have it on my disc?”

**Liz:** “That sounds like a good idea. What will you do?”

Again, an invitation for Evan to think about his problem and to construct a solution.

**Evan:** “I’ll try my disc on another computer. This way if it comes up I’ll know it’s the computer and it’s not me.” He is smiling as he’s speaking.

Liz is nodding in agreement as Evan explains:

**Liz:** “O.K. try that and if you have any other questions, let me know.”

Evan walks over to another computer

Liz has shared with me that at the very beginning of school she tells the children that she expects them to be able to do certain things independently and will demonstrate, give support, and the ‘gift of time’ until they are able to do the new task. She explained that she works very hard on developing a “rich, respectful community of friends and learners” in her classroom and she will take as much time as needed to get that in place, because “if it’s not in place no real learning can happen in the classroom.”

Goodwin (1990) explains this type of interaction as a central component to the organization of culture as well as social organization:

In order to coordinate their behavior with that of their co-participants, human beings must display to each other what they are doing and how they expect others to participate in the activity of the moment (Garfinkel, 1967). Interaction thus constitutes a central place where members of a society collaboratively establish how relevant events are to be interpreted, and moreover use such
displays of meaningfulness as a constitutive feature of the activities in which they engage. (p.1-2)

As we can see dialogue is not simply talk or the sharing of ideas. It is a structured, extended process leading to new insights and deep knowledge and understanding and, ultimately, better practice. There is a strategic orientation implicit in dialogue aimed at advancing beyond participants’ initial stages of knowledge and belief. As Bereiter and Scardamalia note:

“In every kind of knowledge-based, progressive organization, new knowledge and new directions are forged through dialogue... The dialogue in Knowledge Age organizations is not principally concerned with narrative, exposition, argument, and persuasion (the stand-by’s of traditional rhetoric) but with solving problems and developing new ideas” (2005).

Bereiter and Scardamalia (2005) define ‘dialogic literacy’ as the ability to engage productively in conversation where the purpose is to generate new knowledge and understanding. It is “the fundamental literacy” for a knowledge driven society. From a dialogic perspective dialogue is not simply talk or the sharing of ideas. It is a structured, extended process leading to new insights, deep knowledge and understanding and, ultimately, better practice (Abbey, 2004). This is consistent with the Vygotskian tradition and Bruner’s concept of scaffolding. Many educators’ experiences in developing classroom dialogue over the last few decades (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Majake 2008; Negueruela-Azarola, E. 2011; Varelas, Kane, & Pappas, 2009) have moved beyond the old idea that reading and writing are the only ‘real’ work. A dialogically focused curriculum focuses upon the work of students being prepared for and participating in extended dialogue that goes far more deeply (than may be customary) into a subject area, issue, or problem.

If we look at this interaction through the lens of dialogic teaching we can see that Liz is creating an opportunity for Evan to depend on his own problem-solving abilities through the art of reflective questioning. Whereas Evan is not independently accomplished at performing this task of saving his information to the disc, but through the scaffolding questioning technique that Liz employs he is able to construct conclusions and design a workable solution using his experiential knowledge. Evan is discovering what he can accomplish through Liz’s intentional dialogical responses.

MEET “THE BOYS”
THE ARTIC SONG PROJECT

In this next section I will be sharing my anecdotal notes and analysis as I introduce each participating boys. As we begin to consider what counts as literacy, one of the first steps is to see what kinds of literacy processes are happening in the classroom.
It is a wintry Wednesday morning at the Smith Street Elementary School. The afternoon schedule on the white board has whole school assembly, 2:00 p.m., written in red. As the culminating celebration for the completion of the third grade artic unit the class will be singing the song “Artic Friends,” written by Liz to the tune of “Jingle Bells,” at the weekly school assembly. The lyrics have been printed and pasted onto sheets of white paper for each student. Their writing workshop assignment for today is to work on the border of the paper that will hold the lyrics of the song. Each student is invited to draw images of the animal they have studied during the past month along the edge of the paper. Artic animal picture books, rulers, pencils, crayon boxes, and markers are strewn across many of the desks. The children are working quietly, the buzz of voices are at a low hum. I can see some of the children are borrowing crayons and books; they are reaching across desks with questioning glances. Other students are standing at the edges of the desks, holding their papers in front of them, showing their friend what they have drawn so far.

DANNY

Danny sits at his desk with his left hand cupping his chin, looking at the large, blank square piece of paper on his desk. He needs to decorate the entire border of his paper with illustrations from his artic animal study. He stares intently at the paper, his right hand holding his pencil. He then looks up and his eyes move around the classroom, watching the other students as they begin their illustrations. Rebecca, sitting across from him, has been working on her illustrations since Liz explained the directions. Danny looks over at her paper and comments on Rebecca’s drawing, telling her that she has left off the tail of her fox:
Danny: “You’re missing the tail.”

Rebecca doesn’t respond. She continues to draw.

Danny (a little louder): “You’re missing the tail.”

Rebecca: “I know. I’m not done yet.”

She, again, does not look up while she speaks. Danny continues to watch her. When she adds the tail to the fox’s body, Danny releases his chin, lets out a sigh and says “Finally.” He then places his left hand on the paper to hold it in place and begins to create an artic fox in the upper right corner of his paper.

Danny is a “hockey nut” as both he and his friends describe him. He plays on a couple of hockey teams, attends professional games with his family, and often talks about the games that were on television the night before. He loves to play other sports too and is on many different teams throughout the year. When it is time for recess many of the boys in the class gather around Danny and ask what game they are playing and if they can be on his team before they go out in the field.

Danny’s parents describe him as “sweet, kind, sensitive, athletic, but not an “academic” risk taker. His reading and writing are “average” and part of his difficulties with literacy lie in his “need for speed” in order to finish the assignment.1 Liz describes Danny as “energetic, kind and curious.” Some goals Liz discusses with Danny include improving and expanding his work, reminding himself to stay with the group during meetings, making eye contact with the person speaking, and developing patience with the process of selecting appropriate material for independent reading. Danny does well with the math program but “written expression, unless it is a retelling of an exciting sport event, can be hard for Danny.”

I met Danny the year before when he came to my reading room as a second grade student who needed extra literacy support. Danny hated coming. He did not like being considered a “bad” reader (his words) and would spend the first few minutes of our time together explaining why he did not want to read, did not need to read, and would really rather be back in his classroom because he was missing something really important. By midyear his parents asked that he not attend the supportive literacy program because his self-esteem was being negatively affected. When Danny would see me in the hallway for the rest of the year he would say hello and ask when he could come back into reading.

ALEC

Alec sits at his desk tapping a ruler against his head as he looks at his paper. There are polar bears, artic foxes, and owls lining the edges of his paper. He has begun to color some of the animals in and is near completion of the assignment. Aly, one of Alec’s table partners, sits next to Alec. She glances over at the border on his sheet of paper

Aly: “Looks good.”

Alec (smiling): “Yours looks good too.”
Aly smiles in return as she picks up her crayon and colors another part of an animal on the border. Alec looks over his paper; he holds it up in front of him, turning it around so each side faces him as his eyes scan each illustration. When he notices a foot not colored in, he “tsks” to himself, puts the paper down on his desk, and colors in the area.

Liz describes Alec as “fun to learn with,” “conscientious” and “responsible.” Some goals Liz has identified for Alec is for him to stretch toward “trusting and applying the learning strategies he’s developed” and to “listen carefully to (or read) directions, stop and think about them and then follow through.” Liz sees Alec as a positive and integral member of the classroom community. He’s kind and considerate. She does view his reticence to be a ‘risk taker’ as another goal to gently move toward and one that will be achieved as Alec’s confidence increases.

Alec participates in many sports and often cannot make all of the “play dates” with his friends after school because he has a team practice or karate lessons. His father and mother are involved in the school and take turns coming into the classroom once a week to play the grade-wide math games with the children in the class. Alec’s parents shared that Alec is known as a “good boy” in the classroom. He is quiet, respectful, serious, and cooperative. He follows the directions given by the teacher, gets along well with the children in the class, has a lot of friends and speaks of his play dates with different boys in and out of the class.
T.J. is sitting at his desk across the room. He is almost done with his illustrations. Polar bears line the top of his page and the left side. Artic foxes are peeking out from the bottom border. An illustrated artic animal book is open to the last page as T.J. refers to it while he finishes his last animal.

Liz describes T.J. as “friendly and enthusiastic” with the tendency to think, speak, and act quickly. According to Liz’s assessments he is becoming a “stronger reader,” one who can read a variety of reading materials and apply strategies flexibly as he “expects things to make sense as he reads.” T.J. has been known to be active in this school. He likes to share his out of school adventures and enjoys holding his audiences’ attention by embellishing his stories with fantastic details. At times, this works against him and he receives negative attention from his peers. His behaviors have led him to being asked to leave whole school assemblies and cooperative groups because of his disruptiveness and struggle with sharing the work time with the children he is working with. Some of Liz’s and T.J.’s goals have been for T.J. to give himself “time to think things through” when he is explaining and to “catch comments that won’t be appropriate.”

T.J.’s mother describes him as a boy who is “an eager learner,” but “has at times, had problems focusing and listening.” He “likes to always be on the move” and “doesn’t like to be bored.” His hobbies include riding his bike and playing Nintendo but though he is “able to read well when he puts his mind to it he doesn’t care to” and “would rather watch T.V.” His mother does describe his writing abilities as “good” and goes on to write in the interview that he “does good stories once directed.”