

Nourishing Conversations: Urban Adolescents, Literacy, and Democratic Society

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This essay explores the implications of literacy instruction aimed at “nourishing conversations” about life experience in literacy classrooms (Robinson, 1991, p. 264). Drawing on literacy projects conducted in Saginaw, Michigan and Austin, Texas, I examine these projects from three points of view: learning from inquiry, valuing the agency students can manage, and understanding “a mess called democracy” (Fine, 1991, p. 207). In this way, I suggest the nature of the students’ experiences in these projects, emphasizing the sense that students made of their lives when they were allowed to raise their voices through literacy and to project images of urban adolescent life. Finally, I explore the relationships between the opportunity to use literacy for these purposes and participation in democratic society, arguing that curriculum in which adolescents are encouraged to investigate their life experiences engages them in democratic life.

As the video camera comes into focus, Jason introduces himself as the anchor for the WMS News program he and his classmates are producing, "My issue is life," he says, "which, as you know, is a pretty big topic." He continues, "Most people live their lives based upon their goals or their religion. They don't know what life means because they haven't experienced that much." As anchor, he introduces his classmates and provides a tour of his classroom. The camera follows Jason as he points out the room's setup. "This is where we work together," he says pointing to the carpeted area where class meetings are held. "This is where we help each other," showing the round tables that serve as desks. He concludes, gesturing to the whole room, "This is where we converse."

THIS VIDEO PROJECT, conducted in Audrey Appelsies' sixth-grade classes in Austin, Texas, resulted from a collaborative effort to create places for students to "converse" about their lives: to inquire, read, write, and share their findings. It is an example of a literacy curriculum in which students make public their questions about the experiences that shape their lives and join the conversations upon which, as Dewey (1916) wrote, democracy is based. In his opening remarks, Jason, an African American middle school student, points to the artifacts of community established in such contexts: the places in the room where students talk to, work with, and help each other. A spontaneous expression of Jason's sense of his classroom, his introduction speaks volumes about the possibilities made available when students can investigate "life," a big topic for which they have, in contrast to Jason's statement, more experience than they are generally aware.

Over the past several years, my work as a teacher and researcher has been devoted to exploring the ways in which such projects make visible the implications of literacy viewed as social practice. Within the constraints of urban schools (in Saginaw, Michigan and Austin, Texas), these projects have attempted to take seriously the notion that literacy is vitally connected to personal and public empowerment; to the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which literate abilities are acquired; and to the development of a more inclusive, democratic society. Underlying these aims are a series of theoretical and practical assumptions about literacy, school, and the nature of democratic society:

1. Literacy learning is a social process whereby learners inherit, appropriate, and transform the language of others (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1991).
2. Literacy learning takes place most effectively in classrooms where collaborative exchanges are welcomed, where teachers' and students' knowledge, beliefs, and values are honored (Dyson, 1994; Moll, 1990).
3. Classrooms open to such exchanges create spaces where students and teachers can explore together their places in the social world and where these positions can be revised, amended, or transformed (Bruner, 1986; Dewey, 1916; Greene, 1988; Robinson & Stock, 1991).
4. Literate practices conceived within a framework of democratic society invite students, especially those marginalized in other social and political venues, to partake in learning and other social activities as active agents in their lived worlds (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1988).

These assumptions are grounded in contemporary theories of schooling, society, and literacy education, and they suggest that the aims of education ought to concern the development of individuals who appreciate multiple perspectives and who draw on these perspectives for the conduct of social life (Bruner, 1986). Beyond this, educating students must also concern itself with the institutional and political relations that push some students and some schools to the fringes where too often agency is denied and democracy suspended. In such circumstances, schools may be driven to increase test scores at the expense of other, more meaningful educational experiences; they may rely on instructional practices that overemphasize memorization or discreet skills, leaving little opportunity for student choice or critical reflection (Fine, 1991). Exile to the fringes has also resulted in a devaluing of the local knowledge that students acquire outside of school, including knowledge of ineffective social institutions, family survival (and disintegration), health issues, and traditional knowledge or community history (Fine, 1991; Greene, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Maxine Greene (1993) has argued that in order to redress such exclusion, students need opportunities to articulate their stories, questioning how their lives are shaped by experience, and opportunities to find constructive ways to participate in society. Examining the hows and whys of life's experiences within a context that supports the development of critical capacities creates the possibilities for action and change that lie at the heart of a democratic community (Greene, 1993).

To address these theoretical and political aspects of literacy, the projects presented here have attempted to create curricular spaces that are dialogic in nature, aimed at investigating the life experiences of students, and centered on the development of literate abilities consistent with these assumptions about the meaning of literacy itself (Robinson, 1991; Stock, 1995). In Saginaw, I participated for 3 years in a collaborative enterprise with the Saginaw public schools and the University of Michigan's Center for Educational Improvement through Collaboration (CEIC).¹ An ongoing university and school partnership, the project involved examining current practice and efforts to improve the kinds of literacy instruction provided to students. During my tenure, I lived, worked, co-taught, and conducted research with English teachers at Saginaw's two high schools. Approximately 120 students at each school participated in the project from the 10th through the 12th grade. Each year, the curriculum was guided by a yearlong theme: Who am I? What dilemmas do I face? and What do I want to say to my community? Some classroom activities provided opportunities for students of diverse racial and ethnic background to work collaboratively, a significant change for a community with a history of racial tension. During their last year in high

1. Under the direction of Jay L. Robinson, the CEIC brought together University of Michigan and Saginaw public school faculty to examine student assessment, language arts curriculum, and community and school partnerships. Begun in 1986, this partnership also created a schoolwide assessment of writing, reorganized the English curriculum (in part by untracking the system), and developed an environmental project in which students conducted multiyear water quality studies of the Saginaw River.

school, for example, students from the two high schools wrote, edited, and organized an anthology of student work, *Footsteps: Looking Back, Moving On*.

Saginaw, like many Rust Belt cities, has undergone economic demise and the subsequent attempts to rebuild its economic base. Over the past 25 years, downsizing by General Motors left an increasing number of its citizens without stable employment. In addition, white flight to the suburbs around the city has changed the demographics of its public schools. Of its two high schools, Arthur Hill served a student population that was approximately 60% European American and 35% African American, with the remaining percentage consisting primarily of Asian American students and a growing Mexican American population (a result of migrant labor settling in the area). Its students came primarily from working- and middle-class families. Saginaw High School, by contrast, housed the greatest proportion of the city's African American population. Approximately 97% of its students were African American, with a small population of European American and Mexican American students. Its students lived in primarily low-income and working-class homes. The school district's open-door policy meant that some African American students transferred to Arthur Hill because of its reputation as a "better" school. However, both schools offered students safe learning environments, despite some myths to the contrary, and a rigorous, comprehensive high school curriculum. The students involved in the CEIC projects in Saginaw intentionally represented the cross-section of each school's population. All classes were heterogeneously grouped based on the ethnic and academic status of the students at each school.

In Austin, I have been involved in a nationwide project entitled Write for Your Life, a network of university and school teachers working collaboratively to develop curricula aimed at investigating issues that affect students health and well-being.² During the 1995–1996 school year, the Austin project was implemented in Audrey Appelsies' sixth-grade language arts classes, and her 65 students were invited to examine their personal and community experiences, identifying specific social issues they wished to study further. Students then conducted inquiry guided by questions of their own choosing, using an I-Search format (Macrorie, 1984). In addition, each class constructed a service learning project that reflected the broad themes and interests of the class and that, in some way, made public the students' learning.

Audrey taught at one of Austin's smaller middle schools, located in a neighborhood transformed by the city's largest enclosed shopping mall and a major interstate freeway that bisects the school's geographic boundaries. The students who attend this middle school live in low-socioeconomic homes. De-

2. Funded by a grant from the Bingham Trust and Michigan State University, Write for Your Life is codirected by Patricia Stock (Michigan State University), Janet Swenson (Michigan State University), and David Schaafsma (Teachers College, Columbia University). During the 1995–1996 academic year, there were five Write for Your Life sites, in Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, Georgia, and Texas.

mographically, they represented the profile of many schools in the Southwest: 64% of the students were Hispanic (primarily, but not exclusively of Mexican origin), 24% were African American, and 12% were European American. In addition, the school hosted Austin's only bilingual program for middle school students. The school was orderly, well maintained, and considered safe by most students and teachers, despite a reputation influenced by crime in the surrounding neighborhoods.

In both projects, the curriculum emphasized the use of literacy for social and reflective purposes. Reading, writing, sharing, and publishing the results of their inquiries, students struggled to identify significant life events and the meanings these events held for them. For example, during the 10th grade, students at Saginaw High participated in a cross-age tutoring project in which they constructed and implemented literacy lessons with first and second graders. In addition, they composed case studies of their tutees based on the fieldnotes they compiled after each tutoring session and wrote stories that their elementary counterparts illustrated. Through their case studies, students necessarily grappled with questions of what it means to learn, why it is important to become literate, and how learning can be assessed. Immersion in such questions asked students not only to use the literacy skills they were acquiring in the service of others but also to examine an important aspect of their own growing-up experiences.

My efforts as a researcher have been to explore the significance of such projects on teachers, students, and prevailing notions of literacy. Both projects have drawn on ethnographic and teacher-research methods for data collection and analysis. I was a regular participant-observer in all of the classrooms, recording events and interactions with students in fieldnotes and collecting students' written products (i.e., written essays, journals, notes, and other assignments). In addition, I helped construct and teach specific units in each of the projects. The written texts and examples of specific classroom activities from Saginaw were drawn from the wealth of data gathered during my 3 years of research and teaching in this community. Data included audio and videotapes of activities related to specific classroom activities, written artifacts (from both students and teachers), student interviews, teacher interviews, student surveys, and other written responses to the curriculum. In the Austin project, similar methods were used, although the scope of the study in Audrey's classrooms was smaller and was conducted over a single academic year. Data for this project included texts students wrote for the project, student surveys, and group projects the students developed. In addition, Audrey and I identified 12 focal students who were interviewed about their participation, their perceptions of the project, and their assessment of their literacy learning during the school year.

For this article, I explore what students do when they try to tell their stories and extend their voices into the literate world. What supports these students' attempts? What sustains them? What implications do their texts and their voices have for those of us who study literacy? What do these students teach us about teaching them? How do their stories shape our understanding of being and

becoming literate? I have selected examples that illustrate the uses students made of the invitation to explore their life experiences. The texts represent moments of insight that students shared with their teachers and classmates. They also reflect the broad range of interests and abilities students brought to their inquiries. With this in mind, the analytical aim has been to illustrate the possibilities of such curriculum and the ways that students' insights into their own lives or their classrooms can inform theories of literacy as social practice. This view of literacy entails, as Jay Robinson (1991) has written, "the empowerment of individuals to speak freely in such voices as they have about matters that concern them, matters of importance, so that conversations may be nourished" (p. 264). It is also deeply connected to the kind of education aimed toward creating spaces for students to participate actively in the shaping of democratic life (Greene, 1988).

I have organized the essay around three headings: (a) Learning From Inquiry, (b) Valuing Student Agency, and (c) Understanding "A Mess Called Democracy" (Fine, 1991, p. 207). Through these topic-centered sections, I suggest the nature of the students' experiences in these projects, emphasizing the sense that students made of their lives when they were allowed to raise their voices through literacy and to project images of urban adolescent life. I have drawn on students' written texts, their commentary on their experiences, descriptions of various activities that clearly depict how the curriculum invited students to use literacy, and their responses to these invitations. These examples also suggest how such opportunities can help researchers and educators understand the purposes of becoming literate. Specifically, the work and words of the students as they investigate their experiences or struggle to put their insights into meaningful form create a portrait of what it can mean to nourish democratic conversations in literacy classrooms.

Learning From Inquiry

In the attempt to construct classroom environments that invite students to read and write about what matters to them in their own voices, my work in Saginaw and in Austin has been heavily invested in student inquiry. These inquiries have taken various forms – thematic units (e.g., Who am I in school?); yearlong reading and writing workshops culminating in the publication of students' stories, poems, or essays; semester-long research projects such as Write for Your Life that included more typical forms of student research; and class projects arising from specific events (e.g., a survey of students' attitudes about the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and a school census conducted by students for the schools' accreditation). Students' literacy activities included writing biographies of family members, reading and analyzing professional case studies as models, writing and conducting interviews, reading and writing children's stories, composing I-Search reports, producing the wms News video, and organizing the class anthology. In

other words, inquiry in these classrooms was broadly conceived as the means by which students might draw on various reading and writing activities to make sense of some aspect of their own experiences.

It is in the words of students that the meaning of these classroom experiences comes to the surface. For example, Morris wrote of the first grader, Tonio, he had tutored:

Tonio was very respectful and I know he will be a nice young man when he grows up and that he will be a father when has a family. And not leave them like his father did. I know how it feels to not know your father and then find out he left you and your mother because he felt that he couldn't take care of you.

Reading Morris's words, we can imagine the conversations that this cross-age tutoring project nourished between two African American boys. We can imagine the communal bonds Morris felt for his young protégé and the kind of world Morris attempted to create for him. Morris's case study, in this sense, not only reports on Tonio as a reader (he said, for example, that Tonio was "a quick learner" and "pays attention"), but it also reveals what Morris valued in his relations with others.

When Tina, a sixth grader in Austin, ended her I-Search paper with this question and answer – "Why do people get divorced? IT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T LOVE EACH OTHER LIKE THEY USED TO." – her teachers understood that this African American adolescent had come to this conclusion through extended conversations with not only her own mother who was divorced, but her best friend's mother who was also divorced. In addition, she had worked with her classmate Rose, a Mexican American student whose parents divorced when she was 5 years old and who had investigated its causes. (Rose wrote, "They got divorce when I was turning five so this was on my birthday. I thought it was because of me but it was not.") An important aspect of these inquiries lies in the opportunity for students to share experiences among themselves. For example, discovering that his experiences were similar to others, Robbie, a European American boy who also investigated divorce, wrote about his discovery:

Now I realize that I'am not the only person in this room that has divorced parents. I think this exercise helped me out a lot because I got to talk about my parents with some of my friends.... It's just fascinating to find out about some one elses experiance with divorce and everything.

Through their inquiries, Rose, Tina, and Robbie had the opportunity to read, write, and talk to others in order to come to terms with life events important to them.

The inquiry that students conduct and the products of their research also demonstrate the ways in which young students are attempting to appropriate various language forms that they encounter in their social lives. For example, when Jason opens the program explaining that his research topic is "life,"

acknowledging that it is “a pretty big topic,” adult listeners are inclined to laugh at the understatement. But, as his teachers know, he was researching this topic because “his life hasn’t been so great.” When he goes on to introduce the classroom and the schedule of topics, telling his audience that “First, we’ll hear about divorce, then violence will be taking place right here in the classroom, and third, rape will take place outside,” adult listeners are again inclined toward laughter at his unintended meanings and his faulty attempts to sound like Tom Brokaw. But this laughter is also tempered by the knowledge that sometimes violence does occur in these students’ classrooms and rape does happen, as Isabel, the student who researched this topic, can attest. Despite these unintended meanings, Jason’s use of language illustrates his experimentation with diction and structure in the effort to imitate a particular genre.

In their written texts, students may also experiment with language. For example, Lakeisha, an African American student from Saginaw High, wrote a story entitled “Cold Sassy Wind” as her contribution to the children’s story book. Her title encourages readers to appreciate the intertextual relationship she has established with a book she has read and enjoyed (*Cold Sassy Tree* [Burns, 1984]), borrowing from and transforming, as good writers do, the work of others. European American student Heather also experimented with language in the essay she wrote for *Footsteps*. “What is the Answer?” tells two parallel stories: one about a friend who was killed at work by a coworker he had befriended, and another about a high school friend who feels powerless to fight against abusive parents and is contemplating suicide. To conclude her essay, Heather ties the two stories together by voicing her fears about the world in which she lives and by asking, “What is going on in today’s society? Why can’t we prevent these sorts of things from happening? . . . This world into which I was born is a painful puzzle. I want some answers.” Through these questions, Heather’s readers can appreciate the rhetorical connections she establishes between these two episodes. Her text illustrates the efforts students make to speak to others about their inquiries. In this sense, their intended and unintended meanings reveal the kinds of conversations we might want to nourish, conversations about language and learning and the vicissitudes of life.

Students’ inquiries are not the only source of learning in classrooms such as these. Teachers, too, are learners. They invite students to teach them by asking questions, by listening carefully to students’ answers, and more indirectly, by interpreting events and texts for what they reveal about students’ insights into school, learning, and literacy. When asked about their participation in such projects, for example, students often surprise us with their insights. Roseanne, a sixth grader in Audrey’s first-period class, told us during a class meeting that Write for Your Life “wasn’t really school.” When asked why not, she responded, “We get to write about things we know about.” In that same conversation, Marisela commented that students were writing a lot more than they ever had. Isaac added that the topics they were studying were important to them.

The sentiments of these three Mexican American students can also be heard in the introduction to *Footsteps*, written jointly by Arthur Hill and Saginaw High students:

[This] book's purpose is to provide voices that aren't often heard, students'. It is important because we want to give something back to the teachers, to the Saginaw School District which made this project possible, to our families, and to our community. We want them to know how important they have been to us; to show them that their trust, time, energy, and friendship will guide us throughout our lives. As our footsteps carry us further and further away from high school, we will take with us this experience: the lessons learned, the perspectives shared, and the knowledge that we have important stories to tell.

The belief that their stories are important, worthy of inquiry, and potentially meaningful to others lays at the foundation of a literacy that nourishes conversations and opens spaces for students to name their worlds. In reading or listening to their stories, we adults learn as well about the lives students have lived and the lives they would like to make for themselves.

In a similar way, Audrey and I learned much about Berto and his search to understand his father's alcohol abuse, as well as the ways in which his life and school experiences became intimately connected. At the beginning of the year, Berto, a friendly Mexican American boy, noted on his life graph that he and his family had been in a car accident recently. He also wrote in his journal about his father going to jail for shooting his gun on New Year's Eve. As Berto began his I-Search project, Audrey and I watched as he began making connections between these events and his research. We also watched as his confidence in reading and writing grew. Berto, who wrote in his first journal entry, "I don't have enthing to talk abuot," was now writing furiously about his discoveries: "some of the best new thing I have learned are that Alcohol can slow your reaction time and cloud your thinking – leading to serious accidents...." Imagine our surprise when he told us that he had shared his I-Search paper with his father and that his father had stopped drinking. Certainly not every student experiences such dramatic effects from a school-based literacy project, but the impact of one individual's experience teaches teachers not only about the potential power of such projects to shape lives but also about the complexity of students' lives, the great need to open classroom doors to them, and the students' occasionally remarkable responses to such opportunities.

In "The Politics of Literacy," Robinson and Stock (1991) remind us that to nourish conversations, teachers must read, interpret, and assess students' texts humanely, as attempts to construct a literate self in a specific setting. For such readings to be possible, however, students and teachers must establish some grounds on which to stand together as learners, and students must be invited to compose meaningful texts. As Berto and Jason demonstrated, students often use

these invitations to raise important questions – what is life, or why do people abuse alcohol? – and to seek out information that may not always solve their dilemmas, but at least helps them articulate their concerns. To support this quest, in other words to be humane and supportive readers of students’ texts, teachers must read into students’ texts their attempts to compose and recompose a sense of self and of relations to others.

Valuing Such Agency as Students Can Manage

In Robinson and Stock’s (1991) essay, we are encouraged to create a safe and supportive classroom world for students, “one in which they might safely raise such voices as they have to make meanings for themselves and others, voices that will be valued for such agency they can manage” (p. 312). When students develop case studies of the students they have tutored, write a “big book” about healthy choices for fifth graders attending the same elementary schools they have, or publish an anthology of works they have composed over the course of a year, they begin to use literacy in a way that opens spaces for them to speak to others about what they have learned and what they hope for the future. In *Footsteps*, Arthur Hill student Terri Arrizola contributed the following poem, “Don’t Know Why ...”:

On a warm Saturday night,
we drove slowly down the strip.
Darkness had taken over;
we couldn’t see anything,
but red and blue flashers.

Sirens screaming,
police, ambulance, rescue squad cars
flying past.
Something had happened.

Nosey people,
we followed curiously.
The cars traveling by
stopped in the middle
of East Genessee Street,
creating an unexpected traffic jam.

Tired eyes looked
at the packed Amoco gas station.
Police walked casually around
the sullen gray sedan,
winding yellow tape along
the motionless Delta 88.

We stopped, stared intensely
at the windows, one shattered, one half-open.

A body lay bent,
 propped by the dark red seat,
 and blood, like thick syrup,
 trickled down his cheek.

We could tell
 by his slack body,
 that he was dead.
 A bullet right through his head.

As the ambulance drove off,
 the paramedics worked frantically
 on the lifeless victim,
 not willing to give up.

Shocked, we prayed together desperately,
 hoping our prayers might prevent
 the next senseless killing.

The crime never left
 our young minds.
 The frail body of a dead teen
 echoes its image repeatedly.

I don't know who shot him,
 don't know why,
 will never understand,
 why one black man, executes another.

In both realistic and poetic terms, this young Mexican American writer explored the violence she saw in the world around her. Composing her text, she also composed the agency she could manage as a 17-year-old resident of urban America. Shirley Brice Heath (1994) has argued that these stories represent students' attempts to construct theories about social relations. Telling them in safe places allows students to discover others' responses and, as a result, provides both imaginative and concrete outlets from which students can raise what voices they have with what agency they can manage (Robinson & Stock, 1991).

Angela, an African American student in Audrey's class, also used her research project to take a stand within her community. Writing about fears and anxieties, Angela surprised her teachers, because she did not seem to be a fearful child. Yet, her report outlined the anxieties she carried with her: "guns because they are dangerous," drugs because they "can make you die," and "when my mom leaves because there are bad streets and anything could happen." Angela also chronicled her research process, including her research questions, the information she gathered from the library, and a visit she made to a hospital where she talked with a male patient and a doctor. Both of her "informants" told her about traumatic childhood experiences that caused anxieties in individuals. Angela concluded her report with this brief paragraph: "Don't you know that fears can make you mentally ill and can hurt you so bad? I learned that I am not the only one. It helped me understand my fears." The rhetorical move that Angela made in transforming what she has learned into a question to readers is similar to the

questions Heather raised at the end of her essay about her friends' confrontation with death. Both of these students have begun to use literacy as a means of placing themselves in conversation with others about the violence that pervades urban America and the anxieties born of living in a complex and dangerous world.

In a group setting, Audrey Appelsies' students acknowledged publicly their limited power to alter what life presents and their commitments to exercise their individual and collective agency by dedicating their children's big book to "all students who make the right choices and to those who are still trying." Their book, *If the Walls Could Talk*, tells the story of Jamal, a middle school student who discovers that the old school wall sees and hears what transpires in the school's corridors. Jamal is confronted with a series of events in which he must make choices about drug use and peer pressure. Mixing facts and advice, the old wall counsels Jamal about his dilemmas, and in the end, Jamal heeds the wall's advice, making the "right" choices for himself. Audrey and I viewed this text as representing the students' learning as well as their collaborative attempt to speak with others about the kinds of choices they confront, their need for adults to advise them, and the realization that adolescents do not always make the "best" choices for themselves. Its composition marked for these students an important step toward agency, because they constructed together their understandings of what it means to make good choices and because they represented these meanings in a text intended to instruct and inform others.

In creating valued, safe places for students to share their theories and their stories, we also create openings for their participation in democratic society. Certainly, the hope for young writers and poets such as Terri and projects such as those supported by the CEIC and Write for Your Life rests on students' growing sense that they do have stories to tell, that their voices can be heard, and that the agency they can manage will be valued – in other words, that students have a role to play in our society and that the experiences they bring to a democratic conversation are essential to its renewal.

Understanding A Mess Called Democracy

One of the first quotations I learned in graduate school was "Democracy begins in conversation," attributed to John Dewey (Lamont, 1959, p. 58). What no one told me then was how noisy and, as Michelle Fine (1991) has written, how messy it might be. Opening up conversations to all of the members of a classroom community is often like opening the floodgates, and teachers need to be prepared for the generative cacophony that results. Classrooms that invite conversations and student inquiry become hectic places with students conducting all kinds of activities simultaneously. While I was visiting Audrey's classroom one day late in the year, she reminded me of how different her classroom had become: On this day, there were three or four graduate students from my Literacy and Culture class working with students as "research buddies," the special educa-

tion resource teacher was also working with a student on her I-Search paper, two or three students had gone to the library, and two other boys were interviewing the police officer assigned to the campus and then listening to the audiotape.

During the production of *Footsteps*, classroom committees at both Saginaw and Arthur Hill High Schools busily worked to edit, organize, and lay out a 300-page volume. To complete these tasks, the students attended meetings at the staff development center, worked in small groups in the computer lab, participated in individual conferences with teachers, or worked on their contributions independently. Administering a schoolwide census at Saginaw High School involved not only planning, writing, and editing questions, but also developing administration protocols, coordinating schedules with other teachers, sending pairs of students to every second-period classroom to implement the survey, and spending hours in the computer lab entering survey data. Just keeping track of students and tasks can become a daunting task.

More importantly, however, these projects create circumstances for students to collaborate in writing texts sensitive to their audiences and to the meanings students want to convey to others. They must analyze their own and others' texts in order to answer questions about structure and organization, meaning or significance. For example, is a particular survey item clear? Will students be convinced that their responses are anonymous? How can we organize all of these stories, essays, and poems to create a meaningful table of contents? Why should we? How does an author draw conclusions about the student in this case study? What is the role of the author's observations in making these conclusions? Such questions find answers through many conversations in many classroom configurations and invite the kind of messiness to which Fine (1991) alludes in her description.

Conversations that sustain democratic classrooms are not always comfortable places, however. During the publication of *Footsteps*, students from the two high schools periodically shared drafts of the pieces they would contribute. One particular essay, "Why Does It Always Have to be The High?" caused considerable uproar among the Arthur Hill students. In her essay, Nicole, an African American student, took on the myths attributed to Saginaw High School – it was crime-ridden, the students were illiterate, the teachers did not care about students. Having attended both schools, she accused Arthur Hill students of making comments about Saginaw High without any basis in experience: "How is it," she wrote, "that these people know so much about this school when the closest they've come to it is driving down the street? In most cases, they don't even get that close." She argued that the atmosphere at Arthur Hill was less than friendly, writing, "I found not only the students pretentious at Arthur Hill, but the teachers as well." Finally, she defended Saginaw High's academic reputation, stating that Saginaw High's teachers cared about students and maintained strict discipline despite rumors to the contrary. Nicole's move was provocative, and her commentary did not sit well with her peers at Arthur Hill. Some Arthur Hill students even suggested that the essay not be published. With mediating by Arthur Hill teachers Jane Denton and Gail Oliver, however, these students discovered

ways to respond to Nicole's essay by focusing on some of its exaggerations: "Are all students at Arthur Hill snobs?" they asked. "Doesn't Saginaw High have any problems?"

These comments encouraged Nicole to revise her essay without abandoning her original argument. She acknowledged, for example, that not "*all* students and teachers were snobbish, because some did actually care about what we did..." Furthermore, Nicole asserted that many of the myths about Saginaw High were perpetuated by the media: "Let something bad happen here at 'The High,' and [the media] will print it in big, bold letters on page A-2 along with the world and national news." It was her perception that incidents at Arthur Hill might be found "on the last page in the Area-Metro section."

Through this essay, Nicole raised issues and underlying racial tensions that characterized the Saginaw community and its schools. (I also heard Arthur Hill students make the kinds of comments that Nicole describes when we planned for cross-school visits.) And, although some Arthur Hill students continued to deny Nicole's observations, others found the debate enlightening. In a year-end evaluation, several Arthur Hill students, both European American and African American, commented that by working with Saginaw High students "we found the myths were untrue," that working together helped "to ease tension between the two schools," and that it resulted in gaining "more respect for each other." An issue that too often simmered below the surface became a topic of conversation. That students across the two schools continued to disagree about both the issue and the manner in which it was presented constituted a healthy difference of opinion, despite the fact that the debate was often heated and emotional.

These students may have experienced an essential aspect of democratic life. John Dewey (1916) argued that democratic society consisted of "associated living" in which individuals criticize those aspects of social life that are undesirable and suggest ways in which they can be improved (p. 87). Moreover, he insisted that such association required individuals to consider their own actions in light of others. To this end, he advocated curriculum that aims at present dilemmas of community life and that engages students in a process of increasing social awareness. The conversation that Nicole's essay prompted can be viewed as an example of students articulating positions in a social dialogue about present dilemmas. This conversation and the students' responses to it – revising an essay or acknowledging the need for greater collaboration – suggest that these students may have also considered and reconsidered their positions in relations to others.

In a similar way, Audrey's students engaged in democratic conversations about issues vitally connected to living together. Her third-period class selected homelessness as the topic of their service learning project. From the beginning of their work in Write for Your Life, they voiced interest in it, and several students explored it for their individual inquiry projects. For their class project, they elected to study the conditions of the homeless, the help available to those without homes, and their classmates' attitudes about the homeless by conducting a survey of the sixth-grade students. To share their learning, the students cre-

ated an exhibit which featured a “cardboard city” depicting the living conditions of the homeless, the results of their survey, and the work of Habitat for Humanity. Each of the other sixth-grade classes (approximately 150 students) toured the exhibit with student guides who explained the individual displays. In addition, the students organized a fund raising effort, contributing the donations to the Austin Habitat for Humanity. Through this project, Audrey’s students had opportunities to see themselves as actors in social life and as citizens contributing to their communities (Fine, 1991). In this framework for literacy education, then, classrooms become messy places because they are no longer bounded by neat rows of desks, closed doors, or seat work. Instead, their context is the big world of life.

Another part of the “mess” that comes with open spaces and multiple conversations is adults’ relation to students. When given the opportunity, students begin to ask questions for which neither they nor their teachers can always provide answers. For example, when an Austin City councilman came to speak to Audrey’s sixth graders about gang activities, he not only asked students about their inquiry into gangs but opened the floor to other questions. He was visibly surprised when students asked questions about specific laws and social welfare. For example, 11-year-old Robbie raised his hand and said, “I’ve been researching divorce and the laws about children in divorce. Because I’ll be 12 this summer, the state of Texas says I have to choose which of my parents I want to live with. Can you give me any advice?” Another student asked about a recently passed city ordinance that banned camping in public places, an obvious attempt to remove the homeless from the streets of downtown Austin. Interrogating experience quite literally means that students will struggle with the decisions they have to make, the events that have shaped them for good or for ill, and that they will begin to ask adults to be accountable for the decisions that they make in relation to their classroom and their community.

Nourishing Conversations in the Literacy Classroom

In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Maxine Greene (1988) wrote that “We may have reached a point in our history when teaching and learning if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge” (p. 23). I think she meant by this statement that if teaching and learning are to open spaces and nourish conversations, both students and teachers will have to take risks: Students will have to trust that teachers will listen to their concerns or questions. Teachers must trust that students, even those students whose enthusiasm seems lackluster, may often be eager to use the spaces made available to them to struggle with hard questions: “Which parent should I live with?” or “Why are my neighborhood streets subject to senseless violence?” Teachers need to trust themselves as well when students reveal to them the dilemmas or tragedies or joys that they have experienced, even

as these teachers may have only their participation in dialogue to offer in support. Nourishing these conversations becomes especially important because the world of adolescents is different than that of adults, separated by a generation or more, by the accumulation of history, and by differences in class and ethnicity. To bridge these differences, teachers must be willing to teach on the verge, providing what wisdom they have and responding honestly about what students need now and will need in the future to flourish in the constantly evolving society in which they will play out their lives. Only in this way can adults learn what matters most concern today's adolescents and what skills they need to fashion a place for themselves in the world.

In a similar vein, students need to learn how to fashion texts in ways that will be heard in the increasingly large social world they will inhabit. Nourishing literate conversations includes learning to craft a text by revising and editing carefully (Fairbanks, 1994). In other words, students have to learn to struggle with the page just as they struggle to find meaning in their experiences. When they have succeeded, as Terri did with her poem "Don't Know Why," they can assess both how and why their writing accomplishes its goal. Analyzing her poem, for example, she wrote that it "is very detailed and emotional. It gives you a clear picture as you read it. It demonstrates the actual fact that I saw the dead body." Her comments imply the effort that underlies its construction: crafting vivid descriptions, creating suspense, and conveying emotion – all of which are elements of a well-wrought text. Such investment in a text, however, comes from the significance of the topic, one that Terri chose for herself, one that reflected her life, and one that was supported by her teachers.

This support is too often missing in classrooms in which students' experiences diverge from the mainstream. Instead, the landscapes of urban life may be eschewed for more traditional fare: canonical texts and "universal" themes that deny legitimacy to the lives students lead beyond the classroom walls. These traditional aspects of the literacy classroom certainly have a place in school. However, literacy curriculum will also have to make a place for the contemporary realities and concerns of adolescents if today's students are to be adequately served and willing participants in their schooling. Teaching on the verge challenges teachers to infuse curriculum with the study of students' life circumstances. In this way, teachers and students may discover the possible roles literacy may play in their journey to empowered citizenship.

If the students in Saginaw and Austin provide any indications of students' responses to such opportunities, they are willing and able to stand with their teachers on the verge. In their work together, these students and teachers pondered the meanings and consequences of the forces that shaped their lives: they wondered, imagined, criticized, took issue with, and resolved as best they could how to make sense of the complexities of life, lending legitimacy to Jason's discovery that "life is a pretty big topic." Their conversations helped them build literate classroom communities, communities that are sustained by the hopeful-

ness of teachers and students who undertake the arduous task of examining their lives. In other words, nourishing conversations in the literacy classroom entails investing in and honoring the very real people who inhabit such classrooms and the very real lives they lead. These conversations help us all find ways to interpret and re-interpret that big topic “life.” And, they inevitably commit us to the continual remaking of democratic society.

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