"I Just Wanted to Raise a Nice Boy!": Being Critical and Political

Jerome C. Harste, with **Andrew Manning**

Like children still seeking parental approval, many of us have had the experience of sharing our professional activities with our parents and being surprised with the results. I remember giving my mother a copy of *Language Stories & Literacy Lessons* (Harste, Woodward, Burke, 1984). It was like showing off a new baby, and I wanted her to be a proud grandmother. Oh, she was proud that first day. It was the day after, when I came back to visit her, that I got my shock. I saw she had been reading the book, so I asked, "So what do you think?" Her reply: "I just wanted to raise a nice boy! I don't know why you always have to be so critical and so negative about everything! I sure tried raising you better!"

What my mother didn't understand, of course, is that progressive educators must take a stance; we cannot afford to be "nice" about practices that we know are damaging children. Yet in 1984, I had not yet anticipated the role that critical literacy and political commitment would take in my work and in the work of other educational leaders.

Ferguson (1990) says there is an "invisible center" that operates in society. This invisible center, he says, constitutes dominant cultural norms, or said differently, "the expected." It is important to understand that Ferguson's invisible center really constitutes a particular set of social practices that keep particular norms in place and others at bay. When someone calls for a different set of social practices—for example, using children as our informants to plan curriculum rather than what some adult hallucinated as constituting an instructional sequence for literacy—someone else is likely to feel threatened. To show how progressive educational practices have come to challenge cultural norms, I will trace the evolution of my own philosophy and practice.

Whole Language: Too Nice?

While I, like many of you, can trace my change in thinking about literacy to Kenneth Goodman (1967), it was Dr. Carolyn Burke who helped me move from what Manning (1999) has called a "functional" and "cultural" model of literacy to a whole language or "progressive" view of literacy. This shift was quite dramatic. Instead of seeing reading and writing as skills to be taught, I began to see my role as teaching children how they might more strategically use reading and writing to learn. What I didn't question at the time was what children were learning. I still saw schooling in terms of teaching our society's values. Manning describes this shift as one from "literacy as skills" to "literacy as morality," which he further describes as "a cultural stamping of values and sensibilities, in part through the study of good literature."

By 1990 I had begun to see curriculum as lived experience, as a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be (Harste, 1990). I advocated for an expanded view of literacy, one that included art, music, dance, drama, language, and other ways of knowing (Short, Harste, w/ Burke, 1996). One of the big issues for me, then as now, is who is in charge of curriculum. I called for education-as-inquiry for teachers as well as for students, using children and teacher-research as our curricular informants and building curriculum from the inquiry questions of learners. I was interested in making classrooms

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places where all voices could be heard, where conversation and collaboration contributed to creating a community of learners, and where action was followed by reflection and reflexivity. Manning (1999) would say I was seeing literacy as "personal growth," curriculum as "open and pluralistic," and literacy instruction as "student-centered and liberal."

Many of you went through these changes with me, but not everyone was on our side. Many took on the accoutrements of whole language (journals, big books, and children's literature) without understanding the movement's underlying philosophy. Both Carol Edelsky (1994) and Patrick Shannon (1993) began claiming that inquiry wasn't enough, that we needed to get explicitly political. While they weren't willing to walk away from what we had learned about language and learning, nor the importance of building curriculum from children, they called on us to become critically literate ourselves, with hopes that what we could do for ourselves we could do for children.

There were also attacks from outside the whole language community. Lisa Delpit (1995) suggested that whole language served neither minority educators nor minority children. Educators examining genre in Australia began to criticize whole language, arguing that it was too much about narrative and expressive language rather than helping children gain access to the discourses of power (Christie, 1990; Lemke, 1996). Alan Luke (1994, personal communication) criticized holistic notions of "voice," claiming they ignored coded messages, meanings, and attitudes of language.

Yet I had never claimed that whole language should be "nice." In fact I had often said that if you don't want to get in trouble, don't have a new idea. I knew literacy instruction was political. There were lots of educators—basal publishers in particular—who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. I had lots of personal evidence that whole language worked well with African American children from my work with teachers in Indianapolis.

Allowing children to wiggle the curriculum by giving them choice and building curriculum from their interests empowered them and felt more democratic. And despite what the genre-ists said, I knew from personal experience that expository writing was strengthened by first working with children on expressive writing. I argued that classrooms had to support the development of voice before interrogating it.

The problem was that I did not understand the extent to which literacy is political. I did not sufficiently question whose literacy it was that we were advocating or why what we were teaching might not feel very empowering to children as they handled life in the inner city. In some ways, my cavalier attitude toward critical literacy represented a new "invisible center."

Multiple Literacies

A major breakthrough in our understanding of language in the 1990s was the growing awareness that there are "multiple literacies" rather than one literacy. Brian Street (1995) showed how different cultures define literacy differently and how parents within these cultures induct their children into literacy very differently. Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) study of Roadville and Trackton, Anne Haas Dyson's (1995) work with young children, and Luís Moll's (1994) "funds of knowledge" work with Latinos add credence to this view. These works strengthen the notion that educators ought to be building curriculum *from* children rather than doing curriculum *to* children, while at the same time they questioned the notion of a single, universal model of literacy learning and development.

A second major breakthrough came with our understanding of literacy as social practice (Freire, 1970; Gee, 1996; Fairclough, 1992; Lankshear, 1997). In the broadest sense, these researchers were arguing that literacy is much more than just the texts we read; it also includes the social practices that provide the context of those texts. Luke and Freebody (1997) argued that there are multiple definitions of literacy operating in our society simultaneously and that children are learning different things at home than they are at school with regard to what it means to be literate. Further, they argued that in order to change anyone's definition of literacy, one has to change the social practices that are maintaining the old definition. Changing school practices is not going to automatically change community literacy practices. Even more problematic,

school literacy practices pale to insignificance when seen against the backdrop of pop culture and the media. Luke and Freebody contrast the code-breaking, meaning-centered, and functional definitions of literacy with their fourth model, "critical literacy." They see a growing group of educators helping learners critically analyze and transform texts. Ideologically, these educators believe that "knowledge, culture, schooling, and language are inscribed with power and are not neutral, but marked by vested interests and hidden agendas" (Manning, 1999). They believe curriculum needs to focus on "the everyday world as text" and teachers need to help children develop the "analytic tools to deconstruct texts."

Both Dr. Manning and I argue that it isn't good enough that children can respond to text; to be truly literate, children need to understand how texts act on them and to consciously position themselves accordingly. We, like Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis (1999), argue that curriculum should be "interrupting normativity," constantly questioning "the invisible center," the social practices which maintain systems of dominance.

Bill Green (in Comber & Green, 1998) argues that instruction ought to focus on real-world literacy events. He thinks that teachers should help children understand how texts are coded, be the text a map, a set of directions, a story, a rap song, or a community flyer. Rather than calling this "decoding," he sees it as "operational literacy." Like James Gee (1996), Green wants children to understand how texts operate: Who has agency? How is language used to give this agency? What identity has the author taken on and what is he or she trying to get readers to do by taking on that identity? What cultural model or framework is being evoked? What register of language is being used and why?

Making Whole Language Critical

Moving from a progressive educator to a critical literacy educator has not been easy for me. The person, however, who has helped me make these shifts has been Dr. Andrew Manning, Dean of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. Dr. Manning and I have known each other for some 20 years, during which time our most notable achievement has been the creation of an Education-as-Inquiry master's degree program at Mount Saint Vincent University and the creation of a joint doctoral program between Mount Saint Vincent University and Indiana University. We would describe the curricula in these programs as being critical, inquiry-based, and semiotic, or emphasizing multiple sign systems and multiple ways of knowing.

As our programs have evolved, we have had to articulate which whole language principles we see as foundational and which principles have shifted as a result of our critical literacy stance. We see the result of our work together as melding the best that is currently known about language and learning, be the sources whole language or critical literacy. Nonetheless, we want to talk about how a critical perspective has altered our view of these basic principles.

One of the tenets we could not walk away from was our belief that curriculum needs to be anchored in learning. We not only organize the program around the inquiry questions of teachers, but we try to live the curriculum we envision them living with their students. Engagements within the curriculum focus on underlying processes in learning. So, no matter what we are studying, our emphasis is on observation, analysis, collaboration, interrogation, reflection, and other key processes in inquiry.

This does not mean we do not have a content structure. We believe anyone getting a master's in language education ought to know how to teach reading, including cue system utilization and strategy instruction. They also need to know how to teach writing and how to create classrooms that support reading, writing, and content area instruction.

Teachers study the foundations of literacy for an entire year. Using the inquiry cycle (Short, Harste, w/ Burke, 1996) as a curricular framework, we allow teachers to inquire into various aspects of language learning that interest them and to situate their study in terms of their own classrooms. As part of this process, students actively engage in their own teacher-research and curriculum development.

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Yet there are differences because of the philosophical shift. We now help teachers envision reading and writing (schooling, really) in terms of "social practices," and specifically look at how alternative social practices construct different literate beings. We ask teachers to think about what it is that children would know if they only knew about literacy from being in their classroom. Together we explore the repertoire of discursive practices we might want children to have as they exit our classrooms.

For teachers having difficulty thinking about how they might start to raise critical issues with children, we suggest they begin by observing their children on the playground. Recess is a veritable gold mine for critical literacy issues. Taking notes on how children treat each other and sharing these notes at a class meeting creates space for illuminating discussions of social practices. As playground injustices come bubbling into the classroom, we can pose critical literacy as an eye for seeing potential where before it was seen as a problem.

ESL teachers . . . understand only too well the relationship between language and power.

Learners and the Real World as Curricular Informants

The principle of building curriculum from children is another tenet of whole language that we have not abandoned. Too often literacy education, whether for teachers or kids, is about consumerism—about understanding and buying into the text, about learning to teach by following a program, step-by-step. Critical literacy calls for agency. Readers who are critically literate need to consciously decide for themselves whether or not they are going to buy into the text. If the curriculum we offer and the social practices we employ are negotiable, we must be open to non-dominant agendas and choice.

The real change in our curriculum is philosophical. We no longer talk about language as learned naturally. Rather than talk about universal processes in language learning, we work with teachers in planning focused studies with children around such themes as language and power. We constantly remind teachers that common sense is really someone's cultural sense and that there are alternatives. We focus on everyday literacies—television commercials, community flyers, newspaper advertisements, administrative memos, etc. These are the critical literacies that count in the everyday lives of teachers and children. We work with teachers in creating invitations in which children research local language practices as well as study their intent, how language is used, and its effect.

Another change is our emphasis on teachers exploring the effects of their professional practices on different groups of children. Who takes up the opportunities provided and what do they do with them? It is interesting to examine which students please us and what this warming-of-the-cockles-of-a-teacher's-heart says about how we are constructing literacy.

Interrupting Normativity through Literature and the Arts

Those who wish to reform education can begin by reforming their reading and writing programs. One of the easiest ways to do this is through the use of literature. More and more, children's literature addresses issues of multiculturalism as well as focuses on everyday topics in everyday settings. These books are crucial, as it is important that all children see themselves in the texts we use for instruction.

One of the most exciting trends in children's literature is what we call "multiple perspective" books (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000). Rather than providing simple answers to complex problems, these books lay out issues in all of their complexity. The identification of "multiple perspective" books is part of a larger project in which we have been engaged, namely, the reviewing of children's books and adolescent novels that raise important social issues (Harste, Vasquez, Lewison, Breau, Leland, & Ociepka, 2000). We introduce these books at every face-to-face meeting we have with teachers in the program and invite them to create spaces in their classrooms to share and discuss these books with children.

As teachers do so, we ask them to track what social issues are raised. We then support teachers in creating curricular invitations that follow up on these concerns. We constantly emphasize that books are not critical; what makes literacy instruction critical is the social practices enacted in conjunction with these books.

Taking our lead from the New Basics Project in Australia (Luke, 2000), in which students are asked to identify and research a social issue of personal significance

and then use the arts to heighten community awareness, we create similar "rich tasks" for teachers relative to teaching. We begin by asking teachers to bring in a performance objective that they feel obligated to meet as a responsible professional in their school district. We then ask them to think of what literacies the children with whom they work bring to school and to use these alternate literacies to explore literacy critically as well as to support the district's performance objectives. For example, teachers might use a poem to help students identify main ideas, but they can take the study of the poem several steps further by having students dramatize alternate interpretations and explore questions that critically examine social implications of the poem, such as gender roles and power relations. This rich activity uses literature and the arts not merely for aesthetic purposes, but to propel the learning process.

Being Critical and Political

Our mothers, we suspect, may find this critical literacy stance too negative, not "nice" enough. On the other hand, these days there is less resistance to critical literacy. When you talk about the need for children to be critically literate about using the computer, and especially the Internet, parents readily agree. They are very concerned. They want their children to be critically literate about the media.

Middle school educators, too, are very receptive. They are sick of having the middle school seen as a way station and the middle school years as a period everyone simply hopes will speed by. Everyday issues that middle school students face, from getting tattoos to establishing sexual identities, are more frequently (if not frequently enough) addressed in curriculum. The social practices of students are too important not to interrogate; we must create space in our classroom to address topics important to our students, whether "the invisible center" is ready for it or not.

English as a Second Language teachers are another group of educators whom we have found to be receptive to critical literacy. They want their students and the rich cultures they bring with them to be respected and valued. They understand only too well the relationship between language and power. There are other marginalized groups, too, including urban educators and special education teachers. Teacher educators are becoming more interested in critical literacy as well.

So what do you do when the "invisible center" maintains its dominance? You might want to spend time with teachers who are exploring critical literacy issues in their classrooms. Find a colleague who is moving ahead in directions you would like to go. One thing whole language taught us was that we never have to work alone again. We can take the risk to become political and critical. Doing so may help people interrogate their concept of "nice." And that is a start. ⭕

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J e r o m e   C .   H a r s t e is a Martha Lea and Bill Armstrong Chair in Teacher Education and a professor in Language Education at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

A n d r e w   M a n n i n g is Dean of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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