Making the Road by Walking and Talking:

Critical Literacy and/as Professional Development in a Teacher Inquiry Group

By Cathy Luna, Maria José Botelho, Dawn Fontaine, Kristen French, Kris Iverson & Nélida Matos

In this group, I feel like someone who has something to contribute — in other words, a 'knower,' a person with a story to tell, a story that is relevant to the group discussions. This is not how I feel in other settings, like, for example, my school district. There, teachers are under the power of the administration. We are expected to implement top-down curriculum and decisions — which does not provide the space for our input. Professional development is also a top-down decision that puts teachers in the same position: "Teach the students this, in the way I tell you, so they can improve the standardized test results." Being part of a critical literacy group has helped me to move away from teaching students my received knowledge to being conscious of myself as someone who is constructing knowledge with students and their families.

—Nélida Matos, Bilingual Resource Teacher

It feels like we are living critical literacy in this space.

—Maria José Botelho, Teacher Educator

Cathy Luna is an assistant professor and Maria Jose Botelho, Dawn Fontaine, Kristen French, Kristen Iverson, and Nelida Matos are graduate students, all with the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Introduction:
Studying/Practicing Critical Literacy Together

In January of 2001, we set out to study critical literacy together. We met weekly to read critical literacy theory and to connect that theory to our classroom practices. We also conducted teacher research projects in our own classrooms, and, as a collaborative project, audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed our weekly group discussions. Through the process of analyzing these transcripts we recognized that we were practicing and not just studying critical literacy. Based on our transcript analyses and organized around four dimensions of critical literacy identified by Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint and KatieVan Sluys (2002), this article offers a description of critical literacy practice and/as professional development as it evolved in a teacher inquiry group investigating critical literacy together.

As our group of K-12 and university practitioners discussed the invitation to write and publish this article, we recognized a shared feeling of being "imposters" in academia and talked about the ways that participating in our group helped us understand and challenge those feelings:

> Dawn: For me, the idea of feeling like an imposter has been coming up while we've been talking about publishing. I feel like, "That's not where I'm supposed to be." None of us [teachers] thought we'd ever be publishing something. Something has happened in this group that has us thinking we have something to say.
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> Kris: I can't think of another environment where teachers would be welcomed by people who have to publish.
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> Nélida : Yes, but I'm still saying to myself, "What's my contribution, as an elementary teacher?" Sometimes I still feel caught in the structure and ask myself, "What am I doing here?"
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> Cathy: I wonder the same thing. I don't feel like a professor [laughter].
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> Kristen: As a Native person, I felt from the beginning like I don't belong at the university. I felt like an imposter planning our first conference presentation, but now I am thinking of myself in a different way. I found I could do that first presentation because you were there with me.
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> Maria: I feel like I am held together by this group. I'm finding my voice. It's important to understand that the imposter feeling is a consequence of our lived experiences — not some kind of deficit or lack. [In the article,] we should highlight this part of feeling like imposters and the way that letting each other into our lived experiences lets us go places we've never been. It's really about power, this imposter thing.

Like so many of the conversations we had in the year and half we spent meeting weekly to investigate critical literacy, this discussion illuminated for us some of the ways that we, as teachers, are oppressed by the dominant discourses of teaching and of teacher education. In this case, by sharing what we had each seen as appropriate

misgivings about our individual abilities as knowers and writers, we came to understand that our shared, painful feelings of being "imposters" in academia are socially constructed within dominant discourses that position teachers as passive recipients of others' expert knowledge, rather than as knowers in our own right. Later in this conversation, we also connected our experiences of feeling positioned in this way to the experiences of our students. We recalled times when our own pedagogies may have positioned our elementary, high school, and teacher education students in similarly disempowering ways.

The diversity of our subject positions and perspectives complicated our insight into the source of our own imposter feelings. Instead of seeing ourselves as "the oppressed," we were able to uncover and acknowledge the ways that we have participated and continue to participate in the power relationships that characterize dominant discourses of teaching and knowledge production in our society. For example, Cathy, an assistant professor in a teacher education program, asked the group if she could be the first author for this article, to help her build her tenure case. The uncomfortable conversation that followed helped us see the problematic definition of knowledge as an individual commodity that is perpetuated by the discourse of the academy. It also forced us (particularly Cathy) to recognize and to "own" our continued complicity with this limited definition of knowledge and the larger, hierarchical discourse of which it is a part.

Our short-term solution to the problem of representing our collaborative work in a new way was to agree that future publications will carry the names of different first authors. It became clear as we negotiated this plan of action, though, that authorship was only one of many issues for us related to sharing what we learned about critical literacy with others. A more central concern had to do with whether publication in an academic journal is an effective form of social action — whether putting our energies into writing a piece to be read by teacher educators and educational researchers was the best way to effect positive change in an educational system we had come to see as deeply flawed.

Would it be more useful to spend our limited time visiting schools and talking with other teachers about critical literacy practices? Should we, as a group, get more involved in conversations with our state legislators about ways we see standardized testing constraining our diverse students' life chances? Should we put all of our efforts into the individual changes we were making in our personal lives and in our classrooms? We each brought different priorities for action to our group, but this conversation helped us to see that taking some kind of action had become a part of our group's critical literacy agenda.

In January of 2001, we set out to study critical literacy together. Under the auspices of a University grant and a graduate seminar in language, literacy, and culture, we met weekly to read critical literacy theory and to connect that theory to our classroom practices. Beginning in September, 2001, we also conducted teacher research projects in our own classrooms and collected and analyzed qualitative data

to answer research questions we generated related to critical literacy practices. As a collaborative project throughout our time together, we audio-taped, transcribed, and collaboratively analyzed the weekly group meetings at which we shared and discussed our teaching and our teacher research projects.

It was through this process of analyzing transcripts of our meetings that we recognized — with some surprise — that we were practicing and not just studying critical literacy together. In their piece, "Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices," Lewison, Seely Flint and Van Sluys (2002) identify four interrelated dimensions of critical literacy that characterize definitions found in the professional and research literature over the past thirty years: (1) disrupting the commonplace; (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints; (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues; and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. Through our transcript analyses, we saw evidence of each of these dimensions in our discussions. We were able to identify language practices within each dimension that seemed central to our growth as critically literate people and practitioners.

In retrospect, it makes sense that a group of practitioners committed to learning to teach from a critical perspective through teacher inquiry would engage in critical literacy practices as a form of professional development. We attribute our initial surprise to the fact that so many of our professional development experiences have been anything but critical. Collectively, we have spent many, many hours attending in-service presentations where we listened to "experts" answer questions that we had not asked. Our experience in this critical literacy teacher inquiry group was very different. In the rest of this article, we describe this professional development experience as an instance of critical literacy in practice. While we organize our description around the four dimensions identified by Lewison, Seely Flint and Van Sluys (2002), we recognize that, as Barbara Comber (2001) argues, "critical literacy resists any simplistic or generic definitions because its agenda is to examine the relationships between language practices, power relations, and identities — and this analysis involves grappling with specific local conditions" (p. 271). What we offer in this piece is an account of critical literacy practice as it evolved in a teacher inquiry group investigating critical literacy together. Although the entirety of this article is a collaborative product, we begin our discussion of each dimension of critical literacy practice with a brief narrative written by an individual group member. Our collective reflection follows each narrative, and we conclude with some thoughts about our group experience addressed to teachers and teacher educators interested in critical literacy and/as professional development.

"Disrupting the Commonplace": Redefining What Counts as Knowledge

Narrative by Kris Iverson

Looking back at the November 13 [2001] transcript from last year, when I was presenting sections of my teaching journal to the group, it is evident that I had clearly divided in my mind the interactions with students that I would consider curricular discussion or academic discourse from the side conversations or non-curricular discussions. Sadly, even during the fall of 2001 with the life-altering trauma of 9/11 and anthrax scares within our own school, I nervously tried to capture some of the side conversations in my teaching journal, but I didn't give them the same validity I did the academic discussions. For example, I reported on an end-of-class interaction in my 11/12th grade literature class where a student asked me a highly provocative question ("Ms. I, how would you feel about someone wearing a T-shirt that said, 'Homosexuals are Gay,' on it?"). As I presented this section of my teaching journal to our critical literacy group, I felt nervous about taking the time to discuss this interaction fully because it wasn't "academic." But Cathy interrupted me:

> Cathy: You just said, "All these conversations which are not necessarily about the curriculum" and you really separate it in your mind. I think it would be fascinating if you thought about, "Okay, all of this is my curriculum and how is it connected? How is it critical literacy?"

Her comments about pushing the boundaries of what is allowed to be discussed in classrooms have pushed me to use my teaching journal to fully explore the depth and richness of all the conversations that occur in my classes. Now, regardless of whether we discuss the text of Invisible Man or the resignation of our school's principal due to accusations of pedophilia, it is all significant conversation, and it is critical literacy.

This does not mean that I do not still feel tension internally. When my colleagues make statements like, "I am not trained to have such discussions with high school students in my classes and it would be irresponsible to do so…there are professionals to deal with students in crisis," I cringe and wonder, who do I think I am? But then, thinking about my students' desire to ask questions and discuss the charges against the principal in a classroom environment where we have discussed many similarly horrific situations in the literature we study, I remember that I should provide a forum for responsible discussion of real events, just as I provide a forum for responsible discussion of literature and film. That doesn't mean that I don't still watch the door for administrators when we have these discussions, but I do feel like it is a worthwhile risk. I don't leave my life outside the classroom door, nor do my students. Our critical literacy inquiry group has allowed me to take pride in this and to let some of my fears subside.

Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) describe the dimension of critical

literacy they call "disrupting the commonplace" as "seeing the 'everyday' through new lenses" (pp. 382-383). Citing Ira Shor (1987), they write, "From this dimension, critical literacy is seen as a way of "problematizing all subjects of study and understanding existing knowledge as a historical product" (p. 383). Furthermore, drawing on Norman Fairclough (1989) and James Gee (1990), they explain that this dimension involves "studying language to analyze how it shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses, and supports or disrupts the status quo" (p. 383). Lewison, Seely Flint and Van Sluys (2002) use the lens of the four dimensions to examine the teaching practices of Nancy and Kevin, two elementary teachers who participated in a study group and a series of workshops investigating critical literacy that were organized by the authors. The specific teaching practice these authors focus on associated with "disrupting the commonplace" is the use of social issues texts to help students "challenge commonly held beliefs and assumptions" (p. 386). Both Nancy and Kevin (identified as a novice and a newcomer to critical literacy, respectively) used these books in ways that connected students' lives and texts and that raised critical social issues.

In our teacher inquiry group, we initially identified our "subject of study" as the texts that others had written about the theory and practice of critical literacy. Like Nancy and Kevin, we brought texts into our classroom and used them as a springboard for discussion. By our second semester together, however, we had turned our attention to a different type of text: our own classroom practices and lives. Part of this shift had to do with our decision to conduct teacher research projects; by positioning ourselves as both critical literacy practitioners and researchers in our classrooms, we were treating our teaching practices as texts that could be collaboratively analyzed through a critical lens. In addition, we had come to realize that the most important lessons we were learning about critical literacy came from our practice of sharing and making connections between texts we were reading and our personal and professional lives.

For Kris, for example, sharing her teaching journal with our group meant gaining a valuable new perspective on what counted as knowledge in her high school English classes. As she explained at a February, 2002 meeting, our collaborative reading of Kris' journal helped her recognize that she had been policing discussion topics in an effort to support her identity as a serious teacher, focused on a real curriculum: "I was really trying to prove something to myself, you know, I am a teacher and I am teaching curriculum and these side conversations are different." At the same time, Kris recognized that her evolving goals as a critical literacy practitioner included breaking down exactly these kinds of boundaries between school knowledge and students' lives. Crediting her reading of group discussion transcripts with this revelation, Kris told Maria: "I have to say, some of your comments resonate with me and I am writing about them now in my journal with my new students. To give you one example . . . you said, it's not only about bringing the literature to the class and getting students to look at things critically,

but having kids take it into their personal lives." Telling the story of one student who gave his mother a copy of Invisible Man after reading it in her class, Kris reflected: "That's just why I teach. That is critical literacy to me. You read something, you take ownership of it, and then you give it in some way, shape or form to someone in your life." For Kris, examining the everyday world of her classroom through the new lens of our group discussions meant seeing connections between the language practices in her classroom, her identity as a teacher, and the kind of learning and knowing that both she and her students are able to do. The effects of "disrupting the commonplace" in our group included, according to Kris, "the ability to question how I can teach differently," as well as "the freedom to empower students to use their own language and have that be of value, even though it is not traditional, academic language." Similarly, Kris noted that participation in our group had given her "permission to discuss from [her own] experience," even though "in graduate school you are not supposed to use that language."

Like Kris, we were all able to use our experience in this group to resee, rethink, and revise the familiar texts of our classroom practices. The fact that our group members brought diverse social identities and teaching experiences to our discussions helped us to help each other see our classrooms through new lenses. As Kris put it at a meeting last fall, "This group has helped me to think like six people." When she was trying to help a bilingual high school student who was reluctant to write in English, for example, Kris decided to invite her student to write to her first in Spanish. At a later group meeting, Kris reported that she made this decision because she heard Nélida's voice in her head, speaking passionately about her own and her elementary bilingual students' desire and right to use their first languages in school. Each of us had similar experiences in which we used what we had learned from each other to challenge our assumptions and reshape our practice.

Another — and perhaps less typical — way that we disrupted the commonplace and practiced critical literacy involved collaboratively and critically reading a broad range of texts related to the dominant discourses of teaching and professional development. These included physical texts, such as media reports about teachers failing a state licensing exam, as well as the experiential texts we brought from our lives in schools, professional development contexts, and beyond. In conversations like the one we had about writing this article [see pp. 1-4], we interrogated the language and power relationships that shape our experiences as teachers, graduate students, and university faculty. This process raised some of the same questions for us that Kristen grappled with in her practice: What counts as knowledge in our group and in other teacher education contexts? Who decides? What role does our personal experience play in our quest to understand critical literacy and to become better teachers? What kind of language can we use to represent what we are learning, and in what contexts will this language be heard? These conversations were generally serious, but we also used humor to illuminate power relationships. After giving Maria the contact information for an elementary teacher doing critical literacy work

in her classroom, for instance, Kristen joked, "Maybe I'll go with you to visit her — we can be two university experts coming to observe!" Whether serious or funny, all of these conversations helped us recognize and question a dominant discourse about teachers and professional development that defines knowledge as something created outside of ourselves and our classrooms and that positions teachers as the receivers and not the creators of knowledge about teaching.

"Interrogating Multiple Voices": Creating Critically Supportive Relationships

Narrative by Kristen French

The theme of relationship building emerged for me as I read the transcripts. This theme was not easy to pinpoint in specific group conversations, but seemed to emerge over time through sharing personal stories and fears. This process of relationship building involved creating a sense of safety in our group, something I can speak to in terms of my project. I volunteered to be the first group member to present some of my work in progress. I showed a video of myself teaching in my seminar of student teachers. As part of my effort to integrate indigenous issues and critical literacy in my seminar, we put Columbus on trial using Bob Peterson's curriculum in Rethinking Columbus (1998). I was fearful of sharing this video and exposing myself, but tentatively willing to share it with this group. On the day of the video presentation my fears of disclosure erupted, but at the end of the presentation, the group was supportive:

> Kristen: It's so hard to think I'm one way and then I see myself — and I'm so different from what I think I am.
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> Maria: We are all like that.
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> Kristen: I get so excited that I lost track of, I lost track of what I . . . when I look at this I wanted to say that, but I should have . . .
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> Maria: But that's why you did it, right? You did this lesson and then you revise it and you build on it and it's a part of what's expected.
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> Cathy: I agree with you. I thought what [the students] came up with in terms of the 'now what' was really right on, critical literacy-wise.

The conversation turned to what seemed to work well and then to a critical discussion of how to create a more co-constructed and collaborative environment for questioning. Instead of feeling exposed, I felt inspired. In fact, I felt empowered by my ability to share myself and receive constructive feedback. Since the presentation, my fears of examining my own practice have waned.

It wasn't until late in our analysis of the transcripts that we named the quiet soulfulness and bonding that has occurred through our interactions in the group.

The ability to relax, trust, and share the multiple layers of ourselves that make up our strengths and weaknesses and our genuine worth has spilled over into my own classroom. This has occurred in a variety of ways, from making myself more available to allowing time for teachable moments. For example, at the beginning of last semester, I asked students to bring in a brown paper lunch bag filled with at least five objects that represent themselves. In my agenda, I allowed thirty minutes for this activity. What happened when students began to share was magical. We began making connections with each other. The activity lasted for two hours, and a shift occurred that day. As Paulo Freire (1991) suggests, "Our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them....Without this, we have no access to the way they think…what and how they know" (p. 58). As we are all students and teachers in this inquiry group, Freire's words speak to us. We are on a journey of knowing one another and ultimately impacting our students.

According to Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), "[a]uthors who describe the multiple-viewpoints dimension of critical literacy ask us to imagine standing in the shoes of others — to understand experience and texts from our own perspectives and the viewpoints of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently" (p. 383). In Nancy and Kevin's classrooms, this dimension took shape as students discussed the multiple perspectives of the characters in books or explored different positions through role-playing related to social issues.

Although Kristen's description of our inquiry group as a "safe space" may not seem to represent this dimension of critical literacy, our analysis of our group meeting transcripts suggests that getting to know each other and building a sense of trust and community was an important foundation for the practice of reading our teaching and other texts through our multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives. Teaching practices such as role-playing can provide an invaluable opportunity for students to gain a window into different perspectives and even to examine how power is exercised in different situations; however, such practices can also construct the process of interrogating multiple viewpoints as a fairly painless, intellectual exercise. By taking on imaginary roles, students can examine conflicts and consequences in a detached manner, without necessarily challenging their identities and their most deeply held assumptions. In contrast, the process of interrogating the multiple perspectives we brought to instances of conflict within our teacher inquiry group was neither imaginary nor painless. Without the sense of trust in each other that Kristen F. describes, we believe that we could not have explored these conflicts as thoroughly nor learned as much from each other.

Perhaps because we have a lot in common in terms of our perspectives on teaching and learning, the few serious conflicts that occurred in our group centered on the tensions created by the fact that some of us identified primarily as practicing K-12 teachers, while the rest of us saw ourselves primarily as academics. One such conflict occurred during the same meeting in which Kristen shared the videotape of

herself teaching. Dawn had invited one of her high school teaching colleagues, James, to this meeting. After Kristen's presentation, James described a lesson in his eleventh and twelfth grade U.S. History class, and Cathy challenged him as to the appropriateness of one aspect of this lesson. While the conversation that followed was polite, it was a tense discussion and various group members sided with James or Cathy. At the next group meeting, we spent time trying to understand our different perspectives and how they had informed this conflict. We explored a variety of explanations related to our differing social identities and subject positions, but ultimately focused on the issue of the power relationships embedded in the discourse of the academy. Dawn related an experience when she and a group of teacher colleagues had met with several university researchers and had felt like they were treated as sources of data about "real classrooms," but not as sources of expertise. Several group members shared similar experiences and also talked about the intimidation and frustration that practicing teachers can feel when they are in a university context but are not familiar with the jargon and rules of the language of the academy. Dawn captured the essence of the issue when she wondered aloud whose responsibility it is to make sure that groups like ours are welcoming to practicing teachers, like James, who are not affiliated with university programs.

Although this conversation was emotionally challenging, it helped us clarify a problem that needed to be addressed both within and beyond our group. We also recognized the act of having this conversation as a positive development. At the time, Kristen expressed this recognition: "One thing I do feel is we could have easily just not talked about this and I do feel safer [because we have]. I feel like, almost physically, I feel like we made one more step. We are stabilizing the relationship in this group where I feel like I can say anything to anybody and make mistakes and apologize or work it out . . . .That is what safety is in this classroom." In her study of the implementation of a critical language awareness (CLA) curriculum in a South African classroom, Hilary Janks (2001) argues that "[b]ecause CLA can destabilize the discourses that construct students' multiple identities, it requires an environment in which it is safe for students to take risks" (p. 149). One of the ways our group practiced critical literacy was by focusing on our relationships in order to create an environment where we felt safe enough to challenge the hierarchical language and power relationships that characterize typical professional development and teacher education contexts.

"Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues": Theorizing Lived Experience

Narrative by Maria José Botelho

I recently asked the group: "I was wondering how you folks feel when you read your own voices [in the transcripts]. I feel very comfortable in this space, and I feel

very comfortable in saying what I am thinking and what I know, but in reading it, I feel like my Portuguese lens comes out. What do I mean by my Portuguese lens? It's just like I feel uncomfortable with a lot of the statements I am making, not necessarily the content, but how forceful I sound, or urgent. I perceive it as if I dominate certain conversations sometimes." Dawn asked me: "Is that a cultural attribute that you are identifying?" I respond, "This idea of culture....I come from a group…in the Azores, we were dominated by Portugal....I remember being brought up that you are quiet, you are quiet and still and don't take up too much space and so I could say, 'Oh, that's Portuguese,' [but] I say it is part of being a dominated group. Politically and economically, we were dominated by the mainland government....I feel like I have shaken that identity . . . ."

Our teacher inquiry group co-constructs a critical literacy that permits this kind of personal and sociopolitical analyses to exist side by side. Our work together is helping me understand my place in the world, how that place is historically, socially, and discursively shaped, and how my place in the world shapes my teaching and learning. As I shared with Nélida during a recent group meeting: "Social identity is so intertwined with critical literacy…it comes from the center of your being. That's what I see when I read these transcripts…what we are all saying…it's certainly because of what we have lived." My life offers me a window to examine class issues. I have crossed many socioeconomic lines: from peasant to working class to middle class. Investigating critical literacy affirms what I know about class and theorizing critical literacy gives words to my lived experience.

In the dimension of critical literacy called "focusing on sociopolitical issues," teachers and students "attempt to step outside of the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions" (Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 83). The elementary students in the classrooms studied by Lewison, Seely Flint and Van Sluys, (2002) participated in this type of interrogation to varying degrees: Nancy's students did not typically connect their personal experiences with larger social structures, while the students in Kevin's classroom started "to question how power was enacted in their lives" (p. 389). More directly relevant to our investigation of the relationship between critical literacy and professional development is that fact that both Nancy and Kevin used the critical literacy teacher study group as a place to explore the impact of power relationships and sociopolitical systems on their teaching. The discussions of high-stakes testing these teachers participated in sound very familiar to us. The transcripts of our conversations reveal our similar, ongoing efforts to interrogate the sociopolitical systems and power relationships shaping our experiences with issues such as standardized testing for students, bilingual education, "Standard English," academic jargon, mandated curricula, and high-stakes teacher testing.

Maria's narrative highlights what we believe is a slightly different aspect of this dimension of critical literacy as it was practiced in our teacher inquiry group. In addition to interrogating our experiences as teachers, we also used our life histories

and our experiences within our group to help us understand and critique dominant ideologies. As Maria put it at one of our meetings, "There's a story being told through us." Our life stories illustrate how power is exercised, and our social memberships attest to the power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Reading through the transcripts of our conversations, we can hear each other learning to understand and care about the issues like classism and homophobia that have played a role in our individual stories. In addition, having the transcripts available for us to review allowed us to interrogate the power dynamics at work within our group. We were officially a graduate course for our first two semesters together, with Cathy as the instructor. Like other critical literacy classrooms, we faced a number of tensions as we sought to shift entrenched power relationships between "teacher" and "students." Fortunately, difficult conversations about agenda setting and conversational control in our group were also opportunities to understand the power relationships in our individual classrooms and in other educational settings. As Kristen put it, "This group is a living example for me of shared power." In our experience, most professional development activities do not include a focus on sociopolitical aspects of teaching. For us, this focus was expanded and sharpened through a critical literacy practice that involved using our own lives and our group experience to help us interrogate sociopolitical systems and power relationships.

"Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice": Redefining Support and Accountability

Narrative by Dawn Fontaine

I fell in love with the ideas and ideals of critical literacy two short years ago. Little did I know that I was going to be sent on a trip that would shake the foundations of my pedagogy. One of the first quotes I read by Paulo Freire (1991) was, "A pedagogy is that much more critical and radical the more investigative and less certain of certainties it is. The more unquiet a pedagogy, the more critical it will become" (pp. ix-x). Through my participation in this critical literacy collaborative inquiry group, I have come to recognize some of the political, social, systemic, and structural tensions that are inherent to education today and are alive in my classroom. I have found myself immersed in tension, uncertainty, and uneasiness, yet full of possibility. The more I become aware, the more I work to solidify my pedagogy, the more I inquire, the more I find myself in an unquiet space that I strangely welcome. But, while I am motivated, I am uncertain. There is an urgency I've always felt to being an educator in public schools. Yes, I must move, but what should I do? What can I do? So, I start with my students . . . .

"Taking action and promoting social justice" is often seen as "the definition of critical literacy" according to Lewison, Seely Flint and Van Sluys (2002, p. 383). However, as these authors point out, informed action — like Kevin's work

campaigning against high-stakes testing — builds on the lessons learned from participation in the other three dimensions of critical literacy. Like Dawn, we all found that participating in a critical literacy teacher inquiry group unsettled us and strengthened the sense of urgency we already felt as teachers committed to positive social change. However, these feelings did not necessarily translate into taking group action for social justice (aside from sharing our work through presentations and publication). Instead, our work together both supported and motivated us as we made changes at the local level of our classrooms and participated, as individuals, in action projects and political action related to our personal and professional commitments. Supported by our group, we made ongoing pedagogical shifts. Some of these shifts had what Kris called a "ripple effect." Dawn's synthesis journal, for example, is going to become part of the curriculum in all of the classrooms at the school where she teaches. Beyond the classroom, our group has helped us find the courage to get involved in political projects related to education. Kristen, for instance, spoke out at state-level meetings about the need to include indigenous issues in the proposed curriculum frameworks.

Support and motivation are important elements of any professional development effort. However, we found that the meaning of these terms shifted for us in relation to our participation in this group. Within the dominant discourse of professional development, support for teachers is typically conceptualized as having access to expert advice, resource materials, and funding. Although we agree that all of these elements of are important for teachers' professional growth, support in our group had more to do with being listened to, challenged, and validated as we took risks in our classrooms and in our lives. In typical professional development contexts, motivation can be a code word for accountability: teachers are expected to make changes in their classrooms because they are going to be "held accountable" for the results. We did come to feel accountable through our work together, but that sense of accountability came from our commitment to the group and to our work together. Dawn helped us understand that the growing motivation we were feeling throughout our time together also had to do with our increasing clarity about critical literacy: "When you begin to understand the theory of your practice," she said, "you have to become accountable."

Conclusion:

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At one of our early meetings, Cathy talked about how serious and scary critical literacy sometimes felt to her. She asked the group, "Do you think critical literacy can ever be fun?" We are happy to report that writing this article together was fun, especially when we met to construct this conclusion. Cathy started us off by offering her vision of a traditional conclusion — one that would tie up the article's loose ends by describing the alternative to the dominant discourse of professional develop-

ment that our group had constructed together. Some of us looked dubious, and Kris gently but succinctly put these doubts into words: "Would that be one of those conclusions that pulls out the salient points and presents them to the reader as a model for how to behave? I'm not sure that's really what our experience has been about [laughter]." So, instead of concluding with a summary, or implications, or recommendations, we conclude where we began, in process, unsure where we are headed on our journey into critical literacy, but experiencing along the way the power of making the road by walking and talking together.

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