“Nobody Knows the . . . Amount of a Person”: Elementary Students Critiquing Dehumanization through Organic Critical Literacies

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This article draws on a four-year practitioner research study of a university partnership with an all-boys public elementary school to analyze students’ socially situated literacy practices that occurred on the margins of a curriculum driven by high-stakes testing. We bring together critical literacy (Freire, 2007; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2000), realist theory (Alcoff, 2006; Mohanty, 1997; Moya, 2001), and Gramsci’s (1971) conception of the organic intellectual to provide a layered framework for understanding how students at our research site mobilized their cultural identities for critical ends, what we define as “organic critical literacies.” Through illustrative examples of third- and fourth-grade African American boys’ interactions with fiction and nonfiction texts, we examine how students critiqued common ideologies that devalued them, their school, and their city, and enacted more humanizing visions. The elementary students whose work we feature were realizing their capacities as emerging organic intellectuals, translating their singular critical insights and observations into a broader dialogue that had more universal resonance. We conclude by discussing the educational, epistemological, and ethical implications of our study.

Introduction

During a literature discussion on the children’s novel *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), Gerald invited a group of fourth-grade boys to consider the transformation of one of the protagonists, Zero, who readers come to learn has the real name of Hector. *Holes*, set in an exploitative juvenile correctional facility thinly disguised as a summer camp, is widely read and has even become a Hollywood movie. In the book, the corrupt Warden forces children to dig holes in the oppressive heat, presumably as punishment for prior transgressions, but as revealed in the ending, the actual motive is personal profit in the form of buried treasure. Just beneath Sachar’s
lively plots and humorous prose is serious social satire: *Holes* may be considered a comedy, an adventure story, and a mystery, but it is also about the criminalization and devaluation of youth, a theme perhaps best embodied by the character of Zero, or Hector.

The question of naming—Zero or Hector—became the catalyst for an impassioned conversation initiated by the students, the depth and complexity of which did not become apparent until we reviewed the transcript and situated their insights within what we had learned from a multiyear research collaboration with Boys Academy [all names are pseudonyms], a public all-boys school in a Midwestern city. The students took issue with the nickname Zero, which was given to Hector because he was unable to read, and one child stated: “Nobody knows the average amount of a person.” As this comment suggests, the students were concerned with the effects of quantifying human value and made an ethical claim that human worth is immeasurable and individual potential never fully knowable to others. The students’ book conversation exemplified a recurring pattern of critical literacy practices at the school that were informed by their cultural legacies.

A few days later, we made our rounds to all the Boys Academy classrooms for end-of-the-year good-byes. The phrase that teachers used to describe our work together with the children was “a breath of fresh air” (field notes, 5/26/2010). These words took on particular irony in the last classroom we visited, with a teacher and group of children with whom we had become especially close. The summer had set in with a vengeance and the room, with its broken air-conditioner, was sweltering. The children were completing a final battery of multi-subject tests, slumped over their desks and sweating, seemingly delirious from exhaustion, the fans in the room barely stirring the humidity. Their commitment to the rote task at hand seemed desultory at best, similar to the hole-digging of Hector and his friends and in stark contrast to the intellectually vibrant mood of the book discussion.

Boys Academy had been ranked as the lowest-performing school in the state, according to standardized test scores and measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and thus was under curricular constraints and intense public scrutiny. Our collaboration focused on literacy and engagement, goals teachers and administrators felt had been neglected due to an emphasis on test preparation. During our four years at the school, we documented what happened when we worked with the teachers to create more expansive curricular spaces for students “in these times” (Lytle, 2006, p. 257) of high-stakes assessments. The research involved an oscillation between teacher inquiry communities and students’ literacy engagements in classrooms across the school. In this article we spotlight the students, who, at eight and nine years old, mobilized their social identities in their school reading and writing practices. We have come to understand these practices as organic critical literacies that draw on what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009), following Geertz (1983), have conceptualized as “local knowledge”: knowledge generated from collaborative inquiry and, we believe, informed by the “dense particularity” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 30) of social experience. In the context of our work, it is knowledge derived in response to larger social dynamics, including segregation,
racism, poverty, and top-down educational policies, that affect the lives of students and educators. It is also knowledge nourished by local instantiations of cultural and historical legacies, specifically the African American struggle for literacy access and human rights.

**Literacy and (De)Humanization**

Across the United States, educational policies have shaped opportunities for literacy teaching and learning (Meier & Wood, 2005) in ways that Street (1995) would characterize as “autonomous”, whereby literacy skills are treated as neutral. Many school reforms have been driven by high-stakes assessments, with results tied to curricular decisions, teacher evaluations, and funding. While the rationale behind highlighting under-performing schools has been to improve educational opportunities, the practices of quantifying and ranking need to be understood within a historical and social context, specifically with regards to how the testing paradigm has stigmatized communities of color (Sloan, 2007; Valencia & Villareal, 2003; Zacher Pandya, 2011). The discourse of social justice that characterizes reform mandates masks how these policies are enacted on the ground (Christensen, 2007) and the systemic effects of poverty and racism on education. As Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts, what is often framed as an “achievement gap” between white students and their Black and Latino peers is more accurately characterized as an “education debt” that reflects resource inequities.

Scholars who take a critical perspective have argued that literacy must be examined within hierarchies of power and ideologies about whose knowledge counts (e.g., Street, 1995). In a historical overview of literacy evaluations, Willis (2007, p. xx) traces how “reading comprehension research and testing are politically and socially constructed methods used to reproduce dominant ideologies.” The current evaluation of schools, teachers, and students tied to accountability measures often has repercussions that exacerbate social inequalities. Schools identified as underperforming—disproportionately institutions that serve communities of color—face financial and curricular penalties, and are at risk of restructuring or being shut down if scores do not improve. As Au (2007) has documented in a review of qualitative research, in the majority of cases high-stakes testing resulted in three trends with regard to curricular alignment: “curricular content narrowing to tested subjects, to the detriment or exclusion of nontested material,” curriculum “taught in isolated pieces,” and “teachers increasingly turn[ing] to teacher-centered instruction to cover the breadth of test-required information and procedures” (p. 263).

With schools under duress to show gains in scores, teaching becomes framed as a cost-benefit analysis of where resources might result in the greatest yield—such as which children are just below proficiency and, with targeted attention, can be moved into the next band of achievement—an approach that tends to occur most often in schools labeled as needing improvement (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Scripted literacy curricula have been shown to homogenize experience through standardization and exclude culturally relevant pedagogies in favor of increased time spent on basic skills (Campano, 2007). Winn and Behizadeh (2011) link the
educational accountability culture to issues of access and equity for historically
minoritized communities, arguing that such policies have resulted in “low quality
literacy education” which “is a key component of the school-to-prison pipeline”
(p. 151), and that, by contrast, “cultivating critical literacy skills for urban youth
can generate possibilities for disrupting and dismantling this pipeline” (p. 149).

For African American communities, literacy has been used to deny access
to social goods, and also appropriated for liberatory purposes (Holloway, 2008;
Kirkland, 2013). There are rich studies of the latter in recent literacy research.
For example, Kinloch (2009) documents how Harlem youth utilize multiple lit-
eracies to investigate and critique the gentrification of their neighborhood. Lee
(2004) analyzes how, when the classroom is organized around students’ cultural
knowledge, African American language and literacy practices can be leveraged as
a profound academic resource. These important works, among many others, call
attention to how a more expansive notion of literacy can humanize teaching and
learning, and create spaces for students to empower themselves in the curriculum.

**Culturally Situated Organic Critical Literacies**

Our understandings of critical literacy are supplemented by realist theories of
identity and Gramsci’s (1971) concept of the organic intellectual. Critical literacy
has provided a framework for understanding and critiquing the ways that language
and literacy are tied to power (e.g., Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Lewison,
practice as an adult educator, the ways that reading the word entails reading the
world, wherein literacy can be used as a tool of subordination and also as a means
of transformation. Literacy comprises “political and social practice[s] that limit or
create possibilities” (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006, p. 199). A critical literacy
orientation thus seeks to understand and take action on the ways inequality is
produced through discourses (Gee, 2005) that serve to position individuals or
groups in relation to a constructed norm.

Hillary Janks’s (2010) interrelated framework of domination, access, diversity,
and design provides a lens for examining the dimensions of critical literacy. As Janks
elaborates, there is a need to examine texts and practices to understand how their
power operates as a form of domination—how texts function to forward ideological
worldviews, to include or exclude, and to perpetuate hegemonic constructs which
reify social stratifications. The concept of design highlights individuals’ agency in
manipulating existing semiotic resources to move from critique to constructing
alternatives, a process which entails “provid[ing] access to dominant languages,
literacies and genres while simultaneously using diversity as a productive resource
... [in] changing which discourses are dominant” (Janks, 2000, p. 178).

We build on the critical literacy tradition in order to consider the culturally
specific ways in which communities may already possess and mobilize critical
insights. To articulate this dimension, we draw on realist theory as articulated by
the Future of Minority Studies Project, in which Gerald participated as a teacher
and emerging scholar. Realist theory grew out of transdisciplinary collaborative
inquiry that explores the role of identity in knowledge production. A number of scholars of color in the academy, including Alcoff (2006), Mohanty (1997), and Moya (2001), have examined the limits of postmodernism, in particular its skepticism of identity as grounds for obtaining knowledge. They argue for the need to make normative claims and provide an account of accuracy and social distortion in order to forge a vision of social justice, including, as we suggest, what may constitute a more humane schooling environment.

Realist theorists, in line with constructivist paradigms, assert that there is no neutral point of interpretation; rather, all our understandings are mediated by factors including our cultural or social experiences (Mohanty, 1997), which function as theories that help us “read the world” (Freire, 2007). They also contend that positivist orientations should not have a monopoly on truth and objectivity, and are concerned about a relativism in postmodern thought that may undermine progressive politics. Realist theorists thus link subjective experience to more complete and comprehensive knowledge about the world we share, and value multi-perspectival forms of inquiry. In particular, they acknowledge that minoritized social locations provide unique vantage points from which to understand the world and how it produces inequality, what is referred to as epistemic privilege (Moya, 2001).

Due to these emphases, realist theory can help articulate the critical practices that people already engage in by virtue of their legacies and identities. Our research highlights how even elementary-age children have epistemic privilege (Campano, 2007) and, when afforded the curricular space, may mobilize culturally situated organic critical literacies in order to interpret the world and act to promote change to the benefit of their communities. The words “culturally situated” invoke standpoint epistemologies (Harding, 2004), which recognize how knowledge claims are partial and situated in relations of power, as well as the realist methodological tenet that better and “more accurate” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 107) accounts of social phenomena require multiple perspectives, taking especially seriously the insights of those whose knowledge and experiences have historically been subordinated (Ortega & Alcoff, 2009). In our research context, these perspectives would necessarily include those of the African American boys and many of their teachers. The pluralization of critical literacy to critical literacies suggests that there is no one framework by which to promote or transmit a critical orientation to students in the curriculum; following Street (1995), critical literacy practices, like all literacy practices, are most productively understood through an ideological lens that is attentive to local contexts and issues of history, power, and identity. Our emphasis on learning from the communities also informs our decision to use the descriptor organic in characterizing the critical literacies we identified at Boys Academy. The boys did not necessarily need to be “taught” critical literacy, but rather were cultivating critical orientations and dispositions already seeded in the soil of their local context, which included the mentorship of teachers and community members.

The word organic also draws attention to Gramsci’s (1971) idea of the “organic intellectual,” who unlike the traditional intellectual, does not ostensibly view the world from a neutral and dispassionate ivory tower, but rather theorizes from
social experience and struggle. The organic intellectual “actively participates in social life and helps bring to theoretical articulation those positive political currents already contained within it” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 119). Gramsci disrupts traditional hierarchies of knowledge by noting that all individuals navigate the world according to particular, if less explicitly articulated, worldviews, thus engaging in a form of intellectual work. The organic intellectual “giv[es] shape and cohesion to these practical understandings, thus unifying theory and practice” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 119). There are several key features of Gramsci’s notion that we want to emphasize for our conceptualization of organic critical literacies: 1) the organic intellectual works to interrupt commonplace, hegemonic understandings, but from the location of the people, and 2) the organic intellectual moves beyond individual understandings generated in daily practice to a more universal reach.

Bringing together critical literacy, realist theory, and Gramsci’s work provides a layered framework for understanding how students at our research site mobilized literacy for critical ends. As Cushman (1999) has argued, communities who have experienced oppression already exhibit critical consciousness in their language and literacy practices. Thus, it is important to interrogate who is positioned as knowing within critical literacy, so as not to reinscribe hierarchical relationships that this stance seeks to disrupt (Guerra, 2004). The tendency to view critical literacy as transmitted from the “outside”—often by those who have a greater degree of power—is mitigated by the use of realist theory and the role of epistemic privilege. The idea of the organic intellectual reinforces critical insights as rooted in local experience, and adds a centrifugal impulse that helps move from deconstruction to a reconstruction that is aimed at transformation.

We believe the elementary students whose work we feature in this article were realizing their capacities as emerging organic intellectuals, translating their critical discernments into a broader dialogue that had more universal resonance. In the process, they critiqued common ideologies that devalued them, their school, and their city. While never fully transcending these ideologies, they nonetheless began to provide shape and cohesion to an alternative vision of their community more conducive to human flourishing.

**Learning from Others: Practitioner Research Methodology**

Our work with Boys Academy has involved collaborative practitioner research as well as ethnographic immersion and participant observation (Heath & Street, 2008). Teacher/practitioner research has made a case for valuing local knowledge through the theorization of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). A fundamental idea behind practitioner research is the democratization of knowledge: the argument that those who participate in a context are in a unique position to systematically examine it. Practitioner research is not the sole purview of teachers; many have a practice to investigate, including teachers, administrators, and university researchers alike. Communities of inquiry are strengthened by the diversity of their members and multi-perspectival forms of inquiry and interpretation. Practitioner research is thus methodologically suited to learning from the epistemic privilege
of others because it unsettles hierarchical assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), including the tendency to view knowledge as exclusively manufactured in elite settings—such as universities and think tanks—and then transmitted to schools. The emphasis on community-based knowledge construction and subordinated perspectives connects this tradition of collaborative inquiry with other critical orientations, including consciousness-raising in feminism (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2000), counter-narratives in ethnic studies and critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the tradition of Latin American testimonial (e.g., Latina Feminist Group, 2001), indigenous ways of knowing (e.g., Cushman, 2011; Smith, 2012), and theorizations of the epistemic status of identity advanced by realist scholars.

Whereas more conventional qualitative research places emphasis on discovering underlying social patterns in education, practitioner research is also interested in breaking inequitable patterns in order to liberate the fuller potentials of students (Campano, 2009). As practitioners adopt an inquiry stance in their work, they engage in research that has as its goal some element of change, often involving shifting discourse about learners, problematizing the structures of schooling, and creating new conditions for teaching. What often begins as an ethnographic question (What is going on here? What are the underlying patterns and ideologies that govern teaching and learning within a particular context?) becomes the starting point for ongoing inquiry in which taking action and knowledge generation are intertwined processes.

Our Roles and Positionalities

The conceptualization of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) is a reminder that practitioner research need not be a bounded project, but rather a form of ongoing investigation. This critical orientation shaped almost every aspect of our work at Boys Academy, including how we understood our partnership (Campano, Honeyford, Sánchez, & Vander Zanden, 2010). As Herr and Anderson (2005, p. 31) frame, there is a continuum of action researcher positionalities: from, on one end, insiders’ research on their own practice; to reciprocal collaborations between insiders and outsiders; to, on the other side of the spectrum, outsider studies of insiders’ work. Our partnership with Boys Academy involved adopting a range of roles as participant observers, professional development facilitators, co-teachers, inquiry community members, and guest teachers of the students. We drew on our own practitioner researcher lenses to think alongside the teachers about what matters to them as educators, what issues they would like to explore in more depth, and what changes they might hope to enact in their school, and to inform our work with students throughout the collaboration. An inquiry stance created the conditions not only to document the literacy practices occurring at the school, but to design alternative spaces for student learning based on ongoing findings.

We are all former classroom teachers who worked in under-resourced schools prior to coming to the university and consider our practitioner identities inseparable from our scholarly ones. In 2006, during Gerald’s third year as an assistant professor, he attended a meeting between his university and the School Corporation
of Boys Academy. It was part of a larger effort to support the PreK–16 pipeline and also signaled a renewed commitment by administrators in both contexts to forge links between the state’s major research institution and some of its most vulnerable students and schools. Gerald was invited to partner with Boys Academy and welcomed the opportunity to return to city classrooms, despite the over three-hour journey between the school and the university. Lenny joined the project as a doctoral student, eventually renting an apartment in the school’s neighborhood and making his work with students the focus of his dissertation research. María Paula became involved as a research colleague during the final two years of the partnership.

**Study Overview**

Boys Academy is a public elementary school located in a Midwestern city. The area thrived economically during the industrial era, but factory closings in the 1960s led to economic decline and unemployment. As one of the teachers commented, “There were a lot of people who had to move because there’s no jobs like there used to be when the mills were prospering” (transcript, 2/16/10). As with other urban centers, this deindustrialization had a devastating impact on the African American population in particular, because the manufacturing sector served as the primary avenue for social mobility (Wilson, 1987), further exacerbating economic isolation across racial lines.

For decades, the neighborhood school had been coeducational, until a district mandate reconstituted it as an all-boys school one year prior to the beginning of our partnership. Boys Academy reflected the demographics of the district: the student population was 99% African American, and 98% of the students received free lunch. Many of the educators themselves had grown up in the city and attended its schools, including the principal, who had been a student at Boys Academy fifty years prior. The teachers at the school were predominantly African American and had a long teaching history in the district. Boys Academy had a strong sense of African American identity and its mission was informed by rich cultural and activist legacies.

The administration and faculty seized the single-sex schooling mandate to challenge and transcend stereotypes that would impact their “new” all-male population. In particular, the school made an effort to challenge the myth that boys are disinterested in reading by committing to reconfigure the curriculum in more engaging ways. Our research partnership with Boys Academy emerged from this vision. Together, we sought to investigate the following research questions: How do students and teachers engage with literacy learning/teaching within the climate of high-stakes testing and accountability? What literacy practices do students display when teachers and university researchers create opportunities for them to pursue their own inquiries in the curriculum?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Gerald and Lenny visited the school monthly in 2006–2007 and biweekly in 2007–2008. At least one of the three researchers was at the school three times per
week in 2008–2009, and once weekly in 2009–2010. Throughout, we documented our participation with teachers and students through field notes and researcher memos, made audio and video recordings of inquiry meetings with educators and of literacy engagements with students, and collected students’ writings and other evidence of their literacies, such as photographs. Our work with teachers in professional learning settings, held after school and during the summers, became a nexus from which to investigate the literacy practices of students. Teachers’ collaborative inquiries about their students’ literacy learning led to our observations of classrooms, and teachers brought student work to analyze together in our meetings. In the last two years of the research project, we became more involved in directly facilitating literacy engagements with students. We also conducted interviews with teachers and students to historicize the context and learn about their experiences at the school.

Qualitative data analysis is largely an inductive process, but it acknowledges that researchers have their own “theoretical commitments and professional experiences” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 81). Or, as Erickson (2004) says, qualitative interpretation neither imposes a subjective view onto social phenomena nor waits for objective patterns to naturally emerge. We believe data analysis is usefully characterized, in the tradition of practitioner research, as a dialectic between the conceptual and the empirical (Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), where researchers constantly revise their theories in light of evidence and identify new patterns of salience with an ever-refined conceptual lens. For us, a fundamental concern was catalytic validity (Lather, 1986), which ensures that the collective pursuit of knowledge benefited the participants’ teaching and learning.

The data analysis process occurred alongside educators in the teacher inquiry community throughout the four-year partnership. We examined the kinds of literacies students engaged in and “the differences in kinds” (Erickson, 2004, p. 490), which surfaced the tension between the skills-based testing paradigm and literacies informed by community-based ways of knowing that occurred in the cracks of the official curriculum. For instance, early on the teachers identified that students used literacy to convey their emotions in ways that countered both the literacies privileged in their mandated reading program and also dominant depictions of African American boys. Juxtaposing these insights with our observations from across the collaboration, as documented in field notes and teacher interviews, we identified an ethics of care (Collins, 2000) that was tied to African American legacies. Our collaborative analysis of students’ work with the teachers involved adaptations of guided processes for description, such as those used by the Prospect School (Himley & Carini, 2000; Simon, 2013), which provided a protocol to examine individual texts (in our case, student writings, literature responses, and artwork) systematically. There was continuous interplay between classrooms and the teacher inquiry community, so that data regarding students’ literacies was analyzed within the context of educators’ knowledge. Insights informed new cycles of action in the creation of alternative curricular spaces attuned to students’ cultural identities and literacy practices.
Guided by the work of the inquiry community, we looked within and across the data sources to determine salient themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the kinds of literacy practices occurring at the school, and how students and teachers mobilized these practices (for example, to position themselves, to engage in critical inquiry, to connect to community legacies). Due to the length of the school collaboration and its many facets, we collected a substantial volume of data. To manage this quantity, we initially listened to/viewed recordings and made descriptive notes regarding the nature and role of documented literacy events, defined as “occasions in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (Heath, 1982, p. 50). We read across our notes to identify patterns and distinctions in literacy events and what these conveyed about the literacy practices at the school, including “the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear on those events and that give meaning to them” (Street, 1988, as cited in Heath & Street, 2008, p. 104). With initial themes gathered through this approach, we revisited the data in a recursive and iterative process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) to refine our understandings of students’ and teachers’ literacy practices at Boys Academy and search for disconfirming instances in the data. We selected a subset of representative literacy events and critical incidents for further analysis. In this analysis, we applied more specific interpretive frameworks commensurate with the type of data source, such as discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to examine literature conversations, or multimodality (Kress, 2003) for visual products, being careful to contextualize close investigations of particular texts within how they functioned socioculturally (Siegel & Panofsky, 2009).

Findings
In our analysis of the data from across the study, we found that while students participated in rote, skills-based activities as part of the mandated curriculum, when given the space to direct their own inquiries they engaged in critical literacies that were rooted in cultural legacies. While there was a range and variation in the extent to which students displayed organic critical literacies, this theme was present across data from all our classroom contexts for the duration of the partnership. This critical stance was not something we explicitly taught or a pedagogy we asked the teachers to implement. Rather, we found that students’ critical literacies were “organic” to their contexts. An important dimension of the students’ social milieu was their teachers, many of whom we got to know well during our time at Boys Academy. Although the focus of this article is on the children’s literacies, we believe it is necessary to provide a sense of the school culture the teachers helped to create and sustain. This culture was an essential part of the local knowledge and intellectual soil that nourished the students’ critical engagements with texts and with the world.

One unique and, for us, edifying aspect of Boys Academy was that the majority of the teachers were from the area and many had been with the district for decades, including one educator who had been working in the building for 28 years. The faculty and staff stressed the importance of honoring the boys’ cultural legacies.
This commitment had become ritualized in a number of events; for example, during each day’s morning announcements the school body, led by a student, sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and class and school-wide celebrations regularly thematized African American history, such as the students’ participation in the inauguration of the local Langston Hughes Family Museum. The guest speakers at special events were chosen to talk with the students because they were from, and remained dedicated to, the community. We also documented many examples in our field notes of instances when teachers spontaneously invoked local social justice struggles and histories. It was not uncommon for this to be done through testimonial. Teachers shared with the students, and each other, their own childhood stories of being on the front lines of school desegregation and overcoming the low expectations of their new teachers. One staff member of the school recounted how she, with fellow student activists at the university, established the first Black Studies department in the state and, in the process, faced down threats and endured domestic terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan (field notes, 11/24/2007). Teachers had encountered and resisted White Supremacy firsthand and communicated what they had learned from these experiences with the students.

We believe the teachers’ decision to provide the boys with an accurate, unsanitized version of both past and present realities was rooted in, as we have discussed elsewhere (Sánchez, Campano, & Hall, in press), a “gospel impulse.” Scholars characterize the gospel impulse as an intergenerational cultural resource that grounds the burden of suffering within a larger historical and spiritual narrative (Cone & Wilmore, 1993). As a social and discursive practice, it entails acknowledging life’s burdens, bearing witness to one another’s circumstances, and seeking redemption (Werner, 1998). We found the gospel impulse’s ethos of mutual care and interdependence evident in the school’s everyday discourses and enrichment activities. For example, during a lunchtime conversational interview Lenny facilitated with faculty, several teachers emphasized that despite their “pressures” and “struggles”—words brought up repeatedly—they supported one another like a “family” whose strength is to “pull together.” The teachers’ sense of kinship extended to the boys as well, with one teacher commenting that they are “all of our kids—everyone’s!” (transcript, 2/17/10).

Many teachers adopted a skills-based orientation to instruction. This pedagogy was shaped by a high-stakes testing paradigm that consumed much of the curriculum through a regular battery of state- and district-mandated assessments. The faculty expressed exasperation toward the policy climate because they felt the ongoing benchmark exams compromised their abilities to meet the students’ needs as individuals and as complete human beings (e.g., transcript, 2/16/10). One teacher emphasized that the boys “need to be nurtured and love shown. And that they see you really care; that’s what sparks interest, and they want to do better” (transcript, 2/17/10).

This ethics of care manifested itself in the faculty’s desire to give the boys access to a range of experiences, such as a Naval Operations Program based on Deweyan principles of learning, the only elementary school drum line in the state, a dads’ mentorship club, and, with the support of our partnership, the formation of a
Writers’ House—adorned with pictures of Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin—where the children could perform their prose and poetry. These and many more initiatives occurred despite the constraints of standardization and the school’s lack of financial resources. But too often they occurred in a “second classroom” (Campano, 2007, p. 40), an alternative pedagogical space, often built on uncompensated intellectual and emotional labor, where teachers nurtured the individual dignity and cultural integrity of their students. These pedagogical impulses existed in unresolved tension with the priority given to test preparation. Teachers felt they had to “sweat out” the narrowing of the curriculum as a matter of “survival” (transcript, 2/17/10). The principal conveyed the dilemma well: when, anxious to sustain the momentum of our work with the teachers, we once questioned her about why the school closed its doors to outside visitors for a whole month to get ready for the state exams, she replied, “We value the partnership, but if we do not make AYP this year, you may not have a school with whom to partner. We may be closed down” (field notes, 3/12/09).

It may be worth noting that Boys Academy felt itself to be in competition with a number of charter schools emerging in the area, whose faculty demographic mirrored national trends: young teachers, often not from their students’ community, who spend a few years, not decades, in the district, and enact neoliberal policy reforms (Ravitch, 2010). We speculate that neighborhood public schools with the rich culture and history of Boys Academy may be becoming increasingly endangered.

In the sections that follow, we provide three illustrative examples of students’ organic critical literacies in action, which grew out of the local soil that had been nourished by the teachers. For narrative cohesion, we focus on one classroom cohort in their third- and fourth-grade years. We begin by analyzing the historical research of third graders who, dismayed by the lack of African American representation in their textbook, investigated the economic abandonment and racial segregation of their city. We then feature fourth-grade students in two curricular contexts: the literature discussion group around *Holes*, and a school-wide project in which children conceptualized and built classroom libraries. We argue that students drew on organic critical literacies, derived from culturally situated knowledge, to resist dehumanizing discourses and practices and to enact more humanizing visions.

“When the City Left”: Third-Grade Historians Critically Engage the Past

During the third year of the partnership, Lenny facilitated opportunities for third graders to engage in participatory action research projects centered on issues they identified as important to their community, including home displacement, poverty, and the deteriorated conditions of their school (Sánchez, 2010). Over the course of four months, students employed various ethnographic methods, such as photography, film, and questionnaires, in order to pursue their questions and take subsequent action.
One of the student inquiry groups began by reading through a collection of public library books that chronicled the city’s history through photography. During an initial browsing of the books, they recognized streets and buildings, and discovered former businesses that once lined the downtown area. One of the students, TJ, came across a picture of the city’s first school and noted, “That’s all white people!” (field notes, 4/22/09). Intrigued, the rest of the group instantly began leafing through the remaining books to examine the racial composition of the photos. The students struggled to find pictures of African Americans in the texts, which was surprising to them since the African American community comprised 97% of the city’s current demographic makeup.

Over the next several weeks, three students from this group—TJ, Jarvis, and Deondre—chose to investigate issues of representation further, raising queries such as the following: “Where were the black people [in the history books]?” “What happened to the whites?” “What was life like back then in [this city]?” “How was it different for Black people and White people?” This group of students decided to call themselves “The Historians” and committed to researching the racial dynamics of the city’s past to better understand why African Americans were omitted from the published historical record. Their end-goal included creating a newspaper focused on the African American perspective of the city with the intent to take into account their own experiences and those of their family members. In a section of their publication titled “Old Days, New Days,” the students highlighted how schools had changed during the city’s history, and another called “Good Life” was dedicated to what they identified as “great directions” in their neighborhood.

For their inquiry, Jarvis and Deondre worked on finding additional information about the main street located in the heart of the downtown. Jarvis, in particular, wanted to contrast the many thriving businesses found in the history books to the collapsed remains he and his peers witnessed in the present day. His observations prompted a conversation with Deondre about white flight and left him wondering, “Why did all the businesses leave?” The next day, Jarvis and Deondre returned to this question and conducted an online search related to the impact of white flight on their city. They looked for stories and pictures about their city’s “business boom” which occurred in previous decades. They also spent time on an urban exploration website dedicated to showcasing abandoned city establishments around the world. The children found a church, movie theater, and dance school from their city—buildings which were the social hub of the community during the 1960s and 1970s.

After this online research, the two students pulled out their research notebooks and quickly sketched a few drawings to capture their findings (see Figure 1).

The title of Jarvis’s text, “When the City Left in 1960s,” highlights a period when prosperous enterprises and industries began to vacate the area. Within the backdrop of the city landscape, Blacks and Whites are starkly separated and labeled as such. On the right-hand side of the page, Jarvis drew a tractor-trailer, loaded with white businesses and homes, chained to the cityscape and being pulled from the community. Just beside the truck is a car of Whites departing the city, leaving behind the African Americans.
As with Jarvis and Deondre’s research, The Historians’ quest to investigate the absence of African Americans in history books empowered them to ask critical questions about their community and challenge the authority and accuracy of official accounts. The students were aware of the African American contributions to the development of their city and had epistemic access to this history from their teachers, many of whom had lived through the turbulence of segregation, desegregation, and subsequent de facto re-segregation through white flight. The classroom teacher would share stories of housing redlining, exposure to factory pollution, discriminatory medical care, and poor working conditions. When The Historians first raised questions about the deteriorated buildings in their neighborhood, the teacher discussed with the class the ongoing community protests against a plan to demolish the city’s first African American high school, which stood as a historical marker for many decades (field notes, 4/24/09). Rather than accepting a skewed viewpoint of events, the students mobilized their organic critical literacies to uncover a buried past.

The Historians, like many students, live in an area where histories of discrimination continue to affect their present circumstances and educational opportunities. One of the consequences of standardization has been that students are less likely to connect their academic work with local activist and cultural legacies, a historical awareness that is essential to their self-definition as vital members of their community. The space for inquiry carved out by the classroom teacher and Lenny provided opportunities for students to engage critical questions that emerged from their own experiences. The self-described Historians fulfilled their roles as organic intellectuals by challenging “official” nonfiction texts and researching an alternative community genealogy that was more inclusive of African Americans and attentive
to social justice issues. Drawing on insights they gained from books, digital tools, and stories they heard from elders, the students developed an appreciation of their past and understood current conditions within larger patterns of inequality. In so doing, they nurtured the capacity to project a public voice that would resonate beyond the label of low-performing students in need of remediation which had been ascribed to them, and repositioned themselves as researchers and intellectuals.

Critically Engaging Contemporary Texts and Experiences

In 2009–2010, eight of The Historians’ classmates met regularly with Gerald to read and discuss the book *Holes.* As the final page of the novel was read aloud, the following conversation ensued:

1  **GERALD:** So here is a guy called **Zero**—¹
2  **KIDS:** —**Hector! Hector!**
3  **GERALD:** Why should we not call him **Zero?** Tell me more.
4  **MARIO:** Because he’s not a zero. He’s smart, intelligent; he’s a mad genius. He learned how to read real fast and he had a good friend.
5  **GERALD:** Fantastic, a—
6  **DANTE:** —**AND,** what he said, we don’t want to call him **Zero** ’cause we don’t wanna be zeros.
7  **GERALD:** Uh huh.
8  **MICHAEL:** ’Cause nobody know no amount on him, they don’t know . . . ’Cause his name ain’t **Zero,** it’s Hector. And if it was **Zero** it would probably be like 10 million.
9  **STEVEN:** nobody knows the **average amount of a person.**
10 **GERALD:** No one knows what?
11 **STEVEN:** The average amount of a person.

As Gerald initiated the conversation by invoking Zero/Hector, a character who played an instrumental role in resolving the mystery at the end of the novel, the students quickly redirected the course of the discussion. They took issue with Gerald’s use of the nickname Zero by emphatically exclaiming: “**Hector! Hector!**” With their interjections, they were not merely expressing a preference for birth names. This correction can be seen as an example of what Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, and Shuart-Faris (2005, p. 40) label a “disruption” or “violation” in the interactional context that calls attention to contesting ideologies. In defense of Gerald, he didn’t complete his sentence, which could have ended “who we find out is really named Hector,” but the students’ spontaneous disruption signals that what might have been at stake for them was differing understandings of youth and how they should be viewed, a perspective which they elaborated on throughout the discussion.

After Gerald invited the students to explore their immediate responses, Mario offered a counter-representation of Hector as a “mad genius” (“**mad,**” according to
the Urban Dictionary, translates to “a lot” or “extremely”). There are grounds in the text to support his analysis, including Hector’s adeptness at arithmetic and the fact that he did indeed learn how to “read real fast” once he was given the opportunity. The students used textual evidence to make thematic claims about a character in the book, an important dimension of reading comprehension. In their subsequent comments, they linked these specific insights to a Freirian (2007) type of ethical discourse and reading of the world that had both personal and, as became evident as the conversation continued, potentially more universal resonance.

Michael joined his peers in defending Hector through a rhetorically incisive turning of tables. He echoed and affirmed the collectively arrived-at evaluation of Hector and then added, “and if it was Zero it would probably be like 10 million.” One way to understand this verbally dexterous move is as a form of “signifyin” (Gates, 1988), an African American rhetorical strategy of inversion (Holloway, 2008). In the ritualized communicative practice of signification, “the speaker deploys exaggeration, irony, and indirection as a way of saying something on two levels at once . . . to send a message of social critique” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 26). The children used this strategy for literary interpretation (Lee, 1995, 2004) that connected to social issues within and beyond the novel. In their discussion, the boys reinterpreted—in fact, turned on its head—the worldview embodied by the staff at Camp Green Lake that says the youth, and Hector in particular, are worthless zeros. In a hypothetical thought experiment, Michael first ostensibly accepted the premise of a dominant culture that prioritizes the “will . . . to control others” and “the pursuit of external power” (hooks, 2004, p. 115), often through language. His opening clause “and if it was Zero,” suggests that Michael might himself concede a degree of validity to Hector’s ascribed identity and, by extension, the external quantification of his worth and the idea that human value can be plotted hierarchically. The use of the conditional leads the listener to think that he might suggest something in the spirit of “And if it was Zero, he should still be treated better,” which would reflect a form of patronizing benevolence.

But this is not the direction of Michael’s wordplay. He added immediately, “it would probably be like 10 million.” This exaggeration, following Smitherman (2000), functioned on two levels at once: it denoted Hector as having value and not being a “Zero,” and it also indexed a worth outside ready imagination, thus drawing attention to the underlying system of ranking individuals. The students’ signifyng took the form of resistance that went beyond calling out an individual injustice related to Hector. If they had stopped at repositioning him from a “Zero” to a “mad genius,” this would have left intact the ideology of the normal curve, whereby human intelligence is thought to be “distribute[d] along a bell-shaped curve with most people clustered around the mean or average” (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010, p. 3). The students moved inductively from a defense of Hector as a singular example, “Cause nobody know no amount on him,” to an interpersonal connection, “We don’t wanna be zeros,” to a more universal appeal, “Nobody knows the average amount of a person” (any person). Their argument thus took on a more catholic resonance that abstracted insights from Hector’s case to a wider reach, and
through exaggeration and irony, called into question the apparatus of positioning itself. Otherwise, as the students astutely noted, it could be turned against them (“’Cause we don’t wanna be zeros”).

One way to defend against the dehumanizing process of quantifying human value is to assert that all persons possess a fundamental dignity and mystery—or, more specifically, that their potentiality can never be fully intelligible to, or exhausted by, reductive evaluations, and that often individuals supersede the labels ascribed to them. To put it in the words of the students, no one really knows the amount of another person. The radical potential of such a claim of human worth, as Satya Mohanty (1997) suggests, drawing on Kant, is precisely its level of abstraction from social context. It is in fact transcontextual, applying to all people everywhere by virtue of their humanity.

As the conversation continued, the students displayed organic critical literacies by drawing on African American historical legacies to understand Hector’s situation:

12 **UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT:** Like Martin Luther King said, don’t judge people by the color of their skin, but the content of their character.

13 **MARVIN:** ’Cause back in slave times they didn’t want anybody to read, and right now—

14 **GERALD:** —Why? Why didn’t they want anybody to read?

15 **MARVIN:** They didn’t want them to read because they knew if they read and they got smart they’ll have power and they’ll know that they tried to fool them and will try to get their freedom. And they want somebody just to work for them, that’s why.

16 **GERALD:** Tell me the connections.

17 **TERRANCE:** Let’s see. Zero didn’t know how to read, but he was good at math and he’s still smart. And Stanley came, you know, he taught him how to read and write and things like that, and then . . . It’s all about reading, all about the reading! And Zero, first they called him Zero, it was like the slaves, they didn’t know how to read, Zero didn’t know how to read, they learned how to read, Zero learned how to read, they got their freedom and then they were able to learn how to read.

18 **STEVEN:** You all know the saying, if you do something good for somebody, they do something good for you? Well he [Stanley] did something good for Hector, and then Hector was able to read, and he read the suitcase, which helped them win the case.

The student’s invocation of King’s famous quote following the comment, “Nobody knows the average amount of a person” suggests that the children were aware that, too often, evaluations of a person’s ability shade into judgments of their “visible identities” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 6). They then compared Hector’s situation with
North American slavery through an exemplary use of analogical reasoning: Marvin began with the observation that one effective form of subordination involves denying people access to books. Those in power or those who “tried to fool,” in this case slave owners, realize how reading may be a vehicle for critical consciousness and a potential catalyst for resistance and rebellion. Words were certainly a weapon (Wright, 1945) for Hector, whose access to literacy at the end of the novel, as Steven noted, empowered him to read the suitcase and thus defend himself and render justice upon the corrupt Warden. It is a move reminiscent of Frederick Douglass, whose reading enabled him to expose the hypocrisy of Christian apologists of slavery, and of Malcolm X, whose self-determined access to books in prison afforded him the opportunity to read about the permutations of racism in society, subsequently leading to his own political awakening. We believe the connection between literacy and liberation is also evident in the organic and intellectual cultural work of the fourth-grade boys in the Holes discussion group, and of other students at Boys Academy who brought critical readings of their worlds to their interactions with both nonfiction and fiction. The collective struggle to assert one’s humanity in the face of systemic degradations such as chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration has a long history in African American intellectual, political, and literary legacies, going back to the slave narratives (Alexander, 2010; Gates, 1988)—a perspective which teachers at the school conveyed in the cracks of the mandated curriculum. The students’ critical insights, unprompted by the researchers, appeared to be informed by these legacies.

In many ways, the students enacted the drama they discerned in the novel. An important part of the context is that the school itself, and by implication its children and educators, had been stigmatized in the media. Early on in the discussion (conversational turn 6), the boys identified with Hector, noting that “we don’t want to call him Zero ’cause we don’t wanna be zeros.” The comments that followed help us see the nuance of this statement. The boys did not identify with Hector simply because he was labeled a Zero, but more accurately because he, with the help of his friend Stanley, resisted that stigma through intellectual self-determination, teaching himself to read and then using this knowledge to turn the tables and expose the exploitation of the Warden. The students noted a direct relationship between reading and liberation, and posed a critique of reducing people to numbers. Through the openings provided by the literature group, they interpretively dug holes into the text, excavating its meanings and finding treasure in the form of their historically situated agency.

The Classroom Library Project: Reclaiming Local History and Knowledge

Throughout the partnership, students and teachers mobilized critical literacies to transform their learning environment, such as in what came to be known as the “Classroom Library Project.” One of the problems identified by the teachers was that, as a result of the heavy emphasis on testing over the years, classroom libraries had diminished. Though research points to the invaluable role of libraries in
students’ growth as readers (Krashen, 1995), this resource was becoming closed off to educators at the school, who, in following reading mandates, had at their disposal closets full of basal readers and packaged materials, but far fewer books for fostering independent reading, book discussions, or critical thinking—the very activities required to prepare students for higher education and beyond.

The constraints facing the school community as a result of educational policies have roots in the barriers to literacy referenced by the children in the *Holes* discussion group. Historically, access to books and reading instruction have been restricted along racial lines, and literacy tests have been used as a tool to suppress African American civic participation. Holloway (2008), for example, documents how, “as ‘public’ as libraries were declared to be in their presentations, the practice of access was racially constructed” (p. 40). Exclusionary strategies ranged from refusing to stock culturally relevant texts, to banning entrance to African Americans, to creating separate and unequal facilities or closing down libraries rather than integrating them. As Holloway describes, libraries also became a site of resistance in the struggle for civil rights, from the surreptitious borrowing of books to sit-ins that contributed to dismantling Jim Crow laws.

Inequitable access continues in current times with the under-resourcing of public schools and the high-stakes testing paradigm resulting in what we found to be a near absence of literature in classrooms. The educators at Boys Academy identified the discrepancies between the narrow curricula available to them, the research literature, and their own literacy goals for students. This tension became a platform for action, including Gerald’s *Holes* literature group and a school-wide “Classroom Library Project,” facilitated by María Paula, whereby students conceptualized, designed, and built classroom libraries.

Each of the classes began by discussing book preferences and their dream classroom library. This process surfaced the range and variation of the students’ reading interests and influences—for instance, nonfiction books, the arts (topics like drawing or model-making), and texts that emphasized African American history (all of which were largely excluded from commercial reading programs). The boys foraged for books, built bookshelves, studied potential layouts, organized available furniture, and created artwork to bring their visions to life. They framed the libraries around self-identified themes such as “The Golden Readers,” “Reading in Outer Space,” and “Book City.” Students and teachers viewed these libraries as part of the collective legacy future classes would inherit. In this spirit, they orchestrated a celebration to visit and explore each other’s libraries. Marvin commented, “We knew the little kids [younger classes] were gonna come with us so we could tell them what the books mean.” As we detail below, this introduction to “what the books mean” included reconceptualizing their community within literary traditions.

“Book City” Mural: (Re)Presenting the Community

The fourth-grade class centered their classroom library around a mural they titled “Book City”—a panoramic depiction of their neighborhood (see Figure 2).
Literacy forms the core of the city's infrastructure, with buildings constructed in the shape of books and a “bookmaker” vehicle (see Figure 3) traversing the streets carrying titles of interest to the students (“Obama” and “Crazy Stunts”). On the lower left-hand corner, a car flies a banner emblazoned with the words “Bible Study”—attesting to the legacies of out-of-school literacies that form part of the community—and another is labeled “[Academy] Boys,” positioning the students within the landscape of the mural. In the middle of the visual representation, in a place of prominence, is the school, reinforcing the central role it plays both in
the community and in the children’s imagination. The students did not represent reading as an individual act, but as a communitarian project.

Their mural contrasted sharply with much media representation of the city as a site of urban decay. The students put forth an alternative vision based on their own epistemic privilege: They (re)presented their city as literally and literarily built on knowledge, thus asserting creative control of the governing metaphors and narratives used to describe their community. The mural portrays hard work and interdependence, perhaps a self-reflexive comment on the students’ own agency in building their classroom libraries. They went public with a positive vision of their city that was rooted in its intellectual traditions.

When asked about the significance of their mural and the choices behind its design, students shared the importance of reading in their lives as linked to cultural histories, present circumstances, and future learning:

**Steven:** We thought about books because back then when people [those enslaved] didn’t get to read and couldn’t go to school and get an education, so we tried to get a chance, like, for us to read . . . ’cause they didn’t have any chances.

**Terrance:** We were reading, and we helping, ’cause we want other people to be like us and have a chance to do something in their lifetime.

The students rightfully saw themselves as role models that could inspire others’ life opportunities. In ways that resonate with the *Holes* discussion, they understood access to literacy as a historical struggle that goes back to slavery and is part of their intergenerational legacy (Gadsden, 1992), one that involves mutual care and reciprocity (Fisher, 2007). This framing is particularly important in light of current policies that stress individual achievement. Conceptualizing literacy as a human right, in contrast, imbues reading with a communal orientation. The students saw themselves as beneficiaries of past struggles as well as advocates for others.

**Discussion**

The examples illustrate the students’ critique of dehumanization and their imagining of better conditions for social and educational flourishing. The students drew on and rediscovered their cultural legacies, whether by participating in the inauguration of the local Langston Hughes museum, receiving mentorship from educators who lived through the Civil Rights Movement, or researching and correcting the published record. In the process, the students’ reading became a critical practice whereby they gained consciousness of the past and cultivated membership in a larger community that has always had to assert its humanity in the face of oppression. The students’ ties to their legacies honed their abilities to discern dehumanizing practices in the present, as evident in their empathy for Hector. The children also projected a future in which their humanity would be more fully recognized, captured in the mural’s manifestation of a nurturing, interdependent community.
built on knowledge, a “Book City.” This vision and will toward literacy, the spirit behind the Classroom Library Project, reflected nostalgia for past literary legacies and ran counter to current educational and social policies that undercut access to a rich humanities curriculum, such as an attenuated public sphere that is providing less support for neighborhood schools and libraries. Taken together, the examples demonstrate that the children at Boys Academy are not statistics whose academic purpose is to fill out bubbles on accountability measures. They are creators and knowledge generators, emerging organic intellectuals, who employ reading to cultivate critical ideas about the world and imagine a better future. They remind educators of the need to restore a fuller sense of humanity to the humanities.

Acknowledging students’ epistemic privilege (Moya, 2001) entails taking their claims about the world seriously. We believe there are epistemological and ethical implications for educational research in the students’ critique of dehumanization. The literature on practitioner research has long validated the local knowledge derived from teachers and students as they investigate questions relevant to their immediate contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The aim of this research is not to establish law-like regularities with subsequent policy prescriptions, but to obtain a richer understanding of immediate contexts of learning, foster consciousness-raising around issues of power and inequality, and find ways to teach better (Lytle, 2008). We would like to add to this conversation by suggesting that this local knowledge may have more universal resonance than typically acknowledged. What relevance do the boys’ particular perspectives regarding dehumanization have to larger educational contexts? How do the children educate educators about the world and how it affects them? How might their insights compel the literacy field to revise understandings of both research and practice?

It is worth reflecting on how many people might relate to the phrase “Nobody knows the average amount of a person” as an act of resistance to the feeling that quantifications of individuals’ performances too often become symbolically violent ascriptions of their very beings; the threat is not that any one of us may score a zero, but that we may become zeros. The students remind us that none of our multifaceted human experiences can be contained by the labels and numbers used to explain them. Although the boys arrived at their critiques through a socially situated form of interpretive agency that involved drawing on their own legacies—what we have characterized as an organic form of critical literacy—they invite others to make analogies to their own experiences as well, just as they themselves made analogies to Hector. As scholars of Latin American and Filipino-European descent, for example, we relate to the phrase “Nobody knows the average amount of a person” because we have witnessed firsthand how our own family members have been positioned as intellectually or academically inferior due to aspects of their own colonial and post-colonial identities. We also understand the need to unearth our own buried familial experiences, like the third graders did when they excavated white flight, in order to challenge dominant narratives, such as those of meritocracy and assimilation (Ghiso & Low, 2013) that elide the historical determinants of social inequality.
While the students at Boys Academy may have named a common human vulnerability of being labeled inferior, its consequences may be different for differently located individuals and communities. When compounded by the already dehumanizing effects of poverty and racism, bell curve-like evaluations of peoples’ worth will have more devastating effects. But it is also the most disenfranchised who have the epistemic and ethical authority to expose inequality and imagine alternatives, the way the students (re)presented their own city as one built on interdependence, knowledge, and care.

Those engaged in the difficult work of school- and neighborhood-based research must take seriously what they learn from participants and think across contexts with others doing similar work to develop, together, a vision of educational justice. We have learned from Boys Academy that a humane learning environment—one that is nurturing, creatively engaging, and honoring of students’ legacies—should be a precondition, not a reward, for educational growth. We have also become increasingly skeptical of an accountability paradigm that stigmatizes students and teachers, reducing their intellectual labor to a number. Even in writing this article, we found ourselves lapsing into a scientistic discourse about what “the data” we’ve collected “prove,” and have tried to imagine other language to convey what we have learned. Data and numbers have been harnessed for socially just ends; but far too often they have been used to dehumanize and disqualify, especially when directed at historically minoritized communities. These dynamics can only really be investigated and documented on the ground, ideally with those most impacted by the top-down reforms of others.

Conclusion
Critical literacy is not merely a conceptual and pedagogical framework developed in academia and then transmitted to teachers and students. There are also socially situated critical literacy practices that may arise organically in local contexts, especially if students, even elementary-age children, are afforded the curricular space to mobilize cultural and epistemic resources in their transactions with texts and with their worlds. The teachers and students at Boys Academy had never heard of the codified field of critical literacy, and it was not an idea we explicitly emphasized in our work together (in part because we were self-consciously trying not to be presumptuous about our own criticality with a community and generation of educators who had been deeply involved in human rights struggles). Nevertheless, over our four years at Boys Academy and in every aspect of our partnership, we found evidence of students employing literacy to expose dominant ideologies that positioned them negatively and to engage social justice issues that they found relevant. Critical literacies at Boys Academy blossomed despite the constraints of mandated policies that promoted instruction as the neutral transmission of discrete skills and assessments, which induced significant stress for both the teachers and students.

We do not mean for our distinction between top-down and local critical literacies to be thought of as too rigid a dichotomy; they may rather exist in a
productive dialectical relationship with one another. What is perhaps most important is for educators and researchers alike to cultivate a willingness to learn from others’ critically literate traditions and orientations, especially from those whose knowledge has historically been devalued. At its best, the development of critical literacies may involve a creative alchemy of diverse perspectives and practices in learning communities devoted to the full human and intellectual flourishing of students. It probably cannot be standardized if it is to remain critical, and will look different in different locales and times. We believe that nourishing critical impulses ought to be a central component of the curriculum and the ongoing professional learning of teachers, part of (following Leonardo, 2004) a high-quality education in a participatory democracy. This reorientation would require a more accurate image of the students not as “at-risk” youth, but as rational agents with unbounded potential who are always in the act of becoming intellectuals, putting their ideas and creative work in dialogue with others.

We are left with one final question for teachers, administrators, researchers, and policy makers alike: How do we all account for the infinite worth, the millions of zeros, of every student in this “data”-driven era of educational accountability?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Susan L. Lytle, Gregory Wolmart, Rob Simon, and Lan Ngo for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. We are also grateful to Mary Juzwik, Ellen Cashman, and the anonymous RTE reviewers for their insightful and detailed suggestions throughout the revision process. This work was supported by Indiana University’s Center for P–16 Research and Collaboration.

NOTE

1. Numbers indicate conversational turns in the episode; dashes denote interruptions.

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