

# THE LITERACIES WITHIN ACADEMIC SERVICE-LEARNING

by

JENNIFER ELIZABETH AARON

(Under the Direction of Robert A. Fecho)

## ABSTRACT

As the mandates in education and demands placed on teachers increase, it is important that educators continue to utilize ways to teach children that encourage opening up our understanding of what learning means. Academic service-learning is one way of doing just that, by providing students the opportunity to take a critical look at their community and work with its members to identify and address a need. One key piece of this critical look, as clearly defined in the *National and Community Service Act* (1990), is “structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did or observed”—all important aspects of literacy. This study focuses in on what literacy learning looked like within an academic service-learning setting, where third grade learners were expected to question and reflect on the objectives being learned, rather than blindly learning said objectives for “the test.” Using a Freireian critical lens to focus qualitatively on nine literacy events in a third grade classroom engaged in an academic service-learning project, this study sought to answer: (a) What does it mean to take a critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning? What are the possibilities? The limitations? The challenges? (b) What are some of the ways that students use literacy—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make

connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants? (c) What did I learn about myself as a teacher and the practice of guiding the academic service-learning processes with young children?; and (d) What are the implications of doing academic service-learning?

INDEX WORDS: academic service-learning, critical theory, elementary, literacy, teacher action research

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## DEDICATION

For Brad. Word.

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## Chapter One

The familiar institutional chord signals that it's morning announcement time. After the Pledge of Allegiance the students sit back down, waiting to hear lunch choices and other news for the day. "It's that time again! Ms. Harry's SPECTRUM students are starting their annual canned foods drive and will be coming around next week to collect cans to support the local food bank. Keep an eye on the wall outside her room to see the graph of which classes bring in the most. Don't forget to bring in your cans." Students reaching out to help their community. However, other than the bar graph on the wall, and the daily reminder during morning announcements to bring in cans, this project means little to the 251 non-gifted students in the school. Classroom teachers aren't provided a "heads up" that the project is about to take place, so that they might share information about hunger in the United States with their students, nor are SPECTRUM students sharing what they have learned related to hunger.

For decades students around the country have been collecting canned food, second-hand clothes, and pennies as part of special projects—often around the holidays—in order to garner feelings of goodwill and civic involvement. However, other than short term connections and temporary fixes for the needy population, little is done to create critically aware citizens who question and critique the status quo and strive to make changes that will last. One-shot volunteer drives are not designed to make large societal changes, or even relate to the community that is being "helped," let alone teach reading, writing, and arithmetic.

In the last fifteen years or so, however, a new approach has begun to take hold. Academic service-learning is a way of teaching that asks students to identify a need in the community, develop a plan for addressing that need while intentionally integrating their academic subjects, and carry out their plan, all the while observing and reflecting (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). In essence, academic service-learning engages the students in their own critical action research project, moving away from short-term fixes associated with volunteerism and even beyond community service—which allows students to perform good work, and learn how their service makes a difference in the lives of the recipients, but doesn't intentionally integrate academics.

For this dissertation, I studied literacy events and academic service-learning through a Freireian critical lens. While many use the terms literacy events and literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993), I have come to define and use the term literacy event in a slightly different way. Starting with Barton and Hamilton's (1998) definition of literacy events as "activities where literacy has a role.... Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them" (p. 7), I expand on the term literacy event to name the places in which literacy plays a role in order to achieve a larger goal. For example, at the beginning of the school year I wanted to assess my students' understanding of certain vocabulary before embarking on a year-long academic service-learning project (larger goal). In order to do this, however, we had to have three separate conversations over the course of three consecutive days. During these conversations students were asked to look back at the work documented in an earlier conversation, rather than treating each conversation as though the others had not taken place. With this definition, a literacy event may take one hour to accomplish or it

may also take place over the course of a week or several months. I have come to this definition through my work with young children who often do not have the capacity to complete some work within a timeframe that might be quite easy for adults, yet the end goal is just as timely. While the term *event* may seem specific in nature, I see it this way only in that it achieves a specific goal of advancing our understandings, particularly with regard to the academic service-learning project.

A focus on literacy events allowed me to see what happened to classroom literacy in a third grade setting, and how the definition of reading and writing broadened to meet the goals of academic service-learning. In order to help me examine literacy learning, I looked beyond a monolithic definition of literacy as reading and writing to view it as a multidimensional, multifaceted entity that includes one's ability to read, write, and speak critically; to think and question critically; and to analyze and reflect on information not only individually but as an active member of a community. All of these are vital components to a successful academic service-learning project.

This chapter will look at the need for research on academic service-learning in elementary schools—specifically research about literacy's role in such projects—introduce the questions that will guide this research, and discuss the theoretical frame through which the research is viewed.

### **Statement of Problem**

I agree with Au's (1993) statement that "the notions of successive approximation, meaningfulness, and supportiveness are especially important in the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds" (p. 37). Unfortunately schools that serve large numbers of minority and low income students often elect to "focus" the learning,

placing a strong emphasis on “the basics” (see Edison Schools, 1992; Green Dot Public Schools, 2011; KIPP Schools, 1994; Success For All, 1987) rather than providing these students with the opportunities so many of their mainstream peers have. These “back to basics” programs choose to “relentlessly focus on high student performance on standardized tests and other objective measures” (KIPP Schools, 1994) and “on raising student achievement through... research-based school design, [and] uniquely aligned assessment systems,” using “achievement management solutions” (Edison Schools, 1992). During the year that this research took place, 2006, my school had a population of 51% African-American and 45% Latino students. I feel it is of vital importance that these students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1993) not be limited to “the basics” which too often strip the learner of chances to make connections and celebrate the social aspects of learning (Dewey, 1997; Gee, 1996; Shor, 1992 & 1996; Vygotski, 1962)

Literacy is too often treated as functional (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics website, 2012)—something that gets you by—rather than as something that allows you to be a vital participant in your surroundings. This functional view of literacy minimizes the importance of exploring beyond the basics to the questioning that permits humans to shift from “object” to “Subject” (Freire, 1994). Treating literacy as functional also gives those in power the opportunity to suppress a sense of community by pitting learner against learner in hopes of outdoing one another, when in actuality neither wins because expectations remain so low.

So many have pointed to the social aspects of learning and literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Dewey, 1997; Gee, 1996; Shor, 1992 & 1996; Vygotski, 1962) that allow for the inclusion of culture, language, and experience. I wish to push the social

view of literacy by stepping beyond recognition and acceptance of others—which can lead to a “fish bowl” type of education in which our view of those different from us becomes distorted—to a place that takes students’ learning into the community and brings the community to the classroom, making learning tangible on multiple levels. This community connection serves not only as an ever-important social piece to learning, but as an opening that will allow the students and the community to work in conjunction in the future. It is these seven-, eight-, and nine-year-olds (and their families) who are often, because of their race and socioeconomic status, seen as the “other.” It is therefore not enough to present them and their learning as token, but rather recognize these students as genuine contributors to the larger social fabric.

Most research on academic service-learning has either been quantitative in nature and/or researched in university settings (Furco, 2010; Giles & Elder, 1994). Due to this gap in academic service-learning research, I hope to bring new information to the table by looking at academic service-learning in an elementary classroom through a qualitatively critical lens, opening it up to questions that allow all involved to critique social and educational norms, as well as their own roles as participants in society’s perpetual cycle of applying Band-Aids to severed limbs. I wish to highlight the importance of asking students to probe critically the communities in which they live and to propose changes that will have a positive impact.

Thinking back, for example, to the canned food drive, I would carry on a conversation with my students and our community about why there is hunger in a country with an agricultural surplus each year (Shor, 1992) in hopes that they would see the value in asking similar questions in other aspects of their lives. With this desire to broaden the



social meaning of education and to involve my students in a project that encourages them to work directly with the community in which they live, I enter my classroom with the intent to research literacy learning within the larger scope of academic service-learning.

Critical theory and its various pedagogies focus on allowing the disenfranchised an opportunity to reclaim power in their learning, while academic service-learning allows participants to see purposeful connections between learning and assisting community members in need. For this reason I see critical theory and its pedagogies and concepts of academic service-learning coming together in the classroom in a way that has great potential, not only for viewing education as a social equalizer and community builder, but also as a means to look at literacy beyond the confines of readers' and writers' workshops to a place where students have a genuine purpose for using and analyzing literacy events.

### **Research Questions**

By focusing my study on literacy learning, I hope to highlight the importance of viewing literacy as larger than a discrete set of skills to be tested using close-ended assessments, which lack carryover into other arenas and limits students' abilities to demonstrate knowledge of a concept. While these testable skill assessments can certainly tell you something about one's ability to read and write, they do not offer insight into how the learner is able to combine skills and strategies to perform daily literacy tasks. I seek to understand what literacy learning looks like within an academic service-learning setting, which expects the learner to question and reflect on the objectives being learned, rather than blindly learning said objectives for "the test." I have chosen to study the depth of literacy learning within the academic service-learning setting, because I believe

in making explicit those connections between life and learning in an attempt to show my students the importance of education outside of the classroom walls.

I also believe that as participants in the global community, it is our responsibility to involve ourselves in bettering society. Education is one way to do this. Too often educators talk about making connections across the curriculum and into the community. However, canned food drives, or even school-wide recycling programs, just aren't enough because they rarely, if ever, ask the learner to question, critique, or reflect. Through activities that allow the students, teacher, and community to work in tandem, the true scope of what is possible, with respect to literacy events as well as personal growth, is unveiled.

Specifically I wish to look at:

- What does it mean to take a critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning?
  - What are the possibilities? The limitations? And the challenges?;
- What are some of the ways that students use literacy—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants?
- What did I learn about myself as a teacher and the practice of guiding the academic service-learning processes with young children?; and
- What are the implications of doing academic service-learning?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Starting with the two-year-old whose only concern is “Why?,” people, and children in particular, are naturally curious about the world around them. As an educator

I see it as my responsibility to encourage this innate inquiry process (Lindfors, 1999; Shor, 1996). By studying literacy events and academic service-learning through a critical lens I hope to learn more about students' ability to "do" reading within situations not commonly associated with classroom "learning." For example, I conducted a pilot study a few years before this research took place, which looked at student responsibility in learning about their school in its eightieth year. Not only did the students *read* texts centered around the decades being studied, and synthesize and *write* a brochure documenting the history of the school, students created a phone script which allowed them to set up interviews with community members, developed a list of open- and closed-ended interview questions, wrote letters to the historic preservation foundation and other local organizations asking for information on our school, calculated the racial makeup of the school over time, and were interviewed themselves by the local daily newspaper. These literacy events demonstrate how an academic service-learning project moves literacy learning beyond the more traditional ways of thinking about learning.

In this theoretical framework, I argue for viewing academic service-learning through a critical lens. In so doing, all involved are provided a chance to see educating for social justice in ways that directly affect themselves and their families as members of the community. Through the teachings of those associated with critical theory in a language arts classroom (Cowhey, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Edelsky, 1999; Fecho, 2003; Guccione, 2011; Shor, 1996; Vasquez, 2004), along with what the research tells us about academic service-learning (Furco, 2010; Gyles & Elder, 1994; Shumer, 2005; Wade, 1997), students can be provided with an education that allows them to acquire literacy in a non-passive way, which truly allows them to see learning connections between the

classroom and the community. Through an exploration of the literature I will look at critical theory and its manifestations in educational settings as well as how I see it informing the praxis of academic service-learning.

### **Critical Theory**

Critical theory is most often associated with the Frankfurt School, established in 1923 to explain Marxism as “an economic and sociological system” (Crotty, 1998, p. 125). Most would agree that a goal of critical theory is to “transform the production and dissemination of knowledge” (Lather, 1984, p. 50), through focusing on inequities and the social actions used to alter the power structures of today’s society. Critical theory aims to understand the institutional structures and arrangements that reproduce oppressive ideologies, and the social inequalities that are sustained and produced by these social structures and ideologies, by promoting critical consciousness. Several assumptions under which critical theory operates include: history as defined by class struggle (Marx); a cyclical process of reflection leading to action, leading to further reflection (Freire); and that the oppressed have the ability to re-make, to create, and re-create.

A number of theorists (Marx, Dewey, Habermas, Freire), have fed the development of critical theory. As Mezirow (1981) said, “critical theorists hold, with Marx, that one must become conscious of how ideology reflects and distorts moral, social and political reality and what material and psychological factors influence and sustain the false consciousness which it represents—especially reified powers of domination” (p. 6). It was with this goal that critical theory was grounded. While Marx’s focus is most

commonly tied to political and economic issues, he made the connection from politics and economics to social and class issues as well.

Dewey's focus on democracy and personal and communal social interactions, specifically in relation to education, does not often get him labeled as a critical theorist. I argue that Dewey's (1944) case for viewing democracy as a "mode of associated living" (p. 87) with its communicated experiences, citing change and reflection as important keys in making it successful, makes him a critical theorist. Dewey (1944) would say that it is our ability to listen to all information before making decisions that separates us from animals. This process of taking the information in, critiquing it, and reflecting on our choices allows us to make informed judgments for the betterment of the community, the betterment of the democracy.

Habermas, having ties to the second generation of the Frankfurt School, charged "that human beings constitute their reality and organise their experience in terms of cognitive (or 'knowledge-guiding') *interest*" (Crotty, 1998, p. 142), namely: a) work knowledge—which values empirical investigation; b) practical knowledge—with its focus on social action; and c) emancipatory knowledge—interested in self-reflection that leads to a transformed consciousness (Crotty, 1998). I find that these levels of involvement not only closely match the dichotomies of education in general, but also the different levels of community involvement that are associated with volunteerism, community service, and academic service-learning.

Freire (2000) seems to build from the work of these scholars and make direct ties between critical theory and education. Rejecting the traditional "banking education" method of teaching, which fills empty heads with knowledge and promotes the

dehumanization of those outside the mainstream, Freire (2000) suggests investing in self-directed education, critical self-reflection, and identifying the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed as ways of addressing the status quo. Through this authentic action-driven education and reflection, the learner engages in what Freire (2000) called praxis—“reflection and action upon the world to transform it” (p. 33). He went on to say, “[t]his discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection” (p. 47).

With these four scholars, we begin to see the strong foundation of critical theory growing and developing around the interests and focuses of its founders. In this brief evolutionary review one also sees the connections that critical theory has not only to politics and society, but to the education setting as well.

As I read, I feel my understanding of critical theory is most closely tied to Freire and Dewey. This transaction between Dewey, Freire, and myself occurs at a level where I can take the ideals of Freire—allowing the oppressed to guide their own learning—combined with Dewey’s push for social interactions and democratic education, and bring them together in my classroom within academic service-learning so that my students and I can work toward learning for a purpose greater than an end-of-year test. Dewey’s (1944) belief that to fulfill our responsibilities as active citizens in a democracy we must each learn to listen and work together, and his view that education is fueled by experience, are tangible philosophies that I can apply in my classroom. Whereas with Freire I take to heart his emphasis that it is the oppressed (in my case, my non-mainstream students) rather than the oppressor (me, as a middle-class white woman, the school, the school system) that must want and initiate change. And yet I find myself

questioning an eight-year-old's ability to do this. So I return to Freire's (1994) notion of humans as either Subjects (integrators) or objects (adaptors). I can then take it as my job to provide opportunities for my students to "integrate" rather than "adapt." As Freire (1994) pointed out, the integrated person has the "capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality," whereas one who adapts "loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own" (p. 4). It is done without thought. Therefore providing my students opportunities to see themselves as and to grow as Subjects may support them in coming to understand and desire change on a grander level. To quote Freire (1994), "bit by bit, these groups begin to see themselves and their society from their own perspective; they become aware of their own potentialities. This is the point at which hopelessness begins to be replaced by hope" (p. 13).

Critical theory within the context of education becomes somewhat of a "push-me-pull-me" where the search for social equality is linked with politically driven standards, as Morrison's (1989) quote indicates: "critical theory [within education] offers a rich field of study to protagonists and antagonists alike of existing and proposed curricula, drawing together philosophy, politics, and sociology to indicate the direction of advances in curriculum theory" (p. 3). There seem to be clear conflicts between schooling ruled by accountability, the purpose of which is to measure individual learnedness, and educating for social justice, in which creating classroom communities that work cooperatively and critically to achieve a common outcome is the goal. These conflicts can be addressed through critical theory's "dialectical nature." As suggested by Peter McLaren (2003), it "enables the educational researcher to see the school not simply as an arena of

indoctrination or socialization or a site of instruction, but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation” (p. 194). It is this dialectical nature, this internal pull, that teachers need to keep in the foreground of class conversations and curricular choices in order for critical theory to successfully play out in the classroom.

From all of this I have come to define critical theory in education as transactional, political, social, reflective, transformational, and democratic. This personal definition has been influenced not only by Marx, Dewey, Habermas and Freire, but also by Ira Shor, Michael Apple, Henri Giroux and Peter McLaren. I see critical theory being presented in the classroom as critical inquiry, critical pedagogy, and democratic teaching. In an effort to be clear, both for myself and for you, the reader, I will make an effort to use the term critical pedagogy. I do this because my focus is on the classroom, and the teaching and learning that occurs within that setting. Whether it is educating for social justice and the critical questioning of materials or just simply looking at how children come to acquire knowledge, critical pedagogy allows all who participate in the educational setting to become active learners. Critical pedagogy and critical learning provide opportunities for teachers and students to critique and change the world through practices that raise questions about social relationships, reject “high culture” standards, and shed light on language.

Dewey (1944) felt that schools were places that should support democracy through the ability to bring together people of various backgrounds so that they might share their experiences and create new ideas. This shift from schooling to educating is a major piece of how critical theory’s influences can be seen in schools. For my research,



taking a critical theory stance on the study means not only allowing a critical pedagogy to guide me in how I teach, but also in how I will look at the data I collect. I must also begin asking questions and reflecting on those things that define critical theory for me—transactional, political, social, reflective, transformational, and democratic learning—specifically in relation to the literacy events that come out of the academic service-learning topic my students chose to focus on.

### **A Sketch of the Dissertation**

In this chapter I hope I have provided why I want to do this research, what I plan to research, and the theoretical lens through which I have chosen to do this research. Having explained my understanding of where critical theory formed its roots, and therefore my take on critical theory and its place in education, I wish to spend the next chapter briefly discussing shifts in education, moves toward critical pedagogies, specifically in language arts education, the roots of academic service-learning, and the connections I see between critical pedagogy and academic service-learning.

In chapter three, after having outlined my theoretical stance, I will describe my methodological choice and data collection. You will be introduced to the participants, my third grade class, and the school setting. I will tell about the instructional steps I planned to take as well as the deviations that occurred. Finally, I will end with my subjectivities as a teacher and a researcher.

In chapter four you will read about our year—specifically the nine literacy events that helped move the class’s academic service-learning project along while allowing the students to use literacy in different ways. I will begin by briefly describing how I characterized the year, and our academic service-learning project, as occurring in three

distinct phases, and will then move on to relate the experiences of the year, while describing and analyzing the literacy events.

In the final chapter I will share my understandings from having done an academic service-learning project while trying to use a critical lens. Next I will share implications that I see for the field. Finally I will highlight some of the areas in which I feel future research would be beneficial.

## Chapter Two

In the elementary school I attended, I distinctly remember separate lessons with seemingly little to no connection between the subjects. “Time to take out your reading books,” Mrs. Fisk would say. Sixty minutes later, as though an inaudible bell had rung, “Reading time is over, please take out your math books.” Back and forth we would jump between subjects: reading; then math; next spelling; then social studies; out we would go for P.E.; once back in it would be time to practice our handwriting. On the day went in neat little compartments, each with its own book and unique set of rules. Reading and math were always set up in homogenous groups. Language arts rarely involved writing; instead we practiced diagramming sentences, itself an example of education’s compartmentalizing and scientific study of parts, and a skill I have yet to understand the merits of to this day. Handwriting time and spelling time offered more of the same. Social studies and science were a little more creative—we did projects, though it didn’t matter that these projects were often completed by our parents, or worse, copied straight out of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. On the due date we would file past the teacher’s desk leaving our nicely packaged forgeries in an orderly pile to be graded and returned to us with no discussion.

That was my elementary school experience, and that of many others in the United States. While I know that I learned, I also know that there seemed to be no point to what I was learning. No connection was made to how I lived my life beyond the classroom

walls. As I took education courses in college I felt that there were alternatives that would help students make connections across subjects and outside those walls.

In this chapter, I will begin by briefly looking at how schooling has evolved toward democratic education. Next I will look separately at the literature of critical pedagogy and academic service-learning. Finally I will show how I see them working together.

### **Shifting Education's Focus**

Scenarios like the one I experienced are still happening today. Children sit in classrooms surrounded by textbooks (written predominantly by white males) on every subject imaginable, while predominantly middle-class monolingual white teachers teach the “objectives” in distinct categories designated by the state (Bigalow, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). These subjects are then graded based on middle-class societal standards, and grades are presented to parents on report cards that reflect the same segregation of subject matter. Research also continues to do the same thing. Scientifically-based reading research, as suggested by the National Reading Panel (2000), boiled reading instruction down to six dimensions: phonemic awareness, decoding words, fluency, background knowledge and vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. Norm-referenced tests also divide learning into neat categories. “Literacy pedagogy, in other words, has been a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 9). This monolingual, monocultural approach to literacy negates those children whose backgrounds are multilingual and multicultural.

In today's economic society, where "the workforce" is far more important than the individual, and in which states mandate stringent requirements for both teachers and students at all grade levels, a need for true, substantive change is necessary in order to educate thoughtful citizens. Scholars talk about how "schools are designed to continually reproduce a class society" (Bigelow, 1992, p. 72; see also Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 2003; The New London Group, 2000; Shor, 1992), creating a wider gap between the mainstream and oppressed cultures (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999). Currently the goal that society has placed on education "is that education serves the marketplace. Education is for job training and for maintaining the nation's competitive position in the global economy" (Edelsky, 1999, p. 33). Because critical theory guides students to challenge norms and assumptions about class position, teachers are disheartened when trying to incorporate the ideals of critical theory in their teaching practices while attempting to follow mandated, and often scripted, curriculums.

Elementary students usually don't have an understanding of why they come to school beyond "to learn" or "so I can go to high school and/or college." Rarely would a third grader reply, "so that I can learn to question the world around me, in an attempt to make it a better place." Young students arrive in the classroom eager to be given the right answer, not to be told there is no one right answer.

### **Flaws in the System**

This "pouring in" (Freire, 2000) of educational information, often associated with traditional education movements, is particularly detrimental to students of diverse backgrounds, who already face other obstacles. Schools that serve these students are often under-funded (see Kozol, 1993) and staffed by teachers with little previous

classroom experience (see Darling-Hammond, 1994). Nieto (1999) countered that teachers and students need to, "...[develop] important social action predispositions and attitudes that are the backbone of a democratic society, and [learn] to use them to help alter patterns of domination and oppression" (p. 104). Developing social action dispositions and attitudes, and learning how to disrupt patterns of domination and oppression, can be a scary proposition for teachers who are under the accountability microscope, the be-all-end-all of current education orthodoxy.

Carl Glickman (1993) pointed out that, "...virtually every member of the general public has experience with a school as a student and can therefore be an 'expert' on everyone else's school" (p. 4). This is particularly true in today's educational structure, which includes parents, community members, teachers, principals, curriculum directors, superintendents, school boards, state legislatures, governors, and presidents, each with more power than the one before to push *their* agenda of improved learning. Teacher autonomy has all but disappeared, and student involvement is discouraged. This shift in power has had a large impact on what schools teach, and *how* it's taught. Schools are often criticized based on student achievement, which is most often represented by scores on state or national tests. However, viable long-term solutions are in short supply. From its inception in the early 1900s through its many iterations, the "accountability" movement has changed many things about education, but it does little to answer the call of educating active citizens in a democracy. "Arguing that teaching must improve in order to enhance national economic performance is to mask the wider social forces that make it difficult (if not impossible) for some groups in school to embrace the middle-

class curricula or approaches that are blatantly class-, race-, and gender-blind” (Smyth, 2000, p. 497).

Social injustices are perpetuated in schools every day—from children placed in reading groups based on socioeconomic factors and “attitude toward learning,” rather than ability (Shannon, 1992), to counties selecting commercially made reading materials that are socially biased, to struggling readers who are labeled and pigeonholed. Often children whose native tongue isn't English are placed in lower level classes, while English-speaking children who learn a second language are praised (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Research has shown that more time is spent on behavior management than on reading instruction in lower groups (Shannon, 1992). It is time to seek alternative ways of “doing education.”

### **Democratic Education and the Progressive Movement**

The idea of schooling for democracy began in the United States with Thomas Jefferson's common schools. “According to Jefferson, a democratic society needed an educational system that would provide its citizens with the understanding and knowledge necessary for them not only to be able to pursue their own personal happiness, but to fulfill their obligations and duties as citizens” (Button & Provenzo, 1983, p. 59). Dewey (1944) took democracy in education to a higher level, stating that “democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87)—an experience he clearly thought should be brought to the educational system with more authentic learning experiences and social exchanges. This “associated living” can only take place when people with different beliefs come

together and exchange ideas, listening and questioning to develop a deeper understanding of each other.

Dewey, however, did not stop at using a child's experiences to educate. He went on to promote learning as a social process; "when education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities" (Dewey, 1944, p. 59). This social component of education that Dewey spoke of is essential to making democracy work in the classroom. No longer is the classroom set up as a dictatorship where the adult figure hands out predetermined doses of information to eagerly awaiting docile children (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1996). Educators instead "must provide frequent opportunities for students to exchange ideas in a variety of settings with a diverse groups of participants" (Preskill, 1997, p. 317). This exchange of ideas allows students who arrive at school, each with his/her own unique set of understandings, to share and explore with others, creating a unique community of learners, while also practicing the skills of organization, listening, comprehension, and reflection.

Traditionally schools have promoted individualism and competition amongst its students, often instilling fear that others will surpass them, and that failure at an early age results in life-long failure, as seen in academic tracking (Rist, 2000; Shannon, 1992). The Progressive movement strived to counter this through creating communities of learners who learned to depend on others. Around the time of World War II, "group dynamics" began to grow as an important part of educational thought and research (Button & Provenzo, 1983). Shor (1992 and 1996) frequently discusses group dynamics and



dialogue, citing repeated student resistance—the “Siberian Syndrome,” “developed through social experiences and institutional practices” (1996, p. 13), brought about by traditional ways of doing schooling. The Cold War of the 1950s, however, resulted in “progressivism [being] linked with ‘communism’” (Dixon, 2003, p. 20). This has carried on into today’s narrow standards and definitions of learning. This tearing down of “social capital” is in direct opposition to what Robert Putnam (2001) felt is needed to “revitalize our democracy.” “Schools are one of the few remaining social institutions that still have a capacity to enculturate the young in ways of organization that celebrate social relationships” (Smyth, 2000, p. 508).

Still there are educators who continue to fight for the beliefs of Dewey and others. One way that progressive education plays out is through critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

As an educational theory, critical theory aims to highlight the political aspects of teaching and achieve transformational learning. According to the website *Rage and Hope: Critical Theory and Its Impact on Education* (2003), “curriculum study in the United States has progressed from the critical theory of the early Frankfurt school to researchers who now attempt to become actively engaged in promoting social change within the education system and the culture itself.” Giroux (1983) points out that critical theory

must be measured not only by the degree to which it promotes critical thinking and reflective action but, more importantly, by the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle among parents, teachers, and students around the issues of power and social determination (p. 291).

By creating this “galvanized collective political struggle,” critical theory in education is allowed to move beyond the classroom into the larger society where it can begin to take shape and change ways of thinking. Applied in this context, critical theory becomes critical pedagogy and critical learning.

### **Views of Critical Pedagogy**

When thinking about my use of critical pedagogy as a teacher, I felt it was important to look at what frameworks could help me build a solid understanding of what is happening in my classroom. I will now briefly talk about the two frameworks that help to support the decisions I made in using and developing my own critical pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

One view of pedagogy (The New London Group, 2000) includes four factors: (a) Situated Practice, “the immersion in a community of learners engaged in authentic versions [of practice];” (b) Overt Instruction, which allows for scaffolding learning activities that focus on a learners “experience and activities”; (c) Critical Framing, where learners “[stand] back from what they are studying and view it critically in relation to its context”; and finally (d) Transformed Practice, where “students can demonstrate how they can design and carry out, in a reflective manner, new practices embedded in their goals and values” (pp. 31-35). In this model of pedagogy, the teacher becomes a guide and learns alongside the students. Teaching, the exchange of “explicit information,” becomes secondary to the practical application and reflection, creating a place where learners form a community and work toward a common goal. I see this pedagogical view as a critical one. Through “transformed practice” the learner is asked to look beyond the classroom and interact with “real world” applications while questioning goals and

purposes and reflecting on learning and practice. It is this element that moves the New London Group's view of pedagogy to that of critical pedagogy.

In a complementary view of critical pedagogy, Ira Shor (1992) contended that the following values must be present: participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, and activism (p. 17). In his work, he suggested three ways of reaching critical thought in the classroom—through generative, topical, and academic themes. Generative themes grow from students' understandings of everyday "problematic conditions," while topical themes are "social question[s] of key importance locally, nationally, or globally," and are often raised by the teacher. Academic themes are also brought by the teacher and their "roots lie in formal bodies of knowledge studied by specialist in a field" (p. 55). Within these three themes, Shor allows the students a chance to identify topics with the understanding that the teacher should model when and where students need it. Critique is encouraged by all, of all. Shor (1992) echoed Dewey's (1997) belief that education is based on experiences when he stated, "student experience and understanding are the foundations into which academic material and structured knowledge are situated" (p. 84). By starting conversations at a place that is familiar to the students, the teacher is able to see the students' interest and build a community in which all perspectives have a much better chance of being viewed as equal. In addition, by "backloading" the teacher's input, students are provided with the opportunity to develop their own voices and ideas. All of this again points to education as a social act.

### **Taking a Critical Pedagogy Stance in Language Arts Instruction**

In this study I set out to look at how literacy learning played out within an academic service-learning setting. Therefore I feel it is important to pause to look at critical pedagogy within language arts instruction. I will begin by sharing my understanding of what literacy is and move from there to a brief review of critical pedagogy's use in language arts classrooms.

While the definition of literacy has been narrowly defined as the ability to read and write, it has also been broadly defined as the ability to use and manipulate language (Gee, 1996). It would seem that Bloome (1997) was correct when he said, "what counts as literacy at a particular time and place depends on who has the power to define it. The conflict consistently revolves around social, cultural, and economic issues" (p. 16). With such a wide range of possibilities, again I choose to define literacy as a multidimensional, multifaceted entity that includes one's ability to read, write, and speak critically; to think and question critically; and to analyze and reflect on information not only individually but as an active member of a community. As Barton and Hamilton (1998) suggested, seeing literacy learning as a social process means:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.

- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (p. 7).

With these understandings in place, one can see how well critical pedagogy can work in a language arts classroom.

Historically speaking, critical pedagogy in K-12 language arts classrooms has often played itself out within the concepts of social justice and critical inquiry (Allen, J., 1999; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Buhrow & Upczak, 2006; Cowhey, 2006; Edelsky, 1999; Fecho, 2003; McLaren, 2003). The critical classroom becomes a place where student and teacher learn together ways to address inequalities in the world around them. This need to address inequalities becomes increasingly important when one considers that our culturally rich society is not reflected in most public school classrooms across the country.

To assist me in better understanding critical pedagogy, through critical inquiry, in my own classroom, I draw from the following. Beginning with Judith Lindfors' (1999) definition of inquiry—"a language act in which one attempts to engage another in helping him go beyond his present understanding" (p. 4)—I define critical inquiry using the above idea while adding Freireian concepts that allow this expanded "understanding" to encourage action, enact change and challenge the current power structure. It is with this definition of critical inquiry that I begin to see ways of engaging in a critical pedagogy with my third graders.

According to Nieto (1999), "critical pedagogy is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world" (p. 103).

Shor (1999) stated that “critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self.” Both of these definitions require active learning. These definitions also show the interconnectivity between learner and subject and help to explain why there can be no step-by-step procedure for forcing critical pedagogy in the classroom. According to Giroux (1993) “learning has to be meaningful to students before it can become critical” (p. 14). From this I see critical pedagogy and critical learning, and therefore the myriad ways that language arts play out in the classroom, as something students and teachers do, rather than something that is done to them (see Cowley, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). Active learning allows students and teachers to question curricular choices and make changes to instruction to meet the needs of those at the center of learning.

Carole Edelsky (1999) called for a shift in whole language and critical theory so that the two could be combined into a justice-seeking classroom practice. Her guidelines for critical whole language practice ask that (a) students participate in “substantive,” “connected” exercises; (b) that “students’ lives” be the starting point for classroom practices; (c) that classroom “communities” allow for student’s voices to be heard; (d) that students and teachers study from a “critical stance”; (e) that materials used “promote justice”; and (f) that the curriculum encourage student “activism” (pp. 24-29). This critical perspective of literacy learning allows students and teachers alike to view literacy as a social practice that has the potential to change lives.

In classrooms where critical pedagogy is the norm, positive learning experiences take place (e.g. Allen, A., 1997; Foss, 2002; Sylvester, 1994). When teachers incorporate the ideals of critical pedagogy, one of the first things that happens is a shift from teacher

as knowledge giver to teacher as facilitator (Shor, 1992) helping to build a productive learning community. In this newly formed community, students and teacher alike develop “respect, trust, and openness, which ultimately supported critical conversations” (Foss, 2002, p. 395). Community is essential in the classroom that challenges the status quo so that students not only feel that their thoughts and ideas will be heard, but that critiques of their ideas are not personal attacks.

As the students and teacher build this community something else happens: students begin to see themselves as active participants in the decision making process. Sylvester (1994) told about the evolution of “Sweet Cakes Town” in his third grade classroom based on students’ desire to expand and learn about different aspects of their community. By allowing the students to take on community roles in the classroom, Sylvester was able to demonstrate, in a practical way, the inequalities faced by citizens in the larger community. Active discussions and the ability to help make decisions about the curriculum allowed students to build on the community building process. Students bring to school with them a range of experiences and expertise. It is the critical educator’s job not only to help the students identify their strengths, but also to expand on them.

With the coming together of community and the development of genuine participation, students begin to see themselves as valued members in the learning environment. As a way to help move his students to look critically at classroom materials and to develop their voices, Andrew Allen (1997) asked his students to begin by looking inward, at their own likes and dislikes, at their own understandings of bias and equity. Not only was Allen providing his students with the chance to reflect on their own

understandings of such important topics before presenting new information, as these conversations continued students began to expect that their voices would be heard and valued, that they might express satisfaction and dissatisfaction in what may or may not be working at a particular time. Again we see how the “backloading” of teacher input provides a valuable space for students to think, listen, and grow.

At the Center for Inquiry in South Carolina, teachers provide opportunities for themselves, students, and parents to participate in “real world” writing activities (Jennings & O’Keefe, 2002). (I use the term “real world” to refer to the way society at large refers to school learning that makes connections outside the parameters set by the standard curriculum. I am of the opinion that school is, for better or worse, a microcosm of society and therefore is “the real world,” not a separate entity.) By asking students and parents or students and teachers to carry on conversations in writing, students can clearly see that what is taught in school does in fact have practical applications outside the boundaries created by compulsory education. Shannon (1990) furthered this premise by stating:

Critical literacy offers the literate a tool with which to learn about themselves, their lives, history, culture, and contradictions; to make connections between and among their lives and those of others within a social structure; and to act upon this new knowledge in order to bring about social justice and equality (p. 149).

This is exactly what these educators allow their students to do.

Classrooms that employ a critical stance allow students to develop as individuals, while also creating an environment that promotes togetherness (Allen, A., 1997; Cowhey, 2006; Foss, 2002; Sylvester, 1994). It is this community bond that allows students to feel



they are capable of enacting change in the larger community in which they live. Ideally, critical pedagogy affects social change, sending learners into the “real world” equipped with the tools necessary to read between the lines. After all, “education is essentially a social process” (Dewey, 1997, p. 58).

As I have stated, too often learning is compartmentalized, rather than viewed through an all-encompassing lens. However, as Dewey (1990) noted, “if the child realizes the motive for the use and application of number and language he has taken the longest step toward securing the power” (pp. 168-169). As a teacher in an elementary school, I am challenged with how best to meet the curricular demands set forth by the state, while staying true to my own philosophical belief that students need to be critical and active participants in learning. I agree with Kozol’s (2000) assessment that “we should value children as more than future workers whose math and reading scores need to be improved” (p. 87).

With my previously stated understanding of critical inquiry and its influence on enacting a critical pedagogy in my classroom, I offer academic service-learning as an option to allow students to interact with their community in ways that promote questioning of and reflecting on the status quo. Although critical theory and various critical pedagogies have been studied in various settings (Ballenger, 1999; Fecho, 2003; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003; Shor, 1996), little is known about how they play out in relation to academic service-learning. Gustavsen (2001) stated that “...critical theory can inform a process of enlightenment and out of this process can emerge new practices” (p.18). Academic service-learning, a “teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic

responsibility, and strengthen community” (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002, p. 3), is one of those practices. Through academic service-learning, students begin to see themselves as part of the larger community. Research has shown that these same students are more likely to become active citizens, “teachers and students tend to become more cohesive as a group” (p.11), and community and school connections are strengthened (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). It is my opinion that academic service-learning looked at through a critical lens can provide not only students, but society at large, with opportunities to explore wider, more encompassing definitions of learning, literacy, community, and education.

With two seemingly opposing educational stances—state mandated curriculum standards and academic service-learning—teachers and communities may feel they are placed in the position of picking one over the other. However, if academic service-learning is viewed as a philosophy rather than an add-on or special project, students can successfully learn the required curriculum while also developing and practicing the ideals of democracy. No longer is it a matter of pitting curriculum standards against academic service-learning, but one of incorporating the curriculum into an academic service-learning stance. This shift allows teachers and students to be in a position of power within their classrooms and to question the status quo while still learning those things most commonly associated with schooling. Children are knowledge seekers and “education can either develop or stifle their inclination to ask why and to learn” (Shor, 1992, p. 12).

### **Academic Service-Learning**

Despite the push toward national standards and accountability, school systems and universities throughout the country are committing financial and personnel resources to academic service-learning and participatory practices (see Hornbeck, 2000; Maryland Department of Education, 2003; UC Berkeley, 2004). Service-learning is a “teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen community” (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002, p. 3), which Republicans and Democrats alike are supporting as an important factor in the education of the country’s youth. With President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 introduction of the Peace Corps, followed in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson’s creation of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a National Teacher Corps, the Job Corps, and University Year of Action, what has come to be called service-learning fell into the category of community service, either performed in conjunction with school courses or as extracurricular activity. In 1990, then-President Bush signed the *National and Community Service Act* into law, which more clearly defined service-learning as

a method in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community through curriculum integration. It is a method that provides structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did and observed during a service activity and chances to use newly-acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities. Such activities

enhance teaching in school by extending student learning into the community and help foster a sense of caring for others.

While there is no universally accepted definition of service-learning, this was one of the first examples of directly tying service with academics. Bush also established the Office of National Service at the White House, which provided money for community service programs in schools and colleges, and initiated the Points of Light Foundation to promote volunteerism. President Bill Clinton, too, advocated for service-learning when he signed the *National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993*, creating AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National Service.

Service-learning and academic service-learning have been in practice for well over a decade. However, there has been little research conducted to back up the benefits that teachers and researchers have noted with anecdotal data in individual studies (Waldstein, 2003). The push for producing replicable studies has the potential to limit findings to only those areas that a specific researcher chooses to study (Howard, 2003).

### **Application**

Because students' first goal in beginning a specific academic service-learning project is to identify a need in a given community (Wade, 1997), students need to begin by developing their understanding of a community—specifically what and who make up a community, all of which could have direct ties to race, economics, and gender. In order to perform a needs assessment, students need to know who to call on for particular information, and should learn how to interpret that data with a critical eye (Pate, personal communication, Spring 2003).

I break academic service-learning into three parts, *Investigating the Community*; *Developing a Plan*; and *Enacting a Plan*. During the first part of a project, *Investigating the Community*, students and teacher learn about their community by performing a needs analysis. They then engage in chalk talks, brainstorming activities, thoughtful conversations, and written reflections about possible themes they have noticed. In other words, they are accessing the background knowledge needed in order to understand what is to come.

The second part, *Developing a Plan*, involves working with the selected community to develop a plan that addresses the community members' needs. Through direct contact with the community being served, students are required to develop interpersonal skills and reflect on their interactions (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). It is this relationship building that allows students to interact with people who may be different from them and have experiences they might not normally have. During these interactions, all involved are required to think critically about possible ways to solve the identified need, and to make predictions about how to best address the need (Pate, personal communication, Spring 2003). Open, candid conversations with those who are directly within the target community provide an ideal venue in which to question how things are done traditionally and how they might be done differently. Students and community members alike are empowered to realize that they can make changes that will not only help a specific subgroup of the larger community, but that the community at large can be indirectly changed as well.

Finally, the students, teacher, and the community act on their plan either by doing or creating something to address the identified need. This final piece of academic

service-learning, *Enacting a Plan*, is the crux of critical theory. Students and community members work together in an effort to shift the current power structure and create long-term social change. This results in “increased social responsibility,” an increased likelihood of “see[ing] themselves as connected to their community,” the ability to “believe that communities can solve their problems,” (Giles & Eyler, 1998, p. 66) and a greater ability to infer meaning from presented information.

I contend that academic service-learning improves the classroom by providing students with real reasons for learning. The day is no longer divided into segments with little to no connection to other areas of learning. Rather, the lines usually created through traditional views of schooling become blurred. Roles within the classroom also shift. All of this, along with the various opportunities that academic service-learning provide to look closely at the community, enhances critical literacy in the classroom. No longer is “knowledge” dispersed without close examination by all involved; instead, academic service-learning offers students the tools to explore their surroundings through a critical lens.

The New London Group (2000) argues that “human knowledge is initially developed as part and parcel of collaborative interactions”—in other words, “a community of learners engaged in common practices centered on a specific domain of knowledge” (p. 30). This idea, that learning happens when people come together for practical purposes, closely matches the intent of academic service-learning set forth by the National Commission on Service-Learning (2002). Academic service-learning provides a venue in which these “collaborative interactions” can not only take place, but

also presents an opportunity for “the school” to see and be seen as an active and valuable member of the community.

Academic service-learning provides students the opportunity to take a critical look at their community and work with its members to address a need. One piece of this, as clearly defined in the *National and Community Service Act* (1990), is “structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did or observed”—all important aspects of literacy learning as well as a crucial part of critical theory. As Shannon (1990) pointed out,

critical literacy provides a language—a system of concepts and logic—with which to examine the past, present, and future. In the end, critical literacy offers teachers and students a language of critique with which to demystify current social relations in order to determine their human essence and a language of hope with which to work toward individual freedom and social transformation (p. 149).

Academic service-learning is a way of teaching that allows learners to use language to “demystify” community circumstances. This close and critical look at the community, along with participant reflection of the process, allows students to view education as a vehicle for change.

Critical inquiry as a language act moves the participants beyond their present understanding in a way that promotes action and change in relation to power. Academic service-learning is one avenue for doing this, by providing students, teacher, and community members with an opportunity to expand their horizons. For me it is similar to what makes a good reader a good comprehender—the ability to access background knowledge, make connections across texts, characters, or experiences, infer meaning

from the text, and make predictions. The same can be said of a critical thinker.

Academic service-learning allows all involved the chance to work together to do these three things.

Critical theory contains “a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation” (Giroux, 1983, p. 290). Academic service-learning also provides opportunities for self-reflection and self-emancipation. Rather than holding “the real world” just out of the students’ reach, academic service-learning challenges students to become part of the larger community. It is in their role as active, rather than passive, members of their community that they are able to envision a better future.

Embedded in both critical inquiry and academic service-learning are the ideals of democracy. According to Carl Glickman (1993), “through teaching democracy, students connect learning with the real issues of their surroundings” (p. 9). They in turn become stakeholders in their own education. By “combining the progressive term democracy with more critical forms of participation which consistently question and interrupt status quo forms of engagement with public life” (Abowitz, 1999, p. 64), students begin to see their own potential. In this shift from schooling to education, all involved are able to see the big picture: one of a productive future full of engaged citizens.

While I contend that academic service-learning has strong ties to critical theory, most of the available research regarding academic service-learning is based on specific student outcomes. Little has been written about ties between academic service-learning and a specific theory. Of what has been written, scholars have suggested ties to Dewey’s theory of education and experience (Giles & Eyler, 1994); Dewey’s thoughts on



democracy (Harkavy & Benson, 1998; Rhoads, 2000); ties to sociology (Lena, 1995); liberalism and communitarianism (Varlotta, 1997) and a growing number linking service-learning with social justice (Michell, 2008; Wade, 2007). Waldstein (2003), however, suggested that researchers “bring to bear the theoretical arguments in their own disciplines and substantive areas of interest that are applicable to service-learning.” This, he continued, “is one of the greatest strengths of interdisciplinary study” (p. 44).

Academic service-learning, a “teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen community” (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002, p. 3), is a way to incorporate critical pedagogy into the classroom. Curriculum is a “complex discourse that not only serves the interest of domination but also contains aspects which provide emancipatory possibilities” (Giroux, 1983, p. 283). If the critical questions are asked, academic service-learning can open up these “emancipatory possibilities.” It is within this melding of theory with practice that Freire (2000) would contend that critical theory comes alive.

### **Coming Together**

I see critical pedagogy and academic service-learning as complementing each others’ goals—to bring the learner to a place where academic learning is tied with transforming society and reflecting on the process and one’s own participation in that process. In this section, I would like to outline four ways I see critical pedagogy and academic service-learning coming together:

- 1) Students, community members, and the school recognizing their collective ability to make a difference to the community in which they live;

- 2) Creating a shift from schooling to educating;
- 3) Providing a venue in which multiple perspectives can be acted upon; and
- 4) The social aspects of learning and reflecting that both academic service-learning and critical pedagogy can provide.

Allow me to return for a second to what Giroux (1983) said about critical theory, “[that it] must be measured not only by the degree to which it promotes critical thinking and reflective action but, more importantly, by the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle among parents, teachers, and students around the issues of power” (p. 291).

Now let us think about what we know of academic service-learning—students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community. This shows what I would consider one of the best reasons for linking academic service-learning with critical theory and, in turn, critical pedagogy. That is, through direct contact with the larger community, students and their families will be able to recognize their collective ability to have a positive impact on society rather than falling victim to the political structures that so often block their way. Again, as Giroux (1993) suggested, “learning must be linked not just to learning in the schools but extended to shaping public life and social relationships” (p. 15). There are ways to do this without direct contact with the community; however, lack of contact limits one’s ability to make genuine connections. Within the ideals of academic service-learning lies the concept of cross-participation—students learning with students, students learning with teachers, and students and teachers learning alongside community members. This collective learning goes against the way traditional

curriculum is taught and learned: teacher directed and individually. Such an upending of a schooling norm has direct ties to critical theory.

Another way in which I see academic service-learning and critical pedagogy coming together is in the shift from schooling to education. As a teacher of reading, I recognize the power that reading, literacy, and inquiry hold for my students and society as a whole. It is therefore my job to share this knowledge with the students in my class and their families. By “mixing it up,” all involved are required to see school differently, as a place to challenge norms rather than accepting “what has always been.” In this kind of classroom, the teacher is repositioned from “authoritative figure” to “facilitator.” This new collaboration, established between teacher and student *and* student and student, is essential to both the democratic learning that academic service-learning promotes and the “empowerment” that critical inquiry strives to achieve.

According to Carl Glickman (1993), “the essential value of the public school in a democracy, from the beginning, was to ensure an educated citizenry capable of participating in discussions, debates, and decisions to further the wellness of the larger community and protect the individual right to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’” (pp. 8-9). Academic service-learning can promote that charge while also meeting the newest demands placed on public schools. Not only are students provided with the tools to become active members of their communities, they are also given opportunities to practice the skills the state requires in practical ways, promoting the importance of education—learning that goes beyond the Common Core to a level of belonging.

A third way in which I see academic service-learning and critical pedagogy coming together is in the openness that both have to taking in multiple viewpoints, and

the shifts in power that result. Academic service-learning asks students to first look critically at their community—developing a “critical consciousness” (Freire, 2000)—to identify areas or people who may need assistance. Here community is defined by the students and may be as small as a single classroom or as large as all of humanity. During these conversations students and teacher need to ask themselves what factors may have led to this area of need. It is this questioning that is most often missing in those canned food and secondhand clothes drives. Next the class works alongside community members to develop a plan of action either to solve the problem area or bring awareness of the need(s) to the community at large. While working directly with the affected community, conversations about issues of race, gender, or power (to name a few) would be appropriate to assist students in making connections between the specific topic being addressed and larger societal problems. The critically conscious person recognizes that “the various parts of society affect each other, even though not all people have the same power to make laws, politics, trends, mass media, and income” (Shor, 1992, p. 128). Finally the class and community members work to complete the plan. This direct contact with the community in which the children and their families live provides them with opportunities to experience learning and “academics” in a way that legitimizes them rather than placing them on a pedestal. Through academic service-learning, undemocratic power relations are transformed and the social aspect of learning referenced by Dewey (1997) shines. “Teachers and students begin by creating a mutual learning process as the best condition for the introduction of any formal academic subject matter” (Shor, 1996, p. 18).

Finally, the social aspect of both academic service-learning and critical pedagogy is another reason I feel they should be linked. Time and again throughout this chapter I have examined the social quality and interconnectedness of both academic service-learning and critical pedagogy. From the models of pedagogy (The New London Group, 2000; Shor, 1992) which call for participation and sharing, to Lindfors's (1999) definition of inquiry and Edelsky's (1999) call for a critical whole language practice in which communities are key, from the introduction of the Peace Corps to the *National and Community Service Act* (1990), there have been numerous references to the social aspect of both. Again this recognition that learning takes place within social interactions flies in the face of my experience with school that I recalled at the beginning of this chapter. The *National and Community Service Act* (1990) definition states that academic service-learning must allow time for students to "think, talk, or write about what they did and observed." Therefore academic service-learning is an ideal way to nurture this social view of literacy learning and promote participatory education, all the while fostering shared ownership and authority.

Through looking at literacy learning and literacy events within the framework of academic service-learning, I hope to bring new information to the table by opening education up to the questions and critiques necessary to create a democratic society—one in which all are active participants, probe into their communities, and propose changes that will have a positive impact.

Academic service-learning research often focuses on the concepts of citizenry, participation, and democracy on the part of the student learner, rather than the ideas of questioning and acting on "oppression, struggle, and justice" often associated with

critical theory. One difficulty I have with a critical theory stance is that there seems to be a lack of hope. This is where I feel academic service-learning can provide a twist on critical theory by educating for truth, active participation in the change process, and democracy. I view academic service-learning as a philosophy in which “learners explore their world through an inquiry lens, making changes and adjustments in their thinking, experimenting with tools in their environment, inventing new tools, and venturing further into their inquiries” (Pataray-Ching and Roberson, 2002, p. 500). The New London Group’s (2001) model of pedagogy, which included situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice (pp. 31-35), along with Shor’s (1992) values of critical pedagogy—participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, activist (p. 17)—seem to match nicely with the goals of academic service-learning.

Returning again to Shor’s (1992) critical pedagogical ideals—participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, activist (p. 17)—and the National Commission on Service-Learning (2002) definition of academic service-learning—a “teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen community” (p. 3)—it is easy to see how academic service-learning can be woven into the theoretical fabric of critical theory. For these reasons, I feel critical theory may be best suited for the field of academic service-learning.

With this chapter I have described my own understanding of critical pedagogy, its roots and its possibilities. I have also explored academic service-learning and the

connections I wish to make between the two. In the next chapter I will look at my methodology and the methods I used in conducting this research.

### Chapter Three

In January 2001, the Clarke County School District (CCSD) formed a five-year partnership with the University of Georgia (UGA) and the Athens-Clarke County community at large. This collaborative effort—called the Partnership for Community Learning Centers—involved two elementary schools, one of which being the school where this research occurred. A goal of the Partnership was to create schools that would become community learning centers designed to meet the intellectual, social, and cultural needs of all students. The Partnership achieved this through collaboration in which leadership and resources were shared from the school district, the university, parents, businesses, and the general community and its various organizations. The community learning centers were characterized by learning and growth for each student, where new approaches to effective, culturally responsive teaching were developed, assessed, and refined. Teacher and action research was also key to making the Partnership successful (Clarke Co./UGA/ACC, 2002).

It was talk of this partnership that brought me back to the classroom after a two-year hiatus. The idea of a school where research in your classroom was not only accepted, but actually encouraged, was exciting. My interest in academic service-learning, in combination with a desire to teach again, made the opportunity to work there and do my research too good to pass up.

This chapter begins with a review of the questions that guided my research, followed by a description of the participants and the setting. I then discuss my



methodological choice. Next I explain my data collection, followed by initial instructional steps, and data analysis. Finally I look at my own subjectivities, and the limitations and implications that this research will bring to the field.

### **Research Questions**

By engaging in critical teacher action research that investigates literacy and academic service-learning, I am not only systematically taking a look at my own practices and the students' literacy learning within my classroom, I also become a co-investigator in the students' academic service-learning research. Again, I wished to look specifically at:

- What does it mean to take a critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning?
  - What are the possibilities? The limitations? And the challenges?;
- What are some of the ways that students use literacy—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants?
- What did I learn about myself as a teacher, and the practice of guiding the academic service-learning processes with young children?; and
- What are the implications of doing academic service-learning?

### **Participants and Setting**

The school in which this research was conducted is the oldest school in the county, and although it is in a predominantly middle-class white historic neighborhood, very few neighborhood families sent their children to this school at the time the research was conducted. The school was a Title I school, with one of the highest percentages of

children receiving free and reduced lunch in the county. In the four years before this research took place there were as many different administrations. The year this research took place, the school was recognized for making “Distinguished” progress on the end-of-year tests scores from the preceding year, whereas the school had previously been designated as “Needs Improvement” for three years running. One result of the school having been labeled a “low performing school” for several years is that the College of Education at the local university formed a five-year partnership in order to help raise student achievement while better incorporating university and community resources in the education of the children. The Partnership’s objectives included: setting and communicating clear and high expectations for all students; building on the cultural and linguistic diversity of students as a resource that enhances the learning of all community members; providing flexible and adaptable learning structures and school calendars to meet the varying needs of students; integrating technology; using multiple and authentic assessments; and establishing faculty/community teams to study the effectiveness of their practices through collaborative action research (UGA/CCSD/ACC, 2002). As stated above, the Partnership, with its promotion of action research and building relations within the community, are two of the main reasons I chose to work at this school.

The classroom in which the research took place was a third grade class that never had more than fifteen students. Heterogeneously grouped, the class started the year off with thirteen students. As the year progressed two more students joined the group, though one of the original thirteen moved out of state before the end of the year. For the majority of the time that we were actively involved in the academic service-learning project there were a total of fifteen students in the class, although only thirteen were

given parental consent to be included as participants: three Black females, three Black males, four Latino females, two (one participant) Latino males, two (one participant) Caucasian females, and one Pacific Islander female (see Table 1 in Appendix A). The students ranged in age from eight to ten. Twelve of the students qualified for the federal free or reduced lunch program, with three of these also qualifying for Migrant education services. Of the fifteen students, four (three participants) were designated Gifted and Talented (GT), two were receiving special education services by the end of the year, four students had been identified as needing Early Intervention Program (EIP) services (due to test scores of less than 300 on the reading and/or math portion of the second grade end-of-year test), and four (three participants) qualified for English as a Second Language (ESL) services. Our smaller class size and, in turn, lower student to teacher ratio qualified as one way of implementing EIP services. Approximately 42% (six students) of the students began the year reading at least a year above grade level, while 50% were reading from two to six months below grade level, based on individual reading inventories. One student was two years below grade level in reading.

In an attempt to move beyond how children in classrooms are all too often described, allow me to share the children's descriptors of themselves. Early in the year, as one of our community building activities, I asked the children to think about something they "rocked" at. I also asked them to draw self-portraits to go with their statement. Here is what each of them wrote about themselves:

Ana is good at sports. Arleen is good at jump rope. Asako is the fastest writer.

Brelynn is good at cheerleading. Carla is the smartest girl. Carlos is the smartest boy. Christian is the fastest boy in class. Lourdes is the funniest girl. Sascha is

best at speaking languages. Tara is the fastest girl. Teresa is the best swimmer.

Terrance is the best climber. Xander is the coolest boy.

In addition to the students and myself we had Ms. Stars, a student teacher, for the first half of the year.

The physical classroom was one of ten trailers on the campus, nine of which ran alongside the historic 1920s building. Having at one point been the art room, our trailer was located at the rear of the main building away from the other trailers. While small, at approximately 15 x 26 feet, ours was twice the size of the others. The summer before I had painted the room a light gray with a buttery-yellow stripe about eighteen inches from the ceiling to cover the dreary wood-paneling that had once dominated the room. I had also brought in plants and placed them on several of the shelves closest to the four small windows. In this space, with the children's help, we were able to create different areas including a classroom library, a meeting area (for things like morning meeting and mini-lessons), a guided reading table, a writing/computer area, and the obligatory desk/work area (with desks placed in clusters of four). Our daily schedule (see Table 2 in Appendix A) consisted of a three-hour language arts block (specials classes divided this block), ninety minutes of math, and a half hour of science and social studies at the end of the day.

### **Participant Observer or Observant Participant: Questions Concerning Qualitative Research**

Ethnography and participant observation are historically linked with the field of anthropology (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002; Sanjek, 1990). Upon hearing the word ethnographer, many conjure up the classic picture of the anthropologist acting as ethnographer, in a grass hut bent over a table covered with papers, while the natives in

the background look in on what he is doing (Clifford, 1990). As with most research designs that are used in different fields (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology) the definition and the application vary (Howell, 1990; Lather, 1997, Wolcott, 2002). While anthropologists have been going “into the field” for over a century, ethnography in the field of education is a relatively new way of studying the classroom (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

An ethnographer can enter any classroom for a year, become a participant in that setting, take notes, go home in the evening, expand those notes, and reflect on the learning that took place. All they are doing, however, is observing the participants. A teacher-researcher, using many of the same tools as the ethnographer, enters that same classroom on a daily basis, leads, guides, and/or monitors discussions and activities, taking it all in, journaling later and reflecting critically on what happened and why—all as a participant.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) stated, “educational ethnographers examine the process of teaching and learning,... and the relationships among such educational actors as parents, teachers, and learners and the sociocultural contexts within which nurturing, teaching, and learning occur” (p. 28). The role of the teacher-researcher is a tricky one. I cannot separate my roles into distinct categories—teacher this minute, researcher the next. I can however use my role in both categories to my advantage, all the time, while observing. According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) “participant observation includes the use of information gained from participating and observing through explicit recording and analysis of this information” (p. 2). As the teacher, I do this every day in assessing my students’ understanding of what it is we are learning.

I have a distinct advantage when it comes to my role as researcher in my classroom. I am with these students every day for an entire year. As I listen to my students discussing the topic at hand and read their responses on a variety of subjects, I see their incremental growth in all areas. I also often hear myself in my students' responses. This is part of being a teacher. As a researcher looking into my own practices and my students' interactions with critical pedagogy, this is the clearest reminder that researching my own classroom is different. I am required to see myself as an observant participant rather than a participant observer.

### **Action Research**

Since compensatory public education became a reality, universities, teachers, communities, and parents have been looking at how to make it successful for all. As a result researchers and teachers have studied how different programs and techniques have worked for students in different situations.

As a teacher and a researcher I must ask myself, to whom am I responsible? I am constantly thinking about “‘Whose story is this?’ and ‘Who has the right to share this story?’” (Zeni, 2001, p. 45). This means making sure that, as a teacher, I teach and learn alongside my students and their families, and as a researcher, that I am true to the students, their families, the classroom interactions that take place and the stories that are told.

### **Teacher Action Research**

I use Carr and Kemmis's (1986) definition of action research—“[the] self reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the

rationality and justice of their own practice, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out” (p. 162)—as a springboard for explaining how I see teacher research and critical teacher action research as layers of action research. Action research strives to improve practice, understanding, and social and educational environments by engaging all who are involved at all phases of the cycle. Teacher research—which again is a *teacher initiated* systematic reflection on classroom practices—falls under action research because, from this close look at one’s classroom, changes are enacted. This individual attention to what works in a particular educational situation does not adhere to the conventional “one-size-fits-all” approach that more traditional forms of research provide to the educational setting. The immediate results yielded by teacher research make it possible for teachers to take action and change the dynamics of their classroom and/or teaching approach, eliminating the lag time that is present when researchers enter the classroom from the outside.

**Making action critical.** According to Nancy Kraft (2002), good teacher research should include:

- 1) deliberate and systematic examination of practice with the goal of first understanding practice as a prerequisite to improving practice...; 2) an opportunity to examine how one operationalizes his/her belief systems in the classroom and the validity of one’s belief systems; and 3) a process of critical self-reflection through an analysis of personally held beliefs, values, and assumptions (p. 177).

Rather than implying that research in a classroom can be objective, this shift from

technical to critical places the teacher researcher's subjectivities within the data set being collected and reported.

Critical action research is a "self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way language is used, organization and power in a local situation, and action to improve things" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 568). Moving beyond regular teacher research, where a teacher inquires into one's own practice without necessarily looking at the relationship between education and society, the critical action research teacher is expressly concerned with investigating these relationships in regard to his/her own classroom practice.

Critical teacher action research brings with it the thoughts and ideas of critical theory—transaction, politics, social, reflection, transformation, and democracy. Thus, rather than the research belonging solely to the teacher, everyone becomes an active participant and co-researcher, for institutional inequalities and injustices can not be fully addressed without some involvement from all stakeholders. As a result of this shift, students are provided the opportunity to see learning and education as an ever-evolving practice in which they have a voice. Kemmis (1993) advocated that critical action research "aims at creating a form of collaborative learning by doing (in which groups of participants set out to learn from change in a process of making changes, studying the process and consequences of these changes, and trying again)." He went on to say that through doing critical action research, "people [are helped to] understand themselves as the agents, as well as the products, of history. In my view, action research is also committed to spreading involvement and participation in the research process" (§ 8).



Critical teacher action research reaches into the larger society where it can begin to take shape and change ways of thinking.

Rather than being passive and attempting to maintain a level of objectivity, the critical teacher action researcher is an activist, striving to create change in the classroom. The teacher researcher not only looks at the learning that occurred and the interactions that took place, but also at how their role as teacher played a part in those interactions and how it will continue to. In order to assure that institutional injustices are not perpetuated, the critical teacher action researcher takes the research process a step further by acting as facilitator, rather than observer.

The questions that are asked become key to my role as a critical teacher action researcher. My questions reflect what changes need to occur in the classroom so that greater social changes can take place. No longer is it enough to wonder “What does literacy learning look like within an academic service-learning project?” Rather I must ask, “What are some of the ways that students use literacy—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants?” The shift from procedural question to critical question must take into account my knowledge of these learners as disenfranchised members of society and my understanding of critical theory as a way of illuminating social injustices.

### **Researching Academic Service-Learning As a Teacher Researcher**

Research on academic service-learning has traditionally been university based and quantitative. In the February 2010 edition of Phi Delta Kappan, Andrew Furco and Susan Root pointed to the need to strive to research academic service-learning in a way that the

U.S. Department of Education will recognize in order to see it reach its fullest potential. While I feel this is important to the field of academic service-learning, I also agree with Root's (2003) earlier assessment that, "teacher research can provide insight into the situational variables that mediate service-learning, as well as into the lived experiences of the participants" (p. 173). Again we are reminded that teacher researchers are in fact observant participants in the learning and research process, and as such have the opportunity to present data in new and exciting ways. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argued that teacher research provides both local knowledge, which directly affects a teacher's own practice as well as that of the immediate community of teachers, and public knowledge, that knowledge which is generated from the larger community of educators. Root (2003) felt that this can also be said of academic service-learning because it "involves the integration of local or public social problem solving with academic learning, it has the potential to contribute insights and questions and to influence decision making in local and public knowledge communities beyond those concerned with educational practice" (p. 179). Both academic service-learning and critical action research provide students (and teacher) with this opportunity, again building connections between and across academic and social communities.

### **Fine-Tuning**

I chose to use critical teacher action research as my research design. With this comes the need to begin with broad research questions and narrow and redefine them as the data is analyzed. This is akin to grounded theory's constant comparison approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

When I first proposed this study I started with four questions: (a) What does one critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning and literacy learning look like in the third grade classroom and how does that conception play out? What are the possibilities? The limitations? And the challenges?; (b) What happens to students' perspectives of themselves as literacy learners—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants?; (c) How do interactions with the community influence the learning in school and how does learning in school influence the community?; and (d) What are the implications of doing academic service-learning?

As I began my research I realized early on that some of what I originally wanted to look at, like students' perspectives of themselves as literacy learners, would be difficult and quite time-consuming to assess in a meaningful way. Other inquiry goals, like understanding the influence of academic service-learning both in the classroom and the community, proved even more difficult. I realized I needed to narrow the scope of my inquiry and focus in a way that would be accomplishable.

Once I began looking at my data I realized I was answering questions I hadn't even thought to ask—what did I learn about myself as a teacher and the practice of guiding the academic service-learning processes with young children? Even though I was doing teacher action research, I hadn't originally realized that so much of the analysis phase would include my own reflections on my teaching. I was no expert as a teacher of academic service-learning, and couldn't initially see that I would have anything to offer others in terms of better understanding this pedagogical approach.

However, I now realize how important that piece of my analysis is both for myself and hopefully for others who wish to engage in teacher action research and/or academic service-learning in an elementary classroom.

For the pilot study, which focused on students taking responsibility for their learning, it was suggested that rather than trying to get deep data from all students and ending up with little, I should instead look at a cross section of students based on participation level (Fecho, personal communication, Spring 2003). This provided me with a focus, which gave me rich and informative data. I took this earlier piece of advice into the research project I am reporting here, choosing to focus on four students: Ana, Arleen, Christian, and Teresa (names of all participants are pseudonyms). To be clear, I have not done a case study on each of these students, rather I chose to have these four students help tell the story through their words and work, while using data gathered from others in the class to further enhance understanding and readability.

I picked these four students because they represent what I saw in many of the students and matched the demographics for the class. Ana was a twin and a younger sibling of Santana, a boy I had taught two years before. Ana was an English language learner and as such had trouble at times expressing herself in English in a way that matched what she was able to explain in Spanish. At times Ana would do the bare minimum rather than pushing herself. Arleen was new to the school. She and her mother, recently out of an abusive relationship that resulted in their being homeless for a time, had moved to Athens to provide a safer environment for Arleen. School was one of those safe places where Arleen could be herself and shine. Christian was one of the students designated as GT. As an only child, he had developed an ease with talking to

adults, while still being able to be a silly eight-year-old. Lastly, Teresa. Teresa was what could be classified as a typical student. She got along well with her peers and worked to complete all assignments even when they were hard. Academically she fit right in the middle of the class.

### **Data Collection**

Because the research took place in my own classroom, I had a plethora of material from which to draw and the ability to begin collecting data on the first day. What I lay out below was my plan for data collection, specific instruction that took place at the beginning of the research, and data analysis.

With my belief that literacy includes all aspects of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and reflection, I was able to use myriad student work samples, including reflection journals, creative writing assignments, audio-taped class discussions, and reading logs. This is an example of what Bisplinghoff and Allen (1998) called “living in data world.” For this research, I kept a journal that included a mix of personal feelings and field notes, and field notes from university partners, administrators, and other observers in my classroom. Through their notes and informal interviews with the students, I truly saw how differently the classroom was viewed by myself and others. As the teacher researcher, I also had the advantage of keeping a more thorough timeline of the research and learning events, and rather than having to select a few representative work samples, I was able to hold on to it all and look through it during the data analysis stage.

I collected the following types of data for this dissertation research: teacher research journal; audio-taped class discussions; and artifacts that included, but were not limited to, student work samples, lesson plans, and student and teacher portfolios.

### **Research Journal**

As part of my data collection, I maintained a research journal, albeit sporadically. Similar to field notes most commonly associated with anthropological field work (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002), my research journal included direct observations; analytical and theoretical information, such as connections I made to texts and conversations I had about literacy learning; questions I had at a particular point in the research; and any personal notes about my life or my students' lives outside of school that might have affected what I was seeing (Hubbard & Power, 1993). I also included notes I took during independent reading and writing conferences. Classroom observation notes from university partners, administrators, student volunteers, and the school's literacy coach were placed in my research journal too.

### **Class Discussions**

The foundation of the project the class decided to participate in was based on multiple conversations about community, in addition to daily conversations as the project progressed. These class discussions were audio taped; however, for the purpose of this research, only those students whose consent I had were used in the reporting of the research. Students also had the opportunity to opt in or out of the study; however, the lessons, activities, and discussions were part of the everyday classroom experience and included all students.

## **Artifacts**

Along with the field notes and audio-taped class discussions, the majority of the data came from student work samples, charts documenting conversations, my lesson plans documenting the integration of the project's focus into the academic areas required by the state, with learning portfolios maintained by the students and myself providing supplemental information.

## **Instruction**

Having discussed the data I collected for this research, I will now describe how I started. I started the year with a plan, but as is often the case in a classroom, those plans don't always pan out. In this section I will outline what the initial plan was as well as what changes occurred. I have chosen to do this because one of my goals is to help others who might wish to engage in teacher action research. Teaching can get messy and unfortunately, too often, write-ups of research in the classroom can be portrayed as flawless. I feel it is important to look at some of the things I did in the classroom in order to see not only how I collected and analyzed the data, but how the students themselves were involved in their own research project, which also involved data collection and analysis. Because of my role in two simultaneous research projects, the students' service-learning project and my own dissertation, I feel that explicitly showing how they both started from the same place will assist me in being able to see when and where my examination of literacy events differs from our look into the community.

Within the first two weeks of the school year a variety of activities were introduced that provided the students with the opportunity to get to know each other better, and hopefully to learn more about themselves as well. These activities included

asking my students and myself to complete several different learning inventories; make a heart map (Heard, 1998); take a “Power Walk”—(Commeryas, personal communication, Fall 2000), in which we all, students and teacher alike, stand on one side of the room and as I read a statement (“I am a boy.” to “My parents don’t live together.”), anyone who identifies with the statement walks silently to the other side of the designated area, takes a moment to look around and then rejoins the group for the next statement; develop ideas of what we wanted as a class and how we planned to work toward that; create a class pledge (Heard, p. 29, 1998); play team building games; and begin collecting ideas and themes in the students’ Writing Idea notebooks. I believe these first few weeks became instrumental in allowing the students to see that this would be a class that “operated” differently, providing a safe place to learn together and offering differing thoughts and ideas, from students and teacher alike. The final piece to this community building exercise was talking explicitly about community, how our classroom would act as one, and what needed to happen to make sure that would continue.

Originally I intended to then have a broader discussion on community, during which I would pose the questions: “What is community?,” “What communities are you members of?,” “What does it take to make a large community work?,” and “What happens when these things are missing?” After a categorization activity using various bottle caps to discuss different ways of sorting, I planned on the students—first individually, then in pairs or triads, and finally in quads or sextuplets—sorting the ideas they generated about successful community needs. Instead we began with three conversations about community, service, and learning.



As an extension of those originally planned talks about community needs, I thought the students and I would conduct interviews with at least two people (parents, neighbors, ministers) around the idea of successful communities and what gaps they saw within their own communities. When these community member interviews were completed, I would again ask the students to sort for similarities and discuss recurring themes. This, however, did not happen; instead we interviewed community leaders straight away. I have since done this with a subsequent academic service-learning project, and it provided a richer base from which to build questions for community leaders. As a result, I feel it is a valuable piece to include in my future work with academic service-learning.

Following these interviews, the class community would brainstorm identified community needs that they might like to learn about and then choose a need they would like to address. Next I planned to invite community service providers to talk with the class about that need and what was being done and what more could be done to help address that need, though in actuality I only invited one. Some possible ideas that I had considered when planning this study included: discovering unsung local heroes and creating, then painting, a mural celebrating these community members; studying world hunger and making clay bowls to be sold or auctioned off to help support a local food bank; or learning about the benefit of plants on air quality and planting a community garden on a vacant lot or at a local housing project.

Once the students had decided on a specific need they wished to examine, and ways they might go about solving or addressing that need, we would pause to reflect on the process and our learning to that point. At this time an initial timeline would be, and

was, developed. After recording, on the timeline, what we had accomplished thus far, the thought was that we would meet with community members and service providers that would be affected by this project and, with their assistance, develop a detailed plan for carrying out our idea. This part of the plan was altered and is discussed in chapter four and five. The class also talked about general and specific ways we would integrate what the state expected us to cover, and ways to document the learning that was taking place. I then introduced a possible rubric and elicited student feedback to fit the needs of the students.

From here, it was impossible to think in specifics, because each possible service project would have its own plan. I was, however, able to plan on weekly reflections and class meetings that would address questions, concerns, and suggestions.

Students new to academic service-learning also sometimes have trouble seeing the big picture, and when it seems like the task at hand has no stopping point, it becomes easy to see the importance of including the students in the planning process. In order to allow my students an active role in their education, and to help them develop an understanding of how compulsory education functions, I initially asked that they keep an assessment portfolio that would be graded using the rubric that they helped create. The assessment portfolio originally contained the following items:

- learning log;
- activity log;
- timeline/schedule;
- class notes;
- reflections;

- vocabulary log; and
- reading log (Pate, personal communication, Spring 2003).

The learning log was intended to allow students to directly connect specific pieces of the project with specific academic tasks required by the state, while the activity log required that the students make note of the different components of the project. I felt that both of these components would provide the students with a place to make connections to how school is traditionally done and the possibilities that academic service-learning allows. The timeline/schedule would create order, as we worked together to project possible time frames for specific pieces of the project and learn to recognize and embrace changes brought about by branching inquiries and outside forces. Class notes, a vocabulary log, and a reading log would offer other avenues for students to make connections between “book learning” and “real world experiences.” The intent of the portfolio was to offer students the chance to envision themselves as life long learners rather than grade specific learners. By the end of October, however, I had stopped making sure that we took time as a class to update our portfolios and moved toward periodically asking the students to update them when ever they got a chance. As a result some students stopped updating them altogether, others put new pieces in every so often, and a few kept at them. This flux in consistency made it an unreliable piece in terms of data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis should begin with one’s first piece of data. For a teacher this is also one of the most difficult things to make time for. This is where “you enter into dialogue

with [your data]” (Hubbard & Power, 1993, p. 65). In this section I discuss the different approaches used in analyzing the data.

### **Inductive Analysis**

One way to begin this process is to look for words or phrases that seem to stick out. Inductive analysis, which is most often associated with grounded theory, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis (Thomas, 2003) does just this. Unlike deductive analysis, where the researcher is testing existing ideas, the inductive researcher identifies key themes that emerge from the data and modifies the research to explore these themes. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996) “inductivism is based on the presumption that laws or generalizations can be developed from the accumulation of observations and cases,...to reveal regularities” (p. 155). Under the larger umbrella of inductive analysis are more distinct ways of analyzing data. The next sections will briefly touch on these methods.

### **Indexing**

Indexing is a method by which the researcher finds similarities within the data. “When you index your field notes and observations, you create a table of contents of sorts, listing the many categories you noted as well as the pages in your field notes where they occur” (Hubbard & Power, 1993, p. 74). After compiling this index it is important that you begin to define these categories, including similarities across categories. I used indexing to assist me in seeing where particular literacy activities took place within the data. This allowed me not only to quickly access the information, but also to identify the number of times one kind of literacy activity was done in comparison to others.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is the cross referencing of data, either by looking at three different pieces of data and confirming or denying similarities, or by asking others (researchers or participants) to look for patterns within the data. For this research I looked at the data and participated in a Critical Friends Group (National School Reform Faculty, 2004) to compare and contrast my thoughts and codes with that of others who were not so closely tied to the data. In situations when I had more than my own notes (e.g., principal's observation, university partner) of a particular event or lesson, I also looked at similarities and dissimilarities.

### **Analytic Procedure**

I began my data analysis by reading over my research journal. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) write that "there is no substitute for reading and rereading field notes and transcripts, each time with a particular question in mind" (p. 163). During a second reading I focused on words and phrases that jumped out at me and placed them in a separate document. From this document I then grouped the data into categories. I used a similar procedure for looking at the students' work and my lesson plans. After this initial self "coding," I called on other teachers to look at the data in regard to my research questions. Using all this information, I identified commonalities.

### **Subjectivities**

As a teacher and a perpetual student, I am involved in teacher research and studying my own practice as it relates to literacy and academic service-learning. This research seeks to provide a look into an evolving inquiry classroom.

I was a teacher, with seven years of experience, in the classroom in which the research took place. I am a middle-class white teacher. I am a self-proclaimed socialist. I have a learning disability that slows my processing speed. I do better when reading is “non-pressured” and learning is tied to actual experiences. I am conscious of my “whiteness” and struggle with how best to serve my students of diverse backgrounds. In the various schools where I have taught I witness the struggles my students and their families face in a society where literacy is power. Closely related to this power are money and class. So despite the state’s need to evaluate all schools using identical criteria, I agree with McLaren (2003) who stated, “the root cause of [these] inequalit[ies] can be traced directly to the disproportional access to wealth in a society where, despite lip service, the poor are often ostracized to states of unworthiness and inferiority” (p. 177).

As a doctoral student I became interested in critical theory and the creation of a classroom democracy. About halfway through my course work I took an academic service-learning course in which we were asked to engage in a project. At the time I was teaching fifth-grade language arts. Our school was turning eighty that year and after I introduced the idea of service-learning to the students, they came up with the idea to look at the history of our school and create a time-capsule. The students did so much with various aspects of literacy that year that I became intrigued. Because of this interest, I decided to have my dissertation research focus on literacy and academic service-learning within a critical framework.

I have, and will continue, to involve my students in the research process in order to encourage critical thinking. For me, critical inquiry and critical thinking are

intrinsically linked and lead to critical talk and critical literacy. You cannot have one in the absence of the other. Critical inquiry moves beyond the “higher-level thinking skills” that are often promoted in schools to include thinking about and questioning issues of power, race, class, and gender. For me, education is about people, whether they are the students in your classroom, the parents of these students, or the community in which the school operates. To ignore the human factor and focus on skill acquisition is to do a disservice to the community at-large.

Projects have always been a source of discontent for me as a learner. Projects in elementary school were based on teacher-selected topics, done individually, at home, and rarely shared with other students in the class. In high school “projects” were really research papers, again based on teacher-selected topics and done independently as homework. In college, projects tended to be more group oriented, however students were expected to meet outside of class to work on the assignment—again focused around a teacher-selected theme. With the introduction of whole language came the thematic unit. While the curriculum is fully integrated into a thematic unit, the topic is most often picked by the teachers and the students have little say in what and how they learn. I don’t like the word *project*, particularly when discussing academic service-learning, because for me it conjures up the above-mentioned qualities, and because academic service-learning is so much more than that. Still, I do use it at times as a quick filler.

I chose to use academic service-learning because it allowed for the students’ interest and the community’s need to be the deciding factors, rather than the teacher’s likes and dislikes. I also decided on critical theory and democracy as the methods to

carry out these projects to ensure that all voices were heard and full participation was encouraged.

### **Limitations**

“The very strengths of teacher research—its immediacy, continuity, authenticity and personal nature—may also limit it” (Baumann, 1997, p. 12). This is at the heart of critiques about critical teacher action research. Historically, research is seen as needing to be empirical and replicable. Generalization and objectivism, however, are red herrings in the pursuit of “successful education.” Teacher-researchers open their classrooms and students to possibilities that would not otherwise be available if they waited around for the “latest” research to be published and acted on. One-size-fits-all programs never actually fit everyone, or we wouldn’t still be looking.

Schools breed citizens with two distinctly different consciousnesses and world views. One group, those who succeed, tend to believe that they are capable of seeking, possessing, and banking on knowledge. The other group, those who fail, tend to believe that knowledge is “elsewhere,” not to be possessed, to be deferred to rebelled against, or distrusted (Boomer, 1986, p. 5).

While Boomer was speaking specifically of students, the same could be said of teachers as well. Critical teacher action research provides a venue where a shift in this structure is possible. Rather than waiting for “others” to dictate what should happen in the classroom for students to succeed, throwing up your hands in disgust, or closing your door to do your own thing, teacher-researchers look within themselves to answer these questions. It is this “systematic look” that provides teachers with evidence, not just gut feelings, that allow immediate changes to take place.



A benefit of teacher action research for my students was the ability to provide them with real situations for learning and practicing state objectives. The state expects students to learn and be able to carry out the “research process.” What better way to do just that than through action research around academic service-learning? Not only did it provide them with “real world” experiences, but they became co-researchers, rather than those being researched. This is also true of the teacher who researches her/his own classroom, rather than that of another teacher.

In this age of accountability, teachers are required to provide “evidence of learning.” This need for empirical proof too often leads districts to mandate that schools pick from several “approved” scientifically-based research programs, rather than trying a variety of individual approaches. When tests are the determining factor in whether a child moves on to the next grade, one might be hesitant to say, “Hey, I’d like to see if this works.” Critical teacher action research can cause anxiety should some of the strategies used to increase reading comprehension, for example, be unsuccessful. It is frightening for teachers to talk about what does not work. It is certainly not something that often shows up in journal articles, yet for the (critical) teacher action researcher, what does not work is as important as those things that do work. While another researcher may report that “x” did not work, they are rarely concerned with why it didn’t work and what could be changed to make it more successful next time. These are important questions for the (critical) teacher action researcher to ask.

Time is another issue that causes the emerging teacher-researcher to hesitate before beginning the process. Time, however is just one piece of a larger problem—that of institutional support. Without the scheduling support of the administration and the

emotional support of fellow teacher-researchers it is very difficult to get started and to maintain the energy to continue with the research. Teacher-research asks that teachers open their doors and share the different things they are doing in their classrooms. This sharing creates bonds with colleagues in your building and your district. As a result of this sharing and network building, school and district level administrators may be more willing to cut back on the number of meetings, or at the very least change the focus of these meetings to meet the growing needs of their teacher-researchers. With this new focus, or time available for talking and sharing, student learning benefits from the expertise of others in the field. As the saying goes, “two heads are better than one.”

Another problem the teacher-research faces, which the outside researcher does not, is keeping students honest. I had to constantly keep in mind my influence over the situation. No matter how democratic the class was in terms of the power structure, I was still the teacher. I would often hear myself within the voices of my children. This was particularly true during the pilot study when I interviewed them, and as a result I wondered if what the students were saying actually matched what they felt. Students are not normally granted autonomy, and this was apparent, particularly when I sat them down for individual interviews. As a result, however, I learned that focus group interviews or class discussions centered around a specific topic might be a better way to gather information. Also, “anonymous” reflections about how things were going could work well. In addition to these changes in data collection, I recognized the value of working with the students on a daily basis, both in small and whole group activities. This daily interaction provided me with the opportunity to hear and participate in things that an outside researcher might miss.

### **Time Lapse**

During the process of finishing up this work there has been a huge lapse of time. After I finished my course work and the research, I moved to New York City. One thing led to another—worry led to doubt which led to avoidance, until six years later my newest principal started asking me about my research, and I was brought back to what I love. This time lapse, however, has provided me with six additional years of teaching to reflect on, three administrations that all but laughed when I asked if I could do academic service-learning with my students, and one bare bones project that was done on the sly. While I would not advocate anyone taking a six-year hiatus to finish their dissertation, there is something to be said for having some time and space to separate yourself from the data.

During this time between completing work with academic service-learning and data collection in the classroom and writing it up, states have begun to adopt national standards. So while I was using Georgia's Quality Core Curriculum (GA QCC) when I conducted this research, you will see in the following pages that I point out where the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) fit with the work that my students did during our academic service-learning project in the 2005-2006 school year. I have also included Table 2 in Appendix B to help identify which of the CCSS for third grade would have been addressed during this academic service-learning process.

I hope that I have given you the beginnings of a picture of our year and my intentions for this particular research, and what I identified as some possible limitations beforehand. The next chapter documents the school year and the research my students and I engaged in, while retelling and analyzing specific literacy events.

## Chapter Four

In this chapter I will present nine literacy events chronologically from throughout the year within the constructs of an academic service-learning project. To remind you, I define literacy events as the places in which literacy plays a role in order to achieve a larger goal (see Table 1 in Appendix B). With this definition, a literacy event may take one hour to accomplish or it may also take place over the course of a week or several months. Again I have come to this definition through my work with young children who often do not have the capacity to complete some work within a timeframe that might be quite easy for adults, yet the end goal is just as timely. While the term event may seem specific in nature I see it this way only in that it achieves a specific goal of advancing our understandings particularly with regards to the academic service-learning project.

I have chosen these events for a combination of reasons. The main reason that each of these events was picked was because it was a milestone in the academic service-learning project. My process for picking them also included selecting events that both fit a standard Reader's and Writer's Workshop definition of literacy (writing informational texts) as well as those that, while literacy based, are not often thought of as being explicitly literacy (interviews). Using my definition of literacy as a multidimensional, multifaceted entity that includes one's ability to read, write, and speak critically; to think and question critically; and to analyze and reflect on information not only individually but as an active member of a community, I also looked for literacy events that I felt were successful (discussion board), and those that I felt were not quite successful (reflections)

in meeting that definition. I also endeavored to pick events that covered the course of the school year (vocabulary conversations: August; interviews with Denney Tower residents: December; and letter writing: March). After selecting these events, I used information from student work, audio and video recordings, notes taken by me and other adults who visited our classroom, and memory to construct an understandable retelling of each event.

As a reminder, the *National and Community Service Act* (1990) clearly defined service-learning as:

a method in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community through curriculum integration. It is a method that provides structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did and observed during a service activity and chances to use newly-acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities. Such activities enhance teaching in school by extending student learning into the community and help foster a sense of a caring for others.

For the purposes of establishing a basic understanding of how I explain academic service-learning and, in turn, how this chapter is laid out, I believe academic service-learning can be broken down into three parts: Investigating the Community; Developing a Plan; and Enacting a Plan. Others (Kaye, 2010; CommonCents, 2012) have used the terms “preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration/celebration” as a way of defining the stages of academic service-learning. For me, it seems these terms are not explicit enough for younger students. Additionally, because of my desire to approach academic service-learning through a critical lens, I feel that the reflection piece of

academic service-learning should happen throughout, and that characterizing it as a stage gives the impression, correct or not, of only asking students to reflect after they have begun to act on their plan.

Let me state that throughout the chapter I have used the students' words and spellings without modification, though in some places, to make it easier to read, I have included correct spellings in parentheses. Because of the academic extremes in my class, I chose to have a two-tiered approach to spelling. Every week I would introduce a spelling concept either by presenting a "rule" and asking the students to provide examples, or by providing words and asking the children to name the "rule," for example words that ended in -ed, and we would explore how that concept played out with various words. For the stronger spellers I asked that they use these understanding in their writing. For the struggling students, we worked on reading and using sight words during daily guided reading lessons. I did however expect the students' final drafts to have corrected spelling, either with my help or the help of their peers.

Lastly, allow me to remind you that while conducting this research I was not working under the Common Core State Standards, as they did not exist. However, because of the influence that the Common Core is having on school systems across the country and the longevity that I feel they will have, I decided to include, in the retelling of our year, places and ways that I see the Common Core being relevant (see Table 2 in Appendix B). As a classroom teacher, I find it helpful to see how other teachers have been able to incorporate many of the same mandates I faced, while also trying something outside the norm with their students. I hope you will find the same.

## **Getting Started**

Before we began investigating our community, I wanted to get a sense of what my students thought about certain ideas. I wanted to activate and assess their prior knowledge before jumping into this thing that was academic service-learning, which would be our year.

### **Literacy Event One: Brainstorming**

It was Wednesday morning in August, during the second week of school, and we had just returned to the classroom from physical education in the gym. As the students entered the room I asked them to sit in the meeting area. Each student picked a spot and once everyone had settled down I began,

“As you know we’re going to be doing a project this year. Everyone is going to participate in this project, ‘cause this is going to count as our social studies, our science, we’re going to do math through this project, we’re going to do language arts, everything we do here at school will be done through this project. So everyone is going to participate. Yes, sir?”

“Even writing?” asked Carlos.

“Even writing,” I replied.

“YES!” Carlos replied, pumping his fist.

“And so,” I continued, “what we’re going to do today is start talking...we’re going to talk about this word ....”

“Community,” came the excited voices of children as I wrote the word “community” on a chart.

“Right, community. Raise your hand if you can tell me one thing about what you think the word community means.”

Before the sentence was completely out of my mouth, Arleen’s hand was waving frantically.

“It’s like, it’s a big place that like has stuff that you need. Like houses.”

Because I wanted to know what my third graders knew about the terms *community*, *service*, and *learning*, during three consecutive days we had class conversations and I documented on chart paper their thoughts for each of these words (see Tables 1-3 in Appendix C). When looking back at the data for these initial conversations around *community*, *service*, and *learning*, two things stood out to me. First is the seeming lack of connection to each of these terms, and the inability to delve into the words, and second is the children’s ability to use what in some school systems is called “accountable” talk without being taught prompts such as “I agree because....” or “I would like to add to....” (Michaels, O’Conner, Hall & Resnick, 2010).

Of the three terms, *community* seemed to bring the widest understanding and required the least amount of leading.

Right away the children began throwing out their ideas: “It’s like a neighborhood;” “It’s where people work;” “Houses, where people live;” “It’s like a government;” “School;” “Church;” “The shopping mall;” “Where people talk.” Though I did have to interject occasionally for clarification purposes—Me: “Where do people talk?” Terrance: “When they eating.” Me: “So can we call that ‘restaurants’?”—for the most part students responded with a flow of ideas.



Not only were there definitional words and phrases (where people live, where they work, has rules/laws), but the students also included communal words (church, meeting places, swimming pool, funerals, celebrations) surrounding the concept of community. While many of their ideas could be called “typical,” their responses demonstrated a solid understanding of this term, though they showed little evidence that the students saw themselves as members of different communities.

The *service* brainstorming session got off to a slower start. The students began by listing service industry jobs (e.g., restaurant, room service/hotel, hospital, police), then moved onto services utility companies provide (water, gas, electric, cable, phone). Because their ideas were so closely linked, I decided to categorize their responses as we went, hoping to spur more ideas. Though some ideas defied categorization (plants provide clean air, trees provide paper and pencils).

It was, however, during this conversation around *service*, with some nudging, that the students begin to make connections to themselves and their families.

About halfway through the 32-minute discussion, I was becoming frustrated. I kept hearing about hotels and room service and restaurants. I was hoping they would move beyond these ideas of service in which you pay for something, to services in the community that provided something to those in need. So I stopped and re-read what they had come up with, then restated the objective of this exercise, clarifying to include, “what service means, what service is, or other places that provide services. Things that you can think of in the community, that we talked about yesterday, that provide services for people.”

Here, Xander asked if they could look back over the *community* word web, prompting Lourdes to share how her family had to go to a church to get food. This connection, to something experienced personally, opened up their thinking to include organizations that help people who might not have homes or money, which then led to a brief discussion of food stamps and welfare, which again several of the students had personal experience with: “My mom used to go to the food bank before we got food stamps.” This connection was followed by charity—the idea of helping people, and donating—that took us back to organizations that people can give to or receive help from. During the second half of the brainstorming session the students were much more engaged, and this engagement led to connections to their own lives and experiences: “We lived in a shelter, but now we’re moving to a duplex,” and, “We go to Potter’s House [a thrift store near the school] to get our clothes.”

In my teaching experience, these aren’t experiences that most children are usually willing to discuss so openly in whole group conversations, particularly this early in the year, but this conversation allowed them to place themselves and their experiences in the conversation, bringing these ideas to the table, backing them up with evidence and speaking with authority. Responses like these indicated a deeper personal involvement with the term—that, as Freire (1994) suggested, my students were reading the world in an attempt to read the word.

On the third day, we focused our conversation around the idea of *learning*.

A few seconds after I wrote “learning” on the chart paper, Christian raised his hand and said, “You learn something new.”

A few more seconds passed when Ana added, “Something that you teaches, that you hadn’t know.” College, education, and a college degree all came next.

Lourdes then shared, “Something that you’re wanting to learn.”

After a few more seconds Arleen said, “Classroom.”

Followed by Terrance’s, “You get knowledge.”

Ana tentatively suggested, “When you get ready to work somewhere you learn something.”

“So you can learn new things at a job,” I clarified.

For the next four minutes or so students quickly added “Math.” “Science.” “Ohh, that’s a good one,” Christian complimented. “High School.” “Elementary.” “Reading.” “Clarke Central.” “Okay, that’s a high school,” I interjected. “Report card.” “Grades.” “Middle School.” “Social studies.” “Navy School.” “Writing.” “Spelling.” “Jobs. Like you have to learn how to do a job.” “Geometry.” “Dictionary.” “Tests.” “Business, like different companies. You know like learning companies. Like a tutoring company.” “When you a baby you learn how to walk.” “You’re not only learning from the teacher, but from each other.” “Bonuses. Like you have the money to pay for school. Like you pay for college to learn.” “You have to practice.” “Poetry.” “Homework.” “Study.”

Most of their responses to *learning* were fairly boilerplate and certainly all school associated and most could easily be placed in four categories: 1) classes associated with the school day; 2) the path of schooling; 3) assessments; and 4) general terms.

Apart from Xander’s statement that “When you a baby you learn to walk,” and Ana’s statement that “You can learn not only from the teacher, but from each other,” the

students again did not identify themselves as having any connection to *learning* like they did during the *service* conversation. Their responses seemed to focus more on outside forces.

While the terms *community*, *service*, and *learning* can be abstract, they are also words that I thought my third graders would have encountered enough that they would be able to move beyond the concrete. My sense is that my students could explain what happens at school—you learn new stuff, take tests, get grades—but would have difficulty ferreting out *what* the new information they were taught does for them.

Also missing from their understanding of learning were the ideas of learning as being social, reflecting on your learning and growing from it, as well as inquiry—grappling with new ideas and testing theories. Was this because they had never been asked to participate in their own learning? Rather, had they just heard, “You want to be able to read so you can pass the test,” which perpetuates the status quo (Shor, 1996)? It also suggests that I might have worded my question differently. What if instead of asking “What is community/ service/ learning?” I had asked them to talk about communities or learning or service and had them think about their own experiences and interactions with these words and ideas? Or if I had had them tell me stories from their lives outside of school, about where they live, who they live with and what people do to help each other?

As it stood, these conversations showed me that, at the beginning of the year, the students were accustomed to having school done to them, much like being the “object” rather than the “Subject” (Freire, 1994). They did little to verbalize their role as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, or reflectors during these initial conversations, though they were able to make some connections across the curriculum—

Arleen pointed out that we were brainstorming, like we had done the day before during Writer's Workshop—and bring a few of their own experiences to the table. If I wanted my students to embrace my multidimensional definition of literacy, this outsider view of themselves had to change. They were going to need to see themselves as agents of change.

The second thing that stood out to me, and boded well for the year, was the students' ability to have conversation-like exchanges. Often in schools, students are taught about “accountable talk” (Michaels, O'Conner, Hall & Resnick, 2010), and given sentence starters to help guide them through a conversation. This however was not the case with my students. They had not explicitly been taught prompts, yet were still able to have exchanges that were respectful and allowed everyone to be heard and have an opportunity to participate. Throughout all three brainstorming sessions the students' ideas complemented each other. In the conversation about service, when Arleen suggested “the police office,” Carlos jumped in and said that should be placed under the jobs, whereas Carla thought it should be linked with hospitals. When having the discussion about *learning* Lourdes said, “Math,” and Brelynn quickly added, “Science.”

Carlos then said, “Your brain.”

“What about your brain?” I asked.

“It helps you like, if you didn't have a brain you wouldn't remember anything or know,” he replied.

This exchange seemed to spur more ideas. “Thinking.” “Listen when someone is trying to teach you something.” “The teacher.” “Grades, like first,

second, ....” “Calendar.” “Fractions.” “Paying attention.” “That’s like listening,” Arleen pointed out.

“Respect your elders,” said Terrance.

“We’re not in church,” replied Xander, while several others mumbled questioning responses.

“Like, like when you learn how to respect people,” countered Terrance.

“Respect others,” said Christian.

“OK so that’s something you learn. Can we have that be ‘Learn how to act right?’” I asked.

“Yeah,” Terrance agreed.

“Like manners,” added Teresa.

While others might miss it, as an educator not only did I see Xander clearly paying attention to what was being said, but I saw Terrance take what might be considered by some as a challenge in stride and clarify his meaning, and Christian and Teresa begin to latch on to the idea. Such back-and-forth led me to conclude that the students were engaged in a productive conversation, by demonstrating such things as conversational turn taking, active listening, and thinking in a collaborative manner. Their confidence—the willingness to state their ideas, suggest how ideas should be categorized, to disagree with one another—points to the students taking ownership of the conversation, rather than submitting to the “Siberian Syndrome,” in which Shor (1996) indicated students often exile themselves, physically and/or mentally to “Siberia” and force the teacher to take charge in order for the conversation to go anywhere.

There were also a few atypical ideas. For example during the conversation around *learning* the following ideas were raised: “Respect your elders,” “Cooking,” “Bonuses...money to pay for college.” When Terrance said “Respect your elders,” several others mumbled questioningly, with Xander stating, “We’re not in church.” Instead of allowing the exchange to go on or asking a question that would have allowed the students to see that the conversation didn’t have to be school based, possibly leading to some richer exchanges, I said “Can we have that be ‘Learn how to act right?’” This spurred a few more like responses: “Manners” and “Learn how to be nice to others.” With each of these “off” responses I tried tying it back to the topic rather than letting it stand and allowing the students to make their own connections. In the moment, I was trying to get their ideas down on the chart in a succinct manner, but when listening to the conversation later, I was irked with myself for not having more confidence in the students to work these ideas through themselves.

While I called on students some of the time, by third grade they seemed to have adapted to the school standard of taking turns with very little talking over anyone else, and very few flat-out interruptions, even when someone else’s idea sparked one of their own. While for me, this was quite helpful on many levels, it is also mildly disturbing how quickly children adapt to school norms that teach us all how to be good little compliant workers. Additionally, there was some initial evidence of the children’s willingness to hold off on sharing a “new” idea as we all worked together to clarify an idea presented by someone else. For example, during the service conversation, when discussing what services the police office and the hospital provide, Arleen was willing to wait to put something new on the chart in order to help us think that through.

## Understandings From Brainstorming

The goal of the brainstorming activity was to gain a better understanding of what knowledge and ideas my students brought with them with regard to the three terms; *community*, *service*, and *learning*. What it provided me was a clearer picture of ideas they associated with the words, but did very little to push the students' thinking beyond relatively concrete examples of the words presented. Which is exactly what it was, words on chart paper. For example, they seemed to be focused on the what of learning more than learning as a process. This was informative to me as their teacher because it let me know I had to find ways for them to begin seeing learning as something we do, and how we do it. This need to make our interactions with learning explicit seems reminiscent of what Dewey (1990) was speaking to when he discussed a time before industrialism, when every member of a household and of society played a part and understood how those pieces fit together, versus the present when society has lost sight of the process. While I did verbally provide other prompts in hopes of broadening their thinking, by placing the word on a chart and asking them to share their ideas about it, they may have felt limited in how to respond. Rather if I had asked them for stories around those three words, I would have provided them with opportunities to share more of their personal experiences, to open up small moments like Arleen and Lourdes did when talking about *service*.

A second thing I have come to understand from doing these brainstorming sessions was how difficult it is to start sifting ideas and teaching through a critical filter. While the point of these sessions was to figure out what my students knew and believed about these three words, I was disappointed in their seeming lack of engagement with the words. There was very little of them in the responses. Was this separation of experience



and word a result of how the brainstorming words were introduced, or was it a result of the children having difficulty seeing their experiences with community, service, and learning as being valid ideas to bring to such an activity? This silence (Shor, 1993), mine and the children's, was certainly something I would need to find a way to address.

I chose these brainstorming sessions as a literacy event, because it provided a foundation from which I could help the students start to see education, particularly literacy, as something different. When I went back and listened to the recordings of these sessions, I was able to hear the engagement in their voices. How, even though it frustrated me sometimes, they were listening to each other and were able to add to the ideas of others, or allow what others said to spark new ideas in their thinking. Not only are these skills set forth by the CCSS, but the students were beginning to meet my definition of literacy as well.

### **Investigating the Community**

After assessing what my students thought about community, service, and learning and establishing a common understanding of these terms and a general idea of what it was we were about to embark upon, it was time to begin what I consider to be the first phase of academic service-learning, *Investigating the Community*. During this first part of academic service-learning, it is important that the students get to know the community and learn about it in order to identify an area of need. While investigating the community the students gather information through walks, interviews with community members, and exploring what organizations the community already has and what they do. The students then correlate acquired data to identify possible gaps in services to the community, classifying the information into broad categories. From this information two or three

possible areas of need are then further investigated through additional interviews and on-site visits. Finally students choose one area that they wish to address, through educating the public or direct action. Academically, students write letters, learn and practice interviewing, summarizing, and clarification skills. They can make connections across information learned as well as texts that they read, they can begin a non-fiction study to help them clarify and learn more about topics of interest, as well as learn about data collection and analysis, and number systems (story problems, grouping, classifying).

We began by taking neighborhood walks. I asked the students to take note of infrastructure—trash cans, sidewalks, crosswalks, for example—as well as available services, such as businesses, hospitals, grocery stores, and others they had mentioned in the brainstorming session.

### **Literacy Event Two: Interviews**

I was fortunate in that my husband was a journalist for a local newspaper and as such had working relationships with the town's mayor and commission. I was able to parlay these relationships into interviews with the mayor, Ms. Davids, and two commissioners, Ms. Kinsey and Mr. Low. I had explained to the class that we would be identifying a problem in the community—which I defined as the town, though in academic service-learning it can be as small as the classroom or as large as the world—and work to either educate the public or fix the problem. But before we could get started we had to get information, and who better to learn about our community from than those who dealt with the workings of our community every day. It was my hope that these interviews would provide us the common ground from which to better discuss our community. Looking back, it would have been more beneficial to have interviewed a

broader range of community leaders, but given the constraints of the school day and calendar, one uses what one has available.

So in early September the class began by generating questions that would allow us to discover what issues community leaders felt were in need of attention. We also included questions about successful initiatives they had seen in other communities, as well possible solutions to the problems they had identified (see Table 1 in Appendix D). Some of these questions required the interviewee to critique and reflect on our community and others they had visited. After generating questions on chart paper, then literally cutting them apart and reordering them, the class invited the Assistant Principal, Mr. Kline, to be interviewed as well.

As we settled in for our first interview, the students sat at their tables, pencils in hand, seemingly ready to write down every word that came out of Mr. Kline's mouth. Arleen led off the introduction,

“Good afternoon. Our class is going to do a project to help our community. We would like to know about some things that you think need to be fixed in our community.”

With no delay Christian began asking the first questions, which were followed by Mr. Kline's responses: What is your name? What is your job? How long have you lived in Athens? What communities do you belong to?

Carla's and Christian's voices overlapped for a second as he realized the next question was not his. Carla continued, “How does it feel to help in our community?”

Mr. Kline repeated the question, then responded, “I like helping in our community, because it’s my community too. So anything that I do to help it kinda helps out me and my wife and my family and all of the students that I like to see every day.”

After a few seconds, the next question was asked. And so the remainder of the interview went.

After Mr. Kline’s interview we gathered in the meeting area and I led a discussion about what the students thought of interviewing and asked for their ideas on how to make the remaining interviews better. Several students noticed that many of the questions resulted in the same or similar answers. Carla asked if it was okay to remove some questions. I turned the question back to the class, and the others thought that was a good idea, so questions were deleted (as noted in Table 1, Appendix D). When doling out question-asking assignments before our interview with the mayor, Carlos noted, “We don’t need to ask her the question about if she were mayor.” This work of revising their interview questions was a huge literacy move. Revision is hard, admitting to yourself that what you wrote and worked on could be better; it is something that I have seen students struggle with time and time again. Yet it is in the standards, “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach,” with even kindergarten students expected to “strengthen their writing” (CCSS, W5). Students used these revised protocols to interview the mayor and two commissioners. During the remainder of the interviews, with fewer repetitious questions, we got more in-depth answers.

Looking at the notes taken by the students, across the four interviews, many commonalities were observed. First, students demonstrated a firm ability to take notes without explicit teaching; second, they seemed stymied by having their own preplanned questions written on paper and therefore unable to deviate in order to gather more information; and finally, the students showed ownership of these interviews through a willingness to try and make the notes their own with unique interpretations.

While I could have espoused my thoughts on the problems in Athens, and told my students what problem they should address for their academic service-learning project I kept Freire's (2000) words in mind,

only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. ...thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world (emphasis in original, p. 58).

I hoped these interviews would do just that, provide a reality in which action could take place.

I provided each student with his or her own copy of the questionnaire so they could take notes. I felt it was important for everyone to actively participate, both through asking questions and taking notes, so I assigned each child a few questions that they were responsible for asking. I felt this would provide everyone a chance at public speaking and an opportunity to listen and take notes. However, I threw them in the deep end, so to speak, with note-taking during the interviews. I had not provided opportunities for them

to practice that skill prior to being expected to work with actual data that would help us focus our project. With that said, they did a good job even without explicit instruction. The student teacher, Ms. Stars, and I took notes as well during the interviews, and when comparing the students' notes with ours, there are not as many gaps as I expected given the difficulty of the task. This ability to take relatively accurate notes during these interviews was the biggest thing that stood out for me.

For example, during Mr. Kline's interview, he was asked to name three things that needed improvement. He replied,

“The big thing is to always do a better job of being respectful to each other. Being nice to each other. I think we could do a better job with keeping our community cleaner. You know, by recycling or not buying as much trash. Making sure we don't litter. The other thing I'd like to see is more people be able to walk around from their houses to places like to school. So they can always see each other when they walk around and talk and say hi. Not be in cars all the time.”

The students' notes captured the high points. On Ana's notes, for example, she wrote, “Always do a better job and cleaner an reclyeing people walking and talking with eachother,” while Arleen's notes said, “We need to be nice. We need to reycle. Walk around a lot.” I believe the quality of the notes may have been due, in part at least, to the ownership of the idea of wanting to figure out how to help our community. Even when the task might have been seen as being beyond the student's ability due to their status as an English Language Learner, as with Ana, the students still got the information down. This wasn't just an activity that would prepare them for the listening portion of the End-

of-Year test (though it did) that had no connection to life. It was life. They were being asked not only to listen to and take notes from an oral interview, they were then later asked to follow up by finding commonalities among the interviews. To recognize that the “world and action are intimately interdependent.” (Freire, 2000, p. 35)

The second thing that stood out was the students’ reluctance to deviate from the scripted questions, whether it was to clarify an answer or to ask a follow-up question to get more information. While this can be difficult for many adults, it was something that during conversations at meeting times and later with the discussion board (Literacy Event Six) I saw the students do with some degree of success. Looking at their notes, it is clear that they missed some information. For example, when Mayor Davids was asked, “Have you seen something in another community that would like to see in Athens?” she replied in the affirmative and started telling about two things she had seen on a visit to Salt Lake City, benches designed by artists and flags at crosswalks, and one thing from New York City, small public parks.

“[An] interesting thing they had there [Salt Lake City], when you tried to cross the street, sometimes it’s hard to cross the street. Especially if there are four lanes of cars, two driving this way and two driving this way, it’s hard to cross. They’ve got something there that’s really interesting, they have crosswalks and on each side of the street there’s a big sign like we do here, the diamond shaped sign that has the little man crossing the street so you’ll know it’s a crosswalk, but they have little metal canisters, like little baskets, that are attached to the sign and there are flags—a stick with a piece of orange fabric attached to the stick—so that when you cross the street you go to the crosswalk, get a flag out of the canister, and

when you're walking across the street you're carrying your little orange flag. So that when someone's coming across the street, they can see you from much farther away and they know you're in the crosswalk and then when you get to the other side there's a canister on that side, so you put your little flag in it and keep going. So it makes it safer to cross the street. I thought that was a great idea, but in Athens, all of the flags would be gone in about two seconds. You know. They would disappear immediately, so I don't know if we could do that here, but I wish we could."

From this response only four students noted something from this exchange about crosswalks in Salt Lake City. Teresa was one of these exceptions, jotting the following on her interview note paper: "Looking at our bus shelter. Caring orange flag. Publick parcks." The others wrote down things like; "The bus shalter a new binch. Parks. More bick lans." (Christian) and "More bike lanes." (Arleen). By contrast, all but two of students in the class got something down about bus benches and parks. Interestingly enough, the comment about bike lanes came up later in the interview and not during this response. Additionally no one stopped to question Mayor Davids as to why she thought Athenians would steal the flags, or why something else couldn't be done to make crossing the street safer. It made me wonder if they did not understand what she meant, if they could not think of how to ask "Why?" quickly enough, or if they inherently believed it impolite to question what an adult says in such a situation.

Was this inability to be spontaneous a flaw in the way the interviews were set up, or a result of me not being explicit about how interviews work, through direct instruction and watching examples of interviews? In an attempt to provide each student an



opportunity to ask a question, I never explained that they could interject if they needed something clarified or wanted to ask a follow-up question. This is a challenge even with practice, and in part I think I knew the task of note-taking would be difficult enough that they might not be able to both write and generate follow-up questions on the fly. In addition, I believed that, with everyone taking notes, the entire answer would have been recorded when all notes were combined. During the first two interviews, however, students didn't have, or feel they had, the chance to ask follow-up questions if they wanted to. Following subsequent interviews, with the interviewee still present, I began asking the class if they had thought of questions while the interview was taking place. Though questions were generated—"How much do you get paid?" (Teresa), "What did you want to be when you grew up?" (Ana)—they did not relate to questions asked during the interview. In some instances such as Christian's question, "Do you like being commissioner or do you want to be mayor?" the questions posed were something the interviewee had already stated during one of the initial questions.

Lastly, student ownership of the interviews, documented by a willingness to record responses as well as make the notes their own, stood out for me. Despite the fact that we hadn't practiced note-taking prior to the interviews, each student's notes did improve with each subsequent interview. This may have been due in part to an improvement in their skills, and the fact that the interviewees spoke more slowly and provided more in-depth responses, which allowed the students more time to comprehend and write down the answer. Looking across the students' notes from the interviews, I saw that several used some type of abbreviations to help get ideas down quickly. For example, Tara and Carla consistently used "com." for community and Carlos used "\$" to

mean money. Students also often interpreted responses and put ideas into their own words: “nice” for “respectful,” “religion” for “temple,” “need to give poor people money” for “reduce the number of poor people in Athens.” These changes in meaning fluctuated from minor to gross misrepresentation, though in the end each of these self-edits shows a critical understanding, on some level, of verbal information, and seem to point to a “shared ownership” (Dewey, 1997) of the process, as well as demonstrating flexibility with language that one might not see during a traditional writer’s workshop. While a few students got about 80 percent of the interviewees’ responses down, most were only able to write down the main idea. These missing details, however, often might have helped the students understand why the interviewee felt a topic was important.

Clearly, while there are many things I wish I had done differently to make these interviews more informative, again, even students who often struggled in class seemed to be engaged in this portion of the information-gathering phase. One example of this, which I saw with several students, was Brelynn. Brelynn was my one special education student at this point in the year, having been classified as Learning Disabled, though not using the traditional definition of an average to above average intelligence with a discrepancy in achievement. Her IQ score was in the low 70s and achievement scores twenty-plus points below. Brelynn struggled with almost everything. During the interview with Commissioner Kinsey, when asked, “What can our class do to help?” Ms. Kinsey replied,

“Well there are a lot of things, but I did think of a couple of things that children are especially good at. I thought about maybe you could have a garden that you took care of, you could grow some vegetables and maybe donate the food to

people who don't have enough. There are some nice areas around here that you could probably make into a garden. You could also, um, help older people in our community. You could visit them or help clean up their yard. Children are very good with older people, they make older people very happy and you could help out that. And you could help with picking up trash, you could decide that you're going to adopt a park or adopt a street and pick up trash to help keep the town clean so it's a nice place to be."

Brelynn wrote, "A gradn (garden) how (who) dot (don't) have no food[.]" Brelynn and several of the other struggling students appeared to have approached this assignment with an earnestness I have not witnessed very often in my career. This willingness to try, even when what you are being asked to do is difficult, seems to point at a level of learning, ownership, and interest that I had not seen too often before. And as Nieto (1999) stated, "teachers need to build on what the children *do have*, rather than lament about what they *do not have*" (emphasis in original, p. 7).

### **Understandings From Interviews**

My goal for interviewing the mayor and commissioners was two-fold. I wanted the children to have a better understanding of their community and its needs *and* I wanted them to start questioning why some things, like poverty and issues with the environment, kept being talked about. I'm not sure either really happened. As an educator who theoretically "gets" the importance of critical theory, critical pedagogy, social justice, and democracy, I find that incorporating this knowledge into actual teaching practices is difficult work (see Wade, 2007). I wanted my students and myself to walk away from this year-long experience as "better" people.

The first goal of the interviews—getting to know their community—was something I knew third graders were capable of grasping, though our interview questions did not get at this in a deep way. I could have added my ideas to the interview questions, but at the same time I wanted this deeper understanding of our community to be more organic. I have come to realize however that this doesn't “just happen”; questioning for deeper understanding, like most things in education, has to be scaffolded (see Fox, 2010). But a continuing dilemma for me is how to do that while staying true to critical theory.

My second goal—questioning why some themes surfaced repeatedly—was a much loftier goal for third graders. And for myself as it turned out. Again taking what I understood theoretically and applying it is much more difficult than one might presume. A large part of that transfer from theory to practice was my insecurity in talking about poverty with children who were living in it, knowingly or not. How do you enter that conversation in a meaningful, yet respectful way? Unfortunately, I don't believe there is a “right” answer. I have come to understand, through trial and error, that it requires creating a community in which there is a sense of security and being willing to put an idea out there and see what happens. This requires faith in what you are doing. I think for myself, and probably many, it also requires baby steps rather than a giant leap. Looking back, I see that I could have used the experiences they brought up during the conversation around *service* as a starting point, or asked them to write about their own experiences. As Freire (2000) said, “students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to the challenge” (p. 62). These openings could have led to a great conversation of why society seemed to be doing little to bridge the

economic gap between the haves and the have-nots, yet gives lip service to the issue of poverty. Instead I didn't push them to think about the underlying causes of the issues brought out during the interviews, rather we just accepted that these were problems in our town and grabbed on to one.

As a literacy event, the interviews provided a basis for beginning to identify a problem in our community. The interviews also provided the children opportunities to engage in every aspect of literacy as identified in standards—reading, writing, speaking and listening. But they did it in such a way that the smaller skills the students were achieving, like revising, meant something beyond a standard writer's workshop lesson, which might have a teaching point stressing that good writers reread to make sure their writing make sense. By testing out the interview questions on Mr. Kline, then reviewing their notes, they saw and came up with ways to make the questions less repetitious and were therefore able to obtain more in-depth answers from the remaining interviewees. These revisions, for example, then became more about reflecting on what they had come up with, and more about deepening their thinking and understanding in a critical way, rather than being just about “develop[ing] and strengthen[ing] writing” (CCSS, W5).

A couple of weeks later, using student notes taken during these fact-finding interviews, I led the class in a categorizing lesson, in order to pick out common themes from the interviews and place them within larger categories based on these commonalities. The students were asked to recall the highlights of how we could help in order to focus on possible areas for the project. The students were able to recall many of the major points mentioned in the interviews, including: “We need a cleaner community;” “We need to recycle more;” “They also said to help poor people;” “Don't

waste electricity;” “She said that when you brush your teeth, you should turn the water off;” “She said not driving cars as much;” “Plant a garden;” “Help old people;” and “To help people stay in school.” From this, the following broad themes and potential areas in which we could focus our project were identified: clean-up/beautification, helping the poor and elderly, and conservation. With so much information, and the delay between the interviews and our follow-up conversation, I was impressed with their recall. As I noted in my journal, “Dag they remembered a lot. I totally thought I was going to have to replay the interviews, clearly not the case” (Teacher’s Journal, Sept. 12). Next the students voted on their preference. Helping the poor and elderly received the most votes.

Using a resource established through the University-School Partnership, I contacted Ms. Able, Marketing and Communications Director for Athens Housing Authority, and invited her in for an interview. During this interview she provided information about what the Housing Authority does and whom it serves. While she was telling the class about the different housing options provided by the Authority, the students were introduced to Denney Tower. Denney Tower is a high-rise apartment building just north of downtown that houses economically disadvantaged residents over the age of 65. For the students this was ideal—a setting that encompassed both of their interests, the elderly and the poor.

### **Literacy Event Three: Reflections**

After learning about Denney Tower and making the decision to go meet the residents, the students and I reflected on what we wanted to do. It was October and while they had learned a lot about the needs of the town and picked a group they wanted to work with, I wanted them to think about what it was we could do to learn about working

with this community. I called the class to the meeting area and we talked briefly about what a reflection was and where else they had heard it used—“Like a place to write your thoughts,” “A mirror, you see yourself, what you look like,” “A diary,” and “In a pond or a puddle. Like that story where the dog sees its reflection and thinks its bone is gonna be taken (the student was referring to the fable *The Dog and its Reflection*).” The students not only stated the obvious (e.g., a mirror), they also connected it to personal writing and thinking (e.g., a diary), and also made a connection to a piece of literature they had read.

We did not study reflections as a writing genre nor did I even give specifics of what I wanted them to include in this first reflection. These were the first of many reflections and I wanted to see what they would do on their own. According to Freire (2000), “action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection” (p. 48). These first reflections, which lacked critical thought, were a bust. Hence, the things that stood out were the things I did wrong, namely the bad timing and the lack of focus, as they are not so much reflections with thoughtful responses and reasoning as they are superficial lists of things the children thought they should do while at Denney Tower.

The class wrote independently for about fifteen minutes. Some of the students wrote in prose:

“I think we go to Denny tower, we can talk to them & play bingo with them. Ms. Able also said she was going to put the picture of us on the wall” (Arleen);  
and

“We don’t only have to ask what there favorites is we can talk with them about how are doing and all that stuff. We can tell them about us. Oh and how was life when there life like there childhood” (Ana),

while others chose a list format:

“Get the people’s best resipiys (recipes). Help them get a beter kichin. Give them can’s. Talk to them and play game’s with them. Write to them” (Teresa) and “play bingo. saving money. Giving the people can food. Getting to met them” (Tara).

All of the reflections did include the residents of Denney Tower in some way, though there was a mix of ideas for interacting with the residents, like Ana’s suggestion that we “can talk with them about how they are doing...” and quick fix suggestions like “Donate the money. Give the can’s” without the residents’ involvement. And the majority of the students included something about getting to know the residents: “to read to the elderly ask what are their favorite songs ask what are their favorite game” (Xander).

I had some misgivings,

I can’t believe they have chosen the elderly. I am so not looking forward to this. Stop. They are excited, you should be excited too. Planting a community garden would be nice. That way it could be come a legacy project and other classes could continue the relationship with Denney Tower after this year is over (Teacher Journal, Oct. 20).

Reflections, at their base, are about feelings, reactions to things, what you are coming to understand. With this connection to a deeper self, Freire’s (2000) words come alive: “reflection—true reflection—leads to action” (p. 48). First, I should have asked the



students to reflect on why they wanted to work with the elderly before asking Ms. Able to come and speak with them. This would have provided them a chance to think and question why the mayor and commissioners had suggested that they work with the elderly. By waiting to have them reflect, I took away some of their ability to create their own plan of action. As a result of waiting and asking them to write about what we could do at Denney Tower, many of the ideas presented by Ms. Able—celebrating birthdays, playing games and singing with the residents, cooking with them in the common kitchen—are reiterated in the children’s writing. This adopting of ideas from others, particularly when asked to write something that lacks focus, is not unusual in elementary students. Often, after using my own writing to demonstrate a teaching point, I have found my ideas retold in the students’ stories, so it did not surprise me that there were few novel ideas in their reflections. This delay in asking them to reflect certainly took away the possibility that they might think of something out of the ordinary or wonder why it had been suggested that we should be working with the elderly, which again is what reflections are really about, coming to terms with one’s own thinking and understanding. Also, looking back I wish I had provided the students an opportunity to interview people from other organizations that worked with the elderly, so they could have had a wider understanding of what the community was or wasn’t doing to help with a problem identified by elected officials.

Secondly, for this first reflection I think it would have been better to have provided a specific question to focus on, such as, “How do you feel about the possibility of working with the elderly at Denney Tower?” Because I did not provide a focus that could lead to critical reflections, these reflections demonstrate a mix of perpetuating

Freire's (1994) idea of the oppressor's role of doing *to* the residents—for example Teresa's "Help them get a beter kichin. Give the can's"—versus working alongside the oppressed and doing *with* the residents—"We could plant a small garden. Maybe even play bingo or take walks and ask would they like to do" (Carlos). This is something I should have been more cognizant of as we moved on, as one of the main points of academic service-learning (Giles & Eyler, 1998), critical theory (Freire, 1994), and democratic education (Dewey, 1997) is to make connections with the community through open dialogue, which allows us to work with community members, rather than attempting to fix a perceived problem.

Reflection, in addition to being a vital piece of academic service-learning, is also included in the CCSS as a writing standard, "write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences" (CCSS, W10). In these reflections, I was also able learn a little about how the children used the conventions of writing in a less structured format. Some, like Arleen's, "talk to them & play bingo with them," seemed to have a sense of purpose and an understanding of the conventions of writing, while others, like Tara, "saveing money. Giving the people can food," did not appear to demonstrate either. With this information I was then better able to plan whole class and small group teaching points for writing so that I could push the students' understanding of how language can be used.

### **Understandings From Reflections**

My reason for asking the students to write reflections was that I felt it was important for them to start thinking about what they were doing and why. I had hoped that these reflections would offer them a chance to ask questions and share their thoughts

and feelings about what we were doing—a place to have a conversation with themselves that would strengthen their learning (Engin, 2011). While later reflections became more personal, they never really reached the level that I had hoped for. How I thought the children would be able to this without some direct instruction or guidance, at least in the beginning, I don't know. Even now, with several more years' teaching experience to draw on, I am still not sure the best way to teach how to write critical reflections. Yet I feel its importance to the process is so imperative I would never leave it out.

The key role that student reflections played in our learning process is the main reason I included these reflections as a literacy event. These excerpts of student reflections provided an opportunity to see the children's writing and thinking in a form that is not normally associated with academics in elementary classrooms. While the then GA QCC and the present CCSS both include reflections as a goal for elementary learners, neither set of standards focuses on using reflections for furthering understanding of events, outside of thinking about specific texts or writing for a common purpose over time. Neither of these goals stress the importance of reflections as a way of expanding one's critical thinking on a topic or around an idea. This, I believe, is in part the trouble with my students' reflections. They remained superficial in their thinking, due to a lack of focus and guidance from me, and therefore the reflections did not lead the children to question why, for example, poverty was an issue in Athens.

### **Develop a Plan**

Once the class decided to pursue a project involving Denney Tower, we moved to the second stage of the project: *Developing a Plan*. During this phase of academic service-learning, students work together with affected community members to develop a

plan to either educate the public on a community problem, along with potential solutions, or address a community problem through direct action. This part of a project allows for academic learning about problem and solution, writing how-to's, gathering oral histories, and creating timelines.

I could tell that the students, and myself at times, couldn't see how this was going to play out. It was, after all, the beginning of November and we seemed terribly behind, as reflected in my journal: I can't believe it's already November. We haven't even made it over to Denney Tower yet. What if there isn't something they need? Am I just furthering the "throw money at the problem" way of "helping"? (Teacher Journal, Nov. 3).

While I should have had more faith that it would all work out, in my pseudo-what-am-I-doing panic, I decided to have my students look online for other service-learning ideas and to see what other elementary kids had done in their communities. In one of these conversations about projects undertaken by students around the U.S., we learned about The Empty Bowls Project (2006):

The basic premise is simple: Potters and other craftspeople, educators and others work with the community to create handcrafted bowls. Guests are invited to a simple meal of soup and bread. In exchange for a cash donation, guests are asked to keep a bowl as a reminder of all the empty bowls in the world. The money raised is donated to an organization working to end hunger and food insecurity.

In looking back, showing this website was flawed practice on my part. I should not have asked them to think about ideas before we met the residents. Though in my defense, I was feeling the pressure of Thanksgiving and Winter Break quickly

approaching and having “done nothing.” The students found the Empty Bowls idea plausible and they latched on. They could make bowls and host a soup dinner to raise money for Denney Tower, as these reflections show, “We can ask them what their favorite soup is and make a cookbook. Then we’re going to have a soup dinner. We’ll make bowls for the dinner all by ourselves, almost” (Carla); and “We can collect money and give them money to buy what they want to get” (Ana).

#### **Literacy Event Four: Letter to Residents**

It was decided that the first step should be to visit Denney Tower and meet the residents to determine their needs. As a homework assignment, each student was asked to draft a letter introducing ourselves and summarizing what led us to this point:

“Hi my name is Teresa and I am 8 years old and I am in Ms. Aaron’s 3 grade class and we are planning doing a project to help you.... But before we do that we are going to intradose (introduce) are self to you. So when we intradose are selfs we will ask you questions and we will tell you more about our project. So after that we are going to get our stuf redy for the project. So once we do that we are going to play bigo and then we will have another intodocion. So then we will keep on planning stuf to do with you;”

“We are doing a service learning project. We are coming to interview you this month. We are doing this because we want to no about the elderly health. We’re planning to have a diner in March. Will you participate with us?”  
(Christian);

“We are having a commity project called Service Learning. The reason we are doing this is because we want to show everybody how the elderly people need help. So we are asking you if you can help us with the project.” (Arleen); and,

“We have heard so much about you we are very excitit of meeting. in March we are going to make Bolws for all of you and put soup in it.” (Terrance).

Using their drafts I then compiled a letter, using phrases from their writing, requesting a visit. The letter, below, explained to the residents who we were, how we came to learn about Denney Tower, and what we would like to do.

“Dear Mr. Wilks and Denney Tower Residents,

Our third grade class is doing an Academic Service-learning project to help our community. After talking with Mayor Davids, and Commissioners Kinsey and Low, we decided to do a project with the elderly. We also talked to Ms. Able at the Athens Housing Authority and she told us about Denney Tower.

We will be making bowls here at school and decorating them. Then we will have a soup dinner here at Chase Street. People will be able to buy the bowls and get some soup. We really hope you all can come. We will put all of the recipes together to make a big Soup Cookbook and sell those also.

Would you like to participate? We have been planning things we can do with you in Denney Tower. We were thinking that we would have a soup dinner to raise money for something you all need at Denney Tower. The way we would want you to help us is by allowing us to interview you about growing up, your likes and dislikes, and about your school experiences. Also, we would like to

collect your favorite soup recipes. We would like to play BINGO and sing songs with you too.

We would like to come and visit you in December or early January. The sooner the better! We are excited about meeting you and look forward to you being there. Please let us know when it will be good for you.

Mrs. Aaron's Third Grade Class"

With this letter writing assignment, one thing that stands out was, while it was clear that the students understood what we were doing, they were missing how to communicate it so that others could also get a clear picture, which is a CCSS writing goal. The second notable point was my own inability to step back and allow the students to work together to compile a finished letter.

To help facilitate the process, I asked the children to write a letter at home and bring it back in. The final compilation letter was literally taken straight from the students' own draft letters minus spelling and grammatical errors. It is clear in the letters that were turned in that most of the students knew that they should introduce themselves (e.g., "My name is Teresa, I am in Ms. Aarons's 3 grade class"). They also seemed to have a good sense of what had been done to this point, (e.g., Ana: "We are working on a project it is called empty bowls we are gone a come to inerview you if you whant to be interviewed"), and what they saw as the next steps, (e.g., Teresa: "So then we will keep on planning stuf to do with you"). But overall they didn't quite know how to clearly communicate what we were hoping to do when we went to Denney Tower, and their ideas lacked focus,

“Our art teacher Mrs. Dawe is gone a help us with the bowls, and Mrs. Robars our music teacher is gone a help us wit songs we are gone a sing to the elderly people after that we are gone a have a dinner we are gone a sell bowls and earn money and give it to Denny Tower” (Ana).

What I saw was that several of the students’ letters, like Ana’s, referred to “the residents” and “the elderly people” rather than realizing the audience of the letter and referring to them as “you.” This distancing places the residents in the position of Other, instead of as equal participants in this project. This distancing also makes me question how well I had done explaining that our “*educational projects*, which should be carried out *with* the oppressed in the process of organizing them” (emphasis in original, Freire, 2000, p. 36) rather than *to* them. Though in all fairness, it could be as simple as they were having trouble shifting from talking about the residents, whom we had yet to put a face and name to, to the actual people who lived at Denney Tower.

While the final letter clearly is something that third graders wrote, I didn’t include the students in the compiling of the final letter. I didn’t honor what bell hooks (1994) called “educating as the practice of freedom.” How was I supposed to encourage critical readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers if I wasn’t willing to step back and let it get a little messy? I had to ask myself, was I “present[ing] the material to the students for their consideration, and re-consider[ing] [my] earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students” (Freire, 2000, p. 62), or was I “utiliz[ing] the banking method as an interim measure, justified on grounds of expediency, with the intention of later behaving in a genuinely revolutionary fashion” (Freire, 2000, p. 67). Even if I felt we didn’t have the



time, I could have, at the least, asked them to use sentences and ideas that I thought were pertinent and compelling, and had pulled out of their letters ahead of time, and had them work together to put the letter in order. Instead I did it myself and showed it to them after it was done, feeding them the information, and while one sentence was moved at their suggestion and they wrote the final three sentences together, they didn't get the experience of identifying the most important information and thinking about order, nor were they allowed to be the writers and editors that they are.

Furthermore, for the three students who failed to do the homework, their ideas weren't reflected in the final letter. Reflecting on it now, I should have provided an opportunity for them to write their letter in class or at the very least tell me one important thing they would like the residents to know, to practice the "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1988). Not only would this have allowed all voices to be represented, it would have also added to the feeling of ownership, that their ideas were important. After all, why hadn't they done the work at home? Was it too hard, did they not understand, was there not a quiet space for them to do it?

### **Understandings From the Letter to Residents**

When I set out the assignment of writing a letter to the residents of Denney Tower, I did so with the goal of teaching the students about letter writing, which in my opinion is not much different than laying out an argument in an informational piece of writing. Therefore, I explicitly taught the parts and the format for a letter before asking them to write one at home. After reading what they had written, I had a better understanding of both my students' understanding of what we were doing and their ability to lay it out in writing. It was not that the children didn't understand what we

were engaged in, rather I am not sure they had ever been asked to write sequentially about real events nor to formulate an argument for why an idea was important.

I have come to understand that students need more opportunities to write in ways that require them to formalize their thinking and understanding of a topic. At the time this research was done, I was required to have only one piece of informational writing in the portfolios the school system asked us to maintain for each child. My school asked that third graders be taught two non-fiction units, an “All About” unit and a “How-to” unit in writing. These were two units that could easily fit into an academic service-learning project, so that was not a problem. Over the course of ten months, however, two four to six-week units is not enough to provide students with multiple chances to develop understandings of this very difficult genre of writing.

An increased emphasis on expressing understandings in writing is evident in the CCSS, which require that two-thirds of students’ writing be spent writing arguments and informational/explanatory texts (2010). Additionally the Speaking and Listening standards call for students to orally present information in a clearly laid out manner. By asking teachers to have the children do more writing that is explanatory and develops arguments over the course of a year, students will hopefully become more adept at laying out facts or ideas and providing evidence to back up their thinking. This type of argument based on evidence is on some level the same type of discourse, listening to views and opinions that differ from your own, that Dewey (1944) calls for in educating for a democracy.

Once we received a reply, a walking field trip was planned, permission slips were signed and digital cameras were distributed. Our initial visit to Denney Tower was

intended to familiarize ourselves with the project setting and provide us a chance to meet some of the people we would be working with. This being our first trip, we were all excited and nervous. During this visit to Denney Tower, Mr. Wilks, the super, took the class on a tour from lobby to rooftop. We learned that residents lived in efficiencies or one-bedrooms, and used a small common kitchen in the lobby, as personal microwaves and hotplates were not allowed. We were shown a conference room, which doubled as a library, and learned about scheduled resident events. We were also shown around the grounds—two courtyards with planting beds surrounding them, both equipped with barbecue grills.

When we returned to our class, we took time to reflect on this first trip and then had a conversation that was lively and informative. The discussion led off with the children recounting many of the things they had seen walking to and from Denney Tower. This was true of their reflections as well. This was the first time many of the students had seen these places without a vehicle window in front of them.

While they had been told by Ms. Able prior to going that there was a small kitchen at Denney Tower, the students were aghast that the residents had to share such a small space and talk began immediately of raising money to build a new, bigger kitchen. While during conversations like this I tried to step back—both in order to allow the students a chance to talk through their ideas without feeling they had to agree with me, and to allow, more generally, for authentic dialogue—I stepped in and asked, “Who’s going to build this kitchen?” I also suggested we investigate the cost of items like stoves and refrigerators. We then had a discussion about feasibility and whether the residents also thought the small kitchen was a problem. While I was truly excited that they were so

concerned about the residents' comfort, I was also desperately trying to shift their thinking away from something so large and complex. It was decided that we would take another trip to Denney Tower and interview the residents about themselves and what they felt about the needs of their living community.

### **Literacy Event Five: Interviewing Residents and Reflections**

Again, like the process we used to write the interview questions for those initial interviews with the mayor and commissioners, the students generated questions that would allow them to get to know their interviewees and discern what each resident found lacking at Denney Tower. These questions too were literally cut apart, reorganized, and put back together in a logical order (see Table 1 in Appendix D). We arranged for a second trip to Denney Tower, to occur approximately one month after the initial visit. During the second visit, I asked heterogeneous groups to work together to meet and interview a resident or residents. These groupings allowed all students to participate with the support of their classmates. When we got there, only a handful of residents came down. Mr. Asa, Mr. Junior, Ms. Annie, and Ms. Lavern said they would be able to stay for the duration, so these were the residents the students interviewed. Sitting in Denney Tower's common area, around tables, they learned that Ms. Annie had to "baby sit not go outside without mom and dad [and] milk cow" (Christian) when she was their age; Mr. Asa liked to "play in field" (Teresa); Ms. Lavern's favorite teacher was "Miss Antable 5<sup>th</sup> grade" (Sascha); and that Mr. Junior had grown up and gone to school in the "blue righe mountens" (Ana). After the students interviewed and ate lunch with the residents, it was time to walk the one mile back to school.

The thing that stood out to me with these interviews was the marked improvement in their note-taking abilities. Compared to the interviews of the mayor and commissioners, the information gleaned from these interviews was phenomenal. Looking across the interview sheets, even the students who struggled during those first interviews got most of the information down during their talks with Denney Tower residents. For example, Mr. Junior was asked, “What was school like when you were a kid?” Ana, one student who was able to get the main idea of those initial interviews, but rarely got anything beyond that, wrote, “He had school but he had stay home and work” to paraphrase Mr. Junior’s response: “I liked school a lot, but I couldn’t go very much. We was poor and I had to stay home to work on the farm. We all had to work.” Many of the others interviewing Mr. Junior got either “I liked school” or “no school.” Sascha is another example. Her family had moved from Germany in October and she was, understandably, still struggling with the English language. When her group asked Ms. Lavern about her childhood, Sascha wrote “Hit in the eye with a softbl” leaving out only what Ms. Lavern had added about using a piece of meat to bring down the swelling. In part I feel this increased accuracy in note-taking was due to the closed-ended nature of questions asked. However, I have to believe it also had to do with being in small groups and talking about things that the children had at least some experience with themselves—school, growing up, playing games. As Dewey (1997) stated, “we are led to share vicariously in past human experience, thus widening and enriching the experience of the present” (p. 38). This marked improvement in note-taking seems to have had an impact on their reflections as well.

After that second successful afternoon at Denney Tower, the class walked back to school, and once settled in, we took some time to reflect on the interview process and the residents we had just met.

“I though Denney Tower was great becaus I got to enterview a man called Junier. He also tould me about when he was little. Like when he was little he lived on a farm up in the mountains. Also when he was little he went to school until he was in seventh grade. But then he had to qiet because he had to help his family....I hope we can go back agin” (Teresa);

Ana who also interviewed Junior wrote this,

“We went to Denny Tower we had to walk and Mrs. Aaron gave us some a camera that for children and we got to take pictures. So me Terrance Teresa and Carla were asking some question and it was a elderly person his name was Junior and he grow up in a farm so Terrance and Junior were like budys and we took some pictures with Junior after that we went and got a snack it was really fun it was time to leave so we said good bye I can’t wait tell we come back agin to Denny Tower and we are going to do fun thing agin to the elderly people....”

Both of these reflections are more in tune with what you hope to see in a reflection: emotional connections. Additionally, they are able to restate some of the information gleaned during the interview, which connects to the Listening and Speaking standards set forth in the CCSS.

Arleen’s and Christian’s reflections were a bit more subdued retelling the sequence of events, in contrast to the emotional connection evident in Teresa’s and Ana’s reflections.

“Today me and my class went to Denney Tower. We didn’t take a bus or anything like that, we just walked there. When we got there, there were 3 groups, 1: Mr. Asa with...Brelynn, Xander, Tara, & me, Sascha, Lourdes, & Christian with Ms. Lavarn & Ms. Annie, & Teresa, Carla, Terrance, & Ana with Jr. Then we had snack. And Last, we walked back to school.” (Arleen)

and

“We went to Denny Tower. We interview them, we took pictures with them. The Denny Tower residents gave us snacks. I can’t wait to go back.” (Christian).

Evident in the reflections was the personal connection that many of the children made with their respective interviewees. Upon reading these reflections, I was able to point to a concrete example of what Freire (2000) meant when he stated, “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 73). While some of the reflections, like Christian’s and Arleen’s, gave a rundown of the day, with little in-depth thought or feelings, most of them show a connection with the residents: “I really liked working with elderly people its like me talking to my grandma” (Carla); “I thought Denney Tower was great because I got to interview a man called Junier” (Teresa); “I won’t to go back it was fun it was a man i was talking to he was very nice and i wood like to go back” (Tara); and “It was great talking to J.R and I are best friends now.” (Terrance).

These personal connections point to the “emancipatory imperatives of self-empowerment and social transformation” that McLaren (2003, p. 189) stated is necessary for critical pedagogy. The children were moving beyond viewing the world as an individual to seeing it, and themselves in it, as a larger whole. Our academic service-

learning project was no longer this anonymous thing, we now had names and faces and oral histories to connect to.

The last thing that stood out from this trip was our continued myopic view of a genuine need. The next day, while the latest trip was still fresh in the students' minds, we reviewed what we had learned about the residents, their experiences growing up, and what they felt they needed at Denney Tower. While we had asked the residents what they would like to do to make the world beautiful, we didn't take their answers to that question into consideration when thinking about what we could do. Yet another result of jumping the gun and introducing project ideas before spending time with the community and finding out their interest and needs, we lost the ability to "believe that communities can solve their problems" (Giles & Eyler, 1998, p. 66). Instead of seeing that two had suggested gardening and one had suggested picking up garbage, we focused just on their answer to "What are some things you need here at Denney Tower?"—the need for a bigger lending library. While helping them build a larger lending library was certainly something we could help with, it didn't involve the residents in the same way that clean-up and beautification could have. As it turned out, none of the residents interviewed seemed to mind the small common kitchen, thank goodness.

### **Understandings From Interviews With Residents**

We had spent a lot of time preparing for working in the community, though none of it as critically as I had initially planned or would have liked. In planning for the interviews with the residents, my goal was two-fold. I wanted to make sure the children walked away not only with a recognition of a focused need, but with an idea of who the



people we visited were and a common experience that would allow the children and the Denney Tower residents to form friendships. This, I realize now, was a tall order.

After the interviews, the reflections, and the class conversation we all agreed to help the Denney Tower residents build a bigger lending library with the money raised from the soup dinner. We had identified our “need,” though it was not one that required working with the residents interactively. Again my role as the teacher responsible for the required curriculum led me to push things along and prevented us from even richer experiences working with Mr. Asa, Ms. Annie, Ms. Lavern, Mr. Junior, and the other residents.

While I do believe, from reading their reflections, that the children did begin to connect with the residents on a personal level, I have come to understand the need to spend more time in and with the chosen community when undertaking academic service-learning projects. These interviews, and the subsequent reflections, allowed the children to listen to stories about other people’s childhoods and lives and to process what they heard in writing. It is this kind of interaction that I think make academic service-learning such a rich and worthwhile pursuit and in my mind clearly meets the kind of dialogue that Dewey (1944) stated needs to happen in order to have a true democracy. For many, the interviews were the first time they had been asked to look beyond themselves and their experiences, while they also provided an opportunity to find similarities between their own interests and experiences and those of the elderly residents of Denney Tower. Stepping outside the familiar and safe is also an important part of academic service-learning.

As a literacy event, the interviews marked our first trip into the field. As is evidenced by some of the reflections, the physical act of walking to Denney Tower made as big an impact on the children as the interviews. Because we had access to cameras, the students were able to document the trip and create a sort of photo essay of going to Denney Tower, which they later used in a PowerPoint presentation that was shown at the soup dinner. Unlike the interviews with the mayor and commissioners, these interviews also allowed the children to practice public speaking in a more informal atmosphere. From walking around and listening to their discussions, I know that this relaxed feel did not translate to casual interactions, but did provide opportunities for students to ask that part of an answer be repeated or to make connections to their own similar experiences after the initial question had been answered. This ability to adapt speech to a given context is addressed as a Common Core Speaking and Listening standard.

### **Enact a Plan**

During this final phase of academic service-learning: *Enacting a Plan*, students should work alongside community members to implement their plan. Academically, students can write ABC books, poetry or songs, work on summarizing, and create presentations to demonstrate what they have done. We had picked a community to work with: Denney Tower residents. We had decided on a plan and identified a need based on a conversation with the residents: host a soup dinner to raise money to expand the Denney Tower lending library. Now it was time to make it happen.

### **Literacy Event Six: Discussion Board**

All along, other teachers—art, music, library, kindergarten—had followed what the class was doing. With the growing use of technology in our school (every classroom

had a SmartBoard and each grade had a laptop cart, and in the district every teacher was given a laptop and they were in the process of outfitting each class with a SmartBoard), I decided that the students should have a venue through which they could write about their experiences along the way, while also getting feedback from people not directly related to the class, in order to encourage them to keep audience in mind. I felt a blog, with its ability to accept input from both the class writers and comments from outsiders, would be ideal. However, because of a variety of factors, it needed to be private. So after talking with the technology department of the school system, it was decided that a discussion board that required a log-in would be best.

During “down” times, such as while I was working with a guided reading group or after they had completed their work and others were still working, the students would grab a computer off of the laptop cart, find a comfy spot in the room where they weren’t bothering others, and log on to the discussion board. The following is a quick rundown of the basics. The discussion board was started at the end of January and lasted through late March, with 23 unique conversation starters and approximately 150 total entries/responses. The entries ranged from an idea posted with no replies to entry posts with ten or more replies. The average post elicited four to six replies.

Every student who was part of the class, at the time the discussion board was in operation, participated in it. In all, nine students had five or more postings, while only two (Brelynn and Lourdes, who tended to struggle the most academically) posted less than three times. Additionally all but these same two initiated at least one post. Four outside adults also participated with varying degrees of involvement. Two of these adult

participants were involved in one conversation each, while the other two participated in four different conversation strands.

I knew, as Barton and Hamilton (1998) stated that “a first step in reconceptualizing literacy is to accept the multiple functions literacy may serve in a given activity, where it can replace spoken language, make communication possible, solve a practical problem or act as a memory aid—in some cases, all at the same time” (p. 11). I hoped that the discussion board would help us to do just that, and it did to a point. Three themes that I gleaned from the discussion board data were the level of participation, the kinds of conversations being had, and the level of respect shown in the exchanges.

Within the discussion board there were both exchanges between students and between students and adults, again with everyone participating. For example, in one of the early conversations about what jobs we should have at the soup dinner, Christian wrote, “I can be the person who give the people their ticket after they pay. Carla and Teresa can be the shef (chef). Everbody els can be the waiter.” Ms. Ball, the school counselor, replied with a question asking how many people are in our class and if we would need a lot of waiters. Christian and Ms. Ball continued this strand of the conversation over the course of several exchanges.

Christian: It depends how many people are comeing

Ms. Ball: But how many people are in YOUR class?

Christian: 13 &why

Ms. Ball: I asked about how many people were in your class because in your initial message, you stated that everyone else could be waiters. I asked how many people were in your class to see exactly how many waiters and waitresses you

were planning on having and if that would be too many or not enough. Thank you for answering my question. So with that being said, do you feel that 10 waiters and waitresses would be enough or too many? Since you will be giving out tickets and Carla and Teresa were going to be chefs.

Christian: I think its going to be enough.

At the same time as this conversation between Ms. Ball and Christian, others were responding to Christian's initial post:

Brelynn: That will be a great idea. Cause we be the waiters.

Arleen: I don't think the kids should cook the food I think adults should cook the food.

Ana: Why do two people have to be the shefs and the other person have to be waiters? Can't you let about 5 people be the shefs and the other 8 people be the waiters?

A few days later Teresa responded, "I think deciding who is going to be what is going to be hard. Because what if somebody wants to do something that somebody elys is doing? then they will be sad. But I hope they will get over it."

A discussion board is much like passing notes to each other, with the added benefit of being able to keep track of past exchanges. Many of the posts were similar to this exchange about the number of chefs and the number of waiters, in that an idea was posted and others provided their opinions with little regard to adding on to or questioning what others were writing. There were, however, other posts between students that did have more of an exchange of ideas. For example:

Terrance: When the costermers first come in They maby can Pay us Then we give Them a Ticket and Then when Then when they finish they give us The ticket and it Will show us that they payed.

Teresa: I think it is a good idea. So they do not have to worry that they have to pay after thay eat.

Ms. Ball: This sounds like a great idea! How much will they need to pay?

Ana: We do not know how much the bowls are going to be and the soup. Oh ya do you have a soup recipe so if you do. Can you email Mrs. Aaron and can you give your soup recipe to Mrs. Aaron. Thank you!

Ms. Ball: Yes, I plan to do that.

In this exchange the initial idea presented by Terrance seems to have provided a opportunity to share their thinking of this idea, whereas with Christian's naming specific classmates to take on certain jobs you have to wonder if some of the responses weren't a result of hurt feelings. Though with a discussion board, as with most electronic exchanges, intent and voice are much harder to determine.

Unlike a verbal conversation, the discussion board allowed for students to come back to an idea several days or weeks later, like with Teresa's response about how it will be difficult to decide who will be doing what job because people might get their feelings hurt. This ability to come back to an idea later gave students an opportunity to process information at their own rate and cultivate ideas before sharing them with others. Which in turn allowed everyone to feel more comfortable participating. Another example of this was Terrance's initial contribution. It took him several weeks to join in, but when he did, he started a worthwhile conversation about when people should pay and why he thought

that way. This ability to navigate and follow up on ideas presented weeks before points to the students beginning to develop within “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knoble, 2003) as well.

The second thing I noticed from this data was exchanges between students. Twenty-eight conversations were started by 12 students. Twenty of these posts were initial ideas presented to the group, while the other eight were posts on the same topic written under a slightly different subject line, rather than as a response. Of these 28 posts, 23 elicited responses from others. While some posts caused confusion and resulted in responses that seemed disconnected, most of the responses pertained to the original post, and many added to the initial writer’s thoughts. One such conversation was on the topic of when the soup should be paid for.

Tara writes, “I think they should pay after they eat.”

To which Christian replies, “No before.”

Arleen joined the conversation at this point adding, “We should do it like restaurants, after.”

This was the norm with regard to conversational exchanges. While I had seen class conversations in which the students built on the ideas of others (see earlier conversations around the definition of *community*, *service*, and *learning*), these written conversations show an ability to question and analyze, moving beyond the riffing written about earlier. Though there were entries, like this one by Terrance, that I was surprised did not elicit any responses,

“If I come to the soup dinner or if j.r comes he can set be side me. Then we can tell stories about our lifes. Then we can share are favorite recipes. Im going to tell hem the days that im going to visseat (visit) hem if I can. Then every holiday I well give hime a gife.”

Finally, on the whole, the conversations were respectful and provided the students with an opportunity to share ideas that they may not have had during everyday class conversations. When Carla started a conversation about jobs, Ana and Teresa asked “Can you make it a little more clearer please,” and “I don’t understand. Can you explane what you mean?,” respectively. She replied not only with more explanation for her idea, but ended with, “Is that clearer?” This invited others to join the exchange as well.

One student, Carlos, had a hard time within the discussion board. Twice he became frustrated and lashed out at his classmates. In neither exchange did anyone come to the defense of the person under attack, though in one, Christian questioned, “Why are you geting angry. Are you talking about the whole class when you said you people.” I believe this general respectfulness links back to Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) ideas of the social aspects of literacy.

In the end, the discussion board turned out to be much more difficult and time consuming than I expected, hence its only lasting a month and a half. I had previous experience creating static websites, but the discussion board software provided by the school system was antiquated at best. Additionally, the computers from our laptop cart often crashed, as did the school’s network, making the actual posting quite difficult without constant adult supervision.



Despite these difficulties, I feel the discussion board was beneficial. Through the use of the discussion board, students were provided an opportunity to think through their ideas in a way that is far less confrontational than class discussions. They were also able to take their time and come up with thoughtful responses that often lose their place in quick-paced conversations. Additionally, the discussion board provided a chance for outsiders to ask questions about what was happening in such a way that the students had to code-switch to “teacher talk” and provide answers that don’t usually happen when just passing in the hallways. I will definitely try to use something similar in the future.

### **Understandings From the Discussion Board**

As I have stated, the discussion board was fraught with problems, though in some ways was one of my favorite uses of literacy during the year. While in 2012 it’s not unusual for classes to have websites, wikis, or Twitter accounts, seven years ago it was relatively new, especially in the younger grades. My goal in starting the discussion board was similar to my goal for the students’ reflections—providing a space to write, and in this case interact with each other, about the work we were doing and the children’s thoughts and ideas related to that work.

What I have come to understand is the importance of such conversations. The discussion board, in some ways, became an interactive reflection. The children were able to suggest an idea and others were able to comment and add their ideas to the mix. These conversations, unlike our group meetings, could be revisited when new ideas and information came to light.

By providing time for them to work on this individually, students were given the opportunity to think and work at their own pace. This removal of pressure to perform

during a quick moving class conversation provided a more equal chance for everyone to participate (see Al-Jarf, 2004; Lam, 2000). Also, having outsiders involved meant that the children had to keep the range of the audience in mind when they wrote.

As a literacy event, students wrote and expressed their thoughts, while “us[ing] technology, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (CCSS, W6). The discussion board therefore was more than reflections or a conversation. It was a venue in which ideas could be presented casually, though they needed to be more carefully formulated than verbal conversations or individually written reflections, because others could respond without the immediate ability to correct misunderstandings.

Once the kids decided on making bowls and having a soup dinner, other school staff offered to help. Ms. Dawes, the art teacher, offered to devote some of her planning periods to teach us how to make different kinds of bowls—pinch pots, coil bowls, slab bowls and cups—and allowed us the use of her room during periods when she didn’t have class. The music teacher, Ms. Robars, taught us songs from the 1940s and 50s to sing during our next Denney Tower visit. The librarian, Ms. McHenry, led conversations about the project and read relevant children’s literature. Others asked for updates when they saw us in the hallway or at lunch.

As we had learned from reading about The Empty Bowls project, for the price of a soup dinner, diners normally keep the hand-made bowls as a reminder of the project goal. While this sounded great, we had to figure out if it was best for us. We were already making bowls and were coming to understand how time-consuming it could be to make bowls large enough to hold a cup of soup. At this point, we ran the numbers for

two options: making bowls big enough to eat from while selling a limited number of tickets at a relatively high cost, or selling lower-priced tickets for dinner and making lots of smaller decorative bowls available at even lower prices. Our analysis revealed we would likely make more money selling dinner and pottery separately. And that pottery at three different price levels would mean more people might be able pay for the dinner *and* buy our crafts.

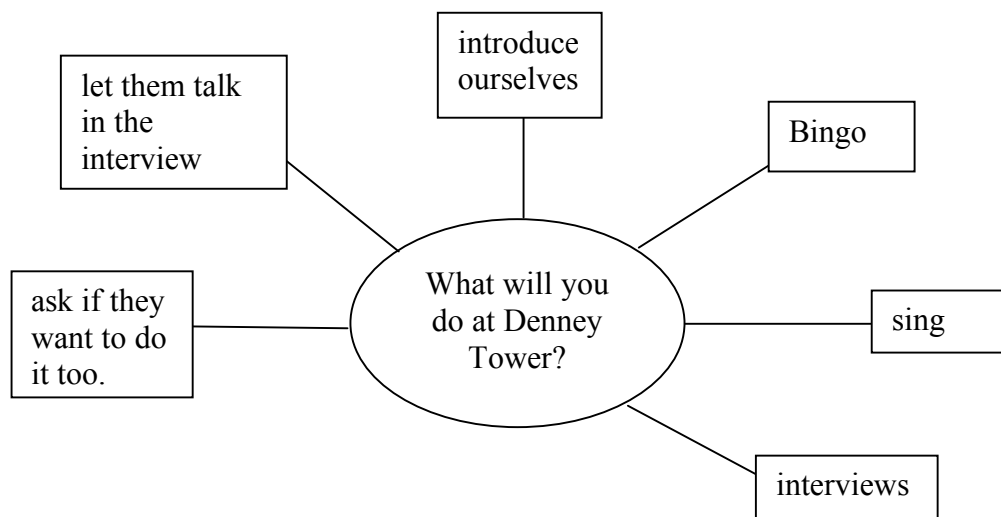
While the spirit of academic service-learning asks that you work with the community that you are helping, because most Denney Tower residents didn't drive and travel would have involved requisitioning a Housing Authority van, it wasn't possible to have the residents come to school to help us make bowls. Nor was it feasible for us to take the clay to them and then cart fragile raw-clay bowls back to school, though looking back I believe I should have made that work. We could, however, spend more time with them. Another trip to Denney Tower was scheduled. We asked Ms. Able to hang a flier to inform residents in advance of our visit, and to encourage residents to bring soup recipes to the gathering. This time we thought it would be nice to play BINGO and have lunch with the residents. Because this was our third visit, many residents were becoming familiar to us, though I still gave everyone a partner so that none of the kids would be without a peer. Several students missed seeing Junior, who was unfortunately too sick to make it downstairs for lunch.

### **Literacy Event Seven: Informational Texts**

During this time, we learned about informational texts and began work on our own: "About Denney Tower and Academic Service-learning." The week-long introductory lessons included immersing the students in informational texts and asking

them to make noticings. These feature noticings were tagged with sticky-notes and transferred to an attribute chart. With this introduction of informational texts and the resulting work, three things stood out. First was the range of understandings that the students were developing about and around academic service-learning and the community; the second was the level of participation by all students; and the last was the students' ability to synthesize information from various people.

After investigating features of non-fiction texts, the students came up with the topics/chapters they felt should be included in their informational text: Who Are We?; What Are We Doing?; What is Academic Service-Learning?; What Have We Learned?; etc. A piece of paper with a chapter title was placed on each cluster of desks, and students were asked to write about their topic for five minutes. Arleen choose to make a web to get her ideas down:



*Figure 1.* Arleen's brainstorming web for information text.

After each student had this opportunity they took the next fifteen minutes to go around the room “anonymously” (a teacher can usually tell whose handwriting is whose) adding information to each other’s chapter sheets.

As an example, here is some of the information gathered on Ana’s original sheet for the “What are we doing?” chapter:

“We went to the enternet and Mrs. Aaron show us the bowls we dicied (decided) for the empty bowls” (Ana); “Play, help with the elderly” (Christian); “Bingo and singing and dinner” (Lourdes); “Let them talk about life in interview” (Arleen); “Cook soup” (Carla); and “We are going to Denny Tower and explane to them about the project. interview. talk with them” (Teresa).

The initial information gathered on each individual sheet demonstrated how well each student understood what we were doing. For example, on the sheet titled “What Is Academic Service-Learning?,” students’ input ranged from the literal, “Our project name” (Carlos), to the wider definition of “Learn about the commuity and help commity be better” (Arleen) and “volintering to help the community” (Christian). And on the page titled, “What Is This Project Going to Do for Us?,” answers ran the gamut from “Help you with kitchen problems” (Ana) and “Helping elderly across a street” (unknown) to “Help us know what the community needs” (Teresa) and “Try to connect with the elderly and learn more about them” (Terrance). Surprisingly, some of these “deeper” understandings came from students who struggled during conventional lessons, but formed strong bonds with the residents of Denney Tower, pointing again to Freire’s (1994) idea of being *with* the world, rather than just *in* the world.

The level of participation at this information-gathering phase was the second thing that stood out to me. Everyone participated, even if the input didn't always seem to make sense. For example, on the page titled "What is Denney Tower?," Lourdes wrote "play wif bingo." On the surface, one might see this response and think, "What? This student doesn't get it." However, when looking at her participation up to this point, especially verbally, Lourdes was virtually absent. But on an "anonymous" paper, she felt comfortable writing something related to the question, even if it was only tangentially related. The chance to participate without judgment seems to have provided a point of entry for her. These initial drafting pieces indicated that "the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" and each other, "feel[ing] increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire, 1994, p. 62).

Once everyone had the opportunity to contribute to each chapter, students, in pairs and triads, began synthesizing information and writing assigned chapters. Here is the resulting draft that Ana wrote:

"What are we doing?

We are doing a project of service learning. We are doing this project for the elderly people. We are doing this project for Denney Tower. We are trying to earn money for Denney Tower.

What is empty bowls?

Empty bowls are these bowls that's empty so you can put food in them and also you can keep as a reminder. Empty bowls are these bowls that we are going to paint them and sell them. Empty bowls is a plate that

you can put soup and fruit in them. It is a program were people make bowls.

What is different about our project from empty bowls?

When we looked in the internet it was different than how are we going to do our project. People can keep it for a reminder but we are going to sell the bowls. In the internet they made bowls and we are going to make some too. People make bowls to keep as a reminder and to put food in them, but we are going to sell them and make soup and put it in there and give it to the people who come to our dinner.”

As with this example from Ana, she was able to take her own ideas and the ideas of her classmates and turn those often incomplete thoughts into a cohesive short essay. For me, this ability to synthesize information, which was demonstrated by most of the students, speaks to their abilities as literacy learners.

Overall the initial information-gathering for the chapters they would be writing gave me a better understanding of where extra support would be needed. Additionally, when gathering books for the immersion stage, I quickly discovered that we would be writing our informational texts based on our experience, that there were very few age- and level-appropriate texts to support our learning about the elderly.

By the time we got around to finishing the pieces at the end of the year (Figure 1 in Appendix F) we were spent. Eventually several of the chapters were merged and narrowed down to four—What Is a Service-Learning Project?, Who Are We?, How We Did It...But You Can Do It Differently, and Ways We Can Help the Community—and students worked in small groups to blend their previous writing and complete each new

chapter. As a result, the finished chapters of our informational book were less than stellar. Each group finished their respective chapters on the laptops and during computer lab. However, other than reviewing general lessons on editing and revising, which had initially been taught earlier in the year, I did little to push their writing to a higher level. In the end each group's product was only slightly longer than what other students I have taught over the years have written independently. Thinking back on this, rather than having students work in groups and make one product, each student should have written her/his own informational text about academic service-learning or Denney Tower.

### **Understandings From Informational Texts**

My goal for asking the class to write informational texts was to gain a clearer picture of what they had learned about academic service-learning, their community, Denney Tower, and to work through the writing process to demonstrate this understanding. Though in the end we produced a very different product—one that did not truly reflect their earlier work and did little to promote the learning that had occurred during the year—their initial drafts did allow me to assess their knowledge surrounding the project.

Unlike other informational text writing units I have taught over the years, due to the nature of what we were doing, writing about our academic service-learning project demanded that it be spread over a longer period of time to cover all aspects of our year. This became problematic, for neither the students nor myself could sustain attention to this writing assignment for the length of time required to finish it. Thinking back on it, I probably would have been better off teaching the introductory lessons and then sitting down with each group separately to figure out when it would be best for them to



complete their section. These individualized group conferences would also have allowed me to teach them to get at some of the more critical pieces of what we were doing. Additionally, like many classrooms (Duke, 2000), my class library was ill-equipped to provide mentor texts to use as references, especially ones on reading levels appropriate for students like Brelynn and Lourdes. This void made it difficult to show the importance of informational texts to our understanding of various topics.

As a focus literacy event, the informational texts are one of the two events that fit traditional literacy definitions as well as traditional classroom literacy lessons—meeting several writing standards. However because of their focus on academic service-learning and Denney Tower, they included a touch of the critical inquiry that I include in my definition of literacy.

Soon after we decided to host a soup dinner, we asked the school community and Denney Tower residents to send us recipes to help us choose what kinds of soup to serve. We gathered just over 20 recipes. One of the children suggested putting all the recipes together in a cookbook to give out at the dinner. In turn, I suggested we make available copies of the three recipes we decided to serve, which was more feasible from a logistics standpoint.

With a stack of recipes in-hand, we needed to narrow them down. Because the children knew that some of the Denney Tower residents had health issues, and that I was vegetarian, they thought at least one of the soups should be meat-free. We each picked our favorite soup, then voted on the three we would serve. While preparing for the big night, we read *Chicken Soup With Rice* (Sandek, 1962) and learned the Carole King version of the song to perform at the dinner.

After selecting the three soups, we talked about what ingredients, and how much of each, we would need. Because each recipe was good for six to eight servings, we divided by the number of tickets already sold to determine that we would triple each recipe. Students were asked to decide how best to do this. Five thought we should add the numbers three times, while the others thought we should double them and add one more full recipe. We tripled one recipe both ways to prove that both suggestions worked. I then asked the students to work in small groups to triple one of the other two recipes each and then check the other groups' work. Using these numbers, we created grocery lists.

### **Literacy Event Eight: Eliciting Donations**

All of these groceries were going to cost us, and since our goal was to raise as much money as possible for Denney Tower, Arleen suggested we ask for help. Our school secretary, Ms. More, had a nephew who worked as a grocery store manager. She informed us that the store sometimes donated to worthy causes, so I asked the students to each write a letter providing a general description of the project and why we needed a donation.

These letters demonstrated two key things. First was the students' ability to summarize what we had done to this point. The second was students' growing awareness of audience, and their ability to draw the reader in, inviting readers to be participants in our goal of carrying out a project to help residents of Denney Tower.

Most of the letters that the students wrote did a nice job of summarizing the project and our immediate need. For example:

“Dear Kroger Manager,

Hi my name is Ana. I’m a student at Chase Street School. I’m in Mrs. Aaron’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class and we are doing a project to help our community. We will be having a soup dinner. We are doing this for Denney Tower. Denney Tower is an elderly home run by the Housing Authority. Denney Tower needs a lot of stuff, we are making bowls so we can sell them. We are hoping to get some donations. We need ingredients for our soup. Would you like to help us by donating groceries or providing a discount for the ingredients? We would love for you to come.

Sincerely,

Ana” ;

and,

“Dear Kroger,

My name is Arleen & I’m in Mrs. Aaron’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class. We are doing this because we would like to help Denney Tower and the community. We picked Denney Tower because Mayor Davids, Commissioner Kinsey, and Commissioner Low came to our classroom for us to interview them, and they talked about Denney Tower. Then Ms. Able came in and talked about Denney Tower. We are having a soup dinner to raise money for the elderly (Denney Tower). If you don’t mind, may we have some money, please? Thank you!

Sincerely,

Arleen”

Similar to the letter to the Denney Tower residents, I took bits and pieces of various letters for a compilation letter to ask if the store would like to contribute to our soup dinner.

“Dear Kroger Manager,

Hi, we are Mrs. Aaron’s third grade class at Chase Street Elementary. We are doing an academic service-learning project to help our community, specifically Denney Tower. We will be having a soup dinner and selling ceramic bowls, that we made, in order to raise money to buy things that the residents at Denney Tower said they needed. Denney Tower is part of the Athens Housing Authority and houses the elderly.

We are asking several community members and organizations for donations to help us with our soup dinner. We were wondering if you would be able to give us, or provide a discount for, our soup ingredients?

Sincerely,

Mrs. Aaron’s Class”

A second letter was written to a local church group, suggested to us by a teacher who was a parishioner.

“We are doing this project because Mayor Davids talked to us. Then Commissioner Kinsey. After that Commissioner Low. They talking about the poor and elderly. We desided to help the elderly. We picked Denney Tower because it’s part of the Housing Authority. We are going to have a soup dinner.

The people we interview are going to be at the dinner. Can we have some money?” (Christian);

and,

“I’m in Mrs. Aaron’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class and we are doing a projekt to help our kumunity and it is for Denny Towwer we are helping Denny Towwer. So now we have dicitet (decided) to do a soup dinner at our school. Also we disitet to pick Denny Towwer bekos the mayor kam and we tokt (talked) about oldly and sik peple and then we disitet to ask Denny Towwer if they wont to took (talk) to us and they thid (did). So we are now in march 28 doing the soup dinner and we are giving Denny Towwer the mony and now aur problem is that we don’t have any mony to by the ingritians we al wod like that you give us a bit of mony so we kan buy the ingridians and make the soup dinner. Maybe il si you at the soup dinner. Tanks.” (Sascha).

From these requests we received a \$100.00 donation from the grocery store and another \$100.00 from the women’s group at the church adjacent to Denney Tower.

With these letters asking for assistance to meet our intended goal, the students appeared to have a much better understanding of how to present information about our project, especially when compared to those initial letters written to Denney Tower residents. This clarity in writing is something that the CCSS (2010) calls for in writing standards two and four.

Brelynn seemed to be an example of what Gee (1996) talked about when he introduced the idea of “borderland discourses,” in which minority/ diverse populations

spend time “interacting outside of the confines of the public-sphere and middle-class elite Discourses” (p. 162). In her letter Brelynn writes,

“We have to sell ticker. We are doing for the Deney Tower. We was  
meating Commissioner and mayor Davids and Mr. Kline We are  
doing this project because Deney Tower neda food. We pick Deney Tower.”

Gee advocates for schools that allow children to explore language critically, to reach their “potential development.” Some might ask: Was she confused about why we were asking for money? This question, however, negates what she did do. Upon reading this I am struck by the content—Brelynn had included most of the salient pieces of information. However, it wasn’t written in a sequence that fits a school “Discourse,” and as such could quiet easily be dismissed as wrong. As a teacher attempting to engage my students in critical literacy, I should have sat down and talked with her about what she had written, allowing her to talk through her thinking and practice forming her thoughts in a way that approximates school “Discourse.”

Secondly, many of the students made the “individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure” (Dewey, 1997). Here, for example, is Teresa’s letter:

“We are doing an Acedemic Service Learning project about our community.  
We were wondering if would like you to help us. First I will tell you why we are  
doing this project and how you can help. We are going to do a soup dinner for the  
people at Denney Tower.”

In a well executed letter, Teresa then goes on to explain how we came to pick Denney Tower, some of the things we did at Denney Tower, and our plan for helping them. She ends her letter with a section titled “What we need.”

“We need some money to buy the ingredients for the soup we are going to make at the dinner for Denney Tower. With the money we raise, they said they needed some more books.

Your Friend, Teresa”;

and,

“We were writing if you all could help us with our project and our project is about a elderly residents (residents) it is called Denney Tower’s and they need our help to get what they want and sometimes me and my family to Kroger so maybe you all can help us too.” (Lourdes).

In both cases, summarizing and making the reader an active participant in our cause, even those students who struggled to write, due to learning disabilities or language barriers, understood the concept of summarizing and eliciting help. After receiving both donations, the students wrote thank you notes.

### **Understandings From Eliciting Donations**

Similar to the letters written to Denney Tower residents, the goal for the letters to Kroger and the church group was to have the students explain what we were doing to an uninvolved party, and in doing so convince them to support our efforts, this time monetarily. These letters did a better job than those first letters to the residents. At this point in the year, the children had been asked to orally explain the project several different times, as well as write about it in various ways. I think all of these rehearsals

made for a better end product. As their teacher I saw improvement between those November letters and these letters written in March.

I realize that there were still gaps in understanding and problems with organization and clarity, but these letters also had a sense of urgency to them. As we approached the date for the soup dinner, the students believed that everyone should want to help out and were not shy about asking for help. The class had developed a “sense of community, of participation in the solution of common problems, which is instilled in the popular consciousness and transformed into knowledge of democracy” (Freire, 2000, pp. 24-25) that they were more than willing to draw others into. I believe these letters are evidence of that. On my part, because the letters were written in one day and then turned in, there was not much chance for conferencing with the children, as with longer pieces of writing. Obviously I wanted their writing to be the best it could be, but with a quick turnaround and none of them being individually published, I struggled, in situations like this, with how much to push the children.

Letter writing is done in classrooms for various purposes, though it was not nor is it now included explicitly in the Common Core standards. However, letters such as these are in my opinion a legitimate mix of argumentative and explanatory writing requiring students to both “support claims using valid reasoning and relevant evidence” *and* “examine and convey ideas and information clearly and accurately” (CCSS, W1 and W2).

To advertise our event, small groups designed fliers to be sent home with every student at the school. They made invitations to community members as well—the mayor and commissioners, university partners, Denney Tower residents. After a discussion to



decide what information should be included, a small group designed event tickets on the computer while others made signs for walk-in ticket sales and the ceramics table. In addition to singing for our guests, we compiled pictures we had taken throughout the year, and a third group created a slideshow presentation to show before the dinner.

### **Celebration**

Finally, the week of the dinner arrived. Several parent and community volunteers went shopping for us and brought back all the ingredients from our grocery list. Now it was time to make the soup. It had been decided, with the kids' input, that the class would make one normal size recipe of the soups and that adults, who had volunteered to help, could triple the recipes for the dinner. While we had touched upon measurements when we tripled the recipes for our grocery list, making the soups allowed a practical hands-on experience. A few students at a time were called up to help chop and stir with a parent volunteer, while I worked with the others on making a "Gallon Man" to show equivalents. We sang "Chicken Soup With Rice" a lot that week.

Prior to the day of the dinner, I asked parents who normally picked up their children if they could stay after school for an hour the day of the dinner. They all agreed. Those four kids and I, along with the help of the school secretary and the guidance counselor, set up the cafeteria. After the kids left, I worked with the parent volunteers to finish preparing the soups and set out bowls, spoons, napkins, and bread.

That night, the kids arrived early as planned. We went to the classroom and gathered our computer and projector and props for the song and made our way back to the cafeteria. There was a lot of nervous energy that evening. As people began arriving, the kids went to their prearranged spots to carry out their jobs. Some students worked the

ticket sales, some sold the ceramics we had made, and others prepared to serve soup and rolls. Family, friends, teachers, government officials, university partners, and Denney Tower residents all mingled and enjoyed their dinner. The students decided to give each of the residents who came a bowl to keep as a souvenir. The kids were proud. I was impressed.

While the soup dinner was over, there was still much to do. We calculated how much we had raised through presale tickets, walk-in ticket sales, ceramic sales, and donations. In all we had raised \$957. Now it was time to write thank you notes to all those who had helped and participated along the way, and finish documenting our activities and learning in our informational text. Plus there was Denney Tower's annual spring barbecue to attend. At the barbecue, we presented a check to Denney Tower, with Barnes and Noble educator discount prices, to purchase books and movies equivalent to \$1,000.00.

### **Literacy Event Nine: Read Alouds and Responses**

Throughout the year we had many opportunities for read alouds and shared readings in the meeting area. Students sitting up, some laying on their bellies, but always comfortable. Three of the texts we read during the year were *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1982), *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), and *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997). I felt it was important that the students not only hear good literature but that this literature be connected to communities and what we were doing as a class.

Two things that stand out to me about these read alouds are the kinds of comprehension demonstrated and the general lack of a link between the poverty in the stories and that of the Denney Tower residents.

After reading the story *Miss Rumphius* (1982) with the librarian in October, the class talked about ways they could make the world a more beautiful place—  
 “Commissioner Kinsey said we could do a garden” (Brelynn) and “Mr. Kline talked about picking up garbage” (Terrance)—including their plans at Denney Tower. They compared what they were preparing to do for the residents to the good deeds of Miss Rumphius.

Due to the short story feel of *Seedfolks* (1997), I read it over the course of a couple weeks in February. Periodically we would stop and chart what we had learned about the characters, as well as general information about the setting. After I finished the book the students picked something to write about. Some students made connections and asked questions:

“My connection is for Nora. Ms. Able works at the Housing Authority just like you and take care of people. both of you take care of all the residents at the Housing Authority and I one question which retirement home do you work at?”  
 (Xander);

and “In 4<sup>th</sup> grade we can plant beans. Or plant a garden and sell plants to people to raise money. We could give them some seeds so they can plant their own garden” (Christian).  
 Some summarized—

“A girl named Kim was born 8 months after her father died. She wishes she knew her father. Kim planted lima beans and a woman named Ann saw her and thought Kim was carrying a gun or drugs. So Ann got a knife and went outside and started digging up the lima beans she didn’t know they were lima beans until she saw the beans...” (Teresa).

Others decided to make predictions: “I think new people will come to the garden and they will have partys and they will grow more plants and they will be friends” (Ana); and

“They should make a sequal about it. But at the end it didn’t seem to have a ending. So I’m going to make a prediction about how it’s going to end. It’s gonna end by the gardeners coming back to the garden” (Carla).

*Fly Away Home* (1991) was the last of these three books that we read, in late April. After finishing it, the students wrote reflections discussing how they would feel if their family didn’t have a house or apartment to live in. Most of the children wrote things such as, “If I lived in the airport I would be sad and poor. Also I would see people haveing a great time I would be sad.” (Teresa), and “I would be scared to live in a airport. I would wont to tack a bath too.” (Tara). Arleen however took this as an opportunity to share what she and her mom had recently been through, writing,

“First, we used to live with this old man named Mr. Robert in Atlanta, but then his “sick wife” moved in with him. So we lived in my mom’s car for about two months. Then we were in a park for a few days when a patrol officer came up to us and my mom and me told him about the past three months. He let us live with him and he found Interfaith. We lived in Interfaith for a month. Then we found a duplex.”

Ana started her reflection about *Fly Away Home* (1991) similarly to most of her classmates, but by the end she began to make connections to her mother’s family:

“I won’t like it because my family will have a smaller room and they would get crowded if we have to share. I will have more room in the house and if we were poor we can’t even aford a house we will just deal with it. If we were really really

poor we won't even go to shcool we will have to work and will earn money so my family can get some new things. Like my mom she and her sisters and her brothers there mom didn't have money so she got her kids out of school so they had to work and that how they got there money and if my family have to work too."

Comprehension is multifaceted, incorporating the ability to draw on background knowledge, question, visualize and infer, determine importance, and summarize/synthesize (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). While not all of these levels of comprehension were demonstrated, the students were doing many of these things within their responses to the literature. Xander saw similarities between what Ms. Able does with the Housing Authority and Nora's work with Mr. Myles in *Seedfolks* (1997). Arleen was able to draw on her background knowledge of what it's like to be homeless to connect with the boy and his father in *Fly Away Home* (1991). Teresa's summary shows an understanding of the story and an ability to determine importance when deciding what to include. I credit the students' abilities to do these things with the work that many of them had been doing all year in Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002) and in Guided Reading.

The second thing that becomes apparent when looking at this data is the lack of connection to what they knew about poverty—either with the characters in the stories, with Denney Tower residents, or in many cases their own lives. While in Ana's reflection for *Fly Away Home* (1991) she talks about how if you were poor you might have to stop going to school to help make money for the family, and ties that to her mother's family, she does not also make the connection to Mr. Junior, the Denney Tower resident whom she interviewed, who also had to drop out of school in the seventh grade

to help his family financially. Nieto (1999) stated that “critical pedagogy is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world” (p. 103), yet I somehow wasn’t setting up the opportunities for students to do this.

Back in January we had spent several days talking about the cost of living and whether people were able to save or if they were just getting by. We looked at three different jobs; a Wal-Mart sales associate, a UPS worker, and a first year teacher, comparing salary and benefits. We also developed a list of monthly expenses. Students then worked in three groups to calculate what part of one of these workers’ paychecks would be left over for savings. Based on reflections of these conversations, I know that the students were struck by how much monthly expenses were and how little money was left at the end of each month, and that a few were beginning to make links between this and their own family’s financial situation. It was therefore disappointing that they, minus Arleen, didn’t draw back on these earlier conversations when thinking about the stories we were reading. I know, for example, that Ana was living in a one bedroom apartment with her mother, father, and five siblings, yet she doesn’t make a connection to her own living situation to that of the father and boy’s situation in *Fly Away Home* (1991), rather she distances herself from it by telling of her mother’s family. It’s like William Bigelow said quite succinctly:

Most of my students have trouble with the idea that a book—especially a textbook—can lie. When I tell them that I want them to argue with, not just read, the printed word, they're not sure what I mean.... Textbooks fill students with information masquerading as final truth and then ask students to parrot back the

information in the end of the chapter 'checkups' (Bigelow in Shannon, 1990, p. 145).

While we weren't reading textbooks that purported to be imparting fact, my students were listening to stories like they always had, relatively passively. Rather than seeing connections to themselves, their friends, their families, the poverty that the mayor and commissioner had spoken of, and questioning it, they listened and wrote responses much like one would find to a passage on an end-of-year test.

### **Understandings From Read Alouds and Responses**

The read aloud and reflections were one of the two literacy events that fit a traditional definition of literacy and I hoped would encompass my critical definition of literacy as well. My goal with the read alouds was to have the children listen to children's literature that had a social justice theme and then reflect on the stories and characters, ideally finding similarities between the books and what we were doing at Denney Tower, or else finding connections to their own lives (Freire, 2000).

Much as been written about children's literature and social justice, but I found it difficult to have brief conversations after the reading that would "tap into the generative energy...to promote debate and discussion about issues that touch [their lives]" (O'Neil, 2010) in their reflections, at least without reading back my own words and ideas. My hope was that they would find these similarities and connections on their own, rather than being led to them. It would seem as though I failed to help my students make the connection between the texts we were reading, our "saving or just getting by" conversations, and the reality of the Denney Tower residents and a large percentage of Americans living at or below the poverty line. I knew better than to think reading what

amounts to a few books, and conducting several conversations over the course of a week, would shape the way these seven, eight, and nine year olds think about poverty. But I couldn't help myself.

I included these read alouds and responses as a literacy event because I wanted to show the complexity of tying literature with a social justice theme to what some would consider social justice work in the community. I hoped the students would go beyond basic summarizing, visualizing, and move to deep connections that would tie what we were doing across the year into the literature and spur curiosity about why things were the way they were. Beyond a few children who raised some questions and ideas, this did not happen. As for standards, many educators would classify readings and response to literature as traditional literacy, which is bolstered by the fact that they fit into several reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards.

### **Wrapping Up**

As I stated earlier, I feel that academic service-learning should be looked at through a critical lens. For me that includes not only Freire's ideas, but those of Dewey, Shor, Nieto, and numerous others. Throughout the retelling of the year I highlighted nine literacy events that I felt demonstrated important moments in my students' literacy growth, and examined points that stood out to me within each one. I would like to wrap up by looking at three points that came up in multiple literacy events—student participation, my inability to take a step back, and the lack of integration between what the class was doing and the social justice piece called for in critical theory.

First, student participation and, in turn, students' ownership were issues that were raised multiple times—during both sets of interviews, the discussion board, and with the



informational texts writing. The level of student participation and ownership during this school year were more than I had seen before. This participation seems to point to what hooks (1994) called a mutual responsibility for learning in the classroom environment (p. 144). Yes, there are plenty of lessons or projects that the students are jazzed about and delve into wholeheartedly, but rarely is this level of involvement sustained for a whole year. Throughout the year, when we would have visitors, whether they were there for five minutes or five days, the students would get them involved in what we were doing, even if it was only to listen to what had happened with our project to that point. They also adopted action that I had done, inviting the mayor and commissioners in, as things they had done on their own: “we asked the mayor to be interviewed” (Christian). Seeing this year’s learning experiences a “co-operative enterprise, not a dictation .... teacher’s suggestion is not a mold ... but is a starting point to be developed...” (Dewey, 1997, p. 72). I found this participation and ownership truly remarkable, in particular with my struggling students and second language learners. As Freire (2000) stated, “students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to the challenge” (p. 62). With a few exceptions, the first letter writing assignment for example, they rose to that challenge at a level that was above what would be considered the norm for low performing students.

A second thing that I noticed several times was my inability to step back as much as I needed to—during the initial interviews, the initial reflections, and with the letter to Denney Tower. Looking back it is easy to see where and how you could allow the children to act as leaders. I wonder how certain products would have changed if I had

done just this, waited before taking over. By being prescriptive in how the interviews were to be conducted, did I inadvertently prevent my students from being able to question critically? Or when I failed to have the students reflect on what they had learned during the initial interviews before interviewing Ms. Able, did I stymie their critical analysis of the situation? Or when I sidestepped the writing process with regards to the introductory letter to Denny Tower, did I in turn sidestep their ability to read, write, and speak critically? I know from re-listening to hours of taped conversation and flipping through piles of work samples that in the end my students did demonstrate an ability, on varying levels, to read, write, and speak critically; to think and question critically; and to analyze and reflect on information not only individually but as active members of a community. However, how much more could they have done had I been willing to let it “get messy” and have them discover more on their own before stepping in?

The final piece was the lack of integration between what the class was doing with the residents of Denney Tower and the social justice piece called for in critical theory—interviews with the residents, and the read alouds and reflections. As McLauren (2003) pushed for, critical pedagogy is about raising questions and issues, and is not necessarily about providing answers. We never really asked the questions that would lead us to question society’s definitions of poverty and its treatment of the elderly. Instead we flitted around the topic with picture books and short stories that dealt with issues similar to the lives of the Denney Tower residents, and the students’ own lives, as evidenced by multiple comments and reflections during the year, lessons about the cost of living, and general conversations about organizations within the community that help the poor.

I believe part of the reason for this disconnect was/is my own discomfort, for lack of a better word, addressing many of my own students' living circumstances. After all a third of my class lived in subsidized housing, so when the mayor and commissioners talked about the "poor in Athens" they were in essence talking about my students and their families. Theoretically I had read all the right articles, taken the right coursework, but in practice I wasn't ready to flat out ask them questions about their own lives and I wasn't sure how far to push them when they brought it up on their own. This unease of making connections between them and the Denney Tower residents meant that the students weren't really seeing how they could make a difference in their own families' circumstances.

In this chapter, I hope I have given a solid understanding of what we undertook during the year and a look at nine literacy events that helped shape our roles as multifaceted literacy learners. In the next chapter, I will readdress my call for doing academic service-learning from a critical theory standpoint by showing what I have come to understand, and what it means for researchers and practitioners alike.

## Chapter Five

When I returned to graduate school to work on my Ph.D., I did so with the intent of taking a closer look at my classroom—not only the students, but my practices as well. During my coursework I took a class on academic service-learning, and felt it would provide both the students and me with an opportunity not only to better integrate literacy, but to do so with a critical theory stance that asks all involved to be active participants in their learning and in the community that we share. I wanted to learn how to better integrate literacy so that my students would be able to see the various ways literacy plays out in their everyday lives. It was important to me, because of the students that I taught and my belief about how democracy and critical theory intersect, that I view academic service-learning through a critical theory lens.

### **Summary of Research**

If the goal of schooling is to educate, we must ask who we are educating and how we wish them to be educated. Over the history of public schooling, the answers to those questions have changed many times, often in time with shifts in government. But having taught children for the last fourteen years, from kindergarten through seventh grade, it is my belief that the goal of education should not be dependent on who is in charge politically. Rather, we should keep in mind what Thomas Jefferson set out to establish: education as a great equalizer—one in which students' literacy and citizenry within a democracy work hand in hand.

This initiative, however, requires that education be viewed not as a “banking” system in which knowledge and answers are deposited in childrens’ heads (Freire, 2000), but as something we all take equal part in, and consider critically, both as teacher and learner. Whether it be with children from a wealthy neighborhood in Manhattan or children of migrant workers in a small southern town, the goals and the opportunities should be the same. Unfortunately inequity often prevails (Au, 1993; Kozol; 1993).

I therefore set out to explore how I could make students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1993) become more involved with their learning. I chose to focus on:

- What does it mean to take a critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning?
  - What are the possibilities? The limitations? And the challenges?;
- What are some of the ways students use literacy—as critical readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, questioners, and reflectors—when they are asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants?
- What did I learn about myself as a teacher and the practice of guiding the academic service-learning processes with young children? and;
- What are the implications of doing academic service-learning?

Before embarking on this adventure, and throughout the process, I read about classrooms in which the teacher used critical inquiry in the teaching of language arts. I learned about children who were learning about class differences within a community (Sylvester, 1994) and about teachers who were figuring out how to have their students reach critical awareness on their own (Cowhey, 2006). I read accounts of teachers doing research in their classrooms (Hankins, 2003). I read about different inquiry-based

approaches to learning (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2010) and academic service-learning (Furco, 2010), all the while trying to figure out what it would look like in my classroom and what I could do to make it work better next time.

Additionally I read about critical theory (Freire, 2000) and educators' accounts of approaching their teaching through a critical theory lens (Shor, 1994). I read about democracy in education (Dewey, 1997) and teachers who strive to accomplish that in their classrooms (Cowhey, 2006). Again, I looked at what my students and I were doing as a community and what I could do as an educator to make this more successful.

### **Understandings**

As I wrote up the year, I began to see all the wonderful things my students and I had done. In this section, using my research questions, I will relate some of the understandings I have come to from the research. Seeing how the pieces fit together over the course of the year, I am quite proud of what we accomplished. Initially it was hard to get a clear picture. I was afraid I had done very little with the students, and that they had learned even less. Could it have been better? Absolutely. Could we have done more? Sure. But what we did do was good work. A springboard for future endeavors.

As I stated in the wrap up of chapter four, for me the points that stood out from the data were student participation and, in turn, students' ownership of their learning; my inability to step back and let the children take more of a lead in our learning; and the lack of integration between what the class was doing with the residents of Denney Tower and the social justice piece called for in critical theory. While these points could seem specific to this project, they point to larger issues: (a) the need to define literacy within a larger frame; (b) a need for teachers to open up discussions and opportunities for students

to question and wonder about the things they are learning and the system that pushes them; and (c) a need to learn and explore their community beyond a scope and sequence that has a predefined path.

## **Literacy**

Let me state for the record: I am not against common standards. In fact, having such a document means that students should be exposed to the same standards regardless of where they live. I have taught in several different states and can attest to the fact that expectations can be quite different. However, as you have read, I have come to define literacy as a multidimensional, multifaceted entity that includes one's ability to read, write, and speak critically; to think and question critically; and to analyze and reflect on information not only individually but as an active member of a community. This broader definition goes beyond "determin[ing] the main idea of a text; recount[ing] the key details and explain[ing] how they support the main idea" (CCSS, grade three RI2). Beyond "recall[ing] information from experience or gather[ing] information from print and digital sources; tak[ing] brief notes on sources and sort[ing] evidence into provided categories" (CCSS, grade three W8). And I wanted to look at some of the ways that students use this broader definition of literacy when asked to make connections across the curriculum, their individual lives, and the community in which they are participants. To see how the students work together and with the community to better "read the world" (Freire, 2000) and see literacy within everything they do and every action they choose to be a part of. When students do this, they, like Ana said, can see themselves "learn[ing] not only from the teacher, but from each other."

In my research this broader definition of literacy also allows students a chance to feel successful by providing them multiple opportunities to hone their talents. For example, by asking the students to write multiple letters explaining what we were doing, the students had several chances to write summaries and many, like Ana, became better with each retelling. Additionally, this wider definition presents them with chances to push themselves and take more responsibility for their learning. As with the note-taking during the initial interviews, Tara clearly had difficulty with phonemic awareness, as evidenced by her spelling, however she rose to the challenge of the task in order to take ownership of what it was we were trying to do—learn about our community. In addition, working together, rather than as competing individuals, the class was able to sort the information obtained through these interviews and identify their own categories, rather than just placing them in “provided categories,” as the CCSS ask for.

The Common Core Standards call for an “integrated model of literacy” and state, “the processes of communication are closely connected,” as it states is evidenced by the fact that the standards ask that students be able to write about what they have read, and speak about their findings after doing research. Within each strand—reading, writing, speaking, listening, language—the expectations for demonstrating competency are not significantly different from previous state standards, save for having fewer broader goals. What the Common Core Standards do seem to allow for, through the use of Bloom’s Taxonomy Revised (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), is individual teachers to filter the standards through their own theoretical stance. The problem is that that places us right back where we were, with children’s learning being dependent on the freedoms their teachers are given with regard to how they define literacy and learning.



Again, by redefining literacy in larger terms, students can better see how literacy plays a role in their everyday lives, rather just as reading and writing. This broadening provides students a chance to alter the roles they play within our society. It allows them to see themselves as more than retellers; it allows them to see themselves as constructors of stories, as agents of change.

### **Questioning and Wondering**

Using my own definition of critical inquiry as “a language act in which one attempts to engage another in helping him go beyond his present understanding” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 4) while encouraging action, enacting change and challenging the current power structure, how many times, in my need to control the situation rather than let the children have the power, did I squelch a chance for them to work through what we were learning and gain a better understanding?

I set out to explore what it means to take a critical inquiry stance on academic service-learning. While two years earlier I had done an academic service-learning project with fifth graders whom I worked with as a reading specialist, I had learned that educating for a democracy using critical pedagogy can be messy. It should be. As Dewey (1997) stated, “when education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities” (p. 59). If you let it, this loss of “power” can throw everything off balance. However, as you accept your role as guide and co-learner new opportunities present themselves.

An example of this was my less than enthusiastic attitude toward my students' desires to work with the elderly. I had been made to visit my great-grandmother in a nursing home shortly before she died, when I was six, and the sights and smells stuck with me. This was what I imagined we would be entering, dark hallways filled with rubbing alcohol-scented stale air. What we encountered, while plainly institutional (cream colored walls and florescent lighting), was a group of lovely people whom my students genuinely enjoyed spending time with. If I had exercised my power as teacher, I could have easily reported different results on the vote that determined what the students wanted to focus on for their project. But then Terrance would have never met Junior and the benefits of that relationship would have been lost. For "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 2000, p. 53).

Attorneys are told never to ask a question in court that they aren't positive they know the answer to. The educator should do the opposite. It should be our goal to pose questions that will get the learning community thinking—to stump ourselves and the students. We should open up the conversation in thoughtful ways that allow everyone to feel their thoughts matter. This also means allowing students to ask questions and opening up the floor to responses, rather than shutting them down because you're not sure of the answer, or out of fear that the topic might be too "delicate." It is through this questioning and wondering that we see how the children construct their understanding and make new ideas part of their growing understanding.

### **Beyond a Scope and Sequence**

Scope and sequence: the road map for the year. As someone who has been asked to teach a grade I have never taught before, I can appreciate the benefits of a scope and sequence that sets the year out before it has begun. However, as an advocate for democratic education and critical pedagogies, I must fight the urge to divide our year and days into neat little subject compartments that have little to no relation to each other or the world outside the walls of the school, and do little to promote tangents of interest and investigation. I must see the goal as moving beyond individual learners to a place where students are part of the larger community, and as such work in and with the community to enrich the standards. Which is why I decided to look at the implications of doing academic service-learning

When schools seek to teach children about social change, it can't be enough to "[drop] pebbles hoping that the ripples will fill our students' minds and hearts and will extend out into the world as well" (Wade, 2009, p. 50). We must push ourselves and our students to show in deliberate ways that we can all be active participants in change. This may mean, however, if one wanted to use academic service-learning, for example, that our year might not fit into a clear cut scope and sequence. With this study, my students did not do the mystery genre study that the other two third grade classes were doing. Instead we were learning about online writing and posting on our Discussion Board. I am not saying one is better than the other, just that one was clearly tied to the lives of the children learning it.

This desire to link schools actively within the communities that they are a part of requires a level of faith in schools, administrators, and teachers. Classes on the same

grade level, if not all working on the same academic service-learning project, might have very different focuses. Rather than see these different focuses as a detriment, as a point of contention, teachers and administrator should approach it, and promote it, as an opportunity for the students to learn from each other. For just as a school picks a common theme and asks each class or grade to focus on a different aspect of that theme, academic service-learning does the same thing—with community as the common theme.

By allowing the students to be the decision-makers when it comes to what community need they wish to address, the teacher must work in tandem with their students to make sure all standards are addressed and that the students see the links between what they are doing and learning. “From the outset, [the humanist, revolutionary educator’s] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization.... [T]hey must be partners of the students in their relations with them” (Freire, 2000, p. 56). This partnership makes for a much richer learning experience than any preplanned scope and sequence.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shared my understandings of the literacy events and their relative importance to the process. I have also tried, through sharing my own learning, to show the importance of teacher action research—the systematic investigation of one’s teaching that allows for a better understanding of strengths and areas of growth as a teacher. As you may have surmised, while I am very happy with the work my students and I did and the things we accomplished, in terms of being a critical teacher, as my mother would say, I “didn’t do so hot.” I struggled with how to help my students make connections to their own lives and the lives of many Athenians. I struggled with how to get to some of the deeper thinking that is called for in critical

theory. I struggled with the largeness of academic service-learning. Teacher action research is hard work, but well worth it when you begin to see how focusing in on choices you make impact the classroom for better or worse. With that said, I will definitely be doing more academic service-learning projects while continuing to use a critical lens, and I will continue to strive to teach critically no matter what mandates are put in front of me, and I will study the decisions I make in the classroom.

### **Implications**

There is still relatively little research about academic service-learning in elementary schools (Furco & Root, 2010) and even less that focuses on literacy, critical or otherwise, within the framework of academic service-learning. But any number of researchers could say the same about their research topic, so I will move beyond the obvious. Given the constant shifts in education it is important that classroom teachers not give up or give in. It is easy to fall into the habit of allowing your day to fit into relatively neat teaching segments, but it is even more important now, as the business model again seeps into school systems across the country, that we as classroom teachers fight this comfortable place, so that our students truly have a chance of becoming active citizens, rather than ill-informed worker bees perpetuating a homogenized society.

I know I did not answer all my questions as well as I could have, and that I have created many more that I will continue to explore. Now that I am teaching at a predominantly upper-middle class school in the TriBeCa neighborhood of Manhattan, I know that, while I learned a lot about how children interact with different aspects of literacy and the community, I need to figure it out all over again, since critical theory and academic service-learning will play out very differently in this setting. I know that there

were numerous times throughout that year that I was asked, “When are we going to do writing?” or, “Why haven’t we done reading this week?” I also know that we read and wrote every day, though often not in the traditional sense, which begs the question, should I have made it more explicit that this is what reading and writing can look like too? I know that academic service-learning can and does allow students to meet mandated standards, as evidenced by my students’ work and by the fact that according to the state’s criteria, they all passed the Criterion-Reference Curriculum Test.

I have come to understand the importance of asking children to look at themselves as something more than students who come to school to be taught the right answer—to see themselves as worthy of making a change. But I have also come to understand this does not often happen without a fight against the status quo of schooling. Even in long-standing progressive schools, things have been done a certain way, and academic service-learning challenges that. Administrations often like to see how you used backward design to plan a unit across the curriculums, or want to be presented with a week-by-week plan of how an integrated unit of study will unfold. Academic service-learning can’t provide this, certainly not up front, because of the uncertainty of what a project’s focus will be until the students have done a needs assessment. What a teacher who wants to do academic service-learning can provide is a framework for the year, similar to what I used: *Investigating the Community*; *Developing a Plan*; and *Enacting a Plan*. This kind of framework allows administrators to have a general sense of where and when you plan to incorporate the standards, the kinds of activities that can be done to address the standards, and the community resources that can be involved. Once the class has decided on an issue and a population to work with, long-term planning becomes easier because

you can schedule dates for outreach and therefore be more specific about when standards will be addressed.

I have come to understand both the importance as well as the difficulty of sticking true to working *with* a community from the get-go. As a novice academic service-learning teacher, once we found one group that might need our assistance, I didn't seek out, nor encourage my students to question, if Denney Tower was the right community. I have learned that, generally speaking, organizations that work with specific populations are more than thrilled when a group is interested in working with their clients. It is important that after identifying a need that the class talk with multiple groups and organizations to find out what they need. I have also learned the importance of being aware of the various organizations in your community so that you know who is available to talk to your students after they pick their topic.

I have come to understand the importance of someone up on high having your back. I was lucky enough to have my administration's support, though three administrations later, I am realizing how rare that might have been. Districts need to support teachers who want to do academic service-learning with their classes. Many school systems hopped on the academic service-learning bandwagon and continue to promote it on their websites. But as a teacher who works in one of those systems, I know that very little support is provided. Sure there are summer workshops I can attend, and the mayor's office distributes a survey asking whether schools have any academic service-learning happening, but little else is done to promote it at the school level. "For an innovation to gain traction in today's educational environment, strong and compelling evidence of its effectiveness must be secured. According to the U.S. Department of

Education, evidence is secured when the effects of an educational intervention are tested under certain research conditions” (Furco & Root, 2010, p. 16). So with this knowledge, academic service-learning researchers must show it to be “an evidence-based practice.” However, as a critical teacher action researcher—whose goal it is to inquire into one’s own practice and investigate the relationship between education and society in regard to his/her own classroom practice—it is very difficult to meet the research conditions set forth by the federal government, while also making sure that I am being true to academic service-learning and integrating standards in a meaningful way, while juggling everything else that a day in the classroom brings.

I have come to understand how truly remarkable children can be when presented with a challenge and shared ownership. I know that there have been times that I have thought children apathetic, but when asked to participate in their community, identify a need, and act on helping create a solution, this class shone. Time and again, Tara and Brelynn persevered, despite the difficulty of the work, and did their best to participate. I know that for many of these students, what we did as a community in third grade stuck with them. At the end of their fifth grade year, students are asked to write an essay about Chase Street. Several of these students wrote about our academic service-learning project for their fifth grade essay.

### **Future Research**

In an era where teachers are vilified for everything from summer vacations to supposedly lavish salaries, and (not coincidentally) the mass privatization or corporatization of the public education system doesn’t seem like a stretch, teachers interested in academic service-learning need to be able to make their case. In my opinion



it is important to continue to research how academic service-learning plays out when considered through a critical theory lens. I also think research that explores academic service-learning's connections with the Common Core Standards is an area in which teacher researchers can bolster support for academic service-learning. Another potential research area is technology. With new and easier ways to integrate technology into the classroom experience, exploring different ways to do so within academic service-learning is a worthwhile pursuit.

### **Academic Service-Learning and Critical Theory**

While I see a clear link between academic service-learning and critical theory, they are not commonly linked. I feel that this is an area that needs further exploration. Students in school should be encouraged to question and confront societal norms rather than being encouraged to perpetuate them through inaction. By researching academic service-learning within a critical theory lens, educators may begin to see benefits previously unknown. By encouraging students to do a needs assessment within their community through a critical lens, we may all begin to see how and where problems continue to surface, and how we can start to be the solution.

### **Academic Service-Learning and the Common Core**

It seems that one of the keys to persuading administrators is to focus on how academic service-learning meets the Common Core Standards, which emphasize informational and opinion texts both in the reading and writing standards. Academic service-learning provides such rich opportunities for students to stretch their literacy selves that to deeply explore the myriad ways that the CCSS could be incorporated would strengthen teachers' cause to get support from administration. Administrations who are

presented with clear evidence that teacher researchers can link the standards (reading, writing and math) to a high-quality academic service-learning project would be hard pressed to dismiss a teacher's desire to continue doing academic service-learning.

### **Academic Service-Learning and Technology**

Academic service-learning provides students a chance to educate others about what is happening in their community. Technology can provide those students a chance to genuinely present what they are doing and practice many of the Standards in a variety of venues. Twitter, wikis, and blogs, for example, allow students to practice their understanding of audience while writing concise informational texts. They also provide students a chance to use a variety of methods, from text to visuals, to present the data they are collecting and the information they are learning. As technology advances, finding ways for a class get its ideas "out there" for general consumption can become part of the educative process inherent in academic service-learning, and can help bolster support.

### **Academic Service-Learning and Effective Teaching**

As new teacher evaluation protocols, such as the Danielson Framework (Danielson, 2007), are introduced, showing how academic service-learning addresses many of their domains or standards becomes another way to point to academic service-learning as a teaching tool in the classroom. Additionally, academic service-learning gets teachers and students using the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy's (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) top four levels (Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating) and Webb's Depth of Knowledge levels three (Strategic Thinking) and four (Extended Thinking). Not only is it good teaching, the incorporation of "high level" academics is again something that

can be cited when administrations and politicians question what is happening in classrooms.

### **This End Is My Beginning**

It took me several years to write this dissertation. I was afraid I didn't have enough data make sense of anything. I was wrong. It wasn't until my latest administrator asked, "Don't you want the parents to know you're getting your PhD?" that I realized what I was squandering. The process was hard, but in the end I have learned so much more about my teaching specifically, the perseverance of children, and teaching in general.

While in my fourteen years of teaching I can remember several students from each year, I distinctly remember every child from this particular year. Not only did I get to see them grow as people and learners, I grew with them. Because of what we were all involved in I learned about their lives outside of school. At the soup dinner, several parents approached me and thanked me for what I was teaching their child, noting an enthusiasm they had not seen in their child before. This is not something a teacher hears every day.

While the goal of the original Empty Bowls project was that the diners keep the bowls as a reminder of the hunger that people endure every day, the three bowls I purchased serve as reminders of how truly amazing Ana, Arleen, Asako, Brelynn, Carla, Carlos, Christian, Lourdes, Sashca, Tara, Teresa, Terrance, and Xander are. They also serve as reminders of how important it is to push to be allowed to teach using academic service-learning through a critical lens.

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## CLASSROOM DATA

Table A1.

*Student demographics.*

Name	Sex	Race	Services Received	Reading Level (grade level approximation: Sept/May)	Place of Birth	Additional Info
<b>Ana</b>	F	Hispanic	ESL	End. 2 <sup>nd</sup> / End 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Georgia	
Ana was a sweet child who was curious about most things. She had a twin in one of the other third grade classes and I had taught Ana's older brother the year we did the academic service-learning project about the history of the school.						
<b>Arleen</b>	F	Black		Mid. 3 <sup>rd</sup> / End 4 <sup>th</sup>	California	
Arleen was a bright child who did not let her experiences impact her negatively. She was new to Chase Street, having recently moved from Atlanta. While not officially in the Gifted program, Ms. Harry did include Arleen when working with the GT students.						
<b>Asako</b>	F	Pacific Islander		Mid. 4 <sup>th</sup> / End 5 <sup>th</sup> (Feb.)	California	Moved away March
Asako was a gifted artist who approached everything with enthusiasm. She too was new to Chase Street, having lived several places because her father was in the Navy. Ms. Harry also was included Asako when working with the GT students.						
<b>Brelynn</b>	F	Black	SpEd	Beg. 1 <sup>st</sup> / End 1 <sup>st</sup>	Georgia	
Brelynn was a friend to everyone in the class. While Brelynn struggled academically, she was quite athletic and was willing to help others during games.						
<b>Carla</b>	F	Hispanic	GT	Beg. 4 <sup>th</sup> / Mid. 5 <sup>th</sup>	California	
Carla loved school and was particularly good in music. While slight for her age, she had a big personality that got everyone involved.						
<b>Carlos</b>	M	Hispanic	ESL, GT	Beg. 4 <sup>th</sup> / Mid. 5 <sup>th</sup>	Mexico	
Carlos was a smart child who knew it and had no problem letting others know as well. This created tension in the classroom at times. He could easily become frustrated if others didn't "get it" right away.						
<b>Christian</b>	M	Black	GT	End 3 <sup>rd</sup> / Beg. 5 <sup>th</sup>	Georgia	
Christian was a sweet child with a great smile. His patience made him a good partner for his classmates who struggled.						



Table A2.

*Class' Daily Schedule.*

Time	Class Schedule
7:30 – 7:55	Morning Work
8:00 – 8:45	Morning Meeting/Calendar (intro tongue twister)
8:45 – 10:15	Reader's Workshop (includes word work, and guided reading)
10:20 – 11:10	Specials (Art, Music, PE)
11:15 – 11:50	Writer's Workshop
11:50 – 12:30	Lunch & Recess
12:30 – 12:50	Read Aloud/Self-selected Reading
12:50 – 2:00	Mathematics
2:00 – 2:30	Science/Social Studies

## Appendix B

## LITERACY EVENTS

Table B1.

*Literacy Events Timeline.*

Literacy Event	Month	Time Frame	Larger Goal
1 Brainstorming	August	Three conversations on three consecutive days	Gather background knowledge
2 Interviews	September	Four interviews within a seven day period	Assess community needs
3 Reflections	October	One hour	Reflect on what we had done up to this point in the project
4 Letter to Residents	November	Homework and one hour at school	Have students summarize and explain project in writing
5 Interviewing Residents and Reflections	January	Two hours one afternoon	Meet and gather information from community participants
6 Discussion Board	January to March	Two months	Interact in writing with co-researchers and outsiders about project
7 Informational Texts	February April	Initial lessons = one week; Final product = one month	Produce informational text about project
8 Eliciting Donations	March	Homework and one hour at school	Have students summarize and explain project in writing and eliciting aide

9 Read Alouds and Responses	Across the year: <i>Miss Rumphius</i> , October; <i>Seedfolks</i> , February; <i>Fly Away Home</i> , April	One hour for each reading ( <i>Miss Rumphius</i> and <i>Fly Away Home</i> ) and response; one week for reading <i>Seedfolks</i> , with fifteen minute post-chapter discussions and 45 minute response at end of book	Listen to Children's Literature and respond in writing
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Table B2.

*Links between Literacy Events and Common Core State Standards.*

Literacy Event	CCR Anchor Standards for Reading addressed	CCR Anchor Standards for Writing addressed	CCR Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening addressed	CCR Anchor Standards for Language addressed
Brainstorming			Participating effectively in conversations & collaborations (SL1)	
Interviews		Develop & strengthen writing by ... revision (W5)	Integrate & evaluate information presented orally (SL2) Adapt speech, demonstrating command of formal English (SL6)	
Reflection		Draw evidence from literary texts (W9)		
Letter to Denney Tower		Write informative texts (W2) Produce clear coherent writing (W4) Develop & strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting.... (W5)		Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style (L3)
Resident interviews		Develop & strengthen writing by ... revision (W5)	Integrate & evaluate information presented orally (SL2) Adapt speech, demonstrating command of formal English (SL6)	

Discussion Board	Integrate and evaluate content presented (R7)	Write arguments to support claims (W1) Produce clear coherent writing (W4) Use technology to produce & publish (W6) Write routinely over time (W10)	Strategic use of digital media to express information (SL5)	Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style (L3)
Informational Texts	Analyze the structure of texts (R5)	Produce clear coherent writing (W4) Develop & strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting.... (W5) Use technology to produce & publish (W6)		Demonstrate command of grammar & usage (L1) Demonstrate command of capitalization, punctuation, & spelling (L2)
Eliciting Donations		Develop & strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting.... (W5)		Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style (L3)
Read Alouds and Response to Literature	Read closely to determine what the text says (R1) Determine central ideas or themes (R2) Assess how point of view or purpose shape the content (R6)	Draw evidence from literary texts to support analysis, reflection, & research (W9)		

## Appendix C

## BRAINSTORMING WEBS

Table C1.

*Community Ideas Chart. Ideas generated around community.*

## COMMUNITY

Neighborhood	People work	House, where we live	Government
Schools	Churches	Shopping mall	Restaurants
Community meetings	Library	Land	Parks
People	Animals	Retirement homes	Apartments
Hospitals – Doctors	Grocery stores	Community pool	Rivers
Beaches	Lake	Recycling	Clarke County
Banks	Celebrations	Criminals – Police	Funerals
Jobs	Dentist	Rules – Laws	Judges – Court



Table C2.

*Service Ideas Chart. Ideas generated around service.*

## SERVICE

Restaurant	Water	Shelter	Charity	Potters House
Room Service	Gas	Food Bank	Money	Habitat for Humanity
Hospital	Electric	Church	Food	Humane Society
Police	Cable		Clothes	Salvation Army
	Phone			

Table C3.

*Learning Ideas Chart. Ideas generated around learning.*

## LEARNING

Classes	Educational Pathway	Assessments	General
Math	Elementary	Tests	Schools help you learn
Reading	Middle school	Homework	Paying attention
Writing	High school	Grades	Learning manners
Art	College	Reading level	Knowledge
Music	Job	Studying	Thinking - Memory
Science			Activities

## Appendix D

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR AP, MAYOR, AND COMMISSIONERS

Good afternoon. Our class is planning to do a project to help our community. We would like to know about some things that you think need to be fixed in our community.

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your job? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you lived in Athens? \_\_\_\_\_

What communities do you belong to?

(How does it feel to help in our community?)

(Do you like living in our community?)

What is it like to work in our community?

How do you feel about our community?

What is your favorite thing about our community?

(Would you like a better community?)

(How can we have a better community?)

What would you like to change about our community?

If you were mayor, what would you do to help our community? (excluded from Mayor Davids interview)

What is something you already do to help our community?

Have you seen something in another community you'd like to see in Athens?

Name 3 things that need improvement?

(Name at least one thing you would change about our community.)

What can our class do to help?

When our class starts our project, would you like to help.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

*Note.* Questions in parentheses were removed after our initial interview with our AP Mr.

Kline. The final question was added after Mr. Kline's interview.

## Appendix E

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DENNEY TOWER RESIDENTS

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

Our third grade class is doing an Academic Service-learning project to help our community. After talking with Mayor Davids, and Commissioners Kinsey and Low we decided to do a project with the elderly. We also talked to Ms. Able at the Athens Housing Authority and she told us about Denney Tower.

We will be making bowls at school and decorating them. Then we will have a soup dinner at Chase Street. People will be able to buy the bowls and get some soup. We really hope you all can come. We will put all of the recipes together to make a big Soup Cookbook and sell those also.

-----  
What is your name?

Would you mind telling me what year you were born?

Please tell me about your childhood.

What did you like to play when you were little?

When you were a kid, did you play sports?

What were some of the rules you had when you were growing-up?

Who was your best friend growing up?

Did you have to do chores?

Did you have any pets growing-up? (What kind? What were their names?)

What was school like when you were a kid?

What did you like most about school?

Did you have a favorite teacher?

Would you tell me about some of the great things that have happened in your life?

Where have you lived?

Do you have children? (Grandchildren?)

What were some of your jobs?

What are some of your favorite things? Favorite animal? Favorite color? Favorite food?

Favorite season?

If you could do something to make the world beautiful, what would it be?

How long have you lived in Denney Tower?

What is it like to live at Denney Tower?

Are you allowed to have pets at Denney Tower?

Do you like soup? (What is your favorite kind?)

We will be having a soup dinner to raise money for you all, what are some things you need here at Denney Tower?

The next time we come, what activities would you like to do with us?

Thank you for letting me ask you all these questions. I really enjoy talking to you.

Appendix F

FINAL INFORMATIONAL TEXT

**Our Service-Learning Project at Denney Tower**

**by Mrs. Aaron's Third Grade Class**

## **Our Service-Learning Project by Mrs. Aaron's Third Grade Class**

### **Table of Contents**

#### **Chapter One**

What Is a Service-Learning Project?

#### **Chapter Two**

Who Are We?

#### **Chapter Three**

How We Did It... But You Can Do It Differently...

#### **Chapter Four**

Ways We Can Help the Community

#### **Resources and community members that helped...**

Commissioner Kinsey

Commissioner Low

Mayor Davids

Mrs. Able (Denney Tower)

## **Chapter One**

### **What Is a Service-Learning Project (SLP)?**

A service-learning project is a way to help the community or someone in need like the poor, the elderly, or a school. It is a way to save the community, make new friends and help someone in need. As a class, we learned about our community and ways to help out. We learned about ways to help not pollute, clean up trash, use less gas, get more books in a library, and to be helpful.

We found that interviewing people, using computers and the internet, and reading books are good ways to begin a service-learning project. Our teacher helped us to stay organized. We think that it is a good idea to write a note to the mayor if something needs improvement in the community.

We learned about academics like math (money, graphs, multiplication, subtraction and fractions), science (heat), social studies (maps, community, ways to help), and language arts (spelling, writing letters, vocabulary, reading books, and interviews) while we did our SLP.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Who Are We?**

We are in Mrs. Aaron's class. We have 15 people in our class, 10 girls and 5 boys. We go to Chase Street School and Mrs. Aaron is our teacher. We live in Athens, Georgia. We are the flying piglets. We like pigs. We hate for people to eat pigs. We play kickball at recess. We read, do math, science and social studies. We like pizza. We are good at math. We don't like when we get in trouble. Sometimes we fight with each other. Sometimes we do not get angry and sometimes we do.

Our names are Arleen, Carlos, Xander, Terrance, Brelynn, Ana, Sacsha, Tara, Teresa, Carla, Christian, Lourdes, Asako and Mrs. Aaron. Thirteen of us are nine years old and two of us are eight years old. We like all kinds of animals. Our favorite colors are blue, red, pink, green, gold, and rainbow.

## **Chapter Three**

### **How We Did It... But You Can Do It Differently...**

You don't have to do it the way we did it, you can make your own service-learning project a little different and creative. This is the way we did it:

We needed to get ready for the community. So, that means thinking about what the community needs. We talked about our idea to people and asked questions to people about their ideas.

#### **This Is the Way We Did It:**

- talked about the community
- interviews with Commissioner Kinsey, Commissioner Low, Mayor Davids, and Ms. Able.
- decided to help Denney Tower residents
- interviews with Denney Tower residents
- planned to raise money to buy books and magazines for the residents
- made charts
- made a timeline
- planned a soup dinner
- had a soup dinner to raise money
- wrote thank you cards to the Commissioner and the Mayor
- went to Denny Tower three times and presented our service-learning project
- wrote a book about our SLP to share our ideas with other kids

## **Chapter Four**

### **Ways We Can Help the Community**

When we interviewed the mayor and the commissioners we learned about different ways to help. Here are some of the things we learned we could do.

If you see a piece of trash, pick it up. Then throw it in the trashcan.

Recycle, if you have an electric toy and it breaks, don't throw it away, recycle it for someone else to use it to build something new.

Conserve water and electricity.

Ride a bike or take a walk instead of driving a car.

Plant more gardens and more parks and cut down less trees.

Make more compost and save natural habitats.

Build more shelters and hospitals.

Make more jobs.

Build more bike paths.

If you mess up a sheet of paper, either put it in a box or save it in a stack of paper.

Be nice to neighbors and friends in your community.

Donate gently used clothing to people who need it.

Volunteer.