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Introduction



The idea for this book came to us in the extraordinary year of 2020. The COVID-19 virus had shut down schools and society at large; people were fighting in the streets over political differences; the United States was as polarized as it has been in its history; police and vigilante murders of unarmed Black people seemed to be weekly occurrences; societal inequities grounded in race, immigrant status, gender, and other factors became the source of concern for many and produced a backlash in others; a contested election produced unsubstantiated accusations of fraud that were widely embraced by the losing side; and the events were all in place to produce the January 6, 2021, insurrection against Congress that has further divided the nation. It was a year to remember. And it was a year that many wish they could forget.

These events all occurred during the nation's first attempt at a near-universal, COVID-driven effort to provide students in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education with remote learning. Although online learning had been touted as the education of the future for several years, once it was underway, it became a national source of controversy, along with much else about the shutdown and its cause: COVID-19. Several concerns arose:

- The technology wasn't up to the task of allowing for fluid online instruction, either in terms of extensive ownership of personal devices or an infrastructure designed to support universal connectivity.
- Many teachers, including the “digital natives” comprising the younger demographic of the profession, had little experience with intensive, extensive online teaching.
- Parents confined to their homes found that working, parenting, and homeschooling were more than they could manage, leaving many to protest school closures and insist on the reopening of physical buildings, in spite of guidelines recommending against gatherings.
- Schools that did attempt to open—often without any measures to protect the health of students, teachers, staffers, custodians, and other workers who were crammed into spaces too small to accommodate them with proper distancing and filled with people who refused to wear masks—frequently shut down when outbreaks occurred and the facility's safety was compromised.

- *Learning loss* became a buzzword as people expressed concern that teachers and students were having a hard time keeping up with the demands of the curriculum and its schedule, pacing chart, scope and sequence, and their benchmarks and accompanying standardized tests.
- The issue of standardized testing, controversial to begin with, rose to the foreground as people felt that if the curriculum itself is hard to teach during a shutdown, then its standardized assessment component is unfair to students and, in turn, teachers, whose evaluations often rested on test scores. This belief was contested by others, many from outside the classroom, who insisted that testing must go on—and on and on—because of its critical role in enforcing the curriculum and the standards it embeds, whose validity was beyond question.

Again, it was a year to remember. And it was a year that many wish they could forget. If nothing else, the events of 2020 suggested that it was time to rethink a lot about U.S. society, including education.

Why This Book?

Among the concerns that drove us to produce this volume is the issue of learning loss (Smagorinsky, 2020a). Many people were concerned that students would fall behind, or be left behind, because of disruptions to the teaching of the curriculum and its standards and tests. What might happen if students missed the lesson on the distinction between *metonymy* and *synecdoche* or even how to spell them properly? How could kids recover if they lost connectivity during a computer module on the important dates of the Treaty of Versailles? This knowledge would be lost and never retrieved, suggesting that instruction should not be interrupted or compromised, no matter how fiercely the novel coronavirus raged, how inflamed the streets were as people burned in anger, and how precariously the nation's political institutions responded to attacks on their legitimacy.

Our concern was quite different. We felt that the times provided one of the greatest learning opportunities in the nation's history. There was so much to teach and learn about social justice and inequity, the U.S. Constitution, public health, and the enduring literary themes of the American Dream, cultural conflict, social responsibility, progress, success, the banality of evil, and many more topics. We believe that falling behind on understanding the difference between a gerund and a present participle is dwarfed by the problems of falling behind on understanding how society works to meet its stated ideals and even how those ideals—such as the Constitutional edict that Black people count as 60% of a person—were constructed as political compromises rather than manna from governmental heaven. Other Constitutional elements, such as the assumption that women were too

insignificant to be granted the right to vote, required no negotiation among the Founding Fathers and their infinite, unimpeachable wisdom, standing instead as biological facts requiring no attention.

Schools have often taken a head-in-the-sand approach to social upheaval. On September 11, 2001, when the nation was in an immediate and terrifying crisis, some school administrators issued orders to prevent students from learning that their nation was under attack from non-U.S. terrorists. In one of history's most teachable moments, they chose to teach students that it's more important to focus on abstract academic learning than to engage with a world whose foundation is shifting. Such schools emphasized that it's much better to memorize facts about the 19th century than to look out the window at the mushroom cloud threatening your existence today.

But if school is for learning, the events and lessons of these times should be central to the curriculum. Returning to instruction oriented toward formalism—the backbone of standards-based curricula—seems hollow and oblivious. Answering multiple-choice questions has been the student's task in corporate schooling, in which curriculum and instruction are driven by tests that measure what's easy to reduce for the sake of measurement, developed by Big Educational Business rather than the teachers of the students in front of them. Current events, in contrast, demand that educators reconsider learning through such means, which have bored students since the advent of the school curriculum and, in the face of a national crisis, are less meaningful than ever.

We have long advocated for teaching thematically (e.g., Skerrett, 2015c; Smagorinsky, 2018) or according to what might be termed *thematic genres* such as protest literature, fake and real news, propaganda, and other focuses such as identity and literacy that enable a concentrated look at a relevant topic.

Each theme potentially provides possibilities for students—and teachers—to learn about the events surrounding them, reflect on their own roles as citizens, and consider ways to take constructive action. In other words, they move outside academic abstractions and apply their learning in more relevant and authentic contexts and tasks. They do so with the understanding that their inquiries might be upsetting or challenging but may also lead to new knowledge about procedures and strategies for inquiry and investigation and insights about the world around them. The imperative for social justice thus takes a corporeal form rather than being another dry, academic topic.

The teacher's role in such efforts requires a balance. Many teachers have been disciplined in recent years for overtly expressing their political opinions to their students or on social media, denouncing opponents and advocating for their preferences. There are risks involved in opening classrooms up to what O'Donnell-Allen (2011) calls “tough” topics on

challenging social and personal issues through which, as her book subtitle says, students can “change the world.” Using the classroom podium as a pulpit for one’s ideology might help a teacher score points with one side or the other but may invite criticism and censure and even produce effects that oppose their intentions (Smagorinsky, 2019). We have written this book to position the teacher as the orchestrator of student activity through which teachers inquire into topics that matter in a contentious world without imposing their personal political views on students, whose task is to construct a worldview of their own.

This approach would require a reconsideration of how schools are structured. Although they typically announce their commitment to diversity in their mission statements, they are immobilized in many ways by the deep structure of schools (Smagorinsky, 2020b). U.S. schools, and schools from around the globe, have been built on the premise that schools serve the role of assimilating diverse people into a national identity. This foundation has produced the Common Core State Standards; Hirsch’s (1987) notion of cultural literacy; standardized curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and other means by which this conception of the proper American is grounded in a white perspective that permeates the curriculum.

This effort to standardize education has roots in Horace Mann’s original vision of schooling as a socialization mechanism for the diverse immigrants of the 19th century. It has promoted the “melting pot” metaphor for U.S. society, one in which everyone gravitates toward the dominant white culture (Skerrett, 2008, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2021). This deep structure of schools has proven to be very durable, in spite of challenges from the more recent movement to honor multiculturalism and to respect the many cultures that make up the U.S. society. Because of the deeply engrained structure that Eurocentric values have established in schools, multiculturalism has rarely penetrated beneath the surface of educational practice and has been resisted by those who feel threatened by the legitimacy of other ways of being. Schools continue to force conformity by policing students’ hair and clothing styles, punishing cultural ways of speaking, maintaining a literary canon founded by (largely male) authors of European descent, and engaging in many other visible and invisible means of using schools as a force on behalf of conservation in a time of pluralism (Portes & Smagorinsky, 2010).

Having a “conversation about race” is a common, if often toothless and ineffectual, solution to addressing inequities. Unless that conversation becomes a hard inquiry into a school’s humanity and fundamental design, we’ll be back in the same place when the current fuss dies down: Students return to schooling that has been scripted by people from another place and time while being gripped by current events that will, in many ways, shape their futures. Those who are concerned about a learning gap will find that returning to business as usual is the best way to create one.

Our book is focused on a much more critical learning gap, one that may open its jaws if schools return to business as usual, to its role as cultural assimilation apparatus tooled with formalist means: memorizing facts, speaking in textbook English, writing structured essays that may be vacuous in content as long as the preferred features are present, and so on. Rather, we take the position that 2020 is a watershed year in U.S. history that cannot be shut out at the school doors so that the curriculum—designed outside the bounds of current events and within the bounds of standardization—may remain intact. If the events of 2020 do not become part of schooling, then schooling will live down to its reputation as being irrelevant to students' lives and the social worlds they inhabit.

Preventing Learning Loss in the Real World

The Urban Dictionary defines “Keep it 100” as “(1) The daily intentional effort to grow and maintain healthy relationships with others; (2) Being dedicated to a lifestyle of integrity; (3) Honest effort, no malicious motives.” It refers to living a life that is authentic and truthful, keeping it 100% real. Keeping it 100 means living life honestly, without artifice or misdirection. For schools to keep it 100, they need to provide an education that is authentic, direct, worthwhile, realistic, relevant, and in tune with the times.

We have organized this book around the creation of opportunities for critical, inquiry-oriented, social justice, constructivist, multicultural, multiliteracy, and transnational investigations into topics that students find engaging. We propose that they can be approached in a variety of ways and that students can express their findings and understandings through a host of media, from formal research to documentary films to opinion pieces to ideological art to dramatic productions and more. Ultimately, the students would be led toward social action that goes beyond the typical writing process stages that end at publication, which is often simply a posting or sharing act. If the early 2020s have taught us anything, it's that action to produce justice ought to be an essential part of learning in school (Johnson et al., 2018).

The delicate part of this educational process is concerned with how to take an open-ended, inductive approach to social justice in classrooms where multiculturalism includes members of the dominant culture itself: students who stand to benefit from maintaining social inequities. Creating a truly constructivist, inquiry-oriented classroom that enrolls students whose families uphold the status quo is among the greatest challenges of teachers who undertake such instruction in the name of equity and mutual respect. Teachers who are committed to doing this work also face the challenge of finding learning communities and resources that will promote their knowledge and practices of inquiry-based and justice-oriented instruction. This book is designed to support the teaching of those

who believe in education as a means of achieving social transformation toward an equitable realization of the goals established in its founding documents, minus the discrimination baked into their contents, no matter how they were interpreted at the time or any time since.

We take readers through six units of study, each coauthored by a teacher we enlisted to road-test the activities in their own classrooms. Chapter 1 serves as a foundational unit, “Exploring Identity: Who Am I in Relation to Others and the World?” coauthored with Mary Grady of the Boston Public Schools. The chapter title poses the unit’s essential question. This unit enables an inquiry into the self, into relationships with others in the classroom, and into students’ relationships with their communities and the broader world. This question is one that all members of the classroom, including teachers, explore together in order to foster students’ self-awareness. They investigate and critically examine different identities, experiences, values, and beliefs within the classroom, and begin re-storying identities and values toward collectively building justice-oriented classroom communities. The chapter proposes that the creation of justice-oriented classroom communities sets the stage for students and teachers to engage in new forms of learning and action that are essential in these times of crisis—and other times, too—and thus to take on the challenges posed in the book’s remaining chapters.

The chapter includes a variety of literacy activities, such as reflective journal writing; partnered, small-group, and whole-group discussion; audio-recorded interviews of peers, family, and community members; self- and ethnographic observations; and a variety of texts, including multimodal and online. Through these inquiries, students and teachers can explore the question of “Who am I in relation to others and the world?” and move toward justice-oriented classroom communities.

In Chapter 2, we detail a unit on “Promoting Critical Inquiry: Discrimination and Civil Rights,” coauthored by Chaka Mason, a teacher in Jackson, Mississippi. *Critical pedagogy* is concerned with how power works in and across social groups. In this chapter, we take the principles of critical pedagogy and show how to put them into practice in service of inquiries into societal inequity. Critical pedagogies are designed to help students become more aware of their surroundings, especially when they are structured unfairly, and how to envision alternatives and act to help them become reality. The endgame for anyone undertaking a critical inquiry is to take action to change society so that it strives toward its goals of equity and fairness.

Students are positioned in critical inquiries as having agency. In contrast, much of school puts students in receptive, reactive roles. They learn facts, take on the syntax emphasized in textbooks, are told what to read and what to learn from it, and so on. A critical stance,

in contrast, places students in an active role, one in which they seek out information, evaluate its truth value, reflect on what the information suggests about society, and take action to make their society more socially just. This approach also shifts the teacher's role from being an authority to being a fellow inquirer, albeit one who provides students with a process for carrying out their investigations. Rather than having the curriculum guide state the content knowledge that students must master, a critical pedagogy views knowledge as procedural and strategic. Knowledge is constructed by students in their ongoing development of a worldview and sense of responsibility within a society. In a critical literacy framework, then, being literate involves more than decoding print texts and reproducing their conventions in writing, as is the case in a reactive curriculum. Literacy instead produces a frame of mind that is open to understanding the world as the students experience and engage with it. Rather than serving the historical role of memorizing and repeating information, a critical stance emphasizes the construction of new knowledge in service of addressing the structures that invest some people with power and others with limited agency.

Chapter 3 describes a unit on “Developing Social Change Activists: Equity Audits” that builds on methods of critical inquiry, coauthored with Alexandria (Alex) Smith, who teaches English language arts in Texas. The discussions in this chapter and the proposed units extend from Chapter 2 in that this chapter centralizes students as social change agents in the communities in which they claim membership, from the local through the global. Students are already deeply embedded in their communities, particularly the immediate neighborhoods in which they live and go to school. They likely feel strong connections to their cities and nation, and some already have developed some commitment as global/transnational citizens. Often, students have deep senses of what is strong and beautiful about the communities to which they belong and the challenges and injustices within and around them. This chapter invites us, as educators, to be more systematic in how we teach students to use inquiry methods to learn more deeply about their communities—what they notice to be strengths and concerns—and how we help them to identify how they can become involved in strategic actions that stand to make the contexts that they care about more just and beautiful.

We offer an approach in which, drawing on Freire's (2000) pedagogy, students begin by taking stock of the world around them, starting with the communities and institutions that affect them (and that they simultaneously influence) every day, moving outward from the local to the global. This approach also takes an asset-based and critical perspective on communities so that students can be guided to notice the strengths and resources that need to be protected and developed and the problems and inequities that need to be addressed. Students become knowledgeable about social phenomena, along with the groups, structures,

and institutions that need to be explored to understand how they are contributing to the fostering of a healthy community or addressing a social problem or how they may be part of the problem that needs to be redressed. Students then develop membership and allyships with causes that serve and provide resources to the community and projects already underway to promote equity. Finally, students learn to think innovatively so that they can become stronger contributors in advancing the work of social justice.

Chapter 4 is focused on a unit on “Teaching Empathy and Understanding: Cultural Conflict,” coauthored with Eric Weiss who teaches in Cincinnati, Ohio. The United States is embroiled in a series of conflicts: between white police and Black citizens, nativists and immigrants, liberals and conservatives, science believers and science deniers, and much more. In these clashes, people have often depicted their opponents through caricature and distortion to accentuate differences and diminish their adversaries’ humanity. The absence of feelings of compassion and understanding that people have exhibited for those different from themselves has produced great emotional chasms that are realized in political clashes (Haidt, 2012). In this chapter, we consider how the curriculum could include attention to empathy as a way of helping to heal the many divides experienced in the United States in times of deep disagreement about how society ought to be conducted and how the national culture might move forward.

This chapter begins by exploring the following:

- the meaning of empathy
- the fact that some people are more naturally empathic than others
- the foundational role of emotions in cognition
- the challenge of establishing empathic understanding between social groups who are dissimilar
- the likelihood that people living privileged lives have difficulty empathizing with those living under stress
- the potential for empathic thinking to disrupt power relationships in society
- problems that follow from the “empathic fallacy” (the belief that one can change a narrative by merely offering another, “better” one)
- other issues that are related to the above matters

The chapter then illustrates the possibilities of teaching students perspective-taking procedures for acting in ways that produce an empathic response to people unlike

themselves. The context is a unit on cultural conflict of the sort that has followed from a lack of mutual understanding and a human tendency to view people who are different from themselves as outsiders, barbarians, threats, and of less advanced or sophisticated cultures.

We next move to “A Blueprint for Racial Literacy Teaching: Distribution of Power” in Chapter 5, coauthored with Alina Pruitt of the University of Texas–Austin and Bavu Blakes of the Manor (Texas) Independent School District. The activities are designed to help teachers and students develop and apply a race-centric perspective to the school curriculum, social life, and institutional structures, policies, and practices. We outline an approach in which teachers and students learn about the definition of literacy, become familiar with ideas related to racial literacy (such as race as a social construct), and learn about how to use and apply their racial literacy to understand better how race functions in their own lives, in schools (its curriculum, structures, policy, and practices), and in society and societal institutions. Teachers and students will read texts and excerpts from scholarship, research, and popular media to understand, build, and apply their racial literacies. The chapter offers specific examples of how teachers and students can engage in learning activities that deepen their knowledge and abilities to use racial literacies to understand educational and social issues and develop responses and actions that can make school and classroom practices more racially just. The chapter also explores and provides examples of how teachers and students can extend their knowledge and actions related to racial literacy and racial justice in schools and classrooms to understand and respond to broader societal phenomena.

The chapter acknowledges that doing work around racial literacy is courageous and essential for students’ learning for today’s world and beyond. The readings and ideas provided for developing racial literacies and applying them to school and social/institutional practices are understood as resources for teachers who will be at varying points of knowledge, comfort, and feelings of readiness to undertake this work. Students themselves will be at varying developmental points, with development understood as a twisting path rather than a direct, linear route to mature adulthood. Revisiting the question of “Who am I in relation to others and the world?” (see Chapter 1) will be important for maintaining a healthy classroom community, cultivating empathic understanding (see Chapter 4), and working to restore relationships. It is inevitable that racial wounds will be discovered and exposed, and existing wounds may experience further challenge in this necessary learning (Grinage, 2019), suggesting the importance of teachers and students extending grace to themselves and to one another when they find the quest frustrating and prohibitive. Courageous teachers and students, and courageous learning, are crucial in these times of crisis (and other times, too).

The unit in Chapter 6 is concerned with “Defining Disputed Terms: Patriotism,” coauthored with Maggie Phipps, a teacher at a racially and ethnically diverse school outside Atlanta, Georgia. Patriotism is often invoked to justify actions during times of stress. Dictionaries define *patriotism* as the vigorous love of, devotion to, and support of one’s country and readiness to defend it against enemies or detractors. In the 1960s, people responded to protesters against the Vietnam War by saying, “America: Love it or leave it!” In the early 2020s, many people view protests against racial injustice as attacks on America. Yet others argue that dissent is patriotic, that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, or that patriotism is the first refuge of a scoundrel. Further, the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrectionists claimed patriotism as their motivation for attempting to overturn the election results; patriotism, in turn, served as the battle cry of those who opposed them. Given the different conceptions of what patriotism is, how it is acted on, what it achieves, what it destroys, who practices it, and how different definitions produce different calls to action, the theme of patriotism makes a worthy choice of concepts to feature in a unit that emphasizes the process of producing an extended definition.

Definitional work is central to many legal questions that have troubled the courts: What is pornography? What constitutes self-defense? When does life begin? It is thus an important sort of intellectual task to undertake in school, with the understanding that patriotism is more a fundamentally emotional feeling than a solely reasoned position. Applied to the question of what constitutes patriotism, an extended definition can help identify the stances that people take toward either societal inequity or responses to societal inequity through various forms of protest. The unit will include a series of activities and projects designed to interrogate the notion of patriotism and help students come to their own conclusions about what a patriot does in service to a nation’s prosperity.

We hope that teachers who aspire to engage their students in meaning-based inquiries will benefit from these possibilities. There has long been a learning loss in schools when it comes to interrogating the world, as students are required to memorize, pick correct options from multiple choices, fill in missing informational blanks, and otherwise sleepwalk through tedious tasks in education. Meanwhile, their social worlds turn at a frantic pace. We believe that students benefit from developing tools designed to promote and support their inquiries, and we hope that this book is among the means that may assist teachers in planning activities through which students grow in their capacity to understand and act in society.