Critical literacies in the making: Social class and identities in the early reading classroom

Stephanie Jones
University of Georgia, USA

Abstract

Drawing from a four-year critical ethnographic study of young girls and their literacy practices inside and outside school, this article foregrounds a lived pedagogical moment when conflicting discourses about reading instruction collided in a critically focused second-grade classroom. Through my analyses I make the argument that the pervasiveness of autobiographical connection-making with texts in early reading instruction positions readers to align themselves with the practices and ideological stances of texts rather than to challenge and critique them. This argument will be extended to consider particular literacy-infused experiences of students who are persistently marginalized in society and written out of existence by mainstream children's literature produced for early readers that sees class-privileged lives as normal. In the conclusion, I suggest that although the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999) offers four families of practices 'necessary for literacy in new conditions, but none in and of itself is sufficient for literate citizens or subjects' (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p.4), the model needs extending to consider issues relating to how marginalized readers may need to feel a sense of entitlement in order to position themselves as text analysts before they can begin challenging and questioning mainstream texts that consistently position their working-class lives as non-existent.

Keywords

children's meaning making, critical literacy events, discourses about reading, early reading, ethnography, identity, social class

'I had goldfish at my party too'

A second-grade girl, Cadence, made the above statement as she read and responded to an early reading text, *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day Ever*

Corresponding author:
Stephanie Jones, University of Georgia, 629 Aderhold Hall, Department of Elementary and Social Studies Education, Athens, GA 30602, USA
Email: sjones1@uga.edu

(Rylant, 1995), a story about a boy and his dog, during independent reading in her classroom. By this point in my three-year ethnographic study of eight girls from working-poor families in the Midwest of the USA, I knew Cadence and her family well. She did not have goldfish at her birthday party, nor did she have a birthday celebration that even slightly resembled the one constructed in Cynthia Rylant's text. As a teacher-researcher in this context, I responded pedagogically to Cadence's statement and represent that response and my analysis of it here through a close reading of moment-to-moment teaching and learning intended to work toward critical literacy practices. My central questions in this teacher-research endeavour were:

1. Is the Four Resources Model sufficient for analysing reading instruction and/or planning reading instruction?

2. Are there reading practices being promoted in the classroom that are hindering the construction of students as text analysts? And if so, what are they and what can be done about them?

3. Does a critical literacies pedagogy change when students are from historically (and presently) marginalized groups of people?

Throughout this article I will make the argument that the pervasiveness of autobiographical connection-making to texts in early reading instruction causes readers to align themselves with the practices and ideological stances of texts rather than to challenge and critique them. This argument will be extended to consider particular literacy-infused experiences of students who are persistently marginalized in society and written out of existence by mainstream children's literature produced for early readers that sees class-privileged lives as normal. In the conclusion, I suggest that although the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999) offers four families of reading practices 'necessary for literacy in new conditions, but none in and of itself is sufficient for literate citizens or subjects' (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p. 4), the model needs extending to consider issues of identity and agency of those very subjects within pedagogical practices. Before presenting the data, however, I will discuss some of the nuanced theories and practices that both drive and reflexively inform my pedagogy and research: critical literacies and 'walking the walk' of theory as a teacher-researcher.

Critical literacies

Critical literacy, by design, eludes definition and thus necessitates a specific discussion of the particular lenses being used in theory or practice. This article is grounded in a nuanced and expansive reading of what is meant by critical literacies in both theory and practice. The nexus of critical, feminist and post-structural theories of language, power and identity is a significant part of my construction of a critical perspective of literacy and one that assumes that power relations operating within and through language construct inequities and systematically marginalize particular groups of people (e.g. Butler, 1993; Comber, 1998; Gee, 1996). This combination of theories provides the tools to deconstruct practices with in and around text while foregrounding issues of privilege, marginalization and the construction of subjects.

The lens used in this article is also heavily influenced by sociocultural theories of language, literacy and power which are often conceptualized as New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002, 2004; Street, 2001, 2003, 2005). NLS provides insights into what teachers and researchers can learn from deep and long-term engagement with communities, including the kinds of literacies used in the local context, the impetus for various literacy practices and the local power relations operating through such literacy practices. As a qualitative researcher in a longitudinal study that was the larger context of this particular article, I embraced the theories and methodologies of NLS, but was aware of what are now referred to as the 'limits of the local' (Brandt and Clinton, 2002) and the missing discourse of agency and power within literacy learning spaces.

Moje and Lewis (2007) have generatively offered a perspective of literacy research that engages both the invaluable insights from NLS as well as the critiques of NLS being too focused on the local context without at tending to how the local is both impacted by, and impacts upon, the broader global context. Additionally, Moje and Lewis explicitly foreground lived concerns of power, identity and agency in literacy pedagogy within what they call critical sociocultural literacy research. Their assertions, particularly around agency, are an integral part of my understanding of critical literacies.

Critical literacies are then, for the purposes of this article, recursive and reflexive practices that are engaged by powerful agents to deconstruct and reconstruct texts, textual practices and social relations where such practices take place (Clarke, 2005; Jones and Clarke, 2007; O'Brien, 1994, 2001;

Spector, 2007; Spector and Jones, 2009). An overarching theme of these practices is, for me, the construction of subjects who are able to *feel* entitled to position themselves to engage in deconstructive and reconstructive practices, something that connects directly to issues of identity and power. And always, for me, the ultimate goal of critical literacies is to work towards social justice, whether that be taking on oppressive social structures or, what is more likely on a daily basis, working in small ways to make changes in local contexts that may lead to broader action (Comber and Nixon, 2008; Comber et al., 2007; Comber and Thompson, 2002; Jones, 2006a; Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001).

In-the-making: Walking the walk of academic theories

Researchers often study phenomena to get a better idea of what practice could look like, offering teachers the resulting designs and the challenge of working toward enacting designs in real classrooms where students' and teachers' social, historic and political selves engage in complex ways. The questions guiding this inquiry were not derived from my position as an outside researcher but were instead catapulted by challenges I faced in my work with young readers inside the classroom as their regular teacher. Mahiri (2004) writes about researchers' willingness to walk the walk of their own ideas in classroom settings where numerous forces are at work influencing the implementation of ideas oriented toward practice. Experiencing these influential forces first hand, rather than hearing about them later from practising teachers, impacted on Mahiri's work as a practitioner but has also informed his work as a researcher. One example he writes about is how it was easier to engage and motivate the fifth-grade students with whom he was working *after* he began spending informal time with students outside the classroom:

- These activities became almost as important as any of my original plans. . . a better understanding of their friendship networks and hierarchies, issues surrounding gender, interests, and skills beyond the classroom would often be revealed in interactions and observations on the schoolyard. (Mahiri, 2004, p. 471)

A deeper understanding of students, whom they were and what they did across contexts was a crucial aspect that informed Mahiri's curricular and relational decisions in the classroom. Walking the walk of his research designs in school settings led Mahiri to comprehend better the complexities of daily teaching and to reconsider research-based practice as something that must always be tailored to each particular context.

This article is one construction of my efforts to walk the walk of critical literacy theory and practice as described earlier, and to attempt to do what I advocate weekly in my undergraduate and graduate courses where I regularly espouse the values of the Four Resources Model and critical literacy pedagogies. Informed by a year's worth of ethnography in the school and community where this study took place, I stepped into the classroom as a full-time second-grade teacher for eleven weeks, aiming to engage the students in critical literacy practices.

An introduction to St Francis and the researcher

An urban, high-poverty and predominantly white neighbourhood in the Midwest of the USA, St Francis[1] is often ridiculed in jokes and sarcastic remarks within surrounding communities (Jones, 2007); it is not unlike the marginalized white populations represented in the work of Heilman (2004) and Hicks (2004, 2005). Negative stereotyping of the neighbourhood is not only noticed by community members but also felt by very young children and − at least on occasion − believed by them (Jones, 2004), thus producing a particular sociopolitical *space* for living, learning and conducting research (e.g. Comber and Nixon, 2008; Leander and Sheehy, 2004). Very small in area, St Francis's 0.57 square miles is home to many families with rural roots in the Appalachian region of the USA. Migrating to big Midwestern cities to find work throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, families often located themselves within close proximity of extended family members to ensure ongoing contact and mutual support. St Francis was one such destination, and has continued to be an enclave of white families with rural ties, with a recent influx of Guatemalan and Mexican men and young families. Economic earning power, however, has dwindled with the changing face of industrialization and a global market − leaving a traditionally working-class community to deal with unstable working poverty (Hicks, 2005). A neighbourhood homeless shelter has also served as a point of transition in the landscape, as families with no extended support systems are transplanted into the community, many of whom are African-American.

As a researcher, I align myself with a number of scholars from working-class and poor backgrounds investigating complex issues around social class, marginalization, schooling and identity (e.g. Bettie, 2003; Hicks, 2002; Reay, 1998; Rose, 1989, 2004; Van Galen, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Like all the girls and mothers in this study, I grew up in a working-poor home and neighbourhood and was confronted often by various obstacles to academic

achievement and the gaining and maintaining of connections to school prac-
tices. Like all the girls represented in this article, I am white and have lived
most my life among white working-class and poor people in communities not
unlike St Francis. My history, then, offers some insight to the inner workings
of St Francis life and the material realities afforded by poverty – but my
current status as a middle-class white woman was not unproblematic
during the study (see Jones, 2007). From the outset of this research study,
class has been foregrounded while being considered within the complex
intersections of race and gender.

Methodologies and data sources

The critical ethnographic study from which the data in this article stem
spanned three years and was focused on eight young girls inside and outside
school during their first-, second- and third-grade years, with follow-up
visits and interviews during their fourth-grade year and occasional interac-
tions via telephone or mail between visits. The participants were chosen via
convenience sampling, as they were the girls assigned to the first- and
second-grade classrooms where I was conducting the research, and their
families agreed to let them participate. Because ethnographic understanding
involves investigating relationships participants have with others, data on all
students in the classroom were collected with permission from their care-
takers. In the case of at least two girls (including Annie and Maggie in this
paper), permission to participate was granted but they did not attend any of
the after-school meetings or the summer programme I facilitated, thus
resulting in their peripheral participation and not among the eight focal
girls in the study.

   This paper narrows the lens to data collected during the first eleven weeks of
the girls' second-grade year when I faced challenges in the enactment of a
critical literacies pedagogy. One challenge in particular – negotiating the
fourth of the four families of practices promoted in the Four Resources
Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999) as children
read texts during independent reading – was evident in a salient literacy
event early in the autumn term. This event marks the beginning of the collec-
tion and analysis of data concerning the particular topics of this paper. Data
sources around this focal point include classroom observations, video-taped
readings and discussions in large groups, audio-taped small group discussions,
interviews, children's writing samples and descriptions of children's books. The
Four Resources Model was used as an analytical tool in the close reading of the

moment-to-moment teaching and learning around a *Henry and Mudge* text in the classroom. However, problems arose with using the model as a tool when I made a strategic pedagogic decision in reading that did not 'fit' into any of the four resources in the model. This stumbling block is however generative in reconsidering the Four Resources Model and working to expand it to include particular considerations around power, identity, agency and early reading texts when working with a group such as these typically marginalized students.

Back to the goldfish: Tacit acceptance of class normative experiences in *Henry and Mudge*

The *Henry and Mudge* stories are written by Cynthia Rylant and serve early developing readers in many ways, including readable texts, the support of illustrations for problem-solving difficult words, the construction of the main character as a child (and therefore assumed to connect with child readers), and the many books within the series that build on knowledge of characters, places and plots. Such characteristics are deemed important for early readers as they negotiate sign–symbol relationships, decoding strategies and constructing understandings through interactions with print. But, like all texts, the series signifies meaning beyond these print-based scaffolds. The storylines take place in a white family's experiences where the mother, father, young boy and dog live in a free-standing two-storey house with a wide front porch, large front yard and a spacious backyard with a swing and a picnic table framed by a white picket fence. Illustrations depicting the interior of the house show a bedroom for Henry where he has a twin-size wood-framed bed, an aquarium, wood floors and feature rug. The family eats at the dining room table together, has a separate table and chairs in the kitchen and something that resembles a breakfast bar. A full basement is available for storage and there is a tool-shed with rows of tools and various materials used for working outside and around the house. The parents throw elaborate birthday parties for Henry and have relatives who live in nice homes in the countryside with materially rich interiors.

In *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All* (Rylant, 1995) Henry invites friends to his home to take part in a birthday party. Well-groomed and dressed-up guests are welcomed by colourful streamers wrapped around columns on the front porch and balloons filling the rocking chair and stretching into the air from their tied positions on either side of the front steps. The children's exquisitely decorated packages with perfect handmade-looking bows are piled up in the living room as they make their way to the backyard for the

fun and games set up by Henry's mum and dad. The text reads (Rylant, 1995, pp. 22–23):

- In the backyard
- Henry's mother and Henry's father
- had fixed games.
- There was ringtoss.
- There was go-fishing.
- There were potato-sack races.
- And hanging from a tree
- was a big blue piñata
- shaped like a donkey.

The printed text alone does not necessarily convey social class distinction, but coupled with the images of a spacious and well-maintained home, a reader might get the sense that Henry, Mudge and Henry's parents are financially comfortable and able to provide for their material needs and desires. Unlike many of the multicultural or social issues (Leland et al., 1999) books I had used for whole-group and small-group conversations in this particular classroom, *Henry and Mudge* was a series of books many students were able to read during their self-selected independent reading time. And although we had engaged in much critically focused work through whole-class read-alouds and small-group discussions within social issues and multicultural texts (e.g. Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), and I had worked to make critical literacies as much about positive constructions of students' lived experiences as about deconstructive practices (e.g. Comber and Nixon, 2008), students were not reading *Henry and Mudge* books critically during their independent reading time. Instead, they were even constructing fictions about their own lives incorporating themes from the series as a way to align themselves with the text. For example, after reading about Henry's elaborate birthday party with games, prizes, balloons and many friends leaving the party with goldfish in plastic bags, Cadence stated, 'I had gold-fish at my party too.'

Cadence made this statement to her peers as I was walking from reader to reader during an independent reading session early in second grade. Whereas her mother Lori had years of wisdom built upon critically reading of the world from a marginalized perspective (as we will see later), Cadence was a seven-year-old girl immersed in a school and a reading culture where texts, and mainstream texts especially, were not questioned or critiqued but perhaps perceived as ideals of society. Baker and

Freebody (1989) anticipated such complications with early reading texts when they critically analyzed 163 basal and supplementary beginning reading books with an eye toward how child status is marked in and across texts written specifically for children. Proposing that social theory is embedded in early reading materials, Baker and Freebody (1989, p. 135) argued that habitually constructed versions of children and childhood 'invite tacit acceptance by child-readers of the particular cultural images of childhood they contain'.

Henry and Mudge stories might seem more contemporary and appealing than the corpus of basal readers analysed by Baker and Freebody (1989), the basal series included in Luke's (1987, 1988) social analyses of texts and the top-selling federally endorsed basal readers critically analysed by Jordan (2005), but they continue to construct a particular kind of privileged life as normal and therefore position readers to accept the text's authority on normalcy. Baker and Freebody (1989, p. 135) argue that:

- Young readers whose identities as children differ from the images embedded in the texts... may have various difficulties in relating seriously to these books. For all children there may exist the practical problem of knowing how to treat these images while taking part in reading instruction based on them, in such a way as to appear to be concurring with the school-endorsed portrayals in the texts.

Cadence probably found herself in this precarious position as she read *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All*. The images she was confronted with did not match her experiences of birthday celebrations, but given the fact that these books were easily located and even highlighted in the classroom library as good books for early readers, Cadence could have read the underlying text of school endorsement of the stories and their representations of normal childhood experiences. Additionally, Cadence was a developing reader within an era in the USA when connection-making reading pedagogy is pervasive, including in this particular classroom and specifically taught by me, her classroom teacher.

Making connections with and through text is ever present in contemporary practitioner-oriented texts (e.g. Harvey and Goudvis, 2000; Keene and Zimmerman, 1997; Miller, 2002; Trinkle, 2009) as well as in research articles about reading (e.g. Bluestein, 2002; Bond, 2001; Hammerberg, 2004; Kaser and Short, 1998; Ketch, 2005). Much of this work is grounded in schema theories of reading comprehension (e.g. Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1977). Reading research in the 1980s and 1990s

(Pearson, 1985; Pearson et al., 1992) focused on strategies that good readers use as they read and resulted in a list of strategies that includes 'activating prior knowledge' or schemata. Schema theory has had a tremendous influence on reading instruction, including the prevalence of connection-making between readers and texts to promote readers' active assimilation of new information into their existing schemata. A problem with making connections is however:

- that often teachers do not consider that texts are not neutral, but instead position readers in particular ways . . . Combined with the ideological positioning of readers by texts, the practice of connection-making through finding and building on similarities between textual worlds and lived experiences may inadvertently encourage readers to accept texts as truth instead of recognizing ruptures and exploring the differences between texts, students' worlds, and larger societal structures. (Jones and Clarke, 2007, p. 100)

Most likely based on the privileging of this kind of reading practice in their classroom and the fact that the text quietly represents ideological frameworks of family practices as truth and unchallengeable (Freebody et al., 1991), the readers in this study seemed to try desperately to perform as good readers and *connect* with Henry and his experiences, rather than question their being representative of 'normal'.

Similar to the critique of schema theories for informing and understanding reading meaning-making made by Freebody and his colleagues (1991), I argue that the connection-making practices of the readers in this classroom focused on topical connections (i.e. goldfish at a party), disguised the ideological work of the text and reader, and discouraged readers from thinking critically about difference, or *disconnect*, particularly from their specific positioning as children from working-poor homes. Following my recognition of students constructing both superficial and fictionalized connections with the text rather than recognizing and working through the disconnect between students' lived experiences and those presented as normal practices in *Henry and Mudge*, I met with small groups of readers to talk specifically about this series of books. Admittedly, however, I did not know exactly how I was going to help students move towards critiquing the ideological perspectives of the books. My only plan was to prompt general conversations, be mindful of everything I knew about each of the students and their families, including their class-specific experiences, and listen closely to the talk of students in order to discern where we might enter critical literacy practices together.

Reading *Henry and Mudge* and the Four Resources Model

The following transcript is from a video-taped small-group meeting held to discuss the *Henry and Mudge* books. Beginning with general questions about reading within the series, the students responded in ways that constructed a framework of the various practices they engaged in as readers within and across texts. Themes articulated by students included three of the four families of practices promoted by Luke and Freebody (Freebody, 1992; Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999): *code-breakers*, *text-participants* and *text-users*. The fourth family of practices in the Four Resources Model – text-analysts – was glaringly absent from the students' responses to my questions and prompts. This led me to quickly imagine an entry point into critical analysis, but ended with more of a pedagogical focus on their individual positioning as marginalized readers and providing a space where, as active agents, the girls could re-position themselves as 'allowed' to reconstruct the text in a way that would centre their too-often marginalized realities. I will argue that working to help them critically re-position themselves as readers whose lives matter not only engaged them in a way that does not quite fit into the Four Resources Model, but also created fissures in their conversations about text analysis.

- (Maggie, Annie, and Hope are pulling books from their plastic bags used to store them – several *Henry and Mudge* books are in each.)
- Annie: I know who the Careful Cousin is. (Annie refers to a *Henry and Mudge* book titled *Henry and Mudge and the Careful Cousin*)
- Stephanie: Do you? How do you know?
- Annie: Because it's her (pointing at the cover of another book, *Henry and Mudge and the Family Tree*)
- Stephanie: You're kidding? Annie, did you learn about her in this book?
- Annie: Yeah.
- Stephanie: Did you just make a book-to-book connection?[2]
- Annie: Yeah (smiles wide)
- (conversation continues around Annie's reading of the *Family Tree* book within the Henry and Mudge series)
- Stephanie: So what do the three of you think of reading *Henry and Mudge*?
- Hope: It's kinda hard, and then, like at the beginning they're harder and then you read the next page and the next page and it keeps gettin' easier.
- Stephanie: Ohhh. Do you think this is helping you to become... a better reader?
- Hope, Maggie and Annie: Yeah.
- Stephanie: Why? Why do you think this helps you to become a better reader?
- Maggie: [Because]
- Annie: [Because]

- Maggie: [Because] it has hard words in it.
- Stephanie: Oh, so what do you do when you see hard words?
- Maggie: Skip 'em
- Annie: Sound it out or see if you know a word inside 'em.
- Stephanie: Oh good, so you use Word Power?[3] And do you usually figure out *most* of the hard words in these books?
- All: Yeah.

The Four Resources Model is a helpful lens through which to examine the ways in which the three readers in this transcript talked about their practices of reading *Henry and Mudge*. Grounded in the assumption that reading is a social practice, the Four Resources Model recommends that literacy learners should be equipped to engage in practices of decoding text, making meaning from text, using text appropriately and flexibly within and across contexts, and analysing text with regard to issues of social, cultural and political power. These four resources, or families of practices as the authors have more recently called them (Luke and Freebody, 1999), are meant to serve as references to what is necessary in the development of critical literacy practices in local contexts. The authors align themselves with researchers and practitioners that argue that all texts are constructed, with none being neutral, and that all readers need tools and practices that will help them decode texts *and* navigate the complex terrain of multiple perspectives and local and global power relations central to critical literacy (Bigelow, 2005; Comber, 1998; Comber and Nixon, 2008; Comber and Thompson, 2001; Kempe, 1993; O'Brien, 1994, 2001; Wallowitz, 2004).

Annie began the above conversation with a comment about the 'Careful Cousin', a character in at least two books within the series. According to Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model (Freebody, 1992; Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999), she was engaging as a *text-participant* – a meaning-maker of text – building connections and inferences, and constructing storylines across texts, something the students in this class had been taught specifically to do. The conversation then moves quickly to what Luke and Freebody would call readers' practices as *code-breakers* in response to my question about their reading of *Henry and Mudge*. Hope described the readability of the series and the fact that the books build upon knowledge of characters, settings and plots with familiar language that scaffolds the reader the more they read the series: 'it keeps gettin' easier.' Familiarity across texts offered the students opportunities to use practices to decode new words and their meanings within predictable storylines and contexts, hence the comment about the series getting easier as students read through the books. Maggie and

Annie chimed in with ease when asked about their problem-solving strategies with the 'hard words' found in the series, including 'sound it out', a prompt that was never used by me as their classroom teacher, but one so entrenched in mainstream discourses (e.g. Compton-Lilly, 2005) around code-breaking that it is not surprising very young children have already taken it up as their own.

Responding to a general question about what the girls thought of reading *Henry and Mudge*, they articulated the major purpose that I, as their teacher, perceived the books to be largely fulfilling: scaffolding readers as code-breakers and text-participants, but they did not include any critical talk around the books at all. Their responses to the following question, more specific in nature, also steered clear of any critical analysis. Instead, Hope's response moved straight into Rylant's craft, positioning Hope as a *text-user* within the Four Resources Model as she considered the labour (though not ideological labour) involved in constructing text and the possibility that she could learn something about the craft of writing narratives for her own purposes.

- Stephanie: Well, what do you think about the stories in *Henry and Mudge*?
- Hope: Well, Cynthia Rylant uses a lot of details.
- Stephanie: Ah, you think she uses details? Like what?
- Hope: (Looking at *Best Day of All*)
  Like at the birthday party she'll tell about all the balloons and their colors and she'll tell about who's in the pictures, and like the way we would if we were writing it.
- Stephanie: Oh, what do you mean by that Hope?
- Hope: (inaudible)
- Stephanie: Oh, so if we want to be a better *writer*, we could write like Cynthia Rylant, right? And put in more and more details. That maybe some people wouldn't put in their stories.
- Hope: (nodding head all along)
- Stephanie: What else do you notice about these stories?
- (Conversation continues about details in the craft of writing narratives, about Mudge giving sloppy kisses, cousin rubbing Mudge's nose, etc. These comments are focused on fondly recalling events in the stories, not questioning their story-lines or perspectives.)

At this point in the small-group reading discussion it became clear that general questions and prompts about the stories were not stimulating the girls to engage in any of the critical practices we had used with other texts in whole-group settings or in teacher-led small groups (see, e.g., Jones, 2006). *Henry and Mudge* as a series was being positioned by the girls as helpful in the sense that it scaffolded them as developing readers and served as a potential source for thinking about the craft of writing narratives, and as

enjoyable to read given the detailed (and fondly recalled) memories of events and interactions in different stories.

The conundrum of entering critical literacy practices hung like a dark cloud over this group of three girl readers and myself. With mind racing, I imagined various entry points and immediately discarded any that might be read as an attempt to critique everything they seemed to love about *Henry and Mudge*. Literacy researchers have written about the dangers of using popular culture texts and practices in the classroom that students enjoy, only to critique them from the position of authority (e.g. Alvermann et al., 1999). Texts such as song lyrics, teen magazines, films, etc. that blatantly perpetuate oppressive normative practices such as standard ideals of beauty, sexism, racism, ableism and so forth are those most written about within the contexts of using pop culture in the classroom. I had not considered (until this moment in the transcribed discussion) the difficulties involved in engaging critical literacy practices with mainstream early reading texts that so *quietly* perpetuated a class-specific way of living life, therefore marginalizing the girls' lived experiences. *Henry and Mudge* positioned readers to enjoy the stories and accept them as representations of what is expected and normal.

Changing *Henry and Mudge*: Nuanced readings of a pedagogical move

Reading practices are locally negotiated and context-dependent, but some prompts and questions work across contexts and with many kinds of texts to prompt readers to engage in particular practices. If this were not the case, then the practice of reading would be brand new to readers every time they faced a different text or began to read a text in a different context. For example, the girls discussed in this article articulated practices that they put to work while reading *Henry and Mudge* that they had used in other contexts and with other texts: making connections across texts to discern who the characters are and their ongoing relations and storylines, 'sounding' out words and looking for small words inside larger ones to help them decode, and thinking about the intentional craft of a writer. However, the girls did not have any stable practices for entering critical readings across contexts and texts and I wanted, at that moment, to offer them an entry point to critically focused reading practices.

To further complicate the pedagogical conundrum at hand, I was increasingly aware of the fact that the 'perfect lives' of book characters portrayed in the majority of early reading texts and critiqued by Cadence's mother (below) might be positioning the girls in a way that made them feel powerless and *not*

valued, agentic readers who could take on texts that persistently wrote them out of existence. In Lori's (Cadence's mother) narration of her philosophy of education and her preference that teachers take students' home lives into consideration when they select materials and construct lessons, she raised the specific issue of book characters' lives:

- You have to find what it is about them – and nine times out of ten, with kids it *is* their life. Because they see things all the time – and they read these little stories in school about all these perfect lives, and mommy and daddy work and blah – *that* is not how it *is*. You have a mom who gets a check once a month whose daddy's on the street corner selling *drugs* whose kid is – you know – sittin' there with people comin' in and out of the house who *buy* drugs and they see this, yet they're goin' to school learnin' about perfect little Jill's life and this and that – and that's *bullcrap* because that's not how it is – and of course they're not gonna listen to that because they think that's *stupid*. Nowadays, that's what they're thinkin' – they're thinkin', screw that – you don't know *shit* about my life. How are you *tellin'* me that this is how it is, *you* ain't in my life. Come walk a day in my shoes and you'll see.

Although Lori was talking about the community in a broad stereotypical way that was not necessarily reflective of the daily realities of the students and families in St Francis (see, e.g., Jones, 2006, 2007), she used examples of drug dealing and unemployed parents to paint a picture of community children's lives that does not resemble the lives represented in children's literature like *Henry and Mudge*. Lori suggested in this narration that students are likely to tune out at school when faced with learning about 'perfect lives' when she said 'they're not gonna listen. . . that's *stupid*.' But then points the perceived animosity directly at the teachers themselves when she states that, from her perspective, students might think 'screw that – you don't know *shit* about my life. Come walk a day in my shoes and you'll see.'

Lori had graduated from high school and experienced some academic success throughout her educational career, but she often recalled various obstacles, or 'hardships', that she faced as a white girl coming of age in a marginalized working-poor community. Her three daughters, she was aware, faced similar challenges, and she believed that the school's consideration of the lives of children would be one way to alleviate such complications. The effect of Lori's comments and ongoing conversations with community members about life in St Francis were with me in this moment as well.

So here comes the recursive and reflexive moment in pedagogy when critically focused questions are on the tip of my tongue, and yet I cannot bear to begin there with the students. Instead, I think of the fact that so many of them

had fathers in jail, even as we spoke, and that most of them had never been in a home like the one that Henry and his fictional (but powerfully representative) family lives in, and that they had come to love the *Henry and Mudge* books in many ways, and that we *had* had critical discussions about gender, poverty, race, incarceration and bullies in other contexts (for examples, see Jones, 2006a, 2006b), and that the girls had never – like the acclaimed author Dorothy Allison (1988) said about herself as a child growing up in a poor white family – seen images of families and home lives like their own in books. All of these thoughts raced through my mind and I made the decision to offer a space where the girls could reconstruct the text with the goal of critically re-positioning themselves as entitled to think differently about *Henry and Mudge*. This included discussing how Rylant made particular choices about characters and practices, but that those choices were not the only valid options. And so pedagogic decision was based largely on the students constructing themselves as powerful readers who do not have to accept the marginalized positions that mainstream books (like Rylant's) offer them.

In an attempt to (in the moment) offer the students all of this in one possible practice for challenging mainstream texts that privileged middle-class and upper-middle-class experiences and lifestyles that might also help to engage them in critical ways with other texts in other places, I offered the only prompt that might transcend the context that I could think of at the time: 'What would you *change?*'

- Stephanie: So you have told me all the things you like about these stories, what if you could change something about them – what would you change?
- Hope: Like the names of the characters and the characters.
- Stephanie: Who would you change?
- Hope: The dog or the father.
- Annie: First change the father.
- Stephanie: Okay, change the father or the dog. Into – what do you mean?
- Hope: Change him into a scientist (giggles from all three girls).

The girls' laughter at the absurdity of someone's father being a scientist *hints* that they are in fact critically reading the ideology of the text in some way. Although they do not use words to articulate the privileged nature of such family occupations and how disconnected their own lives are from such a reality, they certainly use giggling here to signify *something* about their reading of the change suggested by Hope. Therefore it is possible to assert that my prompting the girls about what they would change in the story could be an entry point to critically reading the text, or into the fourth of the Four

Resources Model. I recognized, however, that Hope's changing of the father would not have made a significant difference to the lives and practices represented in the book, so I pushed the girls further.

● Stephanie: Okay, he could be a scientist. Or maybe he wouldn't have to be there at all, right? You could take the father out of the book altogether?

The insertion of this possibility was based on my knowing about the students, their community and their intimate understandings around the comings and goings of male father figures, often due to incarceration. Hope's father was in jail at the time and she seemed under pressure to suggest an alternative 'father' that would fit within the mainstream discourse and ideological perspective of the *Henry and Mudge* series (a white-collar professional), rather than suggest something that might reflect her world. Instead of suggesting a *change* in the systems or structures represented in the books, Hope was suggesting superficial changes that would maintain the integrity of the family structures presented as 'normal'. Changing the *names* of characters would not significantly modify the images or practices in *Henry and Mudge*, nor would changing the father's occupation to that of scientist, given the privilege associated with such a position.

● Hope: And add the father as a big brother or somethin'.

Hope had several older male cousins and uncles that were important in her life, but no older brothers. However, she suggested an alternative to the family structure in the text that looked more like her lived experiences than Henry's traditional nuclear family.

● Stephanie: Ohhh. So maybe there could be a big brother instead of a father? I'm wondering if you started writing a new series like this, hmmm. I'm wondering where you could say the father went. Why wasn't the father there?
● Hope: We could say he's at work.
● Maggie: Or he's lazy.

Hope and Maggie were speaking within competing discourses around fathers, or men in general, in the community of St Francis. Hope suggesting that fathers do in fact work, and Maggie suggesting that, if they do not work, then they are lazy. A more critical reading of not working, however, would recognize the lack of work available to many of the adult men in St Francis who had not completed high school and relied heavily upon their manual labour and market demands for such things as painting, dry wall installation and so on.

- Stephanie: Okay, he could be lazy or he could be at work.
- Annie: Or he could be in jail.
- Stephanie: He could be in jail.
- Hope: He could be in a car.
- Stephanie: Okay, so if you each started thinking about... hmmm. I love to read *Henry and Mudge* stories too, I think they're great stories – but, when I look at this family it doesn't really look like my family. I don't know if it looks like Maggie's family.

Aware of the dangerous waters in which I was treading, my attempt to assure the girls that I *also* liked *Henry and Mudge* was strategic. Not wanting them to believe that to critique a text equates to not liking a text, I positioned myself as someone who both liked *and* wished to alter *Henry and Mudge*. Following my statement that the family in the book did not look like my own, the girls' enthusiasm increased as well as their use of gestures and they began moving around on the floor, activity that might, again, hint at an already existing critical reading of the text that had not been articulated by the girls. Considering a change in one character was fine, specific. But opening up the possibility that the entire family structure can be called into question seemed to excite them.

- Maggie: No. I have *mass* more people.
- Stephanie: How 'bout you Annie? Does this look like your family?
- Annie: No (shakes head no and opens eyes wide).
- Stephanie: How 'bout you, Hope?
- Hope: No.
- Stephanie: So maybe Cynthia Rylant wrote about a family she knew, but if we started to write stories like this we'd have to *change* it a lot, wouldn't we? To write about things that we really know.
- Annie: But it looks like Joanie's family (a girl in the class).
- Stephanie: Joanie in our class?
- Annie: Yeah.
- Stephanie: But she has brothers.

I offered this fact slowly to Annie and the girls and reluctantly include it in this article.

Not knowing how to respond to this comment about Joanie's family, I desperately needed a few moments to think, but at the same time I felt obliged to say something that would challenge Annie's connection with Joanie's family and the family represented in the book. Joanie did have brothers, and dogs, and she lived in an apartment inside a building that had once been abandoned and condemned, and still had no heat during cold winters.

Joanie's family was as far removed from Henry's middle-class material life as any of the other students in the classroom, but Annie's comment speaks to the relativity of material lives, for her own family had been evicted from their apartment and was living with various relatives at the time of this conversation. Annie seemed satisfied with my surface-level challenge and Hope moved the conversation in a direction that was more aligned with my thinking at the time: Henry's family enjoys material comfort and that, alone, is in stark contrast to the daily experiences of the students in St Francis.

- Hope: It looks like my aunt's 'cuz they live in a house and um, they got a backyard with a dog in it and stuff.
- Stephanie: Really? So this looks like your aunt's family?
- Hope: Yeah, my aunt _____, she lives in Florida. And my cousin says, 'I wanna play with the dolphins!'

Hope had discussed her aunt several times prior to this occasion, noting that she lived in a neighbourhood with 'big houses' and near 'doctors and lawyers'. Hope is therefore aligning the material and class-specific conditions of Henry's life with what she knew was the privileged life of her aunt and cousins in a faraway land called Florida.

- Stephanie: So is there anything else you might change in these stories?
- Annie: Switch these (pointing to picture on cover of book).
- Stephanie: What?
- Annie: (points to Henry and his female cousin – the two characters on the cover of the book)
- Stephanie: Oh. Have the *girl* in the real story, in the main story? Oh, Annie, I see what you mean. Here's Henry in the center of the picture, it's all about Henry. And the girl cousin is in the background. So you would switch those?
- Annie: Yeah.
- Stephanie: So your main character would be a girl?
- Annie: Yeah.
- Stephanie: Oh, that would change things, huh? Great idea.

As the teacher, I was encouraged by Annie's suggestion that gender made a difference in this story and that she would like to see the main character represented as a girl. This was reflective of the work we had done together as a class and in small groups around gender discrimination and the value of gender-specific experiences (e.g. Jones, 2006b), but did not come up in this conversation before I inserted the possibility of *changing* the stories. At this

point I wanted the girls to move into independent reading and I hoped, but did not necessarily expect, that the work we had done together around changing the text in small but not superficial ways would be taken up during quiet reading time. I was pleasantly surprised, however, that Hope in particular took on the role of facilitator (or 'teacher') during a small-group collaborative reading. With her willingness to mimic my questions and prompts, Hope continued to plant the seeds of students critically repositioning themselves as readers who were entitled to reconstruct texts that persistently marginalized their lived realities.

Back, again, to the goldfish: Conversations independent of the teacher

Moments after our small-group meeting, Annie, Hope, Maggie, Tina and Brian began reading in a circle on the floor. They chose to read *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All* round-robin style – most likely based on their early socialization in first grade to do turn-taking around a circle when reading. The following transcript is from an audio-taped recording of their discussion after they read the entire book. Hope attempts to scaffold the group to consider 'changes' to the story – something I had not specifically requested that they do, but she took it upon herself to continue the theme from our small-group meeting.

- Hope: Alright, we gotta talk about it alright? Now Annie, we're gonna make you talk some alright? Alright. Annie. Talk. Like, what could we change if we made up the story? (Annie was typically very quiet in group settings, probably the reason why Hope focused on her participation)
- Tina: We . . .
- Hope: Annie.
- Annie: Change . . . (inaudible) to the front cover (she's talking about an illustration).
- Hope: Like what *word* can we change? (versus illustrations)

Hope continued to position herself in the role of teacher or facilitator, but had no success in getting the other students to 'change' something that was meaningful (from Hope's perspective) in the story – although I would argue that it is at least possible that Annie was considering an ideological shift in her suggested change of the gender of the main character. She did not give up, however, and prodded the students to deepen their thinking and finally ended with her own suggestion for a change in the story.

- Hope: Now wait, what could we – what else could we change? I know there are more things, 'cuz we had a talk about this this morning, didn't we Annie?
- Tina: You gotta change somethin'.
- Hope: I *will* change somethin'.
- Brian: [Ms. Jones], [Ms. Jones].
- Hope: That Henry didn't *have* goldfish [at his birthday party] – that Henry *went* –
- Brian: (inaudible – anticipating Hope's suggestion of fishing)
- Hope: That's why I wanted to make a connection, that's what I wanted to say. Tina, you know what I wanted to change? I wanted to change that Henry *didn't have* goldfish – he went *fishin'*. That's what I wanted to change.

Hope's change focuses on practices at a birthday celebration that reflect her experiences of family gatherings, special occasions and celebrations: going fishing. With this simple change, Hope can challenge the assumption in the book that happy birthdays are spent in someone's backyard with costly games and prizes, and replaced that privileged practice with her family's preference for spending time together with fishing rods in hand. With the exception of Annie, who was also in our small group earlier on this same day, Hope did not succeed in getting others to suggest changes that might call into question the authority of Rylant's text. However, it is perhaps promising to know that both Hope and Annie quickly used the stable prompt of 'changing' something from our small group that can challenge and shift the ideological structures in *Henry and Mudge*, a series of texts that had, up to this point, been considered innocent, neutral and the construction of normalcy. This critical re-positioning of themselves in relation to a mainstream children's book that portrays 'perfect lives' may indeed be one of the most significant lessons I would have liked them to walk away with.

Discussion and recommendations for teachers and researchers

Early reading texts and critical literacy

The students in this study needed explicit scaffolding to shift themselves from marginalized readers of texts that represented powerful ideologies to readers who felt entitled to imagine and suggest structural shifts in the Rylant texts. I am not suggesting that this identity work is complete for these particular girls, but rather that identity work is always already engaged in reading texts and that pedagogical decisions need to include considerations of power and identity. Nor am I suggesting that teachers simply stop using this series of texts with early readers (most early reading texts are constructed from similar

perspectives). I recommend specifically working with students who are marginalized by mainstream texts to build their confidence and sense of entitlement, which will allow them to critically reposition themselves as readers. Such confidence and entitlement can enable typically marginalized (and perhaps *all*) students to better imagine challenging, changing and critiquing practices and structures represented by those very texts. This kind of critical engagement with normalized texts is crucial if students are to move towards critically reading the world around them – a world that is often dominated by a hypothetical white mainstream middle-class existence. The critical reading that needed to take place for the students in this study was not one of simply interrogating social issues from a perspective of privilege (often cited as a reason for critical literacy, i.e. Foss, 2002), but instead to begin questioning why mainstream texts did not include lives similar to those in St Francis.

Reading for disconnect

Henry and Mudge, a popular series of texts used for teaching young readers in the primary grades, is about a boy, his mother and father, and his dog. The series can be found in a number of classrooms and libraries, including the classroom where this study took place. The people, places and events of the stories do not, however, reflect the lives of most of the students within St Francis, the predominantly white high-poverty neighbourhood in which this study took place. A pedagogy focused on making 'connections' (e.g. text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world connections as in Harvey and Goudvis, 2000; Keene and Zimmerman, 1997) was not helpful in this context where autobiographical connection-making was often superficial and focused on universalizing aspects of the character's life that were, in actuality, something that most of the students had not experienced (except for Hope, whose aunt had crossed a threshold into a middle-class life). Just as in Lewis's studies (Lewis, 2000; Lewis et al., 2001), where readers attempted to make connections with the text that were superficial and resulted in universalizing experiences without critically considering the *difference* in such experiences, the second graders in this study made superficial connections with Henry and his life while ignoring the fact that Henry's life and the practices engaged in by his family were very different from their own.

However, locating the readers' disconnect, through promoting a conversation around what might be changed in the text, may hold promise in the important work of re-positioning marginalized young students to be critically focused readers. Although rigorously engaging a disconnection–connection

continuum in reading instruction rather than foregrounding the practice of connection-making may be generative for critical reading practices (Jones and Clarke, 2007), it is the identity work of constructing powerful readers that seemed most important, given the data in this article.

Critical literacies in the making: Walking the walk and pushing the four resources

As a critically focused literacy teacher-researcher, I experienced great tension between supporting early readers with texts they could negotiate with some fluency while wanting them to develop families of practices for questioning and challenging texts that excluded life as they knew it. The *Henry and Mudge* series, written by Cynthia Rylant, has been a popular resource in USA litera-ture-based classrooms for supporting readers' development in problem-sol-ving text and building knowledge about characters and context between books. At the same time, I had not explicitly helped the second-grade readers to position themselves as being powerful enough to engage in critical readings of books that portrayed dominant or 'perfect' lives that many of the students had not witnessed. To begin this re-positioning process that centrally engages issues of identity and power, I made a strategic pedagogical decision that called into question the sufficiency of the Four Resources Model in consider-ing reading instruction.

The Four Resources Model offers practitioners and theorists a strong conceptual framework for the reading practices necessary in today's society, but it does not take into consideration issues of identity, power and any sense of entitlement felt by readers (particularly traditionally marginalized readers) to position themselves as potential text analysts. For example, if texts work as ideological tools, as Baker and Freebody (1989) suggest, then young marginalized readers have most likely already been affected by those tools and may not *feel* they have the right to question or challenge such texts. And for students who live materially humble lives and experience daily challenges and hardships similar to those described by Lori, they may even be positioned as 'desiring' a life such as Henry's in Rylant's books. Therefore, without some significant identity work to position students as valuable with lives worthy of being included in texts (although they rarely are), it may be difficult to find the strength to suppress their desires for a book character's 'perfect life' enough to engage critically with the repre-sentation of that very life. A reading pedagogy that incorporates the Four Resources *and* specific attention to the identities of readers must be

informed by the particular knowledge that educators have about students, families and the communities in which they work. Only then will we be able to envision an extended Four Resources Model that reflects issues of identity and whether readers feel entitled (or even a desire) to challenge the ideologies they encounter in texts.

Teachers must know their students well, and researchers should know teaching in particular contexts well. Attempting to 'walk the walk' of complex literacy research is no easy task, as complications and contradictions often arise. But just as Mahiri found that knowing learners and reworking pedagogy within such complications was generative, I also believe that teasing apart pedagogical conundrums will push theory and practice forward. Thus, critical literacies are always in the making, as individual teachers and researchers learn with and from readers who will undoubtedly challenge our best-laid plans and most eloquent theories. Critical literacy theories and practices alone cannot carry the burden of constructing a more just society, nor can we expect them to if educators do not first understand learners' lives in profound, sociocultural ways. Such knowing would inform what kinds of practices we should privilege in the reading classroom, how those practices should be presented, how we can scaffold students to engage with those practices, and how we can move fluidly and purposefully across the connection–disconnection continuum to promote text participation, use and analysis. As useful as the Four Resources Model is, it means virtually nothing if implemented without ethnographic understanding of the developing readers who will be expected to perform these four families of practices. The ethnographic knowledge I had of the students in St Francis led to my rethinking of a meaning-making pedagogy that focused on connection-making, the sufficiency of the Four Resources Model and recognizing the challenges inherent in helping young children position themselves as text-analysts when they move from whole-group and small-group reading work to their own independent reading.

This article includes a quote extracted from one of many long interviews with Lori, mother of Cadence in this study, who regularly criticized practices in schools that privileged and promoted mainstream versions of life in the USA. Using a hypothetical 'Jill' as representative of book characters from typical children's stories, Lori adamantly posited, '*That* is not how it *is*.' But how anything '*is*' is always contextually and culturally specific and begging to be questioned, challenged and reconstructed. This is why critical literacy is never *done* or *covered* but is always in the making by the teachers, researchers, students and families who attempt to walk the walk of what can sometimes be

alienating language of educational theories constructed outside the murky waters of moment-to-moment teaching and learning in classrooms.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. All the names of places and participants in the study are pseudonyms.
2. A strategy promoted in literacy instruction alongside text-to-self and text-to-world connections in a number of practitioner-focused texts (e.g. Harvey and Goudvis, 2000).
3. A generic term used in this classroom to signify all the work readers do to problem-solve unfamiliar words.

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