

Disconnections: Pushing Readers Beyond Connections and Toward the Critical

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This article highlights a popular classroom reading practice in the United States, connection-making with autobiographical experiences, and argues that this practice may hinder critical engagement with texts when not viewed as a continuum. Data from a multi-year ethnographic and teacher-research study that took place in a high-poverty community in the Midwest region of the U.S. are used to explore the use of *disconnections* as a potential entry point for critical literacy practices. Using sociocultural and critical frameworks for thinking about students and literacy, the authors present a case for encouraging students to notice and work through a spectrum of connection-making including disconnections they experience with text.

“Oh, we *loved* those books!”

“I read *that* one!”

“I read that, and that, and that . . .”

Heather, Cadence, and Sarah—three almost-fifth-grade girls—agreed to meet me at a playground near their homes a full two years after I (Stephanie) had been their teacher in second grade. Our mid-summer meeting under the hot sun began with bubbling conversations about families, boys, and the fun they had already been having since school had ended for the year. My head pivoted back and forth from girl to girl as I tried desperately to follow the animated discussion, but the agenda I had planned for the morning was weighing heavily on my mind: Disconnections. Although two years had passed since I was the

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students' classroom teacher, I had come to realize that the practices I thought were leading them to be better readers and critical thinkers may have actually been working against these goals. The one practice in particular that kept me up at night was the popular use of making connections, specifically the connection-making between textual worlds and autobiographical experiences. Therefore, on this steamy July morning following the girls' fourth-grade year, my goals were: (1) to reflect on the girls' experiences with a popular reading series, *Henry and Mudge* (e.g., Rylant, 1995), (2) to work through some of the complications of making connections, and (3) to begin a conversation around *disconnections* as another way to facilitate deep thinking and critical literacy practices, particularly when texts represent experiences that are not similar to readers' lived realities.

We believe that it is imperative to know students well for literacy teaching and learning in the classroom as teachers make decisions about texts to read, recommend to students, and about ways to engage students around texts. Therefore we begin this article with a brief introduction to the girls in this study and to the context where the research took place. Next we discuss the practice of making connections, why this is a popular strategy, and how teachers and researchers can reconsider the practice with a critical perspective. Then we assert that in addition to making connections with texts, something we deem important in many ways, teachers must also encourage students to engage in the continuum of connection-making including making *disconnections*—one practice that can help students to begin thinking about texts critically, hence a starting point for critical literacy practices. Following our thoughts about how readers from all contexts could be engaged in locating disconnections between their experiences and understandings about the world and what they read in books, we will conclude with implications for classroom practice and possible areas for future research.

KNOWING STUDENTS WELL: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GIRLS

The foundation for powerful literacy instruction lies in a teacher's ability to know his or her students well. I had the rare opportunity to get to know my students through an ethnographic research project that spanned three years. The three girls at the center of this article were part of a cohort of eight who participated in the study that could be characterized as both critical feminist ethnography centered on issues of social class (e.g., Bettie, 2003; Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2007; Skeggs, 1997) and teacher-research (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hankins, 2003). The study began on the first day of the girls' first-grade year, officially ended at the end of their third-grade year, but has unofficially extended through the present time as the girls enter sixth grade and some of them maintain contact with me. The

study focused broadly on literacy and identity between home, community, and school and social, cultural, and critical literacy pedagogies responsive to students' lived experiences. Intensive observation and participation in classrooms, around the school grounds, in and around the girls' homes and neighborhood, and at various community meetings and other local events was largely documented in fieldnotes supplemented by audiotaped interviews of the girls, their teachers, and their caretakers; video recordings of classroom activity and after-school group meetings; photographs of the classrooms, school, neighborhood and girls' homes taken by both the girls and myself; and both historical and contemporary documents about and within the school and community. When the girls' regular teacher took a maternity leave, I became their classroom teacher for the first eleven weeks of their second-grade year, and began an after-school and summer program for the focal participants that continued throughout the school year and summer. Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyze select language data (e.g., Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2003), and a cyclical analysis was conducted of data collected weekly with an emphasis on critical examinations of classroom literacy practices and events, language use inside and outside the classroom, patterns of social practices between home and school, and texts used during literacy blocks in school. It was often the case that data analysis led to additional questions or concerns, but given the long-term nature of this study, many times I was able to go back to teachers, students, and caretakers for clarification. This article represents one of those cycles back to "the field" to re-engage participants around a particular question, concern, or "hunch," and the data foregrounded here were collected during the summer visit between the girls' fourth- and fifth-grade years. However, my practices with the girls during that time were informed by four years of ethnographic work as is the writing of this article.

The students in this study lived in a small urban neighborhood in the Midwest of the United States, populated largely by White families who had histories tied to rural Appalachia. The three focal girls here were all White and each of them had extended families living in the rural Appalachian regions at the time of this study. The girls' families were struggling to make ends meet even though they each had two income-earning parents and access to supplemental income, government benefits such as free school breakfast and lunch, housing subsidies, and/or networks of relatives and friends who helped in a variety of ways. The girls each lived within walking distance to grandmas, grandpas, uncles, aunts, and cousins, and the fluid nature of where the girls rested their heads each night (at their parents' homes, grandparents' homes, etc.) was reflective of extended family members serving collaboratively with nuclear family members in ongoing care for young children. When faced with extraordinary challenges that almost always hits working-class and working-poor families harder than others (house fires, losing a job, incarceration of a parent, rise in rent and utilities, child or adult sickness) the girls and their families never ceased to amaze me with

their strength and perseverance. Heather, Sarah, and Cadence were each a part of strong, loving families and they performed varied identities across school, community, and home contexts, positioning each of them differently inside and outside the classroom.

Heather, a fair-skinned blonde-haired White girl, lived with her biological parents and was the oldest daughter of a woman who was one of two of the mothers in the study who had graduated from high school. Heather's mother worked two jobs, one in a banking center and one in retail, and Heather's father worked in construction and was the primary caregiver to Heather's younger sibling when work was slow. Heather was perceived as one of the "good girls" in school, an identity she performed to her advantage in classrooms and with teachers, but one that she easily shifted away from when playing with her friends outside of school (e.g., Jones, 2006).

Sarah, a fair-skinned dark-haired White girl, had been close friends with Heather since they were very young as a result of their mothers knowing one another. Whereas Heather lived primarily with her parents and secondarily with grandparents and other relatives, Sarah lived equally between her mother and step-father's home and her paternal grandparents' home. Sarah's father was incarcerated from the time she was a toddler until her third-grade year, but she had maintained a strong relationship with him through the constant contact with his parents and extended family and through weekly letters and pictures exchanged via mail. Sarah was also considered a "good girl" in school and performed similarly across school, community, and home contexts. Sarah's paternal grandmother was a community activist and Sarah often took up her discourse around the negative positioning of the neighborhood within the broader city context and how difficult it was for adolescents and adults in the neighborhood to overcome the barriers erected by such negative perceptions of outsiders.

Cadence had olive skin that tanned to brown and dark hair that turned to blonde in the summer. Beginning in first grade Cadence was labeled a "bad girl" in school (e.g., Jones, 2003/2004) where she did everything to escape the classroom and the teacher, rolled her eyes when asked to do something she preferred not to do, and argued loudly with girls and boys alike. At home, however, Cadence was the baby of the family and performed a sweet, helpful, supportive role in the presence of her mother and her mother's long-term partner, and both her grandfather and grandmother. Cadence's biological father had also been incarcerated since she was a toddler but was released when she was in fourth grade and at that time Cadence began living between his home, her mother's home, her maternal grandmother's home, and her maternal grandfather's home.

Knowing where the girls were coming from as they entered school practices is particularly significant for understanding their work as meaning-makers and readers within the literacy classroom. Social and cultural knowledge of students and what they do outside of school is crucial if literacy teachers are to recognize

the potential impact of students making connections and disconnections as they engage with all kinds of texts. It was through this deep understanding that I became aware of an opportunity for critical investigation in the classroom that would reshape how I conceptualized making connections and eventually led me to reconsider this practice with my students two years later.

CONNECTION-MAKING IN READING: WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Before we explore one way of enhancing and altering how making connections looks in the classroom, it is necessary to step back and revisit why making connections is such a widely-used practice in many classrooms in the United States.

Making connections is a comprehension strategy made popular by many U.S. educators and practitioner books such as Harvey and Goudvis' (2000) *Strategies that Work*. In this text the authors explain that:

When children understand how to connect the texts they read to their lives, they begin to make connections between what they read and the larger world. This nudges them into thinking about bigger, more expansive issues beyond their universe of home, school, and neighborhood. (p. 68)

As Harvey and Goudvis remind us in their book, it is important that readers make connections because they are building understanding and engaging with the text in a way that brings the reader into a story beyond the surface level meaning of the words.

Connection-making across texts and autobiographical experiences is not only pervasive in practice-oriented texts, but can also be found throughout literacy research journals (e.g., Bluestein, 2002; Bond, 2001; Hammerberg, 2004; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Kaser & Short, 1998; Ketch, 2005; Miller, 2000; Winsor & Hansen, 1999). One reason that this practice became so popular is its alignment with what is believed that good readers do and its roots in schema theory. In the early 1990s researchers began to focus their attention on the strategies that good readers use when they make meaning of text (Pearson, Dole, Duffy, & Roehler, 1992; Pearson, 1985). By understanding the minds and techniques used by good readers, researchers came up with a list of instructional practices that could be taught to struggling and emerging readers. Seven comprehension strategies were identified as consistently used by good readers: drawing inferences, asking questions, synthesizing, determining important ideas, monitoring for understanding, repairing for comprehension, and activating prior knowledge (or schemata) (Pearson et al., 1992). It is the last of these strategies that gave birth to the making connections movement.

Students are encouraged to make connections between what they know and the text that they are reading because of the influence of schema theory in understanding how readers make sense of text. An assumption of schema theory is that as we encounter new information we connect this to previous knowledge or “file folders” of existing schemata. Constructivists call this process *assimilation* as the learner takes this new information or schema and fits it into existing frameworks. As Keene and Zimmerman (1997) point out in *Mosaic of Thought*, good readers think about what they already know to help them understand what they are reading. It is “by connecting their existing schema to the new schema from the book—a vital linking that helps them permanently store the new schema in their long term memories” (p. 70). The process of making connections, then, is perceived as important to activate existing schemata necessary for readers to effectively comprehend texts.

A problem with making connections, however, is that often teachers do not consider that texts are not neutral, but instead position readers in particular ways. For example, in an eloquently theorized and written piece about reading positions, Peter Freebody and his colleagues demonstrate how different texts position readers to take on and accept different ideologies as they are reading (Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991). In addition, Karen Spector (forthcoming) and Spector and Jones (forthcoming) looked closely at secondary classroom reading practices around the Holocaust, analyzing the ways in which readers took up the ideological positions that constructed different texts. 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.

As teachers, we must remember to consider not just the reader but also the way that a text can influence the meaning-making of the reader beyond what schema theory might suggest. In doing this, we acknowledge that texts are *already constructed* by writers who write from a particular perspective and promote readers to read in particular ways. The resulting text does not suddenly become “neutral” when it leaves the author’s hands; instead it continues to carry the ideological perspective and weight of the writer as it is passed from reader to reader.

Therefore, it is important to consider that when we ask our students to make connections we may be inadvertently positioning them to believe in the authority of texts instead of acknowledging, questioning, challenging, and critiquing them. By narrowly focusing on only finding connections as a central part of reading instruction, we are not teaching our students to be consciously aware that someone has written this text to make the reader believe something, to persuade the reader of something, or to leave the reader with a certain kind of feeling.

Given that the majority of early reading texts are written from perspectives that represent a “normal” life as one where (White) mothers, fathers, and children live comfortable existences in middle-class homes and neighborhoods, where girls and boys conform to traditional gender roles, and there are clear lines between “bad” and “good” behaviors (e.g., Baker & Freebody, 1989; Jordan, 2005), readers who live similar lives may make substantive connections to texts while readers who live different lives may find themselves in the quandary of wanting to perform as a “good reader” who makes connections without having substantive autobiographical connections to make. The girls in this study would fall into the latter category when reading most children’s literature. Even with the majority of characters in such books being White, the daily lives presented in dominant texts did not readily reflect those of Cadence, Sarah, and Heather. In this case, then, we might ask ourselves whether we *want* readers to be concerned with making connections or, perhaps, might more opportunities for engaged reading and critical inquiry into a text be offered by also exploring *disconnections*?

Using the Fictionalization of Experience as a Door to Critical Literacy

This potential critique of making connections between personal lives and children’s literature became more clear as I reflected upon a conversation that I had in the students’ second grade. It was during independent reading time when Cadence was reading *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All* (Rylant, 1995) that she said to the children sitting near her, “I had goldfish at my party too.” Overhearing this comment stopped me in my tracks. Because I knew Cadence and her family well, I knew that she had celebrated her birthday with extended family members and maybe a couple friends from the neighborhood if they happened to be around. It was not typical for Cadence or the other students in the class to experience the organized hoopla that was represented in the *Henry and Mudge* story. In sharp contrast to Cadence’s family-oriented celebrations, Henry’s birthday party was complete with a dozen or so friends who had been formally invited and who had come dressed in their best clothes, well-groomed, and armed with beautifully-wrapped birthday presents. A number of games were played in the spacious, picket-fenced backyard, and all children left with party favors including live goldfish in plastic bags filled with water. To a teacher that did not know her students outside the classroom, Cadence’s comment may not have sounded out of place as like many elementary students in the United States, Cadence’s repertoire for talking about books included a focus on connection-making. This connection-making didn’t always get verbalized as “I have a connection. . .” but was more or less appropriated by most students as simply the way that good readers read, think, and talk about books. In essence, connection-making positions readers to go along with texts and to do their best

to show how their lives relate to the text in front of them. For Cadence, who had wonderful birthday celebrations in her home with family members, it meant fictionalizing her experiences to match a more dominant, middle-class version of a birthday party as represented in this particular book. It meant connecting with having party favors such as goldfish at a party in order to adhere to this “image” of birthday celebrations—an image that did not represent Cadence’s actual life experiences.

It was exactly this type of comment that opened the door for me to rethink making connections in the classroom and to realize the tension that many students may feel when they are asked to make connections with texts that positioned them in certain ways and did not reflect their lived experiences. It was comments like this that led me back to this neighborhood on a summer morning to meet with a small group to talk about *Henry and Mudge*, a series of books that populates numerous classroom library shelves across the country. It was comments like this that helped me to think about re-defining how to teach making connections and to consider how a spectrum of connection-making including the making of disconnections could provide an entry point to critical literacy practices. Hearing Cadence’s comment as an attempt to align with the book’s practice, provoked me to not only accept that students may fictionalize their experiences, but to question why they may feel compelled to do so and how specific reading practices may marginalize working-class and poor children’s lives as they are consistently faced with middle-class privileges in classroom texts.

MAKING CONNECTIONS FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

When connection-making in the classroom positions students to accept (or ignore) the ideological perspectives of the text, students are being taught to be passive consumers of texts. By the very nature of using the word “connect” students are being asked to locate *similarities* with their own lives (regardless of how insignificant) or to recognize the text as an authority on normalcy and sometimes, like with the example of the goldfish, may lead students to create fictions if necessary to perform as a good reader. For students growing up on the margins of dominant society this is particularly troubling as text worlds too frequently promote White, middle-class, traditional family structures, values, and material lives. *Henry and Mudge* stories are written as readable text, the illustrations support problem-solving of difficult words, the main character is a young child, and there are many books within the series (characteristics assumed to be important for early readers). But the *Henry and Mudge* series signifies much more—the storylines are situated within a White family’s life, with a mother, father, young boy, and a dog. The family lives in a free standing house with a

wide front porch, large front yard, spacious backyard with a swing and a picnic table, a separate bedroom for Henry where he has a twin-size bed and a fish aquarium. The family eats at the dining room table together, has a separate table and chairs in the kitchen, a full basement for storage, a tool shed with rows of tools, etc.

Most of the students in the community where this research took place did not live in a similar world as Henry and Mudge. St. Francis is located in an urban working-class neighborhood where 94% of the students received free and reduced lunch. Many families lived in close quarters and within non-traditional structures where families struggled to make ends meet and acquired few material possessions. Though the students in this paper were all White, their lived realities did not reflect the dominant lives associated with “Whiteness” in the United States.

When we ask students to make connections with books that are far removed from their own lived worlds, we may be unwittingly normalizing the existences portrayed in print and images. By encouraging students to make connections with these universalized texts, we may be inadvertently sending the message that our students’ worlds are not as valuable as those found in the pages of most children’s books. I found, and others find in their classrooms, that students want so badly to make a connection, they will even change their own (non-White middle class) lives to “connect” with the text. Students want to perform as good readers, and in a class that privileges connection-making, students will do what they must to articulate connections with texts without learning to critically interrogate them as constructions and opportunities to think deeply about societal structures.

MAKING DISCONNECTIONS: MOVING TOWARD DEEP MEANING FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

“The ability to sound out words and make meaning from texts makes children good consumers rather than good citizens.” (Harste, 2001, p. 2)

We need to constantly remind ourselves that our goal as literacy educators is not just to make students decoders of words and surface level meaning-makers—or in other words—consumers of texts, but also, as Harste advocates, good citizens who are able to critically reflect on the world and the word. Although some might argue that making connections has this potential, it has been our experience as teachers, researchers, and staff developers that more often than not the “connections” focus is almost entirely autobiographical and centered on similarities often without promoting critical dialogue. Therefore, I believe that naming a different kind of strategy—disconnections—opens up the spectrum of connection-making

and could potentially help teachers and students to see and talk about similarities and differences in more meaningful and nuanced ways while working toward deeper engagements with texts. By encouraging students to make disconnections we are also giving them tools to read, think, and speak from a critical perspective that assumes texts are constructed from a particular ideological standpoint, and therefore can be deconstructed, or questioned and critiqued.

Equipped with the notion of disconnections (along with connections), my history with connection-making practices in the classroom, and my deep and long-term knowledge of the girls, I assumed that finding those disconnections would bring about important questions as the girls and I worked through the early reading series by Cynthia Rylant, and eventually that did happen. Of course, like any best laid plans, the conversation did not immediately lead to powerful breakthroughs. But as hoped, the girls began to talk about disconnections that led to critical explorations. One of these powerful conversations was around family practices privileged in the text and stereotypes of what it means to be “rich” and “poor.” The following excerpts were taken from a lively conversation during the month of July. I found a window of opportunity to discuss connection-making and disconnections when Cadence began talking about her memories of reading *Henry and Mudge*. In the conversation I asked about their practices of making connections when reading books:

Stephanie: What kind of connections do you make when you read?

Sarah: Life connections between you and the book.

Stephanie: So text-to-self connections, right? So your life and the book.

Heather: Text to family.

Sarah: Texts to other books.

Cadence: And life stories to the book.

Stephanie: Right, and what about to the world?

Heather: Yeah.

Just as I had suspected, the language and practices around connection-making that were so important in second grade (and the years following second grade) were easily articulated by the girls. And although intertextual practices (text to text connections) were promoted when I was their teacher and likely taught by their teachers following me, it was the practice of autobiographical connection-making that the girls spoke of immediately (i.e., life connections, text to family, life stories to book).

I used this focus on autobiographical connection-making to tell a story about Cadence’s connection in second grade with Henry’s goldfish at his birthday party:

Stephanie: One time I was listening to a conversation that Cadence and a group of readers were having about Henry and Mudge, and in *Henry and*

Mudge and the Best Day of All, it's about Henry's birthday and they're having a birthday party:

Cadence: ::*Oh*, I know that one.

Heather: Me too.

Stephanie: So Cadence and a group of friends were talking about *The Best Day of All*—and in [the book] all these friends come over and they brought these packages, they had ring toss in the backyard, they had potato sack races, they had go-fishing, they had a piñata,

Cadence: Egg thingy underwater—like the eggs underwater.

Stephanie: Oh yeah.

Heather: Apples.

At this point I was astonished at the specific details they had remembered about this one book from second grade, an issue that speaks to the power of children's literature and the potential for constructing what children deem to be normal or acceptable.

Stephanie: Oh yeah, they had apple bobbing. Then I remember, Cadence was just in second grade, and she saw the picture with all the kids going home with the little goldfish in their bag because all the kids got to take home a goldfish after they played all these games. And she said, "I had goldfish at my birthday party too."

Cadence: (shy giggle)

Stephanie: And I thought, hmmm. I wonder if that is really a connection to the book or is Cadence feeling like she has to make up something in her life to *fit* the book? So then I started listening to other people's conversations and sometimes it seemed to me that people would make up things to make a connection to the book. So then I thought, "Wait a second, maybe I should be teaching kids to find the disconnection. So you can find the connections with your life, but you can also find the disconnect. The part that doesn't go with your life. And you can talk about that—how it's not the same as your life, and how that can help your understanding. What do you think about that? Have you ever thought about disconnections?"

Heather

and Cadence: No.

Stephanie: Why don't you, just for old time's sake, grab one of these *Henry and Mudge* and let's start looking through some of the illustrations. And we can talk about the connections and we can talk about some of the disconnections.

Following this opening scenario into our collaborative thinking around disconnections, Sarah was the first to talk about a disconnection referring to an illustration in *Henry and Mudge Get the Cold Shivers* (Rylant, 1996) where Henry's mother delivered several kinds of food and drink to a sick Henry in bed:

Sarah: My mom don't bring me all that stuff to my room—she won't bring me no popsicle, no crackers, actually, she'll just—I don't even *know*.

The girls were adept at articulating connections with the books, but faced with the task of describing the disconnect between the text and one's life, Sarah struggled with finding the words for articulating difference. "I don't even know" is indicative of that struggle and her socialization as a reader who has focused on connections—how can difference be described in a meaningful way? Shortly afterward, Cadence commented on an illustration of Henry, his mother, father, uncle, and cousin eating at a dining room table:

Cadence: I have a disconnection. Uh, my family, they just don't always *eat* at one big table. We always go in the living room.

Stephanie: Let's talk about that.

Heather: Yeahhh!

Sarah: Oh yeah, we eat and watch TV.

The girls began talking about all the different places they and their families regularly ate meals and the reasons why. Descriptions of small living spaces, only a couple available chairs around a table, and mail piled high on the table were common across the three of them. Toward the end of this part of the discussion Heather reminded us all that there is never one "truth" however, and that for her family at least, they "sometimes eat like that at Thanksgiving or something."

Now that the girls were getting the hang of making disconnections they all clamored to look deeper at the books which led to an important insight about illustrations and how they can be read as "text." We were able to discuss how illustrations not only reflect the materiality of lives and hint at the positioning of the characters' social class, but they also frame family *practices*. These cultural ways of being, not simply the one-dimensional simplistic illustration itself that includes people and objects, were invoked from the image and became the topic of conversation as the girls considered connections and disconnections between their family practices and those represented in the images. Soon the group moved into a critical conversation dealing with class-based stereotypes as they recognized Henry's cousin who seemed different from everyone else in Henry's family.

Focusing on the same illustration of Henry, his mother, father, uncle, and cousin sitting at a long dining room table having a meal, Cadence piqued the group's interest in the girl cousin who was wearing a bow in her curly hair and a frilly white dress.

Cadence: She's like different. She acts like she's different from the rest of the family.

Heather: She don't eat all that stuff.

Stephanie: What do you mean?

Heather: She eats like lobster.

Stephanie: Oh, you think she eats lobster?

Heather: Yeah, she looks like a little rich girl.

Stephanie: Oh, she looks like a little rich girl, what do you mean by that?

Heather talked on and on about the girl's frilly white dress, her hair bow, and overall the way she was groomed. Cadence joined the conversation but Sarah sat unusually quiet during the interchange.

Stephanie: (to Sarah) Do you think she looks like a rich girl?

Sarah responded by shaking her head no.

Stephanie: Tell us about that.

Sarah: 'Cuz, I ain't rich, but I ain't poor, but I got dresses.

Heather: She looks like a little spoiled brat. Look at her purse. This is how she walks, I'm serious.

Heather stands up to impersonate what she believes the frilly-dressed little girl would look like walking. Here Heather is reading the illustration to understand the social practices and identity performances of the characters.

Cadence: I never look like *that* until like Easter or Christmas.

Sarah: She just looks like she's not used to—she looks like she's from a fancier place.

Heather: To eat lobster!

Cadence: And eat out.

The girls continued to look through the books when Heather found the evidence she had hoped for:

Heather: Oh my God! She *is* spoiled, that's her *room*! Look at her teacups and her hankies.

Stephanie: Do you have a disconnect, Heather?

Heather: Yeah, I ain't got all that stuff on my wall.

Sarah: Heather, but you're spoiled too.

Heather: No I'm not!

Sarah: Yes you are!

- Heather: There's her bed. She is spoiled.
 (Heather refers to a canopy bed in the cousin's spacious bedroom.)
 Sarah: I have a canopy too, but mine ain't just like that. But I got the circle.

The conversation continued and the students began to talk about money when Cadence stated that she was not like that girl (in the book) at all, because she didn't get everything she wanted and she had to do chores around the house to even get any money from her mom. The other girls had a different experience with money, however, and Sarah told us that she was given \$40.00 each week by her father to have fun with and pay her cellular phone bill. This discussion, inspired around making disconnections, became an entry point for a meaningful conversation about how we need to consider multiple perspectives and to resist stereotyping or essentializing people.

- Stephanie: You have a *phone*?
 Heather: I do too.
 Sarah: I been having a phone since I was eight.
 Stephanie: Now some people, Sarah, might say that only really rich kids have phones.
 Heather: Nu-huh.
 Sarah: Oh, that is *not* true!
 Stephanie: Why?
 Sarah: 'Cuz.
 Heather: We're not really rich and we both have a phone.
 Sarah: My cousin, her mom used to be real bad on drugs and then she got better, she's been better for a couple months, and they got 'em an apartment and stuff, and she ain't got a job yet, but my cousin gots a phone. . .
 Stephanie: So there are lots of in-betweens. So if you have rich over here (I draw a line on a piece of notebook paper)—and you have really poor over here (another line is drawn on the opposite side of the paper). There's lots of stuff in the middle, right?
 Heather: And you're doing okay, like. . .
 Cadence: Like not so rich and not so poor.
 (Conversation continues.)
 Heather: She has *teacups* on her wall!
 Stephanie: What does that mean though?
 Heather: She's rich!
 Sarah: She could be spoiled, but her family could, probably couldn't be rich, they probably just like her to. . .
 Heather: Do stuff.
 Cadence: People don't have to be rich and there's uhhh, ugh!

Cadence began to get frustrated acknowledging the complexity of it all—rich-poor, frilly-non-frilly—it had all seemed so simple before this discussion. The text had positioned them as readers to go along with the assumption that Henry’s cousin was a rich, frilly-dressed little girl who conformed to stereotypical femininity and felt out of place in Henry’s home with a dog drooling around the house and Henry wanting to play outside games. Through making disconnections, the girls and I were able to dig a little deeper into these ideological positionings in the book and began to realize that such “truths” may not be truths at all, but rather over-simplistic representations of what some people may be like some of the time. Sarah, specifically, challenged the fact that one had to be “rich” to have a canopy bed and other desirable material goods such as a mobile phone. Sarah also pushed Heather to reconsider her essentializing of the character claiming that Heather, too, was (at least from Sarah’s perspective) “spoiled.”

When I used strategies of making connections in the girls’ second-grade classroom, students seemed to focus most on finding similarities between the text and themselves and their worlds. However, through broadening this practice to include a spectrum of connection-making including disconnections, the girls were able to work through some of the assumptions and stereotypes present in this text and challenge their existence. I was able to then move this dialogue away from stereotypical representations and toward a more nuanced perspective that takes into account individual people, contexts, and practices. Through making disconnections we were able to use these texts as an entry point to a critical literacy practice that had the potential to promote the dismantling of some of the stereotypical representations of characters in books as well as stereotypes that govern social interactions among people in societies.

Beginning with the simple invitation to see if they notice any disconnections, the girls in this small group discussion critically read the illustrations and contexts of the books, articulated stereotypes of what it meant to be rich and a girl, and then pushed through those stereotypes by complicating them with their personal experiences and understandings about life. As literacy educators, this is one thing we would want our students to do in an effort to move beyond code-breaking and surface level meaning-making toward engaging in complex and critical thinking and talking around more nuanced readings of the words found in books and the world around them.

PROBLEMS WITH CONNECTION-MAKING FOR “DOMINANT” STUDENTS

Cadence’s connection-making to Henry’s birthday party overrode her ability to find value within her experiences and articulate those that are typically marginalized in society and obviously in books. Locating disconnection can help

readers like her to “talk back” to, or critique mainstream texts and ask critical questions about stereotypical representations and the construction of normalcy in texts. Readers from more dominant perspectives, however, can use connection-making to do the opposite of what Cadence did and almost co-opt marginalized, even oppressive experiences resulting in universalizing themes that should not be universalized but instead be critically investigated through “disconnect” and a deeper understanding about how lives are lived within societal structures.

For example, in their study focused on the reading and use of multicultural literature in a rural, predominantly White community, Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos (2001) highlight the comfort the White teachers in the study experienced as they connected with, and universalized, the life experiences of a marginalized African American family, and the discomfort the same group of adult readers experienced when difference between the characters and the readers was foregrounded. Looking at race and ethnicity, Lewis et al. (2001) pushed their adult reading group to consider differences—not universals—between them as White readers and the marginalized locations of the characters of color within the books. They wrote, “Our probing or casting doubt upon universalizing often disrupted the group’s cohesiveness, inducing either silence or resistance” (2001, p. 344). Lewis and her colleagues were attempting to disrupt normative readings of systemic inequities based on racial discrimination; their readers’ positionalities and sense of entitlement and privilege grounded in their Whiteness, then, might have been threatened. In a separate article written about the same adult reading group, Lewis (2000) includes herself as a subject in the group who shifted toward connection-making and universalizing experiences when she stated that “Everybody can identify with them [characters in *The Watsons go to Birmingham* (1997)]” and joined in the nostalgic conversation around Buster Brown shoes and who had them among their group (2000, p. 3 of 5 online) even though the shoes in the text were symbolic of White oppression and the resistance to racism by the characters in the book.

Like many educators who believe in critical literacy practices, Lewis (2000, 2001) and colleagues chose multicultural texts to represent *difference* from what is often deemed as a normative White experience and encouraged readers to step outside their comfort level to recognize the social, political, and cultural contexts in which book characters live their lives on the margins. However, likely through years of learning to be “good readers” through the practice of connection-making, even the adult readers in the study had a difficult time locating and voicing the *disconnect* and instead focused on the similarities (connections) between their lives and the lives in the book. Unintentionally, then, even the use of multicultural literature to teach critical perspectives on social issues such as racism, sexism, classism, etc., might have the opposite effect on readers from more dominant societal positions as they search for connections instead of thinking deeply across a spectrum of connection-making to include disconnections.

As teachers of readers then it is imperative that we teach and encourage *all* students, even those who do live lives similar to Henry in the popular series by Cynthia Rylant, to make disconnections as well as connections. Making disconnections is perhaps one way we can help our students be more engaged citizens as they think and talk deeply about nuanced issues that are not common in their own worlds.

DISCONNECT: RETHINKING CONNECTION-MAKING

The connection-making reading practices focused on autobiographical similarities with texts that are pervasive in today's literacy classrooms have roots in the psychological schema theories of reading and may be hindering the kind of engagement necessary to develop students who can read texts and contexts through a lens of nuance. Disconnections is one way we can begin to bridge some of these gaps so that students' experiences can be validated while they continue to build richer understandings of the texts, others, themselves, and society. Disconnections have the potential to act as a vehicle for moving reading practices beyond *comprehension* toward critically investigating texts. This investigation can include the race-, class-, family-, and gender-specific practices that are privileged in a text as well as the ways in which a text is attempting to position the reader.

The disconnect that began the conversations for the girls in the park on that hot July morning were the textual representations of families sitting at a dinner table together and of stereotypical "rich" (as the girls put it) girls as normal practices. This dialogue moved their work as readers from passive consumers of texts they enjoyed toward understanding that texts are constructed and present social practices and assumptions that can be questioned and critiqued. This continued throughout the lively dialogue around the frilly-dressed little girl who was assumed to be rich. In the end, their "love" for these books and the idealized remembrances of them from second grade did not hinder their ability to engage in critical readings, nor did their critical readings change their minds about loving the books. Instead, having the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue around disconnections opened up a seemingly enjoyable space where the girls worked through complex ideas about the rich-poor dichotomy, family eating practices, and the fact that texts are not simply to be accepted and connected with, but they are to be engaged.

To what end?

The practice of complicating connection-making grounded in similarities across a self and a text is not something that we believe will automatically lead

to deep critical engagement, the recognition of inequitable social structures, or the action needed for social justice. What we do believe can come from a more complex engagement with the spectrum of connection-making that includes disconnections is more nuanced readings of texts, contexts, and social practices. If readers can become sensitized to nuance in texts and in life, they may move beyond dichotomies, stereotypes, or assumptions made about people and society. This movement against the sweeping-up of the parts of texts that already “connect” with one’s understandings and beliefs, and the ignoring of disconfirming evidence and ruptures in texts and experiences could promote more critical reflection as readers in a broad sense. On the other hand, for readers who don’t have substantive life connections with much of the dominant children’s literature, the overt permission given by the authority figure in the classroom to recognize and articulate disconnections between their lives and the practices privileged in books can act as permission to deem one’s own life as worthy and not always inferior to those lives lived between the covers of books.

As we bring this article to a close we are left with many questions and lingering concerns about reading practices that have become normative in our own classrooms in the past and in our university classrooms of the present. One potential danger of “naming” a practice is that it may be taken up without the dynamism that we assume makes it worthwhile in the first place. Therefore we will include some implications of this particular article for classroom practice and future research.

Implications for classroom practice:

- Introduce a spectrum of connection-making to readers including an explicit focus on disconnections and plenty of opportunities for talking about difference as well as similarities.
- Classroom inquiry into how and when connection-making and disconnection-making can promote more nuanced readings and when they might inadvertently promote more superficial readings that don’t open up spaces for critical engagement.
- Engaging students as producers of texts as one way to respond to disconnections, particularly when a reader or group of readers consistently find themselves written out of children’s literature.
- Importance of maintaining the integrity and authenticity of conversations around reading and resist the normalizing of textual responses.

Possible future research:

- An in-depth study of the spectrum of connection-making, to include disconnections, in the elementary reading classroom to investigate the impact

of such practices on perceptions of one's lived experiences and identity construction.

- Exploration of how teachers and students negotiate spaces opened up by disconnection-making and how those conversations can be moved toward deconstruction and reconstruction of texts.
- Investigation of the spectrum of connections and disconnections between teachers' and students' lived realities and how teachers might read students in more nuanced ways and use those understandings to make decisions about texts and contexts in the reading classroom.

We suggest these implications for practice and research while simultaneously recognizing that these are grounded in our own reflections upon the popular reading practice of connecting autobiographical experiences to texts and on the specific data represented here. Such critical reflection around reading practices and students can push practitioners beyond what has been accepted as typical in reading classrooms and into new spaces with readers to theorize—through practice—the work of readers, texts, and reading teachers.

ENDNOTES

“I” is used in this article when referring to Stephanie, the teacher-researcher during this study, and the pronoun “we” is used to mark the collaborative analyses and thinking that Stephanie and Lane have done together for this particular article.

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The symbol :: was used in the transcripts to show overlapping talk.

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