



## Reading the World While Learning to Teach: Critical Perspectives on Literacy Methods

By Kathleen Riley & Katherine Crawford-Garrett

Since the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) was formally signed into law more than a decade ago, school reform efforts in the United States have been shaped by a neoliberal ideology that has exacted a tremendous toll on students, teachers, and teacher educators. Apple (2013) defined the neoliberal initiative as “a vision that sees every sector of society as subject to the logics of commodification, marketization, competition, and cost-benefit analysis” (p. 6). According to this definition, the reforms NCLB has perpetuated, including high-stakes accountability measures, a focus on privatization and corporatization, and the advent of alternative routes to teacher licensure, typify neoliberal approaches to school reform and suggest a large-scale, bipartisan disinvestment from public education. Although critiques of NCLB and other neoliberal reform efforts are pervasive (Sleeter, 2007; Zeichner, 2010), little has been written about those arguably most affected by these initiatives: preservice teachers just now entering college whose schooling was shaped by high-stakes accountability.

Because the majority of the preservice teachers currently entering the profession came of age during the era of NCLB, teacher education programs and instructors

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who take sociocritical perspectives face unique challenges. For example, as we built relationships with preservice teachers in our respective contexts, we began to notice how profoundly their perspectives on education, and reading instruction in particular, had been shaped by the neoliberal reform environment they experienced as elementary students. Thus, as we shared across our contexts and discussed our practice as teacher educators in an era of accountability, we posed the following questions as part of an ongoing inquiry into our teaching: How might we, as teacher educators, offer preservice teachers opportunities to imagine school as a place where students explore their own interests, question the status quo, and use literacy for social change? How do the preservice teachers respond to these invitations? What questions, tensions, and insights arise? How and when do they draw on and/or problematize their previous experiences with schooling?

In an effort to engage these questions, we consider how preservice teachers in two distinct regional contexts within the United States respond to literacy methods courses that utilize the framework of critical literacy as a lens through which to problematize past experiences, consider new possibilities for schooling, and interrupt dominant conceptions of teaching and learning as neutral, technical endeavors.

## **Theoretical Background**

To better frame our research questions, we situate our work within the theories of feminist pedagogies and critical literacy. These theoretical perspectives work together to establish literacy as political, social, and cultural and knowledge as collaboratively constructed through accounting for affective dimensions, multiple perspectives, and systems of power.

### ***Feminist Pedagogies***

Rather than assuming a single universal truth, feminist pedagogies assume that students' experience of the world is based on social location (e.g., Evans, 1979; Richardson, 1997; Weiler, 1991). Additionally, feminist pedagogies attend to the affective dimension of teaching and learning (hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984). This perspective has led to practices that foreground the role of feelings and personal experience in classroom contexts, such as poetry (Richardson, 1997), narrative (Hesford, 1999), and art (Ellsworth, 2005). On the basis of the assumption that students bring multiple, sometimes conflicting, life experiences to the classroom from their unique social and cultural experiences, feminist pedagogues aim to create contexts for students to question their own experiences through the creation of *contact zones* (Pratt, 1991) that allow for different cultural experiences to be put in productive dialogue.

As feminist teachers in university settings have theorized practices that bring experience into the classroom for knowledge generation, they have also grappled how to support students in seeing their personal experiences as situated within institutions and systems of power (e.g., Britzman, 1999; Kamler, 2001). Britzman

(1999), for example, writes about the role of *institutional biography*, which allows teachers to gain a critical distance from their own assumptions and resist unconsciously reproducing educational practices. In our classes, we aimed to find ways for students to bring in their own experiences with schooling; question their assumptions; re-see their experiences within widening understandings of historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts; and articulate both their critiques of the status quo and their desires for more humanizing practices for themselves and their students. We see this set of practices that can be mobilized as a means of speaking back to and attempting to disrupt the neoliberal ideologies that have come to function hegemonically in school reform initiatives (Kincheloe, 2008).

### **Critical Literacy**

Like other literacy teacher educators (e.g., Jones & Enriquez, 2009; Rogers, 2013; Vasquez, 2013), we employed frameworks and practices of critical literacy in methods courses. Critical literacy (Christensen, 1999; Freire, 1987; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Royster, 2000) attends to the ways that literacy is culturally, historically, and politically situated and assumes reading and writing to be embedded within one's social world and connected to identity, agency, and power. Luke and Freebody (1997) described the relationship between textual interpretations and social location when they wrote, "One never just (generically) reads. Readers always read something, a textual representation, and readers always take up an epistemological standpoint, stance, and relationship to the values and ideologies, discourses, and worldviews in the text" (p. 195). Similarly, Royster (2000) conceptualized literacy as "sociopolitical action," writing,

For African American women, becoming literate has meant gaining the skills to read and write; it has also meant taking the power and authority to know ourselves, others, and our circumstances in multisensory ways and to act with authority based on that knowing. (p. 61)

Not only does such a perspective assume multiple possible interpretations of a written text; it also suggests that one's interpretations and literate actions are directly connected to a sense of agency and possible futures.

In the context of the methods courses, literacy is both a topic of study and a way of knowing. Therefore we conceptualized literacy as sociopolitical action for the teachers, their students, and ourselves as practitioner researchers. We drew on a *literacies of teaching* (Lytle, 2006) framework that conceptualizes classrooms, schools, students, and communities as texts with multiple interpretations. According to Lytle,

to be literate as a teacher means to engage in an ongoing, searching, and sometimes profoundly unsettling dialogue with students, families, administrators, policy makers, and other teachers who may talk, read and write from very different locations and experiences. (p. 259)

## **Methodology and Methods**

Our collaboration was based on our work in two distinct university contexts. In this section, we detail our approach to our research, contexts, participants, shared pedagogical approaches, and methods of data collection and analysis.

### **Teacher Research**

Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), we define teacher research as “systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings” (p. 27). Starting from the premise that teachers (and teacher educators) are generators of knowledge, teacher research has a history of responding to injustice and working toward more equitable conditions in schools (Ballenger, 1998; Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009a). Historically, teacher-researchers have used their work to legitimize the experiences of underserved students and to disrupt deficit perspectives that cast some populations of students as incapable or disaffected (Ballenger, 1998; Blackburn, 2003; Campano, 2007; Fecho, 2003). Moreover, teacher research aims to challenge the notion that knowledge for teaching can only be generated by university researchers, who largely conduct their research outside of K-12 classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In contrast, teacher research as a practice is concerned with disrupting mainstream conceptions of knowledge and considering, instead, how it can be constructed collectively in school and classroom spaces. Ultimately, teacher research aims to work “against the grain” (Cochran-Smith, 2004) and challenge business-as-usual in schools.

Through the process of documenting our classes, looking closely at our students and their work, and making sense of our teaching through collaborative analysis, we joined others in using teacher research to examine the dimensions of our practice as teacher educators that seemed the most puzzling, pressing, and urgent (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1995; Kinloch, 2013; Rogers, 2013; Simon, 2009). Within a policy environment that is reaching further into teacher education programs, this growing body of scholarship theorizes teacher education from the inside (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) by identifying issues of practice that directly affect the practice of teacher education.

As a critical dimension of practitioner research, we continually acknowledged the tensions inherent in our simultaneous roles as teachers and researchers and believe that the intersection of these dual positionalities offers rich opportunities for learning, a phenomenon Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009b) referred to as “working the dialectic” (p. 43). Although, on one hand, we were the course instructors responsible for creating a syllabus, assigning readings, facilitating in-class activities and engagements, evaluating assignments, and determining final grades, on the other hand, we were also researchers interested in creating spaces where students could grapple honestly with the authentic questions and tensions that come with teach-

ing and learning literacy in “these times” (Lytle, 2006). It is in the intersection of these two positionalities, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, that our work is situated.

### **Research Context**

The context of this study is two separate literacy methods courses that we (White, middle-class, female teacher educators) taught during spring 2013 and fall 2014. In this section, we provide an overview of each of our courses and the students and of our method of collaborating across geographical distance.

**Course 1: Teaching of Reading at a southwestern university.** Katy teaches a course called The Teaching of Reading in the Elementary School at a large, public, minority-serving university in the Southwest. The course comprises undergraduate students in their junior year of college and is the first course students take after admission to the College of Education. The course meets once a week for 2.5 hours and feels “high stakes” in that the course content is closely tied to a state certification exam. In addition to attending university courses, all of the students are also enrolled in field placements at local elementary schools, where they spend 2 full days a week.

**Course 2: Foundations in Reading at a northeastern university.** Kathleen teaches a course called Foundations in Reading, Grades 4-8 at a large, public university in the Northeast that is located about one hour from a major U.S. city. Students in the course are pursuing middle grades (Grades 4-8) certification and have concentrations in math, science, social studies, and language arts. Foundations in Reading, Grades 4-8 is one of four required literacy courses in a middle grades certification program. The students were not in field placements in conjunction with the course.

### **Participants**

The study comprised 48 participants. Twenty-four participants were enrolled in The Teaching of Reading in the Elementary School, nine of whom identified as Hispanic/Latino and one of whom identified as Palestinian. Twenty-four were enrolled in Kathleen’s course, Foundations in Reading, Grades 4-8. Of these students, 23 students identified as White, and one identified as biracial. All students in both classes agreed to participate in the study. Nineteen self-selected to participate in a focus group when the opportunity was offered to all participants (eight from the southwestern university and 11 from the northeastern university). In consenting to participate in the study, students were reminded of the authors’ dual roles as researchers and instructors. We acknowledged the tensions inherent in these positions and reminded students that their willingness to participate (or not) in the study would have no bearing on their grades.

**Shared Pedagogical Approaches:  
Critical Teaching as Collaboration**

Our history as collaborators began in graduate school, where we both completed doctoral degrees in reading, writing, and literacy and had the opportunity to coteach several courses. We also both taught elementary school for a number of years in the Washington, D.C., area and have extensive experience working with diverse populations of elementary students, many from families who have recently immigrated to the United States.

Because we valued our collaboration as graduate students, as we transitioned into becoming faculty members at our respective institutions, we created a structure by which we *cotaught from a distance*. Prior to each iteration of our course, we met in person (either at conferences or visits) to work through our syllabi, determine some common experiences, and develop shared questions for inquiry. Throughout this process, we felt supported and challenged by each other and reflected that we felt less alone in our classrooms. Thus we thought of ourselves as coteaching from a distance in that we had shared a vision, goals, and questions about our work and drew on the collective knowledge that our collaboration generated. Even though our settings and demographics differed, we drew on our shared teaching philosophies to structure and facilitate our courses in similar ways. Thus we aimed to actualize a critical literacy stance in our respective settings.

Classroom practices associated with critical literacy include reading supplemental texts, producing countertexts, and conducting student-choice research projects (Behrman, 2006). In our courses, we enacted critical literacy in several ways. We framed our courses using the concept of *reading the word and the world* (Freire, 1987); provided spaces and invitations for preservice teachers to bring their own autobiographies into the classroom; structured opportunities for personal, creative, artistic, and emotional responses to texts; and had students design curricular units with a focus on social change. One of the key practices we introduced was the shared reading of fictional texts (*Locomotion* by Jacqueline Woodson in Katy's course and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie in Kathleen's course) that highlighted themes related to race, class, cultural identity, language, and family relationships. These texts provoked conversation, fostered collaboration, and offered preservice teachers points of resonance and divergence with their own lived experiences (Adomat, 2014). As the forthcoming data evidence, critical engagements with these texts enabled discussions around literacy, including, What is literacy? What does/can literacy do in the world? Who counts as literate, and who decides? These are questions that we suspect may not have been raised outside of a deep engagement with literature.

In our classes, we started from the assumption that K–12 students' opportunities to know themselves and act on their world through literacy depends on their teachers' beliefs about literacy and their power and authority to do the same. A critical literacy perspective allowed all of us—in our roles as teachers, students,

researchers—to imagine how literacy education could open new possibilities for students in schools to know themselves, their circumstances, and their ability to act on their worlds.

### **Data Collection**

In fall 2013, we conducted a pilot study through which we began to explore our collaborative teaching, refine our data collection process, and develop our research questions. The official data collection for this study occurred in both of our classes in the spring semester of 2014. Our data sources included practitioner researcher journal entries written weekly (14 weeks total for each of the two courses, for a total of 28 entries); one recorded and transcribed class discussion for each class (two total); written artifacts that emerged from the course, including the syllabus (two), mid-course evaluations (two sets, one from each class), and students' weekly online reading responses (a total of 15 weeks, eight from Katy's class and seven from Kathleen's class); and student work. The student work that we analyzed for this study included student literature response experiences and reflections (three in each class for a total of six) and students' final projects (eight projects from Katy's class and nine from Kathleen's class). We also each facilitated two focus groups (four total) with participants who self-selected to participate as a means of deepening our analysis and conducting member checks on the emerging themes. These focus groups occurred at the end of the semester, after the classes were over and final grades had been submitted. In Katy's class, eight students participated in two focus groups; in Kathleen's class, 11 students participated in two focus groups. The focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

In winter 2013, after having each taught our respective courses once, we conducted an initial round of analysis on our pilot data, starting with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which we reread our data and generated themes and categories based on our research questions and then read through the data a second time to confirm whether salient themes were indeed present. We then refined our initial research questions (which were very broad) and noted places where we would align our teaching (see earlier). Throughout spring 2014, we collected data formally. We continued collaborative research conversations as we each taught our courses a second time and continued our efforts to make sense of our pedagogy. After each class we taught, we wrote memos in a research journal, which was a shared document. These memos aimed to capture what happened in class, raise questions and offer insights about our research questions, and grapple with challenges that we faced in our teaching. We then read each other's accounts, commenting in a different color on the shared document. We met weekly to discuss our classes, plan next steps, and identify questions that were coming out of our work that we wanted to explore more.

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Mid-semester, we read through our analytic memos to substantiate themes we had previously identified, identify new themes and areas of interest, and locate confirming or disconfirming evidence for the patterns we saw emerging. We narrowed in on our current research questions, and our memos for the second part of the semester became more focused. At the end of the semester, each of us conducted two focus groups with preservice teachers in which we asked them to describe turning points in their thinking, share specific experiences and assignments that impacted them, articulate visions for how they wanted to teach in the future, and identify some of the challenges they expected to face as teachers. We used these focus groups as an opportunity to confirm or disconfirm some of the themes that we had previously identified and to gain another data point on how students experienced the courses.

### **Findings**

Our findings can be categorized under two significant threads. The first is the idea of *rereading*. Within this area, we consider the degree to which preservice teachers must unlearn certain schooling practices and reread their past experiences to write a new future for themselves as teachers. The second thread focuses on assessment and provides a concrete example of what unlearning and rereading looked like in our methods courses.

#### **Rereading**

The critical literacy framework and classroom engagements offered students many chances to bring their own experiences to their learning. In looking at student work and reflecting on their online and in-class discussions, we noticed places where students took up opportunities to reread their pasts. Thus their own experiences in school became a point of departure for their theorizing practices, with the critical literacy frame offering chances for them to read their pasts critically. In this section, we highlight two ways that students engaged in such rereading: *rereading curriculum and school practices* and *rereading professional cultures of schools*.

**Rereading curriculum and school practices.** As a result of reading foundational critical literacy theorists (Christensen, 1999; Freire, 1987; Luke & Freebody, 1997), students in both classes reread their past experiences in school and discussed what aspects of schooling they might need to unlearn to move forward. For example, in one of Kathleen's early classes, in which students worked in small groups to discuss student-generated questions related to the concept of *reading the word and the world* (Freire, 1987), students engaged in an extended discussion in which they realized the shortcomings and omissions within their curriculum. When Sean and Mike (all names are pseudonyms), two White men, reported out to the class after discussing the topic of the *political nature of literacy and school*, they shared that they realized that they had read "at most 25% women authors in school, maybe

more like 15%.” Then they posed a rhetorical question to the class, asking how many women authors they had read, which Kathleen took up by saying, “Yeah, I’m curious. Call it out—what percentage of books did you read in high school that were women authors?” Answers were mostly in the 20% range, and people started trying to name just a few women authors that they had read.

The conversation then turned to other subjects. Dina, a White student, said she felt like she had been “unlearning” since she got to college and shared that her history teacher said they would be unlearning everything they were taught in high school. A few students then related this idea of unlearning to math, sharing that their college math courses had made them realize that they had only been exposed to rote procedures rather than conceptual understanding in their K-12 math classes. This was followed up by a few students who shared a similar feeling about writing, as another student talked how she only learned the five-paragraph essay in high school, and then in college, her intro writing teacher said that the five-paragraph essay structure is not useful. Jen, a White student, added that she didn’t feel like there was much emphasis on it.

Kathleen then asked if unlearning is uncomfortable or feels bad sometimes, and Dina said it feels bad to think she just believed everything all that time, though maybe her teachers didn’t know any better. “But why not?” she then asked. Other students seemed hesitant to take such a critical stance toward their education, with Siobhan, a White woman, sharing that she didn’t feel that it was bad, that there must be a reason they learned it that way. This conversation illustrates how students took up course themes to generate their own questions about the political nature of school and then came to critical awareness of the limits and omissions in their own education.

In an online discussion, prompted by a reading of the novel *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2004), students in Katy’s class engaged in conversations around the quality and relevance of the basal readers that they were assigned to read in elementary school. After writing about loving to read as a young child, Alina, a White preservice teacher, posted the following on an online discussion board: “My joy and love of reading severely diminished when I went to school. The books we had to read were dull and lifeless. They came in a single bound book but there were many stories in each book, stories that I would have no remorse throwing into a fire as kindling.”

In a similar reflection about the relevance of reading and writing in school, Bonita, a Latina preservice teacher, posted the following:

The most interesting idea throughout both of the readings was the idea of having reading and writing mean something to students. Growing up I hated reading and thought it was pointless. This is because the lessons never related to me as a person. Everything we wrote was some kind of a prompt or some book that was in the curriculum. I understand that this is necessary at times but I also understand that students need to read for a purpose.

These comments show preservice teachers rereading the literacy instructional

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practices they experienced with a new set of theoretical lenses and also developing countertheories to literacy instruction, such as reading for a purpose.

Preservice teachers used their own literacy experiences in the methods courses to deepen these countertheories. For example, Melissa, a Latina student in Katy's class, posted the following commentary:

We have to learn each child and where they come from and try our best to tie those things into the curriculum. It allows the children to want to learn. Now that I am in further into my degree, I have gained my love of reading back. When I read Wilson (2002) and Woodson (2004), I didn't want to put either of them down. I read something that was interesting and related to me, but was learning at the same time. I think it's important to do that when we are teachers.

This comment shows how Melissa drew not only on course textbooks (Lorraine Wilson's 2002 *Reading to Live*) but also on her reading of literature in the methods course (*Locomotion*) to use her own experience as a reader to offer a countertheory of literacy as something that should be "interesting and related to me."

Not only did the preservice teachers critique the curriculum that they experienced in school in the context of the methods courses but the course experiences also led them to reread school practices. Lytle (2006) talked about the *literacies of teaching* as a "critical framework through which classrooms, schools, districts, and communities are viewed as texts with multiple possible interpretations and the potential to become generative sites of inquiry" (p. 258).

In the methods courses, preservice teachers reread the school practices that they experienced, especially practices around labeling, testing, grouping, and tracking. For preservice teachers who were tracked in lower classes and/or given particular labels, these memories had a visceral quality. For example, the excerpt from Katy's field notes documents her own response to an episode that David, a Mexican-American male student, shared in an online discussion: "He wrote about remembering being a special education student and being taken to a separate building to do a reading assessment every few months and seemed to remember it with a haunting level of clarity and almost trauma."

Other preservice teachers, too, shared their experiences of being grouped, labeled, tracked, and tested in ways that brought to the surface feelings of pain and anxiety. For example, one preservice teacher critiqued the predominance of assessments that required her to read aloud in front of the teacher and her peers. Although she remembers being a "decent reader," she is able to critically reflect on how "terrifying" this process must have been for poor readers. Even when the memories didn't have such a visceral quality, many students in Katy's class highlighted how rote procedures were favored at the expense of meaning making; moreover, preservice teachers analyzed issues of power and difference within their childhood reading instruction and how divisions among poor readers and good readers were both reinforced and normalized.

**Rereading professional cultures of schools.** Because the field of teacher education has long recognized the power of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), we took note of moments when preservice teachers in our classes took a critical stance on school cultures, with a specific focus on common practices among teachers. As the preservice teachers in our classes developed more inquiry- and critical literacy-based approaches to teaching, they raised questions about working within school contexts where not all teachers shared their philosophies. They brought up questions about being able to justify their practices to colleagues. For example, Darla, a White student in Kathleen's class, picked up on another classmate's comment when she wrote,

I like your question about changing the mindset of teachers who have been around for a while. I also wrestle with this question and I wonder if I go into the classroom as a rookie teacher with a lot of inquiry-based, out of the box, literacy-driven activities (vs. textbook and worksheets), if other veteran teachers will question my theories or practices.

Other students made comments focused less on being able to justify practices and more on interrogating their own responsibility as teachers to change practices of colleagues that have a negative impact on students:

If a fellow teacher in your school has very strong and negative views about a particular culture, race, religion or other background and you witness it negatively affecting a student's self-esteem or self worth, what can a teacher that is new to the field/school/district do?

Still others focused more on what it might mean to take a particular approach to literacy education when not all teachers in the building work with the same assumptions about literacy education. In a focus group, Anne, a White student, shared,

I want to begin to give the students a different definition of literacy—the one that we've come up with. Although I don't know if it's really gonna be beneficial, 'cause they're gonna go on to the next teacher, they might completely take that all away from them again, tell them, "No, it's reading, writing, and understanding." But I feel like it's worth a shot. Maybe the students will challenge their next teacher and their thinking of what literacy is.

As these comments reveal, the preservice teachers were likely drawing on their past experiences of school and/or representations of teaching in the media to anticipate and actively grapple with what it might be like to take critical inquiry approaches to literacy education within constraining school environments. These comments suggest different concerns—being taken seriously by colleagues as a rookie teacher, advocating for students who face discrimination by other teachers in the building, or working against the prevailing views about literacy. As the third comment suggests, some of the preservice teachers saw their own position as a potentially powerful one, believing that they might empower their students to view literacy in new ways and subsequently teach their colleagues.

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Amid these conversations about the challenges of working in uncritical or constraining school cultures or navigating difficult relationships with colleagues were moments when preservice teachers imagined new ways of being as teachers that allowed them support in enacting their visions and theories.

For example, in Katy's field observations of her students planning lessons based on the novel *Locomotion* by Woodson (2004), she wrote,

After they wrote their lessons, they put them on chart paper and hung them on the wall. We did a gallery walk with sticky notes and they gave each other feedback. I then gave them five more minutes to get back with their group and read the feedback. I overheard Sofia say, "If more collaboration like this happened in schools, education would radically change."

We found it notable that, while preservice teachers experienced many forms of collaboration within their schools, including meeting to discuss students' Individualized Education Plans, planning instruction in grade-level teams, and even participating monthly in professional learning communities, they identified this deep thinking and talking around a text as a unique form of collaboration, one that they had not seen or experienced as student teachers in field placements. These examples speak to the importance of allowing aspiring literacy educators the space to grapple with how they will interact with school environments and colleagues in ways that allow them to continue to do critical inquiry with their students.

Taken together, these examples of rereading make visible some of the inquiries with which the teachers engaged throughout our courses. Throughout the online and in-class discussions, engagements with literature, and focus group conversations, students took a critical stance toward their own educations and imagining how they might create different kinds of spaces for young people in the future. One of the concrete practices to which this kind of rereading was most immediately applied involved assessment. It was necessary for students to radically reconsider the assessment they experienced as students to imagine new possibilities for the future.

#### **Problematizing Assessment**

Preservice teachers in both research contexts also struggled to reconcile visions for authentic and critical assessment processes with their own experiences as students in school settings where standardized and formal measures, such as quizzes and tests, were favored. One of our goals in our classes was to illustrate the limiting and damaging effects of narrow assessment measures (Ravitch, 2014) and to invite preservice teachers to think differently about how literacy ability and competency might be assessed in schools (Campano, 2007). In this section, we build on these ideas by highlighting preservice teachers' past experiences with assessment, discussing alternative approaches to literacy assessment that we introduced in our respective classes and considering how preservice teachers were able to reconcile these alternative visions with the current policy environment.

**Past experiences with assessment.** Preservice teachers' past experiences with assessment significantly shaped their perspectives on and attitudes toward literacy assessment. In a telling moment in class, Katy asked the preservice teachers to reflect in writing on a time when they had been assessed in a meaningful way. There was an uncharacteristic amount of silence as they pondered when they might have experienced authentic, meaningful, or purposeful assessment. Two preservice teachers ultimately raised their hands and offered examples. Both were multiple-choice assessments. Katy became increasingly concerned that the preservice teachers' own schooling experiences in a test-intensive environment precluded them from experiencing assessments that might have altered or expanded their perspectives on teaching. Moreover, Katy recalled her own experiences learning to implement portfolio assessment by having the opportunity to see it in use at an innovative elementary school in Colorado. Without that image of students sharing their portfolios in an impressive, articulate manner or the teachers' integrating portfolio requirements across content areas, it would have been very difficult for Katy to begin using portfolios in her classroom. Thus, as a methods instructor, the problem at times felt insurmountable: When no image of the possible exists, how can preservice teachers become agents of change who imagine new possibilities for students and schools?

Similar problematic experiences with assessment emerged when the preservice teachers were asked to reflect broadly on their experiences as readers and writers in elementary school. Many memories of assessment and categorization surfaced as a result of this invitation. For example, Erica, a White preservice teacher in Katy's class, wrote the following on an online discussion board posting midway through the semester:

My only personal memory of formal reading assessment was a program called SRA. It was a color-coded program of booklets containing short readings, followed by multiple-choice questions pertaining to vocabulary and comprehension. Students would progress through the levels as they completed the dozen or so individual tests within each color group. The readings were dull and did not hold my interest, but I knew that in order to progress I had to pay attention while reading. A record of each student's status was kept on a chart at the back of the classroom. For me, the process was stressful, but in a good way. I and others in the class saw it as a competition—we wanted to be at the top of that chart. In retrospect, this must have been an awful experience for those who were poor readers and therefore consistently at the bottom of the chart.

Preservice teachers needed opportunities to unpack these assessment experiences to assess their constraints and affordances. For example, until Erica was asked to consider assessment through a critical lens, she saw no problem with the SRA approach, primarily because she was a strong reader who progressed through the program without a problem. Other preservice teachers who had not been identified as successful or competent readers in elementary school shared experiences with assess-

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ment that were often complicated and painful. David, a Mexican-American preservice teacher, for example, was able to not only reflect critically on his own experience with special education testing but also make broader and more universal connections to the climate of testing nationwide and how this might impact students:

I remember when I was in grade school I had a lot of trouble with reading. I was in the special education program and was taken out of school a few times for testing. The tests would take place in this little building build near the public school office. There was always a test book that folded up into a triangular prism and I would have to read the side that faced me while the administrator would make marks on the other side as she/he followed along to what I read. Sometimes I would have to read words that were not words just to test how I would try to sound it out. These tests took about half a day to a day and my dad would drop me off and then pick me up after it was done. . . . I am very interested in experiencing the assessment environment from the other perspective and hope that my prior experiences help me make it a more comfortable assessment. I do not like all the assessments we give kids and want to lessen the impact they have on true learning and teaching. I know it will be hard to fight the assessment tidal wave our country has been caught up in but I will do my best to practice assessments that avoid a stressful environment, while ensuring that I can track all my students' academic growth appropriately.

Thus, in many instances, we noted that preservice teachers who had been designated as “good readers” during elementary school, like Erica, initially had difficulty critiquing traditional literacy assessments such as multiple-choice tests, whereas those who had been subjected to special education, participated in second language services, or were otherwise designated as “poor readers,” like David, immediately took issue with the limitations of these measures. Assessment, then, and notions of what counts as assessment became contentious issues in both classrooms as students openly questioned issues related to validity, rigor, and equity. These examples illustrate the power of even simple reflective activities in supporting preservice teachers in critically reflecting on past experiences to develop empathetic stances or to connect with broader movements that might prove problematic on a larger scale.

**The power and promise of alternative assessment.** As we reflected on the preservice teachers' previous encounters with assessment and their immersion in rigid, testing environments as children, we each planned assignments and activities intended to support preservice teachers in developing an alternative vision of literacy assessment.

For example, in response to the silence encountered when asking preservice teachers when they had been assessed in a meaningful way, Katy asked preservice teachers to read two visions of purposeful assessment—one by Wiggins (1998) and the other by Johnston (1997). By using these texts as thinking partners, preservice teachers collaborated to create their own visions of literacy assessment. Collectively, preservice teachers generated a typology of literacy assessment that they described

as “multi-faceted, starting from prior-knowledge, relevant, authentic, ongoing and individualized.”

Another way that we each supported alternative visions of assessment was through developing an integrated literacy unit that we wanted the preservice teachers to plan using *backward design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and that we hoped would provide opportunities for them to design rich and rigorous assessments. For the most part, students eagerly embraced this opportunity. For example, as a culminating assessment for a third-grade unit on the Industrial Revolution in Katy’s class, preservice teachers designed an alternative assessment that spoke directly to the goals of the unit:

The students will develop a blueprint of a useful invention for the final project. They will write one paragraph about the pros and cons of their possible invention. . . . In assessing the project, the students must show that they understand pros and cons and can identify why their invention is useful and why it could be considered dangerous.

These preservice teachers recognized that because the enduring understandings they had outlined for the unit involved the pros and cons of technological innovation, including considering costs such as child labor and poor working conditions, an assessment like the one described would enable the preservice teachers to see whether the students could apply their learning to a new situation—creating their own invention.

Another group of preservice teachers in Kathleen’s class whose unit focused on the civil rights movement designed a unit assessment that aimed to assess how students could connect the reality of the civil rights movement to their daily lived experiences as raced/classed and cultured beings. They designed a final project that involved middle school students teaching younger students about what they had learned using art created by the older students as a starting point for the discussions. Ned, a White student, shared his rationale:

I can assess students on their ability to relate the history of civil rights to appropriate connections in their lives. I can assess whether or not the student genuinely grasped the concept of raising tolerance and refusing to accept continuation of social injustice in their community. Teaching the younger students will also give a good opportunity for the teacher to see how much the student took away from this project as they are sharing what they believe to be the most important concepts to pass on.

Taken together, these examples illustrate that preservice teachers were actively wrestling with inherent limitations of mainstream assessments and beginning to recognize the ways in which alternative forms of assessment are better suited to evaluating how students apply principles of a unit of study to their lives or how they engage in deep readings of significant, historical texts collectively. The assessments that the preservice teachers designed as part of their units aptly illustrate

that, with guidance, novice educators can think beyond the limiting assessments they may have experienced as students and begin to conceptualize more complex ways of evaluating knowledge.

**Reconciling alternative assessment with policy environment.** Although these unit assessments demonstrate the potential power of methods instruction to transform thinking, many of the preservice teachers still struggled to reconcile these new notions of assessment with hegemonic perspectives of assessment that suggest the only valid or credible assessments are “tests.” In some cases, the preservice teachers were acutely aware of the policy environment in which they and their future students would be operating, which at times led to dissonance as preservice teachers attempted to translate knowledge from the methods course to the real world of schools and schooling. For example, a question that surfaced frequently in Kathleen’s classroom involved the tension between employing alternative approaches to assessment and preparing students for standardized testing. For example, Libby, a White woman, said,

A question that I have about assessment is, if you assess students in ways such as projects and writing assignments rather than tests, how will they be prepared for standardized testing? Is it our responsibility to prepare students for standardized tests?

In a complementary example from Kathleen’s class, Dina responded to a class activity that modeled an alternative approach to assessment by noting that while she liked the activity, she would want to have a test, too, in order to determine what her students understood. When Kathleen left some space for response, Libby said they didn’t feel they would need a test. This led to a conversation about how the activity allowed for students to show their understanding, which then led to a conversation about other ways of assessing (some said observations, some said individually written reflections).

Later, when discussing how to assess an artistic response to a piece of literature, Callie, a White woman, worried that although alternative assessments were engaging, they might not reward those who put the most effort into a task. For example, someone could produce a beautiful, artistic response with very little effort, while someone else could work tirelessly on the same task and not have a professional final product to show for it. The difficulty of determining effort on formal assessments like tests and quizzes was not explicitly mentioned, nor did students mention the idea that tests might privilege certain cultural ways of knowing, although this was discussed in class. These omissions suggest that students might take the “fairness” of tests for granted.

These questions about fairness prompted preservice teachers to probe more deeply into the purposes of assessment and to pose questions that highlighted the inconsistencies endemic to all forms of classroom evaluation. Melissa, a Latina student in Katy’s class, for example, wrote the following in an online discussion board posting:

A question I have about assessment is that of fairness. All students are diverse in their learning style and personality, whether they are visual, auditory, kinesthetic, extroverted or introverted. Thus, if we base assessment off of a single method such as how much did this student contribute to the class discussion, are we really being fair? The student may know more than his or her extroverted peer, but not feel comfortable sharing with the entire class. On the other hand, some students may have test anxiety and perform poorly on normalized exams as a result. How do teachers know what, or how many, types of assessments are appropriate for different kinds of projects and assignments?

By introducing preservice teachers to the complexities of assessment and unpacking some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about who benefits from assessment, we allowed these teachers to begin to question the very nature of evaluation—a skill they must possess if they are going to become critical educators who question policy. While the kind of questioning demonstrated earlier is essential to any academic discipline, it becomes even more urgent in a field like education, in which teachers are likely to reproduce the kinds of schooling they experienced (Lortie, 1975).

### **Implications**

The findings described here suggest several important implications for teacher educators choosing to teach in “these times” (Lytle, 2006). First, teacher educators must be able to facilitate not just learning but also “unlearning”—a process that requires preservice teachers to unpack their past experiences as students to interrupt and essentially reread their perspectives on schooling. Second, preservice teachers need opportunities to work across methods courses as a means for helping preservice teachers construct new visions and new possibilities for educational practice. Last, educational policy and the politics of schooling must be foregrounded in teacher education programs if preservice teachers are to become educators capable of negotiating complex policy environments, especially those in which their voices are often discounted.

**1. Teacher educators need to reexamine their role as instructors to become facilitators of “unlearning” and “rereading.”** The apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) has long been an issue within teacher education and one that countless teacher educators have sought to address through their instructional approaches (e.g., Boyd, Gorham, Justice, & Anderson, 2013; Grossman, 1991; Knapp, 2012). (We must consider, at this historical juncture, what the apprenticeship of observation looks like against the backdrop of NCLB and the limited views and perspectives on schooling that might emerge as a result.) Even preservice teachers who recognize the deeply problematic implications of education within a climate of high-stakes accountability must still unlearn how to adopt these approaches. Moreover, this idea of unlearning is even more difficult when neoliberal models still dominate in most schools and when these ways of teaching are reinforced through field place-

ments and practicums (Selwyn, 2007). Therefore teacher educators must design curricula explicitly aimed at rereading past experiences and at reconstructing or reenvisioning future practice. If preservice teachers, for example, are going to critique and problematize the use of multiple-choice assessments, they must also have an opportunity to design and utilize alternate forms of assessment and experience firsthand their potential benefits in the classroom.

**2. Preservice teachers need a multitude of opportunities across methods courses to construct and enact a vision of education.** To be truly effective, the processes of critical visioning and reimagining mentioned here must be programmatic and not isolated within the purview of a single methods course. Rather, preservice teachers should be provided opportunities across their classes to consider what schooling could look like outside of a system that privileges standardized testing and limited forms of accountability (Simon, 2009; Sleeter, 2007). This kind of work requires more than simply assigning students to read about diverse pedagogical practices. We must work alongside classroom teachers to co-construct experiences that allow our preservice teachers to apply their vision in authentic contexts; to observe firsthand what happens when students are engaged in purposeful work; and then to reflect on these encounters with colleagues, professors, and school personnel. Ironically, as this kind of work becomes increasingly urgent, in Katy's experience helping to coordinate an elementary education program in a large southwestern city, fewer and fewer classroom teachers are willing to take on the work of mentoring preservice teachers owing to the pressure of value-added models of teacher evaluation. Thus questions remain about how we might incentivize classroom teachers to collaborate with us in this kind of critical visioning process when myriad factors discourage them from doing this work.

**3. The policy environment that continues to shape teaching and learning should be an explicit curricular topic in methods courses.** Although teaching has always been a political act (Freire, 1970), it continues to be depicted in mainstream reform efforts as a neutral endeavor that can be easily measured and quantified through the metric of the test score (e.g., Kumashiro, 2012; Ravitch 2014; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Preservice teachers preparing to enter the teaching profession cannot afford to be apolitical and must emerge from teacher education programs with the ability to read and interpret policy and understand its implications for teaching and learning. Therefore policy, both current and past, must figure into discussions, readings, and course assignments (Edmondson, 2004). Preservice teachers must consider the challenges in designing and setting policy in education, must examine who creates policies and who are impacted by them, and must propose viable solutions concerning what can be done when policies further marginalize populations. Most critically, in the field of literacy, preservice teachers must also consider who is poised to make substantial gains from these policies (i.e., basal reading companies, software corporations, etc.; Altwerger, 2005; Larson, 2001; Shannon, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Neoliberal approaches to school reform are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Teacher educators cannot afford simply to adapt our classes in response to the latest wave of mandates without also addressing the impacts of these mandates on students, teachers, and schools. Rather, we must “read the world” of educational policy critically and require that our students do the same. This means utilizing pedagogies and practices that fall outside of the typical purview of methods courses and highlight personal experiences, critical inquiry, policy analysis, and alternative pedagogies to work toward a new vision of schooling. In advocating this approach, we want to be clear that this does not mean a shift away from introducing teaching practices and approaches that preservice teachers can utilize in their respective classroom contexts. Rather, we argue that methods classes must be much more than a site of skill acquisition. Without opportunities to critically reimagine schooling alongside exposure to content and pedagogies, there is little hope for true educational transformation.

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