

## Intersecting Realities

### A Novice's Attempts to Use Critical Literacy to Access her Students' Figured Worlds

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It's a Thursday morning in Ms. Bacon's (a pseudonym) junior English class. There is a palpable hum of noise and activity as her students grapple with a multi-genre project that their student teacher, Jenny Morgan (a pseudonym), has created as a culminating activity after a unit studying Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. The students are attempting to connect some of the central themes of the play to other forms of media, like art, poetry, song lyrics, and film. In one corner, a group pours over a photocopy of a painting where a blind guitarist is chained to a monkey. Having selected the theme of revenge, jealousy, and betrayal versus forgiveness, loyalty, and faithfulness, one of the students explains to me:

The monkey is like John Proctor's wife, chained to her husband. But if you look closely, you can tell that the monkey is not all that upset about the situation because of his body language—the faithfulness and loyalty win out in the end even if the monkey is frustrated by being bound, just like in the play. (Author, observation, November 2, 2006)

A few days later, another group is reading over lyrics to an Akon song called *Locked Up* and debating the comparison between the song's narrator—a man who is accused of stealing a car when he cannot find the registration paperwork during a traffic stop—and the townspeople accused of being witches in Salem. A conversation about injustice and power evolves as the group considers whether to use Akon's song as a part of their final presentation.

Ms. Morgan moves from group to group, conferring with students. When a student wages a complaint about another group's selection of a country and western song entitled *I Loved Her First*, she acknowledges the group's dislike of country

music, but then says, "Hey, I had to listen to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony all morning, so be open to this," which is greeted with laughter from the group and neighboring students (Author, observation, November 7, 2006).

The following week, while sitting in on several days of presentations, I am struck by the complexity of the students' thinking and the ease with which their young pre-service teacher has guided them through the project. This is not an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) track classroom, but rather characterized by Ms. Morgan as not just a grade-level class but "a dumping ground for students who did not fare well in other English teachers' classrooms" (J. Morgan, personal communication, October 17, 2006).

This is a significant statement; at West High School (also a pseudonym), where a clear dichotomy between those with privilege and those without is visibly apparent, many of Ms. Morgan's students are overlooked during the course of the day and, as a result, subjected to their education (Freire, 2005) rather than actively engaged in learning. Ms. Bacon, her cooperating teacher, is a vocal advocate for her students and regularly ruffles the feathers of others in her department by refusing to hold lower standards for her students positioned as "regular" in the world of West.

This makes my work as a researcher interested in understanding the figured worlds of schools (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007) and in preparing teachers to serve as conduits of social justice in the literacy classroom (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Morell, 2005, 2008; Nieto, 2000; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002) much easier to facilitate.

What follows here is two-fold: first, I explore the figured worlds present and co-existing at West High school; then, I

consider how Ms. Morgan's efforts to help students move beyond the limiting curricular guidelines set forth by the district both nurtured a depth of thinking not present in many grade-level classes and in addition helped those students alter their positions (Holland, et al., 1998) and begin to name their world (Freire, 2005).

#### Intersecting Realities for Preservice Teachers

Research suggests that while students in public schools in the U.S. are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and culture (Hodgkinson, 2002), the pool of prospective teachers is made up largely of White, middle-class women. The demographic imperative (Banks, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Dilworth, 1992) indicates that this trend will remain stable for the foreseeable future, reinforcing the necessity of critical multiculturalism as a vital component of the teacher preparation process (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

By asking novices to examine the institutional practices and hegemonic norms that reproduce inequity in public schools, teacher educators can help develop young teachers as agents of change prior to their entry into urban classrooms. Putting these notions into practice, however, is a daunting task for fledgling teachers, particularly for those completing their apprenticeship in schools that offer minimal flexibility in terms of planning and curricular design.

In attempting to document life in schools, one must first acknowledge that schools are foremost institutions with rules and procedures that are produced (and reproduced), rules that often do little to serve those students existing along the margins. To address the competing realities co-existing within these institutional spaces, the scholarship on figured worlds (Fecho, et al., 2005; Holland, et al., 1998; Rubin, 2007) offers a meaningful roadmap

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for analyzing data. Figured worlds have four characteristics: they are historical worlds in which people are recruited for participation (or willingly enter); they are social realms in which positions of the participants matters; they are socially organized and reproduced; they are peopled by familiar social types developed by the particular worlds' activity (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 41). By using this body of work as a lens through which to examine a novice's entry into the profession, it is possible to gain greater clarity about the challenges of negotiating the different realms—and competing realities—of all who labor inside a school's walls.

A second frame that guides this work is that of critical literacy, whereby students “are able to critique social structures and cultural practices” and “to know themselves better and participate as more actualized tolerant beings in the human family” (Morell, 2008, p. 84). This investigation extends beyond the literary canon often present in secondary classrooms, and can include the use of popular culture as a means of developing “academic and critical literacies in urban classrooms” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005, p. 285).

By helping students read their world (Freire, 2005) in its entirety—in and out of school—we are additionally reinforcing “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). In an historical moment that seems to reflect a reverence for the canon and the standardization of the curriculum, critical literacy offers a workable compromise: teach the expected text, but help students bridge the messages conveyed in the literature with their own experiences, interests, and the messages present all around them in a whole host of media.

### **Ms. Morgan's Entry into the Figured World of Public Schools**

This qualitative case study followed a secondary English/language arts preservice teacher as she completed her final intern and apprentice (student) teaching semesters at a large urban university in the Southwest. In addition to documenting the practical considerations of learning to teach in her content area, this study investigated the preservice teacher's understanding of multiculturalism and her attempts to enact a culturally responsive

pedagogy (Gay, 2000). Ms. Morgan, who was part of a larger study that included several members of her teaching cohort, is a middle class White female who had attended a largely homogenous, suburban high school.

While on the surface her apprentice teaching occurred in a similar setting, upon entry into the school she immediately detected two different worlds within the building—largely separated by floors and by race and socioeconomic class. Using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), Ms. Morgan was selected for her particular student teaching assignment based on her stated commitment to equity and culturally appropriate teaching practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and her receptiveness to notions of progressive teaching and critical theory (hooks, 1994; Morell, 2008).

Among the data gathered for this study, reflective journals and interviews served as beginning points for conversations between participant and researcher about diversity and privilege. The collection of both lesson plans and student artifacts were on-going. Observations allowed the researcher to document the interaction styles, pedagogical choices, and curricular decisions that Ms. Morgan employed in the classroom and tentatively to gauge her success in negotiating the intersecting figured worlds evident within her school.

Data were collected from 2006 to 2007 and subsequently analyzed inductively using guidelines delineated by Huberman and Miles (1983). Triangulation of multiple data sources (such as observation notes, lesson plans, reflective journals, and interviews) was built into data collection and analysis for the purposes of achieving trustworthiness.

### **One School, Two Worlds**

The large, urban high school where Ms. Morgan was assigned for her practicum teaching represented two distinct figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998; Rubin, 2007); the lower floor housed mainly honors, college-bound students. Separated by departments, the English wing proudly displayed student work in the hallways and classrooms were lively spaces filled with students working collectively on creative endeavors or arguing about self-selected texts they were reading for classes.

Ms. Morgan's classroom—housed on the third floor of the building—was equally stimulating inside, but both Ms. Morgan and her cooperating teacher, Ms.

Bacon, felt isolated from the larger English department down below them. Ms. Bacon acknowledged that while she was in many ways “the dumping ground” or “last chance teacher” of the English department (M. Bacon, personal communication, October 1, 2006), she welcomed all who crossed her threshold—many of whom had learning disabilities, were still learning English, or who had simply been overlooked by the figured world of West High School. Throughout the months I collected data, there was a repeated occurrence of students getting reassigned to Ms. Bacon's classroom, often when there was a conflict with another teacher in the department.

Like their shared students, who were often labeled “regular” by the adults in the building and positioned as lower in status within the larger figured world of the school, Ms. Morgan and her cooperating teacher felt similarly marginalized. When discussing the power relationships within the department, Ms. Morgan acknowledged, “I know downstairs the teachers pride themselves ‘on doing things right down here’” (J. Morgan, interview, November 2, 2006). While not saying so directly, it seemed evident that the larger English department was dismissive of those teachers housed in separate wings of the building.

Indeed Ms. Bacon acknowledged to her students at one point “I don't know why we're up here ... [maybe] we're relegated to the third floor because I won't agree to teach what the rest [of the English faculty] do” (J. Morgan, interview, November 2, 2006). Thus, as Ms. Morgan endeavored to learn her craft, like the students she was charged to teach she was equally burdened with the diminished expectations of her colleagues.

Ms. Morgan expressed concern about the school's positioning of her students, worrying that this caused them to internalize the label, in her words making it “part of their own identity formation.” She acknowledged a trend in the school in that African American and Latino students were placed in “regular” (grade-level) classes, where they learned “the drills and skills while simultaneously being subliminally trained that they (were) inherently ‘regular’ people, and consequently, remain in these ‘average,’ ‘on-level,’ or ‘regular’ stations for the remainder of their high school—if not lifetime—careers” (J. Morgan, written reflection, March 2, 2006).

As an example, Ms. Morgan conveyed a story of a Latino student who appeared dejected when Ms. Morgan introduced

what she characterized as a “fun, new kind of activity.” The student raised her hand in class and said, “Miss, you know we’re just regulars. This kind of stuff isn’t for us. This is ‘honors kids’ stuff” (J. Morgan, written reflection, March 2, 2006). Perhaps more disconcerting was the reaction of the rest of the class to this statement; students laughed in response, nodding their heads in agreement.

Refusing to reinforce a sub-standard treatment and positioning of her students, Ms. Morgan insisted, “My students may be on-level, but they will read Shakespeare and ‘do poetry’ because I am confident that they are capable of the same things as the ‘honors’ kids can do” (J. Morgan, personal communication, September 26, 2006). Reflecting the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy described by Gay (2000), Ms. Morgan continued to hold high expectations for her students, in spite of their self-described diminished positions within the larger school. Eschewing the “kill and drill” that she so despised, Ms. Morgan made efforts to test out more complex learning tasks with her students, in hopes of capturing their attention and, possibly, altering their positions within the school.

### Reconsidering Teacher and Student Positions

Fecho (2005) and his colleagues acknowledge that one of the unique characteristics of figured worlds is that they are constantly changing as we take action within them. These actions allow us to “determine our positioning within that world, author ... a response to that world, and reconceive that world” (p. 177). Perhaps because she was positioned as a novice at West High School, Ms. Morgan took risks in her teaching and in nurturing relationships with students, believing that if she made a mistake, she’d be forgiven since she was new to the profession.

The opening vignette in this article represents one such risk. While several of the other participants in this study closely followed the curricular guidelines delineated by the school district—which included not only what literature would be studied, but also a timeline for completing each unit of study—Ms. Morgan built in extra time to explore the larger themes in greater depth. Part of this exploration included the multi-genre project in which students were expected to draw on their own lives and experiences to connect to *The Crucible*.

Students spent several days in the

library locating poems and artwork that reflected selected themes from the play. They were also encouraged to bring in song lyrics from their music collections for use in the projects.

The choices present in this activity produced an additional benefit; students were able to act as agents in their own learning, and not just as mere depositories of the information their young teacher proffered (Freire, 2005). In their discussion of a dialogic classroom based on Bakhtin’s thinking, Fecho and Botzakis argue that “the invitation of wide-spread participation implies the need for multiple perspectives to be in play in the classroom for more than one possible slant to have efficacy” (2007, p. 552).

Ms. Morgan’s students—even in their disagreement and disgruntlement with one another’s choices in terms of song lyrics, poems, and artwork—were expected to substantiate their choices with details from the text. Additionally, the students served as evaluators of each other’s work. Following a class-constructed rubric, students offered comments and critique after each of the group’s performance.

Thus, even though students may not have agreed with one another’s choices in terms of art or song lyrics (as is demonstrated earlier in this article), if presenters were able to justify their choices and connect them to the larger themes present in *The Crucible*, they were then rewarded with a good grade from not just their teacher, but from their peers.

### Reciprocity within the Zone of Proximal Development

What made this project intriguing were the conversations and negotiations that occurred while students were planning their presentations. Ms. Morgan encouraged students to take a leadership role in making their selections and allowed them to include song lyrics that might otherwise be considered inappropriate in the classroom context. Her willingness to learn from her students’ experiences and open a window into their world as they engaged with text was mutually beneficial; it nurtured trust and a depth of conversation that might otherwise be lacking in a more limiting group-work assignment.

As is reported in Ladson-Billings’ (1994) pivotal study of effective teachers of African-American students, Ms. Morgan “encouraged students to act as teachers, and they themselves [the teachers] often functioned as learners in the classroom” (p.

163). In this sense, a burgeoning reciprocity began to surface inside the classroom. Not to be confused with Palinscar and Brown’s (1984) description of reciprocal teaching—which employs a systematic method for reading improvement using summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting (p. 29)—the reciprocity occurring between Ms. Morgan and her students reflected more of a shared space inside the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Many studies discuss the ZPD in terms of a student’s development by means of assistance from an adult or more capable peer. The reciprocity discussed here represented moments that students were mediating their young teacher’s understandings about their sociocultural knowledge, where students served as the more capable agent in imparting valuable knowledge to their young teacher.

In this manner, reciprocity worked in a multi-dimensional manner, where both teacher and students were afforded opportunities to serve as expert, thus moving through two separate (but overlapping) zones of proximal development. Students provided scaffolding to assist Ms. Morgan in understanding their prior knowledge and lived experiences; she, in turn, expanded her pedagogical practice to adapt to these new understandings and foster relevant connections between her students’ lives and the language arts curriculum.

### Students Name Their World

By using cultural artifacts that interested the students and tying these to literary content, Ms. Morgan was actively supporting critical literacy—and, in some ways, a subversive pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005), given the restrictive scope and sequence adopted by the district. An increased agency—for both the preservice teacher and her students—began to surface as a result of this deviation from the traditional text and curriculum.

By freeing students to develop their own interpretations of alternative “texts,” and welcoming “students’ out of school literacies” (Morell, 2008, p. 91) into the literacy classroom, their enthusiasm and willingness to participate became a hallmark of the class. By moving beyond the drudgery of worksheets, textbook questions, and a regimented curriculum, Ms. Morgan was better able to tease out students’ strengths, pique their interest, and honor their voices.

This is not to suggest that Ms.

Morgan's practice was absent missteps. There were moments when she might have pushed students to contemplate issues related to power, inequality, and justice, but in an effort to "keep the peace" she allowed such conversations to wind down, or changed the subject.

One such instance occurred during a class discussion of the character Danforth, the judge from *The Crucible* who embodied an inflexible "law and order" disposition and who ultimately sentenced many innocent victims to death during the Salem Witch Trials. Attempting a connection between the play and current events, one of Ms. Morgan's students commented, "Yes, but Bush is doing the same thing Danforth is doing with national security [under the auspices of] maintaining the integrity of the country and morale. But in truth, it's really insulting" (Author, observation, October 24, 2006).

While Ms. Morgan was pleased by this exchange—particularly since it involved a student who was not typically participatory in class—she was equally alarmed because it opened up an opposing argument by two girls in the class who had brothers in the military and who were unwilling to hear President Bush criticized during a time of war. Ultimately, the conversation was cut short by Ms. Morgan, who said afterwards, "I was thinking, 'oh yea, that's great... anyway, we've got to do something else now.'" She seemed ill-equipped to moderate an all-out argument in the classroom and was sheepish about the interaction, saying, "I did *not* bring it [Bush and the war] up" to me after class (J. Morgan, personal communication, October 24, 2006).

By changing the subject and redirecting students to another assignment, she avoided altogether an opportunity to commence a conversation about leadership and authority—a topic that could lay the groundwork for future discussions about justice, power, and inequity. In this instance, Ms. Morgan came face to face with the complexity of enacting a multicultural stance in the classroom, where all voices and perspectives are honored, expected, and considered.

This seemed to confirm Nieto's (2000) observation that "most approaches to multicultural education avoided asking difficult questions related to access, equity, and social justice... questions that strike at the heart of what education in our society should be" (p. 180). It is likely that given more practice, Ms. Morgan might better navigate contentious discussions in the

future, and embrace the controversy arising from differing points of view.

Interestingly enough, although the exchange about our former President caused Ms. Morgan to question her ability to maintain a civil discourse in the large group discussion, she exhibited less fear when students were working earlier in the unit, in small groups. At one point while students were constructing character charts—large graphic organizers that compared the main characters from *The Crucible*—Ms. Morgan said nothing when students placed President Bush's name in a section reserved for a description of Judge Danforth. It seemed that student opinions were less regulated depending on the context of the conversation; since the small group was in agreement about this placement on the chart, she did not interject her thoughts into the conversation. These charts were later hung all around the room, giving voice to each of the group's discussions.

There were other instances when students were able to name their worlds. Ms. Morgan regularly assigned short narrative writing, where students could connect topics that came up in class to their lived experiences. While these were not shared publicly, Ms. Morgan was in constant dialogue with students both in person and through writing. As a result of their written work, she knew a great deal about her students: that Kenda was overwhelmed by her duties as an athletic trainer, so much so that she would often forgo sleep to get her homework done; that Pierre loved the television show *House*, which he discussed *ad infinitum* with Ms. Morgan; that Cassandra worried over her parents' divorce and the effect it would have on her family's life (all names pseudonyms). Regarding the latter, Ms. Morgan wrote back to Cassandra at length, discussing her own experiences when her parents divorced during her high school years and offering advice. Afterwards, Cassandra began to take on a leadership role in class, passing out and collecting papers and actively participating in class discussions.

### Developing Agency

Because figured worlds are social realms populated by constantly-evolving humans, movement—in terms of one's position—is possible within a particular space. Thus, as participants attempt to author their experiences, they can engage in "social experimentation as well as social reproduction" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 238),

essentially trying something new versus adhering to the status quo. In essence, people hone their identities in relation to their work with others.

It is valuable to note, however, that "agency lies in the improvisations that people create in response to particular situations" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 279). In her attempts to connect and engage with students, Ms. Morgan was developing agency; by giving her students a voice and encouraging them to deepen their thinking, she was helping them alter their positions as learners at West High School. Although there is no way to gauge the long-term implications of their work together, it seemed clear that the students exhibited more confidence as language arts students over the course of the semester, and saw themselves less as "just regulars" and more as dedicated learners.

Those of us committed to social justice are called on not only to critique the institutional practices that exist in public schools that limit the possibilities of urban students; we are also obligated to document and examine pedagogical practices that might serve as examples of effective teaching for others. Ms. Morgan was an extraordinarily gifted young teacher, driven by her own experiences and frustrations with how her own high school served as a nurturing space for her (an intellectually ambitious, dedicated student) while allowing her younger brother (a rebellious, learning-disabled student) to quietly fall between the cracks. Her unwillingness to "dumb down" her teaching practices for her grade-level, "regular" students (J. Morgan, interview, November 2, 2006) and insistence on developing as a change agent within the public schools was refreshing to watch.

Given the climate of our profession, however, with the limiting effects of standardization and the increasing appearance of barriers put in place that control the work of teachers (Apple, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999), it seems on some level disingenuous to nurture the kind of teaching that Ms. Morgan exhibited. There were several instances when Ms. Morgan worried she might get into trouble for not sticking to the recommended text and/or assignments suggested by the district curricular guides.

For instance, while assisting students with their multi-genre presentations, another teacher in the English department came to collect copies of *The Crucible* from Ms. Morgan. Because the play was supposed to be taught in the second six weeks of the school year, the teacher

insisted on taking the texts (which were shared within the department) despite the fact that they were still in use. Given the power differential and to keep the peace, Ms. Bacon sent the teacher away with a large box of books. To allow students extra time to complete their presentations—which required direct quotes—Ms. Morgan and Ms. Bacon scoured local used bookstores for copies of the play, which they purchased with their own money. They briefly considered the possibility that the other English teacher might make public that the two were extending their study of the play, and thus getting “off track” of the prescribed curriculum. In the end, after weighing the benefits of the assignment, Ms. Bacon gave Ms. Morgan the green light to continue on with the project despite a possible reprimand for not sticking closely with the planning guides.

Ms. Morgan benefitted in many ways from her assignment to Ms. Bacon’s classroom. While Ms. Bacon joked endlessly about being separated from the rest of her department, she was somewhat freed by the absence of the scrutiny of other English teachers walking in and out of her classroom during passing periods and breaks in teaching. Ms. Morgan also had an advantage over the other preservice teachers in her cohort. After observing and teaching a few lessons in Ms. Bacon’s classroom the semester prior to her apprentice teaching, Ms. Bacon was so impressed that she requested Ms. Morgan as a student teacher the next semester. Because of this, Ms. Morgan came into her final semester already understanding the circumstances of the school and was privy to many of the “unwritten rules” existing in the figured world established at West High School.

Comfortable with her cooperating teacher and her teaching style, Ms. Morgan made a seamless transition to teaching the bulk of the day earlier than her peers; having already gained Ms. Bacon’s trust, she was able to take risks in her teaching and attempt instances of culturally responsive practice. And, although Ms. Morgan was still positioned in the situation as a novice, she exhibited more power and agency than the others in her cohort.

### The Adolescent Literacy Conundrum

It is estimated that as many as 70% of secondary students struggle with literacy in some way (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 8); these problems range from a difficulty with fluency to an absence of comprehen-

sion strategies when engaged with increasingly difficult texts. As a result, while NAEP scores have improved modestly for students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade over the past several years, students tested at the 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade years are exhibiting little or no progress (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010).

Given that students today must become critical consumers of text in order to further their aspirations and options after leaving high school, it is important that those of us who prepare preservice teachers dedicate ourselves to projects that further our collective understanding of effective literacy instruction. This is important particularly in light of the time in which we labor, when students are expected to engage in literate practices across the content areas and throughout the school day.

Students must also critically examine and master new literacies and understand power (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004) in order to thrive as sentient beings. Among these are: using research tools through on-line portals; communicating via email, blogs, facebook, and other social networking web sites; and viewing and understanding multimedia messages present online, in film, and on television.

The recent Carnegie report on adolescent literacy acknowledges that “our schools are systematically failing to provide many students with the guidance, instruction, and practice they need to develop these ‘new basic skills’” (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). As a result, we face a moral imperative to assist students in cultivating the development of literacy skills that will help them realize their full potential both in and out of schools.

To fulfill this imperative, we must strengthen teacher preparation programs, and model our work with preservice teachers after the practices of experienced and successful public school teachers. But to ignore the fact that students and teachers *do* have a modicum of power within the walls of the classroom despite fears about test results and large-scale data, is to minimize the hard work taking place in schools day in and day out, across the country.

What this article suggests is that certainly positions matter in figured worlds; however, by acknowledging the lived realities of all of those laboring in a classroom and building connections between the differing worldviews and the curriculum, students can become empowered agents

of their own, developing literate practices along the way.

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