Urban Students Testifying to Their Own Stories: Talking Back to Deficit Perspectives

Elizabeth Dutro
University of Colorado at Boulder

Kristien Zenkov
Cleveland State University

Molly had recently been reunited with her mother after spending several months with a foster family. She liked this foster family, even better than the previous families with whom she had been placed. She was worried, however, because she just wasn't sure how long she and her mother would be able to stay in their apartment. They had been evicted from such homes before. Maybe, she said, it wouldn't be too bad to leave this building, though. It was a little scary. Her 13-year-old sister had been attacked there, almost raped by an older man. "You know what *raped* means, right?" Molly asked Elizabeth. Her sister was still in foster care after this attack and Molly missed her. Molly looked at Elizabeth clear-eyed and, pushing aside her long, honey-colored bangs, ended this part of her story with a smile: "I'm glad to be back with my mom. She tells me every day how much she loves me and that she's going to make a good life for us." Sitting cross-legged on the carpet in a quiet corner of the school library, Molly shared her story in the midst of an interview about her reading and writing experiences in her third-grade classroom. This conversation was just one of the many ways in which Molly documented the interwoven threads of her life and literacies across her year in third grade.

That same school year, in a nearby neighborhood, a teenage boy snapped a picture near his home as part of a school project. The project asked youth to document through photographs and writing their perceptions of the purposes of school and the impediments to and supports for their school success. One of Edward's pictures showed a little girl standing in an empty alley (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Edward's Photograph

Edward titled the photograph, "The Alley Behind My House," and the accompanying description clarified what he intended to convey with this image:

This little girl lives two doors down from my house. Drug dealers live in the neighborhood, and the alley is where they sell drugs. One time my brother was riding his bike there, and he saw prostitution going on. People running from the police always go through there. It's dangerous for her to be playing there. When I was that age, there used to be volunteers who would play games with us in the park. That program helped keep us out of trouble. It's not there anymore.

Edward documented this incident to illustrate his perspectives on some of the impediments youth face as they attempt to succeed in school. Molly's story, accumulating across a school year, also provides evidence of some of those challenges. Our goal in this paper is to examine the sources that testify to the lives of students in urban classrooms and consider how literacy educators might employ a critical witnessing stance in order to better understand and actively address the relations between the challenging circumstances of students' lives, constructed understandings of urban youth, and persistent deficit perspectives. The children's and youths' oral, written, and photographic stories we share are drawn from two qualitative studies—one focused on elementary children and the other on youth—in one high-poverty neighborhood within a Midwestern urban district. In other words, the third graders in Elizabeth's study were, in theory, the younger siblings, cousins, or neighbors of the youth with whom Kristien engaged.

PERSPECTIVES

The difficult experiences, wrought of social inequities, that some urban students bring to literacy classrooms cannot help but impinge on children's and youths' abilities to focus their full attention on school literacy practices. However, stories of students' challenging life circumstances— including family members in prison, placement in foster homes, community or family violence, reliance on public assistance, and transience or homelessness—can be taken up by middle-class policymakers, educators, professional development programs, and the larger lay public in ways that fuel deficit perspectives. If interpretations of children's life experiences function to reinforce assumptions of deficiency in families living in urban poverty, the difficult stories some children bring to classrooms potentially undermine attempts to make students' experiences matter in positive ways. Therefore, acknowledging all of the experiences students bring to school and creating literacy pedagogies that support them in the midst of these realities requires reconceptualizing what those stories can mean for urban students' school literacy experiences. We argue that such work calls upon literacy educators to consider how, by whom, and to what effects those stories are documented and witnessed.

Despite a hopeful picture painted through examples of the rich resources in the lives and learning of city students (e.g., Dorsey-Gaines & Taylor, 1988; Morrell, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 1997), the children and adolescents with whom we work face bleak realities that middle-class youth do not: a dropout rate that is consistently higher than 50 percent (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Federation for Community Planning, 2003; Kaufman, Alt & Chapman, 2004), intergenerational poverty and alienation from public schools that have failed poor urban families on many levels (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001; Anyon, 1997; Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006), a post-industrial

city economy that has translated into extreme under- and unemployment, and a consistent ranking as one of the US cities with the highest levels of child poverty. As ethnographic research with working-class and poor urban youth within and outside of the United States has long emphasized (e.g., MacLeod, 2004; Willis, 1981), such challenges, born of decades of social inequities and economic shifts, are implicated in the alienation or resistance that some youth experience in their relationships to formal schooling.

In addition, no one who spends time in or around urban schools is unfamiliar with the pervasive nature of deficit language in educators', policymakers', and middle-class lay-persons' conversations about children, youth, and families of color and those who live in poverty (e.g., Au, 1993; Nieto & Bode, 2007). Although urban students comprise a majority of the P-12 school population in the United States and represent an astonishing diversity of races, ethnicities, languages, and cultures, they are often characterized as having a monolithic and limited relationship to formal schooling and its traditional literacy tasks. Many scholars have challenged the deficit model in important and persuasive ways (Delpit, 2006; Edwards & McMillon, 2000; Gay, 2000; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2007; Orellana, 2001); yet, despite the crucial influence of metaphors that emphasize the diversity of students' lives outside of school as funds and resources for knowledge and learning, deficit perspectives remain entrenched. We believe that students' difficult stories—those narratives that are often not included in educators' examples of what count as resources for learning in schools—are implicated in the ferocity with which deficit perspectives hold sway. We also are concerned that the increasing popularity of certain professional development programs aimed at addressing the gulf between middle-class educators and families facing poverty *facilitate*, rather than *challenge*, the impulse to cast those students and their families as Other (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Ng & Rury, 2006). Although many teachers are masters at actively resisting and recasting pathologizing narratives of urban families, this is not easy in the face of the persistence of middle-class perspectives in such professionally endorsed programs and in the media (Shannon, 1998).

Therefore, if teachers and other adults working with children, adolescents, and families living in poverty are to move beyond a deficit frame, new language, metaphors, voices, and tools are necessary—new ways to see, to speak of, and, therefore, to act on the material realities that students face and that have consequences for their relationships to schooling and our literacy practices. Further, although high school dropout (or "pushout") rates in many major urban settings—including the one in which our work was situated—have remained near 50 percent for better than three decades, the efforts to address this crisis rarely consider students' own points of view about how our literacy pedagogies might be made more supportive and relevant (Moje, 2000; Morrell, 2007). So, as we also argue, urban students need new ways to tell their own stories, on their own terms, in ways that can challenge the deficit perspectives through which others too often interpret their lives.

In search of those conceptual and practical tools for understanding and intervening in the processes through which student's lives are documented in schools, we brought together lenses we each had employed in our research. We focused on the metaphors of testimony and witness, drawn from feminist literary theorists (e.g., Felman & Laub, 1992; Whitehead, 2004), as a way to conceptualize how students' lives are documented in classrooms (i.e., the sources of testimony about

students) and how educators respond to and interpret information gleaned about students (i.e., what kinds of witnessing occurs in classrooms) (Dutro, 2008a). Although a pedagogy of testimony and witness holds many implications for literacy classrooms (Beverley, 2005; Dutro, 2008b; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007), here we focus on how these metaphors can be employed as critical tools to accomplish two objectives: first, to examine the sources that testify "for the record" about students' lives and literacies in high-poverty urban schools, and, second, to explore how students can intervene in acts of witnessing to their lives in ways that challenge deficit lenses. In addition, we turned to research and theory within visual studies to consider the tools by which students could provide active testimony to their lives and school literacy experiences in ways that allowed them to actively push back on the deficit lenses through which some aspects of their lives may be interpreted by middle-class observers (Marquez-Zenkov, et al, 2007). Together, these theories and tools provide a framework for a pedagogy that acknowledges the complexities of students' lives as they are documented and lived in classrooms, including the stories that are indeed hard to tell and hear (Caruth, 1995, 1996; Leys, 2000), while pointing to methods that facilitate youths' active roles in intervening in the interpretations brought to their lives and school literacies.

EVERYDAY TESTIMONIES AND THE NEED FOR CRITICAL WITNESSING

We turn first to the subtle ways in which testimonies to students' lives and literacies are documented and interpreted across time in schools and literacy classrooms. In the context of a qualitative study across two years in a third-grade classroom, Elizabeth has considered the ways in which children and those who surround them in classrooms are everyday documentarians—sharing and interpreting information about one another's lives across a school year (Dutro, 2008a). The data we share here are drawn from year one of Elizabeth's study in a high-poverty school (in which 100 percent of children qualified for free lunch) that served one of this Midwestern city's most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse neighborhoods. The classroom of 19 students reflected the racial diversity of the neighborhood, with three African American, nine white, three Puerto Rican, two Asian American, one Arab American, and one biracial African American-Puerto Rican child. Twelve of the children were designated as "limited" or "basic" in reading proficiency based on district reading assessments. At the generous invitation of Sharon, the classroom teacher, Elizabeth spent at least two days a week in the classroom across the school year, interacting with children in the classroom and at recess and lunch, keeping fieldnotes, gathering documents and student work, and video and audio taping classroom interactions and interviews with Sharon and each of the children.

Analysis across the multiple data sources revealed the various ways that children testify to their own life stories in various contexts including informal conversations with teachers and peers, class discussions about ideas and shared texts, and informal and formal writing. Educators also gather additional evidence about children's lives through interactions with parents and other family members, conversations with social workers, local news reports about the city or neighborhood, and, importantly, through policy documents and professional development programs designed to "translate" families living in poverty for middle-class educators. These everyday testimonies to students' lives and the ways such testimony is witnessed can be insidious and consequential for

how students are positioned within the essentialized views of class, race, and what it takes to be a successful student that are often present in schools (Jones, 2004; Shannon, 1998).

Documenting Molly's Year in Third Grade

Reading through ethnographic data collected across Molly's year in third grade (see Table 1), for instance, reveals the varied sources that accumulate to document her life and her relationship to school. In Table 1 we share our analysis of a few telling instances from different sources, including Molly, her teacher, her peers, and the media.

Table 1. Data examples: The "everyday" documentation of Molly's life and relationship to school

---

Molly, talking to Elizabeth on the playground:

"This is kind of a boring playground. No swings or anything. I've been to other schools. I bet this won't be my last school."

From fieldnotes:

9:00 am: Sharon asks the class to look at their tables and raise a hand if someone is absent today. Jade raises her hand.

Sharon: Who is absent from yours, Jade?

Jade: Molly's not here.

Several children start to talk ("Oooh. She's skipping." "She is not sick.")

Julius: Ms. Blair, Ms. Blair! I saw Molly on the way to school—

Ricardo: Me too!

Julius: She was going into the party store, that one by the corner. She was walkin' right in there.

Ricardo: She's just skippin'.

Interview with Sharon, Molly's teacher:

"You may have noticed that the white kids are some of the poorest in the class. A lot of those families are troubled. The kids like Molly or Randy. Have you heard what some of the other kids call some of the white people in the neighborhood? Hillbillies. You'll hear them refer to "hillbillies" in their conversations. And, it's not a put down the way they use it—just a descriptor. The white kids sometimes too."

Headline in the city's major newspaper, July 20, 2003:

"Children Left Behind: Life for [this city's] kids harder than in other cities." The headline is accompanied by a large picture of an African-American infant girl smiling into the camera. The article discusses a recent report ranking the city as having the highest child poverty rate in the US.

Interview with Sharon three months later:

"Did you see the headline about child poverty in the city last summer? Of course, I could have told them all of that from teaching in the schools all these years. You know now after being in my room what the kids are facing."

Even these few examples provide a sense of the array of sources that testify to varying aspects of Molly's relationship to school and school literacies, as well as the complex discourses about children, poverty, race, and schooling that surround such sources and their interpretations. For instance, Molly's talk on the playground confirms the reality of the many moves—between apartments when she is with her mother and also between foster homes—that can't help but be disruptive to her school experiences. However, her comments also speak to larger discourses about some families in high-poverty urban neighborhoods as transient and unable to provide consistency in children's lives, an interpretation that is not likely to be applied to middle-class families who move frequently due to parents' work situations.

Molly's peers' discussion of her absence provides another source of testimony to her relationship to school, this time framing her as a child who is already opting out of school, an anecdotal report that soon became formally documented and a source of concern for her teacher and school administrators. In a city district with a high dropout rate, Molly's "skipping" at the age of 9 was rightfully a stark warning that her ties to school were already fraying. Indeed, her absences speak to the importance of paying attention to the process through which schools become irrelevant or alienating places for some students at very early stages in their schooling experiences. Although there are many potential reasons for Molly's school absences—perhaps she feels her mother needs her during the day or she is anticipating the family's next move—the consequences of Molly's life circumstances and the impact on her schooling were potentially quite devastating.

At the same time, Molly's absences became one more source of evidence that led to her teacher's (Sharon) observation about the White children as particularly "needy." Although many children in the class shared stories of experiences related to poverty that school year, a few of the White children did face some particularly challenging circumstances, including utility shut-off, eviction, and movement into foster care. In addition, the use of the term "hillbillies" in the school and neighborhood was a manifestation of how race was layered onto class in this highly racially integrated but overwhelmingly poor neighborhood. Historically, the White population in the neighborhood was, indeed, established in the mid-twentieth century as workers migrated to the Midwest from Appalachia in search of employment in the burgeoning industrial economy. The children regularly used the term hillbilly to refer to poor White people in the neighborhood, including Molly and some of her classmates. As one biracial, Puerto Rican/African American boy explained to me: "It means that they walk around bare footed. And their yard and house is really dirty."

Testimony to children's lives also accumulates through larger discourses about cities, schools, and children. Like many inner-city teachers, Sharon drove to work from a more affluent suburb and at times she invoked popular media reports as evidence when discussing her students' circumstances. For instance, the headline in the city's paper and its dismal news about child poverty seemed to provide an "objective" source that substantiated and reinforced her already established beliefs about her students and their lives. The report on child poverty was an important wake-up call to the city, reinvigorating policy debates on how to address the economic struggles of its citizens. However, as Shannon (1998) discusses, the language in many media accounts of people living in poverty constructs a "distinction of value among human beings" (p. 4), creating an "us" and "them" that casts the middle class as the subjects and the poor as objects in such accounts. These class-based

dichotomies perpetuate assumptions of pathology and deficiency in high-poverty families and communities. Molly, as a poor child in a city plagued by poverty, becomes evidence of the city's problems and, in turn, the city's troubles work to confirm "what these children are facing."

Although the everyday ways in which children and young adults testify to their own lives have the potential to challenge assumptions of deficiency or deviance that more privileged viewers may hold, too often students' difficult stories are perceived by middle-class adults in ways that potentially reinforce those assumptions (e.g., Jones, 2004). Sharon was a White teacher with 25 years of urban teaching experience and her deep care for her students was clear and displayed in multiple ways. However, she also interpreted students' lives in manners that reinforced her assumptions about both race and class and that firmly positioned her students as "other" in relation to her White, middle-class experience. Further, although she was quick to celebrate her students' accomplishments and worked hard and successfully to cultivate close relationships with children's families, it was the challenging circumstances in her students' lives that seemed to fuel the deficit language in some of her comments about students' families. This points to the necessity for middle-class educators to be highly aware of their roles and responsibilities as witnesses to students' lives, which includes cultivating and applying a critical lens to the sources through which evidence on students' lives and literacies is gathered and the influence of this "evidence" on their own assumptions.

YOUTHS' PROACTIVE TESTIMONIES AND A DEMAND FOR CRITICAL WITNESSING

If narratives about the intersections of urban students' lives and school literacies are being constructed all the time and if those stories demand that middle-class educators critically examine how students' life circumstances are interpreted through class and race-based assumptions, how might students play a purposeful, proactive role in that process? What does it look like for students to provide testimony to the realities of their experiences in ways that intervene in others' narrations of the relationships between their lives within and outside of school? And what happens if students are provided with tools and opportunities to document a range of experiences that testify to the challenging circumstances, the personal resourcefulness, and the family and community supports that demand that these witnesses set aside their assumptions? For this, we turn to Kristien's work with adolescents on a project, "Through Students' Eyes" (TSE), that took place in the same city neighborhood in which Elizabeth's research was situated. The project involved high school students in using photography and writing to document their perspectives on the purposes of school and the impediments and supports to their success in school.

Expanding notions of literacy indicate that city youths' expertise with visual texts—and, in particular, photographic images—might provide new angles on how these adolescents' perceive the connections between their lives, school, and its literacy practices (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Karlsson, 2001; Street, 2003). Photographic and other visual texts created by youth are commonly used in the field of visual sociology (Cavin, 2000; Margolis, 2004), but have been infrequently integrated into P-12 education and research. Much current research reveals that because visually based research techniques rely on the evidence of pictorial

media, these methods provide data that are not available via language-centered methods (Collier & Collier, 1990; Mitchell, Weber & O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005; Pole, 2004; Raggl & Schratz, 2004). Such representations support what Eisner (1991) has called "epistemic seeing" (p. 68)—acquiring an appreciation for the larger world through the examination of pictures of specific people, communities, and contexts (cf. Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; O'Brien, Springs & Stith, 2001).

With two colleagues (a teacher and a community activist), Kristien asked three groups of city youth (a total of approximately 100 students) to illustrate what they believed to be the purposes of school, as well as the supports for and impediments to their school success. The primary site for the "Through Students' Eyes" project was a high school serving a population that speaks more than 20 languages, includes almost 200 ethnicities, and accommodates all of the district's "English as a Second Language" programs. The dropout rate amongst this school's largest population—Latina and Latino young adults—has risen as high as 67%, and ninth graders average below a fifth-grade reading level.

The middle and high school students who participated in the TSE project included African American, Asian American, Latino, and White boys and girls. Although most of the high school youths were academically on-track for high school graduation, almost all of these students were children of high school dropouts. Most of the participating youth lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the high school, which were primarily comprised of working poor and working class families. Kristien and his project co-directors were serving as full- and part-time English language arts teachers with all of the students in this project.

Each student was supplied with a 35mm "point and shoot" or digital camera. Following an initial "photo walk" introduction to the project and instruction in the basics of camera use, students took pictures for several months to over a year to answer the three project questions: What are the purposes of school? What helps you to succeed in school? What gets in the way of your school success? At twice-monthly sessions, the students and the project directors (of which Kristien was one) chose photographs with the aid of volunteer professional photographers. Images were initially identified based on students' and adults' insights into the relevance of these pictures to the project questions, as well as evaluations of the photographs' quality and participants' interests in the images. From more than 8000 images that students shot, approximately 300 photos were chosen as the best illustrations of students' answers to the project's questions. These pictures were discussed in small group and one-on-one sessions and eventually explained in students' paragraph-length writings. Each of the project's directors then separately content-analyzed these images and writings for descriptive and visual topics (Prosser, 1998; Silverman, 1993; Walker, 1993).

In their images and writings, youth revealed an awareness of the myriad relationships between their lives and their school—and, in particular, their school *literacy*—experiences. Indeed, their work testifies to the tremendous number and range of challenges, responsibilities, and options these adolescents confronted as they negotiated their school and out-of-school lives. In this section we share a few of these images and the accompanying written descriptions in which students documented aspects of life that represent challenges, but that do not often get told from youths' own perspectives. As we share these students' photographs and writing, we emphasize the kinds of responses that these students' work demands of their audience.

With the following paragraph Von, a student, described a picture of Elton sitting at a desk in a high school classroom, throwing a symbol with his hands that many would suspect was a gang sign (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Von's Photograph

"FRIENDSHIP"

This is one of my only best friends besides Marvin. We always said that we were going to build a dynasty and nothing could break us up. And with the recent problems Elton is having, we try to be there for him and one another if we have a problem. So the symbol Elton is showing in this picture means a lot to us. We don't want to lose another friend to death, streets, or jail.

Instead this sign was a triangle that represented the trinity of Elton, Von, and a third friend, Marvin—who was another of the youth who had been involved with this photography/literacy project the previous several years. Von and Marvin were still in high school, still steadily pursuing that elusive diploma, and still more or less on track for entering college the next year. Yet Von was painfully aware of the impact that he and his peers were having on each other, their survival, their school success, and, by extension, their literacy achievement.

But Elton and his relationship to literacy were also being influenced by other social networks and economic pressures—comprised of and enacted by the young adults and even older women and men who engaged in the secondary economy "extracurricular" activity of "selling on Madison": dealing drugs on a part-time basis to earn a bit of extra cash for new clothes, phones, a car, for something to do, or to help out financially at home. With good reason, Von was worried that Elton would become one of many of his friends and acquaintances whose unsanctioned "extracurricular" activities would result not only in his rejection of schooling's traditional literacy activities, but also to his eventual dropping out of high school or, worse, to the juvenile justice system or physical harm.

Elton's challenges are important to understand, but who narrates his story is also crucial. Von expressing concerns about his friend and the potential consequences of Elton's decisions require that we read his story differently than if it had been told by someone distant from Elton's circumstances. Von, a youth working hard to maintain a relationship to schooling that he fears his close friend is losing, forces the viewer/reader to see Elton's potential. Von's perspective does not allow the consumer of his work to make sweeping generalizations about how urban youth negotiate the challenges of life in struggling neighborhoods.

Another illustrative image was Adam's photograph (not shown) of his eleven-year-old cousin attempting a gang sign that was being modeled by an older sibling. Described in his reflection

below, the image revealed some of the multi-modal literacies in Adam's life—for instance the accounts of family histories and the symbols of gangs—and the tensions between the benefits and dangers that those literacies represent:

"FAMILY SIGNS"

> This is a picture of my cousin, D'Angelo. He's 11 years old and he's in the fourth grade…He is throwing up the "King-Kennedy" sign because he represents King-Kennedy. People join gangs because they want to get back at other people who jumped their friends. His mother was born at King-Kennedy. My mother was born at King-Kennedy, too. My little brother goes to school right near the King-Kennedy projects. I don't want to join a gang because when gangs start fighting and then you have to represent your 'hood, then people start shooting, and then you'll feel stupid, and then you'll get shot, and you'll think, "I shouldn't have joined that gang."

Similarly, Marvin's photograph (Figure 3) and writing emphasize the tremendous number and range of responsibilities youth encountered and the roles that their family, work, and peer relationships and commitments played in challenging their orientation towards school's literacy activities:

"HAVING FUN"

> First thing Monday morning, I wake up at 5 o'clock and get my sister up and ready for school, get her down to the rapid station by 6:00 and then I come back and make sure that my younger brother and another sister get up and dress by 6:45. My younger brother and I catch our bus and we get to school about 7:30. I call my sisters' schools and make sure they made it there safely before I go to class….During athletic seasons, I go to practice after school, then to work at 5:30. Then, I head home at 10:00 and get there about 11:00. Before going to bed at midnight, I help my mom with her daycare business and clean around the house.

Figure 3. Marvin's Photograph

When would Marvin possibly have time in his schedule for English class homework or even to think about the school events of the day? Marvin's efforts here are an example of how *seeing* students' perspectives can provide educators with realistic understandings of youths' lives that provide crucial contexts for issues such as "quality of work" or "homework completion." Marvin's photograph and writing challenge

some of the assumptions made about urban youths' detachment from schooling and its literacy practices; Marvin is highly engaged in the idea of education as important and very much desires to be successful in school. However, his responsibilities and significant extracurricular commitments pose challenges to engaging in school and with its literacy tasks in the ways expected of him. We believe that Marvin's perspective makes a case for a different approach to curriculum and for instructional practices that proactively take into account and build from the very full lives of urban youth. In other words, serving as effective witnesses to students involves both providing opportunities for children and young adults to document their own perspectives on their lives in relation to schooling—via media with which they are familiar—and allowing those documentaries to have real impacts on what these youth experience in literacy classrooms and how their education unfolds.

Figure 4. Tabitha's Photograph

In the last photograph we share in this paper, Tabitha has created an image of a young woman holding her newborn baby (Figure 4) that was complemented by her reflection:

"NOT WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE"

> Although the young lady in the picture appears to be happy, in reality she is not. What is supposed to be the happiest day of her life, the day her son was born, is probably the worst. Her mother, her father, and even the father of her baby were not there for the birth. She has no one. She's only 19 and now has two children and can barely take care of herself. If you don't have anybody to help you and you have to raise two children, then it will be difficult to accomplish your goals. That's what gets in the way of education.

Tabitha's picture and writing capture the consequences of early motherhood in a way that both evokes and moves beyond the media- and politically driven tropes of young motherhood in US society—brave young woman "beating the odds" or promiscuous "drain on society." As in Marvin's work above, Tabitha as documenter raises issues that make it impossible for the viewer/reader to interpret the image as implicative of the experiences of all teen girls in this neighborhood. Although many students documented significant positive relationships with family and members of their community, Tabitha's writing represents a concern that ran through several students' images. Time and again these students branded what many of us would deem our principal set of relationships—family connections—as voids into which their wishes for direction, financial and emotional assistance, productive social exchanges, and even a constructive orientation towards school and traditional literacy success were pulled.

Over and over the reflections and photographs students in this project produced suggested that they understand and appreciate the kinds of supports that are imperative for their academic and personal life success and well-being, and yet they recognized the patterns of their communities and the simple realities of poverty that make such support difficult to find. The students speak to their challenges, but do so in ways that complicate assumptions that more privileged viewers/readers may make about these youths' lives. Behind the cameras and holding the pens are young women and men who are actively considering their relationships to schooling and its literacy curricula and who are in the midst of negotiating the many and varied demands and challenges that impinge on these relationships. The opportunity to create such texts and to share what those texts convey are both critical considerations in finding ways to better support these youth and their peers to engage successfully with school and its literacy practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Through these research efforts, we have found that city children and adolescents often do not feel well understood or supported by teachers and other adults in schools; they frequently perceive that their lives do not matter in these formal education settings or our literacy classrooms. In considering our work across schools and age groups in this city neighborhood, it is this question of how to make students' lives matter in literacy classrooms (and, in turn, make school literacies matter for students' lives) that is crucial for each of us. So, to conclude, we turn to this idea of how, by whom, and with what effects the intersections of students' lives and school literacies are documented and the aspects of this issue that are highlighted in each of our projects.

Elizabeth's work with the younger children in this neighborhood would suggest that narratives of children's lives and their relationships to schooling and its literacy tasks are constructed early and from multiple sources. Recognizing that the lives of children and youth are being documented in ongoing, everyday ways can offer points of entry for understanding what those running narratives might mean for students' relationships to their education. In addition, such recognition can provide ways to intervene in how those documentaries are built and interpreted by the adults by whom students are surrounded in schools. These everyday documentaries can fuel deficit perspectives in insidious ways—because they happen by default over time. As Elizabeth emphasizes, the difficult stories from students' lives can reassert class-driven dichotomies of "us/them" in schools, even in the midst of very well-intentioned and important efforts to view children's lives and literacies outside of school as funds of knowledge or as resources for supporting these literacies.

The tough stuff is hard to place; aspects of Molly's story do not seem to straightforwardly count as funds on which her teacher might draw for her school literacy pedagogies. And, yet, if the difficult experiences from Molly's life get bracketed from what officially counts in school, then those experiences will be left as unexamined but powerful narrative threads in the unfolding story of Molly's education. She testifies to her experiences and, in turn, that testimony requires active, critical witnessing. Critical witnessing requires that children's and youth's perspectives be sought out and listened to—a challenge sometimes in the midst of the cacophony of other voices and texts that add to narratives about students—and be allowed to speak back to the entrenched images of life in high-poverty neighborhoods.

As well, students should be given opportunities to explicitly and proactively document their lives and experiences for *real* audiences, both within and beyond school. Children and youth should be involved in projects, like that facilitated by Kristien, that allow them to use a range of tools and texts to share their perspectives and to intervene in the ways their stories are interpreted by others. The youth from Kristien's study share powerfully and pointedly that they and their peers face very real challenges that impinge on their schooling. In this city neighborhood, it is clear that some of these challenges are wrought of and exacerbated by the economic struggles and social inequities in which those hardships occur. Through their visual and written work, these young adults invoke challenges that middle-class viewers/readers may assume about inner city adolescents, including gangs, drugs, and teen pregnancy. And, yet, because they are the creators and the active subjects of their texts, these students not only raise issues and implications that could only be drawn from their perspectives, but they also interrupt the ways their audiences can construct versions of "urban youth." By providing opportunities for these children and youth to be the active documenters of their own relationships to schooling and its literacy tasks—to show the interweavings of their lives in and out of school—students both provide powerful testimony and make important demands of their witnesses.

Children and youth do not shield the adults in their literacy classrooms or school in general from the difficult experiences that have consequences for their relationships to schooling and our literacy pedagogies. However, the onus is on educators to challenge the class-based dichotomies that hold students at arm's length and to allow these youths' perspectives and experiences to matter in what occurs in our literacy classrooms. Complicated and difficult stories from students' lives will inevitably be told in classrooms and the responses these accounts receive are heavy with implications for how urban students are positioned in English language arts classrooms. Within and across our work in urban schools, we are engaged in thinking about how critical witnessing can and should be accomplished in response to students' testimonies. And, we cannot be complacent. When less than half of Molly's third-grade peers can be expected to join some of the youth from Kristien's study as alumnae of the neighborhood high school, there is far too much at stake.

REFERENCES

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Kabbani, N. (2001). The dropout process in life course perspective: Early risk factors at home and school. *Teachers College Record, 103*(5), 760-822.

Alvermann, D. E. & Hagood, M. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in "new times." *Journal of Educational Research, 93*(3).

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Au, K. (1993). An expanded definition of literacy. In K. Au (Ed.), *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings,* (20-34). New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Balfanz, R. & Legters, N. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them?* Johns Hopkins University: Author.

Beverley, J. (2005). *Testimonio*, subalternity, and narrative authority. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research (3rd Edition)* (pp. 547-558). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bomer, R., Dworin, J., May, L. & Semingson, P. (2008). Miseducating teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne's claims about poverty. *Teachers College Record, 110*(11), Accessed from http://www.tcrecord.org on 9/6/2007.

Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J. & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.

Caruth, C. (Ed.) (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cavin, E. (2000). In search of the viewfinder: A study of a child's perspective [Photo essay]. *Visual Sociology 9*(1), 27-41.

Collier, J. & Collier, M. (1990). *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (2000). Multiliteracies: The beginning of an idea. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures* (3-8). London: Routledge.

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.

Dorsey-Gaines, C. & Taylor, D. (1988). *Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dutro, E. (2008a). *Children's testimony and the necessity of witness in urban classrooms*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Dutro, E. (2008b). "*That's why I was crying on this book": Trauma as testimony in children's responses to literature*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Edwards, P. A., McMillon, G. T. (2000). Why does Joshua "hate" school. . .but love Sunday school? *Language Arts, 78*(2), 111-20.

Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Federation for Community Planning & United Way Services of Greater Cleveland (2003). *Social indicators 2003: Education, employment, and income*. Cleveland, OH: Federation for Community Planning & United Way Services of Greater Cleveland.

Felman, S. & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. New York: Routledge.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Jones, S. (2004). Living poverty and literacy learning: Sanctioning the topics of students' lives. *Language Arts, 81*, 461–469.

Karlsson, J. (2001). Doing visual research with school learners in South Africa. *Visual Sociology 16*(2), 23-38.

Kaufman, P., Alt, M., & Chapman, C. (2004). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2001.* Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES Report #2005046].

Leys, R. (2000). *Trauma: A genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewis, C., Enciso, P., & Moje, E. B. (Eds.) (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power*. New York: Routledge.

MacLeod, J. (2004). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood* (2nd ed). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Margolis, E. (2004). Looking at discipline, looking at labor: Photographic representations of Indian boarding schools. *Visual Studies, 19*(1), 72-96.

Marquez-Zenkov, K. (2007). Through city students' eyes: Urban students' beliefs about school's purposes, supports, and impediments. *Visual Studies, 22*(2), 138-154.

Marquez-Zenkov, K., Harmon, J., van Lier, P., & Marquez-Zenkov, M. (2007). "If they'll listen to us about life, we'll listen to them about school": Seeing city students' ideas about quality teachers. *Educational Action Research 15*(3), 403-415.

Mitchell, C., Weber, S., & O'Reilly-Scanlon, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Just who do we think we are? Arts-based methodologies for self-study*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Moje, E. (2000). "To be part of the story": The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record, 102(3),* 651-690.

Moll, L. & Gonzalez, N. (1994). Lessons from research with language minority children. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 26*, 4.

Morrell, E. (2007). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York: Routledge.

Ng, J. C. & Rury, J. L. (2006). Poverty and education: A critical analysis of the Ruby Payne phenomenon. *Teachers College Record* [online], available http://www.tcrecord.org.

Nieto, S. & Bode, P. (2007). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education.* New York: Allyn & Bacon.

O'Brien, D.G., Springs, R. & Stith, D. (2001). Engaging at-risk students: Literacy learning in a high school literacy lab. In E. B. Moje & D. G. O'Brien (Eds.), *Constructions of literacy: Studies of teaching and learning in and out of secondary schools* (pp. 105-124). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Orellana, M. F. (2001). The work kids do: Mexican and Central American immigrant children's contributions to households and school in California. *Harvard Educational Review, 71*(3), 366-89.

Pole, C. (Ed.). (2004.) *Seeing is believing? Approaches to visual research (Volume 7).* New York, NY: Elsevier.

Prosser, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers.* London: Falmer Press.

Purcell-Gates, V. (1997). *Other people's words: The cycle of low literacy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Raggl, A. & Schratz, M. (2004). Using visuals to release pupils' voices: Emotional pathways to enhancing thinking and reflecting on learning. In C. Pole (Ed.), *Seeing is believing? Approaches to visual research (Volume 7) (*pp. 147-162). New York, NY: Elsevier.

Shannon, P. (1998). *Reading poverty.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text, and interaction.* London: Sage.

Street, B. (2003). What's new in New Literacy Studies? *Current Issues in Comparative Education, 5*(2), 77-91.

Walker, R. (1993). Finding a silent voice for the researcher: Using photographs in evaluation and research. In M. Schratz (Ed.), *Qualitative voices in educational research* (pp. 72-92). London: Falmer Press.

Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.