

Elizabeth Dutro

Children Writing "Hard Times": Lived Experiences of Poverty and the Class-Privileged Assumptions of a Mandated Curriculum

Through writing about their experiences with poverty in response to a story about the Great Depression, children challenge the assumptions of their mandated curriculum.

Jade bent over her paper, her many short, brightly banded braids bobbing as she intently moved her pencil across the page (all names of people and locations are pseudonyms). When she had placed her last period, she raised her head, heaved a sigh, and walked her paper to the purple plastic "completed drafts" tray at the side of the classroom. She wore a satisfied half-smile as she walked back to her desk. That afternoon, after Jade and her classmates had left for home, her teacher, Sharon, gathered the papers from the purple tray and sat down at her desk to read. From first line to last, Jade had filled her paper with stories—stories about being left home alone while her mother worked the late shift; about her older sisters, 12 and 13 years old, who had recently been sent to separate foster homes following the birth of the 12-year-old's baby girl; and about how difficult it is when there is not enough food in the house. These were stories she had not shared with her teacher before, but Jade seemed to feel inspired to share them now, prompted by a question included in the district's mandated literacy curriculum. And she was not the only one. On that day, stories of lives lived in poverty poured from the pencils of many of her third-grade classmates.

The question to which Jade and her classmates were writing, "What are some signs of hard times?", was included in a unit on *Leah's Pony* by Elizabeth Friedrich, a story about a young farm girl's experiences during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In the story, which was adapted from a published picturebook, the Dust Bowl takes a harsh toll on the protagonists' family farm: crops shrivel and die, and Leah's family goes without meat, makes clothes out of potato sacks and, unable to pay their debts, almost loses their farm to auction. Sharon glanced periodically at her

teacher's manual as she wrote the "Question of the day" on the board during day 4 of the 5 days that the literacy program allotted to *Leah's Pony*. The children sat at their desks, listened, thought, and wrote.

My goal in this article is to explore the fissure between the children's responses to this writing prompt during the *Leah's Pony* unit and the social class-based assumptions embedded in the curriculum. In short, the curriculum disregarded both children's lived experiences of poverty and their deep engagement with this story. However, in spite of the curriculum's positioning of students as immune from sustained "hard times," the children harnessed the opportunity presented by the question "What are some signs of hard times?" to powerfully bring their lives to bear on their learning. Indeed, their responses represent connections to this story that could only be forged through first-hand knowledge of economic struggle. Thus, the children's writing emphasizes their "epistemic privilege" (Campano, 2007; Moya, 2002)—the idea that by virtue of the struggles that students and families living in poverty or in historically disenfranchised communities continually navigate, they have a privileged understanding of the inequities of the world.

CHILDREN'S VOICES, POWERFUL TEXTS, AND POVERTY

The view of class I bring to my analysis is grounded in a critical tradition arguing that economic inequities are built and sustained through systems, such as capitalism, in which those with access to wealth and the power that it affords will attempt to maintain structures and institutions that ensure their continued dominance. At the same time, as critical theorists emphasize (e.g., Freire,

2000; Hall & Jefferson, 1990), human agents resist their marginalization, be it through voicing their lived knowledge in school or organizing large-scale social movements to enact change. For my purposes here, and as I explore further below, I am particularly interested in how language functions in the tensions between structures that work to sustain class-based divisions and the possibility of resistance and transformation.

Language, Identity, and the Interested Nature of Texts

My analysis of the *Leah's Pony* unit is grounded in critical approaches to discourse that assume language plays a central role in the construction and maintenance of, as well as resistance to, inequities. In this view, the language of curriculum, as an example, constructs a particular view of the world and speaks from a particular perspective that necessarily values some perspectives and knowledge more than others. At the same time, language is a tool through which children can resist such efforts to silence them. These perspectives, which inform an increasingly rich area of research in the field of literacy, work to expose the role of language in shaping, regulating, and controlling knowledge (e.g., Hinchman & Young, 2001; Moje, 1997; Nichols, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Rogers & Christian, 2007).

A central goal of such work is to dig beneath the seemingly neutral, transparent language of curriculum, policy, and classrooms in order to expose the interests and perspectives embedded in language and to explore the consequences of such language for the teachers, children and youth at whom it is aimed. According to critical and poststructural theories of language (e.g., Foucault, 1990; Luke, 1997), identities are constructed from and through language. How I define myself and understand my life cannot be separated from the language used to construct what it means to be a professor in a particular community, a middle-class white woman in the US, a mother, a daughter, a wife, or a sister. Similarly, individuals, groups, and institutions use an array of discourses to construct understandings of what it means to be a child living in poverty, a successful third-grade reader and writer, or a teacher who works to deliver an engaging and rigorous literacy curriculum.

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Perspectives on poverty from those who are economically comfortable will certainly be different from the perspectives of a person living with poverty every day; however, in a society in which those of economic means have control over institutions such as the media and government, it is the understandings of those in power that hold sway and enjoy the status of "official" discourse (Gee, 1996). Those official discourses have consequences for how material resources are distributed, how the efforts of individuals and groups are valued and evaluated, and whose perspectives are privileged in social institutions such as schools.

Resistance to Positioning within Discourse

Although I will argue that Sharon's students' knowledge related to the *Leah's Pony* unit went unrecognized by the official discourse of the literacy curriculum mandated by their district, the children's writing functioned as resistance to that subordination. Although some discourses clearly exert more power than others by constructing and maintaining *structures* that benefit some *groups* more than others, the concept of "power" can be viewed as a force that is distributed and available to all, albeit in different ways and with varying consequences.

As Foucault (1990) notes, it is important to examine both the disciplining nature of official discourses and the resistance to those discourses that can and does occur among those who are the targets of that discipline. In the case of the *Leah's Pony* analysis, the children's writing defies the curriculum's assumptions that poverty and its impact on families is something children will access only through the text and that their responses will, therefore, be surface-level and text-dependent.

Attending to Social Class in Literacy Classrooms

Researchers who investigate the experiences of K–12 students facing economic struggles emphasize the presence and consequences of class-based assumptions in the discourses surrounding schooling (e.g., Hicks, 2005; Van Galen, 2004; Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). For instance, in her work with working-poor, white girls, Hicks (2005) dem-

onstrated how the girls with whom she worked "were strongly voicing a working-class discourse within a school setting more typically defined by middle-class language and values" (p. 3). Similarly, Jones (2004; 2006) has shown how the life experiences and language of children living in poverty are often viewed as inappropriate for school and, thus, are rendered invisible or deviant.

Commercial literacy curricula necessarily operate from assumptions about students and what they do, can, and should know. It follows, therefore, that such curricula are highly implicated in these issues of social class and literacy classrooms; they are, by definition, documents that purport to address the needs of any child, regardless of race, class, gender, or region, resulting in the construction of a "generic child" (Luke, 1995/1996). In the case of the *Leah's Pony* unit, that "generic child" was assumed to be economically secure and able to respond to the poverty of the Great Depression as a historical artifact, rather than a reflection of the current and ongoing material reality of her/his own life.

Presumptions about the knowledge that children will bring and apply to their encounters with curriculum are further exacerbated by policy contexts that point to the acquisition of discrete skills as the unambiguous remedy for the academic challenges some children face in public schools (Stevens, 2003; Yatvin, Weaver & Garan, 2003). This focus on instrumental literacy necessarily ignores the structural, material, and social bases and effects of poverty that are emphasized by poverty research across fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and economics (Danziger & Haveman, 2002; Iceland, 2006; Newman, 2000; Rank, 2005; Shannon, 1998). Instead, viewing literacy as a set of discrete skills that can be transmitted through scripted curricula and demonstrated through high-stakes tests operationalizes the "boot strap" mentality that locates school struggles in individuals rather than in systemic issues such as poverty and institutionalized racism.

Further, an instrumental view of literacy overlooks the emotional dimensions of literacy engagement that are so apparent in Sharon's students' writing. As Hicks (2005) argues, an education system blind to class will be unable to meet the needs

of many children because "the complex facts of young lives shaped, first, by the economic stress of poverty and, then, by the tentacles that extend outward from poverty's center create a landscape of materiality, feeling, and conscious awareness unlike that of middle-class [children]" (p. 12). As I will discuss, it is just such a conscious awareness—a sophisticated interpretation that reached well beyond the superficial inferences prompted by the official curriculum—that Sharon's children brought to their reading of *Leah's Pony*.

CONTEXT

The children's response to *Leah's Pony* occurred in a city that, according to various economic indicators, had the second highest child poverty rate in the nation. Although African American children made up 100 percent of many of the city's schools, Davis Elementary was located in one of the most racially diverse areas of the city. The school's surrounding neighborhoods were racially integrated, including White, Puerto Rican, and African American families, with increasing numbers of recent immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. As in many cities in the industrial Midwest, the city's economy suffered a severe blow in the 1990s when traditional manufacturing was displaced by the "new economy," resulting in high unemployment and increased poverty.

I spent two years as a participant-observer in Sharon's third-grade classroom at Davis Elementary, a school in which 100 percent of children qualified for the free lunch program. The children's experi-

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ences with *Leah's Pony* that I share here occurred in the first year of my collaboration with Sharon and her students. My interaction with the children was extensive: I visited the classroom as often as possible during the literacy block (2–3 times a week) throughout the school year; I accompanied the children to

lunch, recess, and on field trips, documenting observations and classroom interactions through field-notes and audio recordings; I learned from and about the children through interviews and informal interactions within and outside of the classroom. I also collected children's written work and all of the literacy policy-related materials that Sharon received from the school and district.

The array of data collected for the larger study provided understandings of the children's literacy practices that served as context for my analysis of the *Leah's Pony* unit. For that analysis, I drew on methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly tools described by Fairclough (1995) and Luke (1995–1996). Consistent with the perspectives on language discussed earlier, my analysis of the *Leah's Pony* unit was guided by questions adapted from Luke

and Fairclough that revealed how class-based assumptions were codified through the curriculum's structure and language and, in particular, the class-specific meanings that were embedded in its structure and content (for examples of these questions see Table 1).

The literacy curriculum mandated by the district was not as scripted as some of the more widely adopted commercial literacy programs that have characterized Reading First. Yet, fac-

Table 1. Curriculum analysis: Guiding questions and examples of results

Guiding Questions for Analysis	Examples of Results
What classification schemes are drawn upon?	• Contrast between "good times" and "hard times" in <i>Leah's Pony</i> • "Hard times" are discussed in historical terms in teacher's edition, consistent use of past tense • "Hard times" are equated with "disaster"—extraordinary, natural occurrences
What ideologically significant meaning relations are there between words?	• Descriptions of emotions, changes in family routine, are tied to loss of livelihood and the term "hard times" • The word "many" in the "possible responses" to the hard times prompt constructs distance between the responder and the content of the response and locates hardship as a community crisis rather than something experienced by individual families
What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?	• Teacher's edition use of "possible responses" to anticipate children's verbal or written responses to posed questions • The possible responses are limited to references specific to the story, rather than about children's own experiences
What textual structures does the text employ? How do these structures convey meaning?	• Story selection followed by "think and respond" questions (meets expectations of "typical" commercial reading program structure) • Text boxes used in student text to highlight tasks, contextual information for story, or emphasize literacy skills and strategies or cross-curricular connections (e.g., "Focus Skill: Fact and Opinion"; "Focus Strategy: Self-Question"; "Social Studies: People and the Environment") • Teacher's edition includes student text surrounded by text boxes that indicate the timing and content of instruction related to the story • Scripts for teachers are included in black print and student "possible responses" in pink • Teacher's edition directs all aspects of instruction, whether literally scripted or not • More activities are included than could realistically fit in a literacy block; the high accountability context made the classroom teacher very nervous about what to include or exclude • The inclusion of some of the text boxes in the student text indicates that these are particularly important topics (e.g., the Social Studies connection and the photo of the children sledding that accompanies it)
What larger-scale structures does the text have?	• Genre of commercial literacy program—familiar structures, holds authority for both teachers and students • Curriculum has been deemed to meet Reading First requirements and thus facilitates state access to federal funds • Curriculum is mandated and teacher feels highly accountable to teach it as directed
Are there ways in which the text seeks to control the language of others?	• Inclusion of "possible responses" of students defines and prescribes children's responses and teacher expectations • Scripted questions and lessons for teachers limit opportunities for students to build on their own experiences • Instructions to teacher consistently use imperative mode, directing her/him to enact particular behaviors • Images as well as written text work to place boundaries on responses (e.g., photo of smiling, picture of sledding children suggests what is appropriate response to question about what people do in the winter)
Is there grammatical agency? If so, with whom is it located?	• Grammatical agency lies with the teacher; teacher is constructed as the one in control of what, how, and when topics are taken up and skills and processes are learned • Student agency is absent in grammatical structures

ing a high-accountability context in a school that had not met Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, Sharon felt immense pressure from her administration and the district's literacy coaches to adhere to the curriculum in both content and pacing. Although she recognized the powerful way that her students' responses to the "hard times" prompt pushed back on the curriculum's false assumptions, she did not feel able to put aside the schedule and pursue the children's connections. Sharon, like many teachers in the current policy climate, struggled with the pressures of acquiescing to a system to which she was beholden, while also understanding the shortcomings of the teaching approaches to which she was expected to adhere.

Sharon was allotted five days to spend on the *Leah's Pony* unit. "What are some signs of hard times?" was the "Question of the Day" for day four. The teacher's edition specified that those questions, one for each day, could be assigned as a written response or used for oral discussion, and Sharon varied the way she used the included questions throughout each unit. The children's written responses to the question occurred after Sharon had introduced the story and the historical context of the Great Depression, they had heard the story read aloud, read it independently, and experienced mini-lessons on skills highlighted in the curriculum. Of the 18 children in Sharon's class, 13 were present on the day Sharon asked them to write to the prompt that elicited the stories discussed in this analysis. Of those 13, 8 children wrote about issues related to individual and familial experiences of poverty. I share stories from the following children (all names are pseudonyms): Jade, a nine-year-old African American girl; Julius, a nine-year-old biracial African American–Puerto Rican boy; Tara, an 8-year-old white girl; Randy, an 8-year-old white boy; Tiffany, a 9-year-old white girl; Diante, a 9-year-old African American boy; Thomas, an 8-year-old white boy; and, Jalal, a 9-year-old Lebanese American boy.

THE CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO *LEAH'S PONY*

In the climax of *Leah's Pony*, Leah sells her beloved pony and takes the money to the bank auction, where all of her family's belongings,

their home, and their very livelihood are at stake. When Leah bids a dollar for her family's tractor, the neighbors follow her lead and the auction becomes a "penny auction," allowing the family to keep their farm and sustain it until the crops can again thrive. The reader discovers on the final page of the story that the family will stay in their home, the crops will grow again and, to make for a happy ending indeed, Leah gets her pony back.

In this way, the story constructs a view of poverty that is very different from the systemic poverty experienced by Sharon's students. The economic struggles in *Leah's Pony* are portrayed as temporary, resulting from a contained, if devastating, economic depression. This sense of Leah's family's economic struggles being new and temporary is conveyed through the primary classification scheme of the book: good times ("the year the corn grew tall and straight") and hard times ("the year the corn grew no taller than a man's thumb"). The book sets up a very clear before

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and after, with economic struggle defining the "after" and a carefree existence defining the "before." Sharon's students' stories reveal the ways they resonate with the dust bowl tale of *Leah's Pony*, even as they relocate economic struggles to their urban experiences. In the following paragraphs, I will

show how children responded to the text aesthetically, thematically, and emotionally.

One way in which the children's responses parallel the story is through the details of economic struggle that they convey. In the story, Leah's mother begins to make underwear out of flour sacks, she waters her petunias with left-over dishwater, and the family watches as their neighbors fill a truck with as many possessions as they can and leave for Oregon. Similarly, Julius writes of specific economic struggles faced by his family:

Some signs of hard times are when the gas bill shoots up to \$300 dollars. My dad was kicked out of work. Now we can't get gas for the car when it runs out of gas.

The house bill could be a lot of money. My mom could not have enough money to pay the bills. She would have to borrow money from someone. It would not be a good thing to witness.

A car bill can be another problem. If that bill is not paid we will not have a car. Another hard time for me was losing my baby brother. Losing a brother is a very hard thing to get over. I was sad for a very, very long time.

Another hard time is when there is not that much food left. We could starve to death. It would be too bad for it to happen to anyone in the world.

Just as the story allowed the children to view one family's struggles during the Dust Bowl from a child's perspective, Sharon's students provide an account of urban economic struggle through their own eyes. Julius makes this role explicit when he writes, "It would not be a good thing to witness."

Tiffany also chronicles economic struggles:

Some signs of hard times are. When one person's car breaks down. My mom's car broke down. So she used my grampas truck. One time we did not have enough money for food. So we had to get some food from my aunt Cindy.

When you have hard times it is sad. Like when you get kicked out of your house. Now that is sad. Or when you get stiches or when your stuff gets stolen.

Or when your mom get fired. Or when you move away from your dad or mom. Or when your mom has a baby. She might not have enough money for clothes. When ther are hard times that is not fun at all.

As the children's "hard times" stories reflect, families' economic struggles in their city—as confirmed by children and parents and as documented in the city's newspaper—often centered on job loss, worries about bills, and the costs associated with maintaining reliable transportation. Like several of his classmates, Jalal writes of specific ways in which economic struggles can impact families:

Hard times are when people can not buy gas because it caust too mush. so that's one thing but the car's need fixing, like breaks motors and tires. Also in hard times it is hard to buy a car because they cost too much for people. Work is hard to find now but some people can. Also in hard times it's hard to buy food and the prices get higher and too high to buy food. Also houses cost too mush to buy. Also when somebody dies that is hard times.

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In his response to the "hard times" prompt, Thomas echoes several of his classmates' stories of difficulties with transportation: "A hard time for my family is a car my mom doesn't have a car. It is hard without a car, because it is hard getting place to place without a car. Sometimes she takes a bus to work because my sister is not there."

In addition to the connections students made between *Leah's Pony* and specific instances of economic struggle in their own lives, the children's responses also expressed parallel emotions. The story conveys the emotions attached to "hard times" through words and phrases such as sad, hard, puzzled, brave, worried, "Leah wanted to run away," "Leah swallowed hard," and "mama cried." On one page that focuses on the impact of the dust storms on the family, the word "hard" is repeated six times in a total of seven sentences to describe the wind, everyday tasks, and the family's situation. The pictures work with the text to convey the emotions experienced by the characters,

including several close-ups of Leah's face clouded with sadness and worry. In their written responses, the children also describe the emotions attached to the signs of hard times that they relate, such as when Tiffany says, "When you have hard times it is sad" and "it is

not fun at all." Or when Tara writes, "My mom has hard times with my family because my dad got laid off of work cause there was only a little bit of work left. Before they shut down the building with nobody to work with in the building. Everybody will be sad without a job to get money for the rent and to pay for food and cable bill."

The story of *Leah's Pony* also includes very explicit examples of how Leah's knowledge of her family's hardships is built: she overhears her parents' hushed conversations in the kitchen, she observes her mother crying, she sees changes in her family's routines, and she absorbs the implications when her father tries to explain why the bank is going to auction off their possessions. Some of Sharon's students' accounts, like those in *Leah's Pony*, create vivid and detailed images of intimate family interactions that invoke economic struggles. For instance, Randy writes a narrative of one particular family experience, complete with dialogue:

Once the family had a disagreement with my mom she said "I do this for our family honey!" My

dad said "but honey I don't want to go for a long time." You are going to go to an apartment. This is starting to be hard times. For days he was gone. For five months he was gone. We got to go over on Sundays. My mom did not have enough Monday money [money left over after fixed expenses such as rent and bills which can be spent on food and other items] for us. This is hard times for me. She started to get worried for us kids and started to cry. She got back together again with my dad.

Randy provides his child's-eye view of his family's experiences—clearly based on various interactions he witnessed between his parents and his observations during the time his father was not living at home—in much the same way that *Leah's Pony* presents the emotions and actions of adults through a child's point of view.

Similarly, Jade adopts a narrative style in the latter half of her response, writing:

But when things were not going well with my sisters Alesha and Keshia they got taken away from my house and I could not see them again. Well my sister named keshia, she can't see her baby named Gail any more because she was not takeing care of her baby and she left her baby at my other sisters' foster house. She ran away from her baby because she was not ready to take care of a baby right now any way.

She writes of her family's experiences in the passive voice, adopting the point of view of a witness to the events. The adult actors in this part of her response are not explicitly invoked, but are implicitly present throughout her story—someone took her sisters away, someone ensured that her sister could not see her baby. Jade also describes her sister's motivation for leaving her baby in words an adult may have used to explain the situation to her: "she was not ready to take care of a baby right now anyway."

Even when the children's responses are not written in such a vivid narrative style, they chronicle circumstances that would lie outside the purview of most class-privileged children. For instance, Diante writes:

Hard times is something that you have. Everybody has hard times. Sometimes I have hard times

like when I'm down at my grandma's house. I have hard times. She doesn't have any food or I don't have any transportation, walking around my Aunt's house. Sometimes I have hard times and hard times keep on passing by sometimes. When my family and I were poor I had hard times. all of us have hard times But when it is hard times you are sad your mother won't have any money to buy you what you want. Hard times will keep passing you by sometimes and hard times is a signal for you.

[Diante] and his peers responded to Leah's experiences in highly personal and sophisticated ways as they brought their lived knowledge of hard times to bear on their responses.

Like many of his classmates, Diante conveys a personal understanding of the economic struggles related in *Leah's Pony*. As my analysis suggests, he and his peers responded to Leah's experiences in highly personal and sophisticated ways as they brought their lived knowledge of hard times to bear on their responses.

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE CURRICULUM

How many middle class children are aware, as Julius so clearly is, of the high cost of heating a house in the winter? How many could relate to Tiffany's understanding that a new baby in the house presents a very real economic concern for the family? How many children in economically comfortable families would understand, as Randy does, that a lack of "Monday money" has consequences for what a mother is able to feed her children that week? Given the focus of *Leah's Pony*, it seems not simply possible, but *likely* that children living in poverty would respond with their own stories of economic struggle. Indeed, unless a curriculum was constructed through a myopically class-privileged vision of the world, it seems obvious that their responses demand attention; after all, the curriculum purports to support all children in engaging with and learning from this story. As I argue below, my analyses of the teacher's edition suggest that it is just such a narrow view that Sharon's students were pushing against.

The "question of the day" that invited children to reflect on signs of hard times is the only opportunity presented in the *Leah's Pony* unit that would allow a discussion of economic hardship outside of the historical context of the Great Depression (which is presented as a temporary condition that leaves hope and prosperity in its wake) or apart from additional bounded events,

such as other natural disasters. To illustrate the underlying class-based assumptions in the teacher's edition of the unit, I share two examples from my analysis: 1) the language used to predict students' "possible responses" to teachers' scripted questions and, 2) activities and discussions aimed at making connections between the story and other content areas.

Assuming Children's "Possible Responses"

As with most commercial reading programs, this series includes possible student responses in parentheses following the prompts or questions that teachers are to pose. For the question, "What are some signs of hard times?" the program lists the following possible responses: "Many people don't have enough money to buy things. Crops aren't growing well. Businesses are doing badly. Many people are out of work." Although the linguistic features of the "Question of the Day" prompt allow for open interpretation of the kind that occurred in Sharon's classroom, the reading program's "possible responses" do not anticipate such an interpretation. Rather, responses like "Crops aren't doing well" and "Businesses are doing badly" are located in the particular context of the story. Further, responses such as "Many people don't have enough money to buy things" and "Many people are out of work" are located in the collective, rather than the particulars of individual lives, and, therefore, in no way anticipate a personal story of poverty as lived by individual children.

The "possible responses" included in commercial programs are problematic for a number of reasons. As scholars in literacy argued long before this period of current reform context, the inclusion of these and other kinds of scripts in curriculum represent the "deskilling" of teachers (Apple, 1988; Shannon, 1987), assuming that teachers need help anticipating what counts as an appropriate response. In this case, the presence of "possible responses" also serves to place boundaries on which responses teachers can expect to receive from children. Given the role of language in shaping perceptions of what counts as the "norm," the absence of the kinds of connections made by Sharon's children from the anticipated responses reveals one way in which the

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curriculum privileges some kinds of knowledge over others.

Middle-Class Assumptions in Connection to Other Content Areas

Another example of how class-based assumptions are visible in the curriculum involves a text box titled "Social Studies" that is intended to help teachers make connections between *Leah's Pony* and another content area. The text reads:

People and the Environment: Point out that conditions in the physical environment affect people's actions: Ask: How does the weather affect the corn crop? How does it affect Leah's family? Then ask students to tell how the weather affects families in your region. Ask: What do people do differently when it is unusually cold? How might conditions here have affected local Indian nations?

The picture that accompanies this text is of three white children, clothed in brightly colored ski jackets and stocking hats, smiling rosy-cheeked into the camera at the bottom of a sledding hill.

Taken alone, the questions the teacher is directed to pose might open a discussion, building on some of the children's "hard times"

responses—perhaps about the high cost of gas and the hardship of paying for heat during a severe Midwest winter. Or, one might imagine Sharon's children talking about how winter impacts their families' transportation issues—cars that are prone to breakdowns are more likely to pose problems during the winter months. And, surely, the children would discuss more mundane, even fun, aspects of winter as well. However, the picture that accompanies this discussion (included in the children's text as well as the teacher's edition) effectively excludes some of the harder aspects of winter that might be experienced by the children. It suggests that what is expected is a discussion of winter as a season that requires different clothing and provides opportunities for different recreational activities. Further, any discussion of the hardships that winter might pose is likely limited by the context of history, exemplified by the question about the past experiences of Indian nations, rather than as the lived realities of the children reading this story.

HONORING CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE THROUGH CRITICAL INQUIRY

The children's experience with *Leah's Pony* illustrates why class analyses deserve increased attention in both literacy research and teaching. Such attention to class is even more urgent in a policy climate in which the mastery of discrete skills and straightforward inferences about text are the coin of the realm and literacy curricula are increasingly scripted, leaving teachers little room to adapt to the needs of their students.

The stakes are high in how curricula conceptualize literacy. The children's writing engaged *Leah's Pony* thematically, aesthetically, and emotionally, even as the curriculum's focus on straightforward, text-bound inferences privileged far less sophisticated responses. Even though the children in this classroom were in a *better position* than middle-class children to effectively and powerfully respond to the story, their vibrant and highly relevant documentation of their connections to the economic hard times faced by the story's characters was relegated to the margins of what officially counted as relevant knowledge.

Without doubt, the children demonstrate that they are not merely subject to the literacy practices and ideologies imposed by the mandated curriculum, but they have agency to challenge these practices through their own situated knowledge. However, the *Leah's Pony* unit also reveals how economic inequities are both visible and exacerbated through school texts that position some children's experiences more centrally than others. In response to such inequities, teacher resistance and advocacy for students is crucial.

My collaborations with teachers and others' examples of equity-focused teacher research efforts (e.g., Nieto, 2005; Dozier,

Johnston, & Rogers, 2005) suggest that individual and collective teacher inquiry represents an essential tool in creating and sustaining equitable literacy classrooms. The potential foci of such inquiry are many, but Sharon's students' experiences suggest that literacy educators committed to increasing equity for children living in poverty can and should proactively pursue the following:

- Uncovering and resisting the assumptions that too often go unheeded in the language of curriculum, whether a packaged program man-

dated by a district or materials crafted with the best of intentions by individual teachers.

- Attending to the specific ways in which children speak back to the assumptions embedded in curricula by bringing their knowledge and experiences to bear on their school literacy practices.
- Examining and critiquing policy mandates for their impact on teacher opportunities to creatively and appropriately support and engage children in making deep and meaningful connections to text.

Engaging in such inquiry requires both tools of analysis and a stance of resistant advocacy. Analyzing and intervening in the language of literacy curricula and instruction requires two active stances:

1. Systematic questioning of school texts: *Whose perspectives and lived experiences are included and excluded?*
2. Close analysis of student work through the question: *How are my students bringing their knowledge and experiences to bear on their learning?* In addition, more detailed questions, such as those I employed in my analysis of the *Leah's Pony* unit, can guide close analysis of curricular materials and children's responses to them (refer to Table 1, p. 92).

Taking on such equity-oriented work requires a conscious decision to advocate for children, particularly in high-accountability contexts that place enormous pressures on teachers to adhere to mandates. Literacy curricula *should* be held accountable to support all children, and policy should honor the crucial need for teachers to have the flexibility to follow children's leads as they build personally and intellectually rich connections between their lives and the stories they encounter in school. It is up to teachers to find ways in which to teach "in the cracks" (Short, Schroeder, Kauffman, & Kaser, 2005) of accountability policies that threaten to strip them of the autonomy and creativity necessary to support all children. As Katherine Bomer (2004) reminds us, "When pressure is placed upon you to push your children to perform on tasks removed from real connections with literature and learning,

[Children] have agency to challenge these practices through their own situated knowledge.

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resist seeing children as numbers and percentages" (p. 176). Instead, we must focus on the child, like Jade, who is finding ways to use her experience, the important understandings she brings about the world, to her learning and engagement with school literacies, in spite of curricula and policies that may not acknowledge the richness of the relationships she builds with the texts that surround her.

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Elizabeth Dutro is an associate professor of Literacy Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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