

# Education Activist Bess Altwerger, NCTE's 2016 Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts

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Educational activist Bess Altwerger describes and discusses the influences upon and nature of her work in support of literacy in public schools.

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**B**ess Altwerger refers to herself as a “product of the New York City School System.” She graduated from Jamaica High School, a well-known integrated high school in Queens. While she credits that early educational experience with raising her awareness of racial and economic disparities, it was her enrollment in a New York City community college that launched her deep commitment to political activism through her involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Along with other students, she participated in major strikes and protests across the city and in shutting down the college in response to the dismissal of an activist professor. Along with igniting her political activism, the small classes and caring professors at the community college awakened her passion for learning that has lasted a lifetime.

Upon transferring to the State University of New York-Stony Brook, she discovered her interest in issues related to education and earned her elementary teaching certificate. After graduating, she taught in the NYC Public School System where she became acutely aware of the role of literacy in the tracking and marginalizing of students of color. Her heightened interest in literacy issues led to her pursuit of an MA in Reading at Jersey City State College and eventually a doctorate at the University of Arizona.

Bess recently retired after almost 35 years as a professor of language and literacy at the University of New Mexico and Towson University in Maryland. Her research and writing have focused more



recently on the negative impact of federal policies on schools and classrooms. Her books include *Literacy Policies and Practices in Conflict: Reclaiming Classrooms in Networked Times* (Shelton & Altwerger, 2015), *Re-reading Fluency: Process, Practice, and Policy* (Altwerger, Jordan, & Shelton, 2007), and *Reading for Profit: How the Bottom Line Leaves Kids Behind* (Altwerger, 2005). In addition to her scholarship, Bess is a cofounder and National Action Coordinator of Save Our Schools, a national education advocacy organization. She was recently elected to the Howard County, Maryland, Board of Education.

**Richard Meyer:** Tell us about how you first became interested in educational issues related to language arts.

**Bess Altwerger:** As an undergraduate, I had some excellent education professors who introduced me to Ken and Yetta Goodman's early work on a psycholinguistic model of reading. I became interested in dialect and the influences of nonstandard dialect on literacy. As a reading teacher in New York City, I noticed that the students in my “remedial reading” classes were mostly kids of color who spoke a nonstandard dialect or spoke English as a second language. It intrigued me that these two groups were the ones that needed services, but I didn't fully understand why. I thought that perhaps dialect differences might somehow explain it.

**RM:** But it seems that you had an intuitive sense, based on your interest in dialect and psycholinguistics, that something deeper was going on.

**BA:** Yes, so I decided I needed to find more answers. The International Reading Association conference was in New York that year, and I attended a presentation by the Goodmans and their colleagues because I remembered their names from my undergraduate work. The decision to go to that session changed my entire life in every way. Ken and Yetta Goodman both presented along with Dorothy Watson, Rudine Sims, and others. I didn't know it at the time, but these scholars were forming the bedrock of a powerful, informed, and progressive literacy movement. They talked about miscue analysis and using language experience with children, and they alluded to the transactional nature of comprehension. Everything they said spoke to me as a teacher who was watching my students learn to read. I returned to my New York City classroom, where I was required to teach phonics in workbooks. But I found that my students were much more successful as readers when I used Roach Van Allen's language experience approach, which drew upon students' language and experiences.



I already had this sense that if the kids used their own language, knowledge, and experiences, they would be more successful in learning to read, and they were.

**RM:** Perhaps some readers don't know this approach, so please tell us a bit about it.

**BA:** In this approach to teaching reading and writing, the kids dictated to me their personal

stories about their lives or responses to books they read. I already had this sense that if the kids used their own language, knowledge, and experiences, they would be more successful in learning to read, and they were. Their dictated stories were also inherently culturally relevant, which made them more eager to read and share what was on the page. I was so excited by my discovery, but then I was "excessed" [fired] during a budget crisis, along with many beginning New York City teachers.

**RM:** So how did you end up getting a Master's and a PhD?

**BA:** This goes back to the presentation by the Goodmans and their associates. I went up to Ken Goodman at the end of that session and said, "I must learn more about this. I cannot leave New York. Where should I go?" and he said, "Go study with Dorothy Menosky at Jersey City State College." So I showed up at Dorothy's summer workshop, which also included Rudine Sims and Dorothy Watson, to learn more about the reading process and how to teach from this new perspective. After the workshop, I was so excited that I went up to Dorothy and said, "Ken Goodman thought I should study with you," and within a week I had my application in, was accepted, and was given a Graduate Assistantship. This was fortunate because, like hundreds of other New York City teachers, I had no job. As part of my assistantship, I worked in their literacy clinic and taught Critical Reading and English as a Second Language to freshman at the college. The assistantship saved me both financially and in terms of a career.

By getting a master's degree in reading, I was certified as a Reading Specialist and intended to look for a job in that specific area. But my life took a bit of a U-turn toward the end of my program when Dorothy Menosky insisted that I get a doctorate. I was a working-class kid who grew up in New York City, and I was not the greatest student in the world in high school. I did become a good student in college, but it

never occurred to me that I would be capable of pursuing a PhD. However, Dorothy insisted that I apply to study with the Goodmans, who were moving to Arizona from Michigan at that time. When Yetta came to visit Dorothy in New Jersey, she introduced us and later announced that that had been my interview. If I had known that beforehand, I would probably have been too nervous to speak.

**RM:** How did learning about literacy tie into your work as an activist?

**BA:** I had already been involved in the anti-war and women's movements. And while teaching, I already had begun to suspect that there was a political dimension to literacy that determined who became literate and who didn't. I also suspected that standardized testing played an important role in tracking and dividing students. I began to wonder whether the kids weren't learning to read or if it was their test scores that told a story that landed them in remedial reading.

**RM:** What about your personal history led to your activism, both inside and outside of education?

**BA:** I grew up with a very strong sense of justice and fairness. I don't know whether that was something that my parents instilled in me or it's just something about my personality, but I have always had this strong sense that there needs to be justice for all people, that there needs to be equality, that there needs to be fairness and equal opportunities for everybody. I was very influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, and that led me to the commitment to resist and struggle against racism. I was also influenced by what I was reading and watching on TV. I was very young during Freedom Summer [1964], but I was intrigued by it and wanted to learn more about the Civil Rights Movement. I think that growing up in a neighborhood with children of Holocaust survivors and first-generation Americans also had a big effect on me. I was staunchly anti-racist.

**RM:** That's very important. It has to do with the idea of what can happen to a massive number of people at the hands of a few in power.

**BA:** Exactly, and I was appalled by segregation, appalled by apartheid in South Africa. While I was at community college, I became active in anti-war groups that worked side-by-side with the Black Panthers. I was very impressed by the Panthers—not just because of their militancy but because of their knowledge base. They knew their history, worked in the community, and held workshops to teach others about the Civil Rights Movement and about slavery. That had a tremendous influence on me, so when I came into education, I was already sensitized to issues of race.



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I was also sensitized to issues of class because when I went to high school, it was the first time I had associations with students from wealthier areas. I couldn't help but notice that their parents didn't work as hard as my parents, but yet they were wealthy. My father worked his fingers to the bone and my mother worked, too, and yet we lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment and they had palatial homes. I just remember thinking, "Why don't we have a society where your labor counts, where wealth isn't accumulated based on the exploitation of other people, or because you own a business or you are a CEO in a corporation?" Looking at my parents, I thought wealth should be based on the contribution of their labor to society.

**RM:** How does all this relate to your life as an educator?

**BA:** I really cannot make a sharp distinction between my political activism outside and

inside of my professional life. Education was the perfect career for me. It had the intellectual stimulation that I was seeking, and it also had the political dimension in terms of how issues of race and class are endemic to the public education system.

**RM:** How does that perspective sort of wrap itself around your work with the Goodmans?

**BA:** What attracted me to working with the Goodmans (prior to the label of “whole language”) was the socio-psycholinguistic theory that they were developing. I was intrigued by the idea that children’s culture, language, lived experiences, as well as their mental thought processes all combined to make them readers—not passive readers, but active readers who construct their own meaning.

**RM:** Why is that a political statement?

**BA:** This was not just a theory of reading; it was an anti-authoritarian ideology that said that learners are in charge of their own learning. This perspective validates the cultures, life experiences, and languages that children bring to the page. It validates who they are as individuals, their social history, their personal history. Instead of locating power in the text or in the basal reader, it is in the hands of the reader. I began to understand that this perspective challenged the systemic racism and classism inherent in the way public schools are structured and the role they play in reproducing the class system. I saw the ways in which reading is used as a gatekeeper, how testing is a gatekeeper; it explained why it’s always kids of poverty and color who are labeled by their test scores and trapped into either the low group or the remedial reading classes. This is bigger than the individual child; it is systemic to public education itself.

**RM:** So you had the understanding of where meaning is made and your understanding about race and gender. How did you choose to express that as activism or advocacy?

**BA:** Studying with the Goodmans and Roach Van Allen gave me the knowledge base to question and be critical of what I was seeing in the school system, but what I realized along the way was that change needed to go beyond the struggle of individual teachers. If we were going to change the systemic nature of racism and classism, we needed a movement. We needed teachers to come together, learn together, and understand the nature of their work—including the political nature of their work. I believed (and still believe) that together we could reconceptualize what instruction should be, what assessment should be, and what curriculum should be so that we could empower children and transform the public education system.

Once I understood that the political nature of literacy went beyond the interaction of an individual and a page, or between an individual child and a teacher, then I realized we needed a systemic solution to the problem. Whole language and the whole language movement held the power that I thought could transform schooling. Whole language was and is a pedagogical movement, but it is also very much a political movement. Along with scholars such as Carole Edelsky and Barbara Flores, I viewed the political dimension of whole language as being just as important as the pedagogical. Most educators understood that the whole language movement was about changing the nature of teaching and learning as well as empowering students and teachers. But I wanted to push the boundaries of the whole language movement to encompass a larger political project.

**RM:** How did you push those boundaries?

**BA:** I concentrated my academic work on exploring the political dimension of literacy. Paulo Freire was a major influence on my work. In my early career, I saw whole language as a perfect nexus between good pedagogy and political consciousness. But then I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire,

2000). That work changed my perspective because Freire wrote about literacy as liberation. He explained that becoming literate could liberate and transform not only the readers, but also the world around them. The key concepts of conscientization and praxis had a big influence on me and helped me to see how whole language, as a liberation movement, could help to transform the larger political system.

I have to give credit to Freirian scholars such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Donaldo Macedo, and Angela Valenzuela who further developed critical theory as a pedagogy for liberation and transformation. I believe that melding critical pedagogy with whole language is critical to unleashing the power of literacy to change the world. Barbara Flores and I wrote a piece called “Toward Critical Whole Language Pedagogy” (Altwerger, 1999) in which we tried to build a vision of whole language practiced through a critical lens so that kids are not just empowered to construct meaning, but empowered to change their lives and the world around them.

**RM:** Your publications are definitely evidence of your success as an activist and an advocate. In what other ways did you enact your views?

**BA:** Activism can be expressed in many different ways. You can be an activist scholar, and you can express your activism through your research and your writing, which I did do throughout my career. Both my writing and research were aimed at the goal of moving the field of literacy toward a more political end. I engaged in collaborative long-term research projects aimed at making a difference. I hoped they would help people become more enlightened about the system of power within education and within literacy. I wanted to address the fact that over the decades, the field of literacy, more specifically reading, had been co-opted through the passage of legislation and the intrusion of corporate power into our profession.

For example, my colleagues and I at Towson University did a major study (Altwerger, 2005) looking at the impact of different types of reading programs on students in second-grade classrooms. The results questioned and critiqued top-down mandated programs, like Open Court, DISTAR, and Direct Instruction, in comparison with more homegrown literature and whole language programs. Our findings were really kind of shocking to many who had simply accepted the mandates as “proven” approaches. We found that the kids in the literature-based and whole language programs we studied performed just as well on the de-contextualized phonics tests we administered as those in the mandated scripted reading programs, but were better at using their graphophonic knowledge in the reading of literature. Our results challenged the federal and state-level curriculum mandates that dictated to teachers what program they had to use. We revealed that the mandates were more about power, control, and profit than good literacy pedagogy. This was my form of my activist scholarship.



We revealed that the mandates were more about power, control, and profit than good literacy pedagogy. This was my form of my activist scholarship.

**RM:** So you believe that scholarship can be a form of activism.

**BA:** Yes, I believe that it is possible to be an activist through your scholarship. Research is never neutral; it depends on the questions that you ask and the perspective that you have. Through publishing that project and another on fluency (Altwerger, Jordan, & Shelton, 2007), I hoped to challenge the propaganda claiming that the federal and state education policies

and mandates were built upon solid evidence and sound theory. In another project (Shelton & Altwerger, 2015), we looked at a supposedly successful school in an urban area that made adequate yearly progress (AYP) to see how the school engaged students in 21st century literacies. We found that the teachers were so worried about their students passing the tests to make AYP that they did little actual creative and authentic work with new literacies.

**RM:** You've done very impressive scholarly work that constituted forms of advocacy. When did it overflow into different kinds of activism and advocacy?



What came out of summer 2010 was the Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action of July 2011. We planned it in collaboration with other people we knew who also believed that we needed a mass movement.

**BA:** After spending a career as a scholar doing all of these research projects, I began to realize that it wasn't enough to do the research and the writing. We needed a movement of people working together to make change. You are an activist if you're sitting in front of your computer, but you are not going to be part of a movement unless you get up out of the chair and put your "boots on the ground" to do something. I give credit to Jesse Turner, who in the summer of 2010, had that same epiphany—that it wasn't enough to just be writing and doing your research, and being an academic, or even being a critical academic. It wasn't enough to present at conferences. It wasn't even enough to be teaching. We had to get out there and do something to change the

ever more dangerous political landscape in which corporations and their political pawns are basically destroying public education through policies that impose high-stakes tests and standardized curriculum and then turn mostly urban "failed" schools into privately run charters or close them altogether. Jesse Turner decided to walk from Connecticut to Washington, DC under the banner "Children are more than test scores." As a professional friend and colleague of Jesse, I hosted him when he reached the DC area. Then we asked another colleague and critical educator, Vivian Vasquez, a professor at American University, to hold a welcoming event for Jesse. That was when we hatched this idea that although Jesse walked to DC by himself that year, maybe the next year we could get a million people out there to march with us.

**RM:** And how did it go in the summer of 2011?

**BA:** What came out of summer 2010 was the Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action of July 2011. We planned it in collaboration with other people we knew who also believed that we needed a mass movement. There were teachers out there feeling very disenfranchised, disillusioned, and isolated. Perhaps they were active in local struggles but didn't realize that there were others across the country experiencing the same struggles.

**RM:** And that really launched a national movement?

**BA:** Well, it was a very successful three-day event. We had a conference for activists, a rally with remarkable speakers, and a march to the White House. We also held a congress the day after the march in order to plan for what we'd do next. There were numerous speakers at the rally—Jonathan Kozol, union presidents, civil rights workers, singers, teachers, parents, and more—representing many organizations across the United States. Busloads arrived in

DC from Wisconsin, Michigan, and more. Matt Damon—the actor, whose mother Nancy Carlson-Paige is an early childhood educator—gave a wonderful speech in support of our event. People flew in from around the country and estimates ranged from 6,000–10,000 attendees. At the conference, folks learned strategies for organizing, and groups like Rethinking Schools and Progressive Leadership presented and inspired. We even had two US Supreme Court cases represented: Mary Beth Tinker (Tinker v. Des Moines) who, at 13 years old, wore a black armband to school to protest the Vietnam War and was thrown out of school for that action but later won her case; and descendants of Plessy v. Ferguson (of the historic 1896 case in which the concept of “separate but equal” was argued and won) who attended to discuss their civil rights work as a group they call Plessy *with* Ferguson.

**RM:** What other actions or groups grew out of summer 2011?

**BA:** Many! The United Opt Out movement, the Network for Public Education, and the Badass Teachers (BATs) to name a few national groups; many local groups around the country also were inspired or formed after that summer. As we speak today, Save Our Schools is planning major actions for July 8–10, 2016, in DC.

**RM:** What are your thoughts on the current political landscape?

**BA:** I think that we are at a crossroads in public education. I thought we were already there in 2011, but we are at an even more critical point today. I think we are now trying to save the very life of public education. The powerful corporate lobby is working to privatize public education, and its big money is driving the education policy agenda. We’re talking about Pearson, the Gates Foundation, the Koch brothers, and the Walton Foundation. Starting back in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the National Business Roundtable, the corporate elite in this country began to

realize that there were taxpayer dollars being directed toward public education that could be redirected into their pockets or toward their goals. And their goals do not include being well read in literature, or being well versed in art, music, and other creative forms of expressions; their goal is to produce an unquestioningly compliant workforce capable of keeping them globally competitive.

**RM:** What are some places that you see hope?

**BA:** I think that the movement is growing dramatically. Teachers, who have felt the heavy hand of oppression over their teaching and are unfairly evaluated on the basis of standardized test scores, are increasingly finding the courage to stand up for themselves and the kids they teach. They know that it is not their teaching but rather poverty and racism that is at the root of our problems in public education. Increasingly, parents and teachers are forming new alliances to stand up for their schools and communities, demand education justice and equity, and end the violence against our children of color. I believe it is becoming harder for the corporate power base to blame the problems of public education on teachers and schools rather than on a broken economic system that produces the highest child-poverty rate of all comparable nations. I am actually very hopeful right now that we are all beginning to see that we have to make political, social, and economic changes to create a more just and equitable school system and country.

**RM:** Thank you, Bess, not only for this interview but for all the work you have done and continue to do for the children and teachers of our country and the world. Congratulations on winning this most-deserved award.

**BA:** I’m truly honored, and I’m grateful for the privilege of working with the many teachers, students, colleagues, and education activists who have inspired me throughout the years.

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## 2016 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2016 elections, Elementary Section member **Franki Sibberson**, Dublin City Schools, Ohio, was chosen vice president. Sibberson will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

The Elementary Section also elected new members. Elected to a four-year term on the Steering Committee were **Eliza Allen**, University of South Carolina, Columbia; **Scott Ritchie**, Kennesaw State University, Georgia; **Tasha Tropp Laman**, University of Louisville, Kentucky; and **Joanne Yatvin**, Portland, Oregon. Elected to the 2016–2017 Nominating Committee were **Denise Dávila**, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, chair; **Jane Bean-Folkes**, Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey; and **Sanjuana C. Rodriguez**, Kennesaw State University, Georgia.

On the NCTE website, see additional 2016 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2017 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections>).

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