Katherine and Randy Bomer, NCTE’s 2017 Outstanding Elementary Educators in the English Language Arts

This interview explores the teaching and scholarly work of Katherine and Randy Bomer, recipients of NCTE’s 2017 Outstanding Elementary Educators in the English Language Arts Award.

Established in 1995, the Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award annually recognizes distinguished national or international scholars who have “made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education” (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d., para. 4). The award criteria note that “Nominees must have dramatically influenced literacy classroom practice, made ongoing contributions to the field of literacy, obtained national and/or international influence in literacy teaching and learning, [and] contributed a body of work that is compatible with the mission of NCTE” (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d., para. 5). Previous recipients of this award include Rudine Sims Bishop, Anne Haas Dyson, Ken and Yetta Goodman, Charlotte Huck, and Louise Rosenblatt. The 2017 recipients, Katherine and Randy Bomer, have served in many roles as literacy educators—teaching young readers and writers, teaching preservice teachers and graduate students in university courses, facilitating professional development, and writing to inform and enhance teachers’ classroom practices. They met during their time at Teachers College, Columbia University, where they each received graduate degrees.

Katherine works with teachers and schools nationally and internationally as a literacy consultant, and Randy is dean of the College of Education at the University of North Texas. Along with numerous articles and chapters, Katherine and Randy have published several books that have impacted literacy teachers’ classroom practices, such as Building Adolescent Literacy in Today’s English Classrooms (R. Bomer, 2011), Hidden Gems: Naming and Teaching from the Brilliance in Every Student’s Writing (K. Bomer, 2010), The Journey Is Everything: Teaching Essays That Students Want to Write for People Who Want to Read Them (K. Bomer, 2016), and Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School (R. Bomer, 1995). Together, Katherine and Randy wrote For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action (2001).

Both Randy and Katherine have been active in NCTE, with Katherine serving as elementary representative-at-large on the Executive Committee from 2001–2004. Randy served as president from 2004–2005 and as chair of the committee responsible for writing and revising NCTE’s Professional Knowledge about the Teaching of Writing. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Literacy Research Association.
Through their teaching, writing, and advocacy, the Bomers have urged literacy educators across grade levels to take a more critical eye toward unjust school systems, to engage students in meaningful writing and reading that draws on students’ rich literate lives, and to live out principles of democracy in their classrooms. Their work has advanced the field of literacy education by demonstrating how capable young readers and writers are and how teachers can build on those capabilities. I was fortunate to have an opportunity to learn more about Katherine and Randy Bomer in the following interview.

Amber Warrington: What were some early influences on your work?

Katherine Bomer: My writing career began when I was an undergraduate studying creative writing with authors whose published work I had read. So writers were my first mentors. From these women and men, who spent their days hunched over books and typewriters, I learned how to look at texts as teachers, noticing how texts are made and how my writing voice might develop from bountiful amounts of reading and endless amounts of writing and rewriting. I continued to learn from writers after graduating, as I attempted to craft a life around my own projects and to find any work I could as a writer, from public relations to technical and grant writing. I’m still learning from writers, and that process of studying writers’ work is one of the topics I write the most about.

My career in literacy education began when I took courses from Lucy Calkins in graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University, and she invited me to come work with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Two of Lucy’s greatest books, Lessons from a Child: On the Teaching and Learning of Writing (1983) and The Art of Teaching Writing (1994), introduced me to the Writing Process Movement and to Writing Workshop as a structure for teaching in K–12 schools. Lucy was my most important early mentor and the person to whom I owe my career as a literacy educator. Through my work with teachers in New York City and area schools, through Thursday think tanks and weekend retreats with Project colleagues, and by learning from dozens of visitors in literacy
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amber warrington  |  katherine and randy bomer

justice transformed me. i reread her work often and never fail to learn from it. when patrick shannon spoke at teachers college, he lit the spark of critical literacy for me—of reading texts and the world through a critical lens for just and equitable treatment of vulnerable groups of people. as we were writing for a better world, randy and i leaned heavily on the foundational work of john dewey and paolo freire, as well as from political scientists and theorists who work on democracy. it’s always been important to us both to draw from diverse and wide areas of scholarship to enrich our thinking about teaching and curriculum. one thing we each try to do is synthesize multiple bodies of work in order to push our thinking further and deepen the content we make available to kids—and also to make sure we’re getting things right, not distorting them to make school convenient.

katherine brought up her orientation as a writer—a memoirist, a poet, a maker of art—and i think the fact that we both came to education from the arts is important to our shared vision. i was in theatre right before i went into teaching, and we both have backgrounds in music—experiences that are very important to us from childhood through adulthood. from the arts, i think we both expect that the important experiences are disruptive, that our attention is arrested from checking off the day-to-day boxes as our perspective is transported and changed.

i also came into teaching with stories in my mind—from plays and movies, from the real lives of writers and composers—of heroes who stand up to authority and interrupt regimes. maybe coming from that place, i expected that, to be good at something, to make a contribution, would always involve messing things up, going against the easy flow of expectations. i’m not saying we’ve always done that, or that when i have, i’ve done it wisely, but i do think it’s been an assumption about how to be. i also think it has helped me as an educator to carry the assumption—one that art doesn’t let you forget—that difference, struggle, conflict, and dissonance are normal and interesting and a source of meaning and beauty.

aw: katherine, you mentioned lucy calkins as a mentor for your teaching. are there other teachers and scholars whose work has served as important influences?

kb: i was privileged to take three courses from maxine greene at teachers college. the thinking in her books and lectures about the power of the imagination, “wide-awakeness,” and aesthetic experiences to educate for social

education, i felt so lucky to have such rich resources available.

randy and i met while we were both working at the teachers college reading and writing project, and he became not only my fellow grad student, my work colleague, and my mentor in many areas of life, but also my life partner!

randy bomer: right, we were thinking partners before we were life partners, so even though there were lots of life things to consider together as a couple, katherine also became a huge influence on my continued development as an educator.

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My 4th and 5th graders shocked me with their deep, critical thinking about texts and the passion with which they pursued projects in writing for social action. I witnessed the sophisticated reading and writing work my students of any age could do when they had time and choice and appreciative response for their work, when they were allowed to grow at their own pace, and when I consistently named the specific beauty and brilliance each one of them displayed. So now, when I work in K–12 classrooms around the world, I approach every student I meet with the same expectancy. I cannot imagine any other way of being and teaching.

RB: I became a middle and high school English teacher, and just about at the same time, because it was the mid-80s and I knew something about teaching writing in a place where most people wanted to learn, I started doing professional development with elementary teachers in my district in New York State. I probably had no business doing that yet, but they let me learn with them. What that allowed me to see was child development from early childhood through high school, and it made me aware of some of the basic processes that were the same across the years, and the perceived differences that get emphasized in some rigid curricula that just aren’t necessary or even valid.

I’ve been privileged to work in places that let me take this broad view and focus on underlying essential things, like appreciative perspectives on what kids can do; drawing on their existing knowledge, languages, and resources; asking students and teachers to be decision makers in dialogue with one another and their communities, even in the midst of policy measures that try to take away agency.

AW: How has your K–12 teaching shaped the work you do now?

KB: As a Pre-K through 2nd-grade teacher, I learned what early literacy learning looks like and how it develops differently for each child. Especially when I taught K–2 in a multiage setting, I became convinced that literacy does not happen by climbing rungs on a ladder based on a child’s age, but instead, in ripples and waves that depend upon hundreds of influences and circumstances. There were twins in my class who could read Junie B. Jones chapter books by the end of kindergarten and write prolifically and lyrically in any genre. And I had an eight-year-old who could not or would not read, and who refused even to try until I wore him down with humor, compliments, and love.

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School should be a place where kids can make more of what they already know, using that knowledge and those capabilities to expand into new territories.

Second, we think, with Dewey, that activity within school should be continuous with social life outside school and should engage kids in the kinds of reading, writing, and social relations that people care passionately about in the world at large. It shouldn’t just be preparation for life but should be life.

Third, because the work is of importance to both the kids and the world, kids’ work in school should be fantastic—the writing should be beautiful and clear, should knock readers’ socks off, and the discussions about reading should be complex and life changing in their insights.

Fourth, teachers in a democracy have an obligation to work with their kids for more democracy, now and in the future, which includes the challenging work of foregrounding power differences in society, in school, and in all kinds of texts. People live their lives in groups, those groups have different degrees of power, and the work of justice is to mitigate the impact of those power differences. This is everyone’s work to create a better public—White people, Black people, Latinx people, indigenous people, Asian people; straight people, gay people; males, females, people whose gender does not conform to those labels; people who speak dominant languages and those who speak heritage languages that are under pressure to conform to dominant group practices.

These have always been challenging conversations, though I think in recent years, we have, as a field, developed some better ways of thinking about them. And ironically, these days, with a polarized political context, it feels very risky to undertake the conversations. But since this is the only time these kids will be kids and will be in school, I think we have to be brave enough to give them the education they deserve.

**AW:** You mentioned this in previous responses, but countering a deficit stance and promoting an appreciative one is central to your work. Could you explain the importance of taking an appreciative stance to you personally and how you’ve carried that message throughout your work?

**RB:** Regardless of the ideals we supposedly subscribe to as a culture, there is a deep-seated belief among many that people are not really created equal, that there is a hierarchy of ability, a great chain of being, higher forms of people and lower ones. School is the place where this belief in inequality is enacted most explicitly. It takes a lot of concentrated thinking for an educator to gain and hold a perspective that appreciates people’s strengths and builds upon them, rather than first regarding them as a collection of deficits, weaknesses, bad habits, or blank spots.

To the extent that an educator believes that children arrive at school deficient in low-level, fundamental things, that educator will never engage kids in a rich curriculum that includes uses of literacy for civic engagement, participation in digital culture, making literary art, building an independent agenda for a reading life, becoming more sophisticated in conversations about texts and issues, or any of the higher hopes of a literacy curriculum.

To try to give kids a chance to make decisions and build literate lives, it’s important for teachers, administrators, counselors, and policymakers to think through, very carefully, a critique of deficit thinking and replace that with appreciative thinking. If we could do that, a lot more innovation, inquiry, and openness to discovery would become possible in schools; kids would go so much further.

**KB:** I see myself as an enabler. I name specifically what a student does brilliantly, her signature voice, his compassionate understanding of characters’ plights in novels. I notice and give feedback to a teacher whose way of being in the classroom helps children soar. When I do this, I can see that I have touched them, informed them of something they may not have realized about themselves. That enables them to keep being and doing these things, and to become open to trying something new or more difficult. People have transformed before my eyes, from insecure, perhaps disenfranchised, to powerful and engaged, even moved by their own worth. It seems almost magical, and yet it is the most reasonable approach to teaching, isn’t it? To say, “Look at what you can do! Now how can we grow and stretch that? What else can we add to your repertoire?”
AW: Katherine, you mentioned your work with teachers. Could you talk a little more about that part of your work?

KB: I am fortunate to work with inservice teachers in public and independent schools and districts across the country. Occasionally, I get to travel abroad to work in schools in places like Jordan, Morocco, and Hong Kong, and to present at conferences like the spectacular Near East South Asia Council conference in Bangkok. The graduate course I teach at the University of Texas at Austin is largely for preservice teachers, though there are also some students who teach full-time while working on their advanced degrees.

Most often, I am asked to work with teachers and kids inside classrooms, with their colleagues joining in to collaborate on a demonstration of the Writing Workshop model or on some aspect of writing, such as genre work in essay, memoir, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Some schools have explicitly invited me to present about and demonstrate critical reading and writing for social action, the topic of the book Randy and I wrote together.

Teachers want what is best for students, and they will work exhaustively to provide that. My favorite work occurs when I am able to build sustained, long-term relationships with teachers. I do not believe in one-shot PD sessions, and I dislike the term “training” when it comes with the assumption that once a teacher hears about some concept or pedagogical model, she has been “trained” and should be able to immediately and with fidelity implement it in her classroom. That is not how learning happens at all. Instead, I believe that adults experience growth through our ongoing relationship, especially when we read and write together and share that work. When teachers see me demonstrate a lesson in writing or confer with a student who is having difficulties, it deepens their understandings. And when teachers try the work themselves, with me watching and coaching alongside, the learning becomes embodied.

Finally, I believe that teachers must be allowed to conduct research and assess constantly in their particular settings, and from that data, be able to make decisions about what, how, and when to best teach the children in front of them.

AW: What issues are on your mind as you think about the broader world of education?

RB: What’s become clearer to me lately is that some people who are already advantaged by the system will use all their resources and will engage in daily tactics to secure further advantage for their own children. I think this is more the case today than it even was in the past. Then, those same people turn around, even after receiving benefits of all kinds, including constant wealth transfers across their lives, and say that they have earned their privilege and that people who do not have those privileges just haven’t been paying attention or working hard.

Because of that belief, poor families and kids of color receive insulting messages, degraded school curricula, and more intensified control of what will be made available for them to learn. There are a lot of places in that process that need to be interrupted. Katherine and I have mostly worked to insist that kids from communities historically underserved by the school system receive a kind of curriculum that is worthy of them. But we also need to work on the other dimensions of the problem—or at least on making them more visible and more widely understood.

KB: I agree. It feels as if we are now fighting to save the very foundation of public education for every child; this concept—while it certainly has flaws that we have been and will continue to work on—is the best conceivable arrangement for educating to make life better for all.

So what do we do in response? We continue to work in classrooms with teachers, helping them see that every child brings strengths, vibrancy, and gifts to the activities they do in school. We communicate with coaches, school administrators, and district supervisors, helping them notice and name the dedication and craft their teachers possess and helping them recognize that teachers need time to collaborate with each other and autonomy to make decisions about what their students need. It seems more crucial than ever that we help teachers and students develop critical lenses for reading the texts and messages whirling around them and for knowing how to respond in writing when they feel a situation threatens human and civil rights.

AW: What is the better world that you envision for students and teachers?

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RB: I’m not sure that the vision is of a static world that is already finalized as “better,” once and for all. I think a better world would see itself in process, in a state of becoming. When we say “for a better world,” it’s a sense of purpose that drives, informs, and shapes action, not necessarily anything like an instructional objective that you can work backwards from. So the world is better as soon as we begin thinking of it as becoming better and acting toward making it so . . . for our mutual living in the world within a constant flow of change.

KB: What I envision for students and teachers is the same thing I hope for the entire world, which is that people are treated as equal human beings; that they do not feel hungry; that they receive treatment for mental or physical illness; that they are not hurt physically or psychologically; that they can continue learning across their lifetimes; that they can pursue their desires and lead meaningful lives, rich with possibilities, and free from fear, from authoritative regimes, and from oppressive judgments and boxing in. I would hope for nothing less than that for the humans, young and old, who spend their days together in school buildings.

AW: Thank you, Katherine and Randy, for your vision of just and equitable classrooms and for your work toward that vision. You inspire and challenge us to become educators who break down deficit notions of students and build literacy education that honors students’ languages and literacies with time, choice, and agency to write and read in powerful and meaningful ways.

References

Amber Warrington is an assistant professor of English education at Boise State University and has been an NCTE member since 2006. She can be reached at amberwarrington@boisestate.edu.

The 2017 NCTE Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the NCTE Annual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Learn more about the Bomers and how you can nominate an outstanding educator for the 2018 award at http://www.ncte.org/awards/elemeducator.

Call for Nominations: Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award
The Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award recognizes a distinguished national or international educator who has made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education. Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at http://www.ncte.org/awards/elemeducator and must be submitted by November 15, 2017. The award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, TX.