In these professional books, teachers are not engaged in discourse structures of IRE, where teachers initiate questions to which they already know the answer, where students respond, followed by the teacher’s evaluation. “Yes, good job!” or “No. Try again.” Instead, each of the books we review in this issue reveals teachers and researchers asking complex questions regarding their practices and biases, and creating rich learning contexts for students. In these reviews, we highlight authors whose work inspired and challenged each of us to examine our positionality and how it informs the kinds of curriculum we generate with and for students. Each of these authors offers us a vision for creating joyful, critical, socially just classrooms that helped us outgrow our current thinking. We hope they do the same for you.

Teacher Inquiry in Literacy Workshops: Forging Relationships through Reggio-Inspired Practice, Dr. Judith Lysaker acted as a mentor to six area teachers who came together each Thursday afternoon for two years to support one another as burgeoning teacher-researchers. Lysaker explains that initially . . .

We talked. We talked a lot. We told stories of the children we loved, the children who perplexed us, and the moments that filled us with nearly unmanageable emotion. Those stories were crowded with points of inquiry, where questions would arise . . . not-yet-completely-formed questions full of mystery and the power to provoke our thinking (Lysaker, 2013, p. xii).

This provocation of thinking, as well as a new districtwide push for the implementation of writing workshop, led the group to explore the roles of relationships and literacy workshop within their Reggio Emilia-inspired classrooms. Each of their individual classroom inquiries uniquely spoke to three broad questions: 1) What are the connections between the curricular construct of workshop and Reggio-inspired beliefs? 2) What sense can be made of the commonalities and points of difference to deepen our pedagogy? 3) How will workshop within the context of the Reggio-inspired classroom work to transform our current understandings of children as learners, inquirers, and literate people?

After contextualizing their work together, Lysaker offers a brief overview of the historical and political contexts of the Reggio approach, as well as a description of each of its basic tenets. These are summarized as: 1) children as agentive; 2) the environment as a “third educator”; 3) the teacher as, among other things, a learner; 4) the valuing of multiple languages; and 5) an inquiry approach to meaningful learning. It is obvious from the outset that these beliefs frame not only
the classroom teachers’ instructional practices but their research as well. This is evidenced by each teacher’s dedication to positioning students as co-researchers who work collaboratively to construct the classroom structures from which data is generated, and themselves as theorists, interpreting data and determining what implications the data have about teaching and learning.

Lysaker then turns over the reins to Amanda Angle, Karen Goldstein, Patricia Durbin Horan, Alyssa Hildebrand, Jennifer Wheat, and Kristin Scibieniski as each writes a chapter presenting their individual teacher-research studies. Topics vary from the reduction of play in kindergarten, to using read-aloud to build a peaceful community, to ways in which relationships support literacy learning. Each teacher-researcher lays out specific questions, context, methods, data, and findings. At the end of each of their chapters, Lysaker conducts a “research conversation” in which she interviews the teacher-researcher about one aspect of the inquiry process. These conversations help the reader imagine the behind-the-scenes work as well as envision how this same work might play out within her or his classroom.

Teacher Inquiry in Literacy Workshops concludes with a final chapter detailing the commonalities found across the multiple studies. However, as interesting as it is to read of the intersections between Reggio, literacy workshop, and the role of relationships within the classroom, perhaps the greatest gift Lysaker and her colleagues have to offer us is a vision for what our own reflective practices could be. Teacher-researcher Karen Goldstein says it best, explaining, “I realized that teacher research was the vehicle that allowed me to pursue my own classroom inquiries, not with the intent of ‘proving’ some level of mastery or ‘fixing’ some deficiency, but to genuinely make better sense of what I see happening in my classroom on a daily basis and to provide me with interpretations and directions for my ongoing work” (p. 43). Indeed, this is a laudable goal for each of us, whether we are experienced or novice researchers ourselves. (CH)


“To understand what it means to ‘humanize’ research, it is important to consider the ways in which people, and more specifically youth, are often ‘dehumanized’ or to borrow Blackburn’s words ‘[made] less human by having their individuality, creativity, and humanity taken away, as when one is treated like a number or object.’” (p. 43)

Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn demystify the techniques and discourses surrounding conducting research with marginalized populations. In this collection of essays, they feature scholar-activist-educators whose goal is to provide insight and wisdom on conducting qualitative and ethnographic research with disenfranchised youth populations facing systems of inequity based upon race, gender, class, sexual orientation, citizenship, language, and other categories of difference. Paris and Winn situate themselves as activist-researchers who are . . . driven to understand how our research can be further dedicated to understanding not only how inequality happens across multiple communities and from multiple perspectives, but also how we can be a part of solutions that support equality within our research practices and in the lives of the young people and communities we learn from. (p. xix)

To accomplish this goal, the book is divided into four distinct and powerful sections: 1) Trust, Feeling, and Change: What We Learn, What We Share, What We Do; 2) Navigating Institutions and Communities as Participatory Activist Researchers: Tensions, Possibilities, and Transformations; 3) The Complex Nature of Power, Relationships, and Responsibilities; and 4) Revisiting Old Conversations toward New Approaches in Humanizing Research. Each section is prefaced...
with an introduction by Paris or Winn providing an overview of the section contents. The editors then allow the voices of the contributing essayists—including but not limited to Valerie Kinloch, Timothy San Pedro, David E. Kirkland, and Mariana Souto-Manning—to incorporate vignettes, photographs, personal insights, and collaborative explorations as a means of illustrating the process of humanizing research. Each essay concludes with reflective questions that can be used to probe researcher positionalities and serve as stark reminders to listen and bear witness to the voices and stories of students who are far too often silenced.

Although aimed at qualitative and ethnographic researchers, Humanizing Research is easily approachable because of its conversational tone and its wealth of pedagogical techniques and strategies that can easily be incorporated into a teacher’s repertoire. Kinloch and San Pedro discuss the fundamental importance of recognizing the power in the “Space between Listening and Storying.” This essay reminds teachers that classroom discussions are fertile ground for legitimizing voices, listening to alternative worldviews, and reflecting on personal journeys. These authors ask both students and teachers to reconceptualize the art of listening, to view it not as a passive action, but instead as the beginnings of a critical and dialogic act. This “critical listening” requires a participant to pay careful attention to what is verbally announced but also to examine “people’s utterances, voices, vulnerabilities, body language, lived conditions, backgrounds, and ways of being in the world” (p. 26). They contend that critical listening provides insights into a more sophisticated view of the speaker’s world. This can be seen clearly in the thoughtful and complex responses garnered from their student participants. The other essay topics are equally profound and include examining classroom language use, problematizing disparities in giftedness, and creating spaces to engage in controversial topics.

Humanizing Research concludes with an epilogue by Winn summarizing the power and significance of each essayist’s work in decolonizing policies and practices that marginalize and oppress. Even within its concluding words, Winn reminds the reader that humanizing research begins with researchers and educators visibly displaying their humanity—facing fears, confronting conflicts, and relishing in results. Her parting words are a reminder of our purpose in education and research: “to ‘refuse’—to paraphrase Tuck and Yang—the kind of research (or practice) that does not take as a starting point the humanity and dignity of all people” (p. 251). (DS)

Critical Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom: Unpacking Histories, Unlearning Privilege

“There is no such thing as neutral text and there is no such thing as neutral teaching practice. . . . Whether we realize it or not, every word that we utter and every action that we take in the classroom involves a choice.” (Vasquez in Kuby, p. ix)

In this autoethnographic account of her experiences teaching kindergarten during a six-week summer enrichment program, teacher-as-researcher Candace Kuby walks her readers through the tumultuous process of decision making that many teacher-researchers face as they attempt to bring about social change in their classrooms and communities. When another teacher orders the children off the shaded “teachers’ bench” at recess, Kuby grapples with her own feelings of uneasiness and discomfort at what she has witnessed. She asks, “What is a child to do with what they observe—if what they witness and experience is a common belief or way of being in their community—even if at gut level something does not feel right?” (p. 49). Although Kuby is apprehensive about broaching the subject of injustice with her students, she opens up space

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within her classroom to allow her students to engage in critical conversations about their experiences.

Using autoethnography, critical literacy, critical sociocultural theory, and Whiteness theory to undergird her teaching and research, Kuby begins by “unpacking” her own history, beliefs, and personal experiences relating to the power struggles that often take place within society. She investigates how her Whiteness influences her decisions and actions in the classroom and explores her own moments of consciousness-raising—a step she deems necessary for all educators. According to Kuby, teachers must “intentionally examine who they are and how their beliefs shape teaching decisions” (p. 11). However, Kuby believes that merely raising one’s consciousness about social issues is not enough. She challenges educators to take action by allowing students to be co-inquirers along the journey to better understand the intricate systems of privilege and power in society.

Kuby struggles here with what “critical” truly means. She questions, “What does critical literacy really look like in lived practice?” [and] “Do we just want children to agree with what we think is critical and just?” (p. 44). The author reminds us that the very nature of discourse is laden with power and identity struggles. Therefore, educators must constantly reflect upon their decisions, rethink their practices, and strive to find varieties of ways to open up new possibilities for their students to explore their own thinking.

Since critical literacy often emphasizes creating change through social action projects, Kuby questions what social action looks like in the early childhood classroom. Instead of forcing her predisposed ideas upon the students, Kuby first reconsiders the goal of social action—“to influence future interactions and beliefs” (p. 106)—and then allows the children to generate their own ways of social action in a variety of modes such as painting, drawing, and role-play. Kuby discusses how the tensions brought about by engaging in the critical literacy process can and should be viewed as “productive resources” (p. 108), since tensions help teachers and students make more sense of the issues at hand and motivate them to continue to raise their own levels of social consciousness. Kuby concludes, “I do not believe one can ever know exactly how to teach from a critical perspective; there is no script for this type of work. It comes from relationships, embedded in a particular context in space and time, in an attempt to truly know someone else and their experiences” (p. 113). Ultimately, Kuby’s journey helps us undertake critical study of our own positionality and practices. (LS)

Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms

“... all teachers can find joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds. It takes humility, a willingness to learn, an openness to acknowledging and valuing the tremendous assets of students of diverse backgrounds, and a commitment to public education.” (p. xiv)

In this poignant book, Nieto tells the stories of teachers who, despite the context of an educational system driven by the push for high standards, “have found joy in teaching our most vulnerable and marginalized students” (p. xv). Nieto invites readers into the world of practicing teachers to understand how they thrive in teaching students of diverse backgrounds.

To identify with current sociopolitical contexts, Nieto reviews federal policy from the past three decades in order to help readers understand how such policies “are wrecking havoc on the lives of students, teachers, and the educational system as a whole [. . . . She encourages us to] envision another kind of education, one that is joyful and liberatory” (p. 5).

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Readers will identify with sociopolitical issues in schools and society that prevent equal education for all children. Nieto posits that because all classrooms today are diverse, the best way to teach students who embody differences in social class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and other areas is to develop a social justice approach to teaching. A social justice approach is a “set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in relation to teaching, learning, and students that form the foundation of one’s pedagogy” (p. 21). Such an approach also challenges stereotypes, provides students with material and emotional resources needed to learn to their full potential, draws on students’ talents and strengths, and promotes critical thinking and agency for change in a democratic society.

Inspired by their “humility, stamina, and enthusiasm” (p. xv), Nieto tells stories of thriving teachers across diverse schools in the United States and highlights features that define these teachers, such as modeling great caring, instilling values of empathy and responsibility, or affirming family and community resources. Readers will meet teachers like Angeles Pérez, a fourth-grade bilingual teacher in Texas, who incorporates students’ identities into the curriculum and focuses on culture, language, and identity while teaching. Or Adam Heenan, a high school teacher in Chicago, who creates spaces for his students to “talk naturally about race and other differences” (p. 57) by building a community of trust before broaching topics that impact the daily lives of students, like discrimination and marginalization. And Alicia López, a middle school teacher in Massachusetts, who initiates connections with her students by writing each of them a letter during the first week of school, where she openly discusses her own family, culture, and identity in order to build relationships with students from the start of the year. Epitomizing culturally responsive teaching, Nieto sheds light on the ways many educators across the country effectively teach students of diverse backgrounds.

Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds concludes with an elaboration of themes undergirding the success of teachers portrayed in this book, where teaching is viewed as an act of love and an ethical endeavor, where teachers are advocates and challenge the status quo, and where teachers thrive as learners who honor students’ identities and believe in their futures. Nieto delineates dispositions necessary for teachers to be effective with all students: 1) engaging in critical self-reflection, 2) valuing language and culture, 3) insisting on high-quality, excellent work from all students, 4) honoring families, and 5) exemplifying a commitment to lifelong learning. Such values are neither “templates nor recipes for success” (p. 138), but natural qualities of mind and character, indispensable because:

The children in our classrooms and schools, regardless of how similar they may look on the outside, are diverse in ways that may not be apparent—social class, ability, family structure, sexual orientation, the language spoken at home, among others. (p. 139)

Nieto’s work clearly demonstrates a commitment to culturally responsive and socially just teaching practices needed in all classrooms if educators are to find joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds. (EB)

Elizabeth Bemiss is a graduate assistant and doctoral student at the University of South Carolina. She can be reached at elizabethbemiss@gmail.com. Chris Hass is a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina and a teacher at the Center for Inquiry in Richland School District Two in Columbia, South Carolina. He can be reached at chass74@gmail.com. Tasha Tropp Laman is an associate professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at the University of Louisville. She can be reached at tashalaman@att.net. Dywanna Smith is a graduate assistant and doctoral student at the University of South Carolina. She can be reached at smith.dywanna@gmail.com. Lisa Stockdale is a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina and a teacher at Midway Elementary school in Kershaw County, South Carolina. She can be reached at lstockdale@sc.rr.com.