What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

This beautifully written, powerfully argued book compels educators to think about more than the learning our students have lost. It considers instead what our students might gain in learning contexts that focus on much more than the critical learning gap. The authors make plain that this gap isn't a gap at all, but an apparatus tooled with formalist meanings: memorizing facts, speaking in textbook English, writing structured essays that may be vacuous in content as long as the preferred features are present, and so forth. By avoiding this trap, they position the current moment in education as a watershed, cautioning against returning to instruction oriented to formalism—which they suggest is the backbone of standards-based curricula—hollow and oblivious. Instead, the authors encourage teachers to reconsider how schools are structured, offering a model including a variety of activities and resources that can be used to reimagine schooling and, perhaps more important, position students as having agency. This book is not just a must read. For the educator desiring to make real change and real difference, this book is a must read *now*.

—David E. Kirkland
Founder and CEO, forwardED, LLC
Professor, Urban Education

Allison Skerrett and Peter Smagorinsky have dared to write a war manual for justice-centered educators. I am overjoyed by their unapologetic commitment to name the moment while providing tangible examples of what K–12 educators have done in their classrooms to continue the struggle for accuracy and critical reflection through literacy. These are tough times, but white supremacy doesn't have a chance if we take the authors' lessons seriously.

—David Stovall
Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago

Upending the deficit narrative of learning loss, combating broken approaches to racial equity, and wading deep into the contested waters of democratic principles of learning within today's schools, Allison Skerrett and Peter Smagorinsky offer an accessible guidebook for making our classrooms sites of justice and joy. Perhaps most important, theirs is a book that reveals classroom practices as they really are—the voices of teachers are situated as co-authors in this important journey. I cannot think of a more timely or relevant book for English educators than *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times*.

—Antero Garcia
Associate Professor
Graduate School of Education, Stanford University

I love this book. It is both practical and inspiring, providing examples of thematic units that show how teachers can facilitate students' inquiry into issues that matter to them including identity, activism, cultural and racial conflict, and patriotism. It's full of questions for students, guidelines for teachers, resources, hands-on examples, and the kinds of student-created artifacts that show readers exactly what critical social inquiry looks like in the high school classroom. During these times of social upheaval and political silencing, teachers must dare to give students the tools they need to make sense of the distortions and disorder they find in the world. Allison Skerrett, Peter Smagorinsky, and the teachers whose masterful work they present show us how these tools work in the classroom. They explain why they matter. Their work explodes the conservative myths that pervade schools and traditional instruction. They show us education that is authentic purposeful, relevant, and designed to move the world toward justice.

—Deborah Stern
Author, *Teaching English So It Matters*

TEACHING LITERACY in TROUBLED TIMES

IDENTITY, INQUIRY, and SOCIAL ACTION
at the Heart of Instruction

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ALLISON SKERRETT
PETER SMAGORINSKY
Foreword by Mariana Souto-Manning

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Foreword

To those who dare teach and transform education in the pursuit of justice

Amidst widespread narratives of *learning loss*[1] day in and day out, educators dare to teach in the pursuit of justice. Reading the racial grammar of "learning loss," they see it is a diagnostic readily dispensed to students of color, a decoy for "social policies [that] created racial, economic, and educational inequities and sustain the conditions in which they persist" (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021). Recognizing the pathological portrayals delineating learning loss, a symptom of mounting inequities that came into (even) clearer focus amidst COVID-19, in this book, Skerrett and Smagorinsky argue that it is crucial to *transform* schooling, lest educators continue condoning inequitable realities.

Defying deficit narratives that pathologize Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, this book offers powerful counter-narratives to the pedagogical pathologization of students of color. Instead of seeking to remediate communities of color via a violent process whereby educational success hinges on assimilation into white voices, values, and practices, thereby being damage-centric (Calderon, 2016), Skerrett and Smagorinsky argue that the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated inequities and laid bare some of the atrocities committed in and by schooling, including anti-Black racism, xenophobia, and more. These atrocities

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[1] A 0.67-second Google search in January 2022 yielded 1.3 billion results.

press on the need for systemic change and require students, teachers, and communities to work collectively as critical problem-posers, activists, and transformative facilitators.

Skerrett and Smagorinsky urge teachers to critically read the world instead of acquiescing to add-on approaches to multiculturalism that center on Eurocentric values, voices, and practices, purporting to do the work while simply painting thin veneers of diversity atop inequitable systems and structures. Instead, they explain the need for and exemplify pathways toward much-needed transformation, predicated on naming, confronting, and examining mis-educative journeys and myths about learning, schooling, ability, and—ultimately—humanity itself. Teachers' roles become multifaceted—entailing learning, orchestrating, curating, problematizing, facilitating—all while centering students' voices, values, experiences, and realities . . . and attending to issues of inequity and injustice.

Inviting us to move away from understanding education as the transmission of knowledge (Freire, 2000), Skerrett and Smagorinsky offer windows into cultivating critical inquiry that is praxical—entailing in-depth critical reflection and action—and examples and valuable insights into the intentional development of scholar-activists, learner-activists, and teacher-activists. They problematize injustices in schools and society via critical pedagogies and urge us to work on deciphering the racial grammar of schooling via racial literacy (Guinier, 2004). Their questions, insights, and examples unveil how, even in so-called literate cultures, racial illiteracy prevents the

> dynamic movement between thought, language, and reality that, if well understood, results in a greater creative capacity. The more we experience the dynamics of such movement, the more we become critical subjects concerning the process of knowing, teaching, learning, reading, writing, and studying. (Guinier, 2004, p. 3)

In reading this book, you will have the opportunity to deepen and expand your own racial literacy, deciphering the racial grammar of schools and schooling. To facilitate and orient this process, I offer five North Stars toward justice-oriented potentialities for freedom (inspired by Freire, 2005):

- Teaching and learning are deeply entwined; the role of teacher is also that of a learner.

- We should not be paralyzed by our fear of not knowing, of not getting it right; instead, we must address our fears with a resolve to learn and expand our repertoires.

- Education does not in or by itself result in transformation; nevertheless, it has the potential to change those who can foster such transformation.

- Humility is key to transformative teaching; there is more learning across a community than in any one person, no matter how schooled that person might be.

- Democracy and freedom in education demand upending false binaries between theory and practice; practice offers rich ground for theorizing and transforming.

This constellation of North Stars offers important coordinates to reorient our compass away from Eurocentric norms and expectations (to which schooling and society have long been oriented) and toward freedom and justice.

In this book, this constellation of North Stars toward freedom comes to life in classrooms throughout the United States via units and across questions. These classrooms, units, and questions offer us invitations to rethink our relationship with schooling and with the world in critically conscious ways. They urge us to reject the comfort of pedagogies of expectability—often conflated with pedagogies of respectability—and to instead enact a pedagogy of potentiality "embodied in specific social worlds" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 14). Moving toward transformative potentialities, Skerrett and Smagorinsky show how reading the world via critical pedagogies affords teachers and students a critical meta-awareness of the systemic injustices in place and the historical roots of such injustices.

As they offer windows into potentialities for expanding teachers' and students' imaginaries via critical pedagogies, racial literacy, and in-depth understandings of educational and social issues, the authors shed light on possibilities as they unveil how teachers work to make their practices more just by understanding and responding to broader

societal phenomena. Ultimately, Skerrett and Smagorinsky show the power and possibility of (re)centering pedagogical practices and priorities on the values and experiences of individuals and communities who have been historically dispossessed and minoritized and (re)focusing the gaze and purpose of education on potentialities. As you turn the page, you will be invited to (re)consider your own imaginaries of schooling in terms of their potentialities to foster freedom and uphold justice.

—Mariana Souto-Manning

Erikson Institute

Publisher's Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Allison Skerrett is a professor of curriculum and instruction and director of teacher education in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. As a former secondary English teacher in Boston Public Schools, Dr. Skerrett continues her commitment to secondary English teachers, students, and English language arts curriculum and instructional practices through her teaching and research at the university level. Dr. Skerrett works with secondary English pre-service and in-service teachers as a teacher educator. Additionally, her research focuses on diverse adolescents' literacy practices and the design and implementation of secondary English curriculum and instructional practices that reflect the strengths and needs of diverse student populations.

Allison writes for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers in secondary English education–focused journals such as *English Education* and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Her award-winning book, *Teaching Transnational Youth: Literacy and Education in a Changing World* (Teachers College Press, 2015), is the first to examine the educational opportunities and challenges arising from increasing numbers of students living and attending school across different

countries. Dr. Skerrett has received college- and university-level awards for her teaching at The University of Texas at Austin. She has also received awards for her research from the Literacy Research Association. Dr. Skerrett lends her expertise in secondary literacy/reading to national and international education advisory boards, including the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading (NAEPR) and Scotland's International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA).

Peter Smagorinsky is Distinguished Research Professor emeritus in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at The University of Georgia (UGA); and Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Universidad de Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. From 2012 to 2020, he served as the faculty advisor to the student-edited *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* at UGA; and from 1996 to 2003, he coedited, with Michael W. Smith, *Research in the Teaching of English.* Recent awards include the 2020 Horace Mann League Outstanding Public Educator Award, 2018 International Federation for the Teaching of English Award, and 2018 Distinguished Scholar recognition by the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy. His research and teaching take a sociocultural approach to issues of literacy education, literacy teacher education, and related social concerns. These interests have produced two 2020 books from Bloomsbury: *Learning to Teach English and Language Arts: A Vygotskian Perspective on Beginning Teachers' Pedagogical Concept Development* and, coedited with Yolanda Gayol and Patricia Rosas, *Developing Culturally and Historical Sensitive Teacher Education: Global Lessons from a Literacy Education Program.* His interest in neurodiversity has produced two recent edited collections: *Creativity and Community Among*

Autism-Spectrum Youth: Creating Positive Social Updrafts Through Play and Performance from Palgrave Macmillan and, coedited with Joe Tobin and Kyunghwa Lee, *Dismantling the Disabling Environments of Education: Creating New Cultures and Contexts for Accommodating Difference* from Peter Lang.

Exploring Identity

Who Am I in Relation to Others and the World?

This chapter explores the question, "Who am I in relation to others and the world?" This question will serve as an anchor and thread across the book's chapters. Identity matters in how people think, understand, value, believe, learn, act, and interact. We draw on a definition of identity that is socially and culturally constructed, relational, and ever-adapting in response to new social contexts and situations (Holland et al., 1998). Thus, the term *identities* may be more fitting to capture the multifaceted nature of each person's ways of knowing, doing, and being in relation to themselves and to others.

The concept of identity is crucial in teaching and learning. For the curricular topics or themes we take up in this book, students and teachers must grow their awareness of who they are and who they are in relation to others who make up their classroom community and the broader world. We are reminded of the African concept of *ubuntu*, described by Makalela (2019) as "(I x We): *I am because you are*" (p. 237), which is also translated as "I am because we are." People, in this conception, only have meaning in relationship to others.

Let's dig a little deeper into the concept of identity.

What Does It Mean That Identity Is Socially and Culturally Constructed?

The idea that identity is socially and culturally constructed acknowledges that each person is born into multiple, overlapping contexts that often

share (but sometimes differ) in the ways that people interact with one another. Each emerges from values, from culture. Many people are born into a family, and families can be quite diverse in terms of how they are organized, how they function, and how they distribute particular roles or positions across individuals. For example, the way that someone is shaped as the oldest sibling in a family with one full-time working single parent provides opportunities for that oldest child to develop a sense of responsibility and practices of care for younger siblings. Although all siblings may develop caring relationships with one another, younger siblings may not develop the specific kind of responsibility taking that the older siblings are positioned to assume. Of course, these younger siblings, as they grow older, will be asked to take up (or demand) greater responsibility in other social contexts in which they participate, such as school. A family is, thus, a social world that shapes an identity.

Each of us is also born into a home culture. *Home culture* is where people are socialized to act in particular ways toward different people in and out of the family and value particular things or goods, such as maintaining peace with others and striving toward economic success.

Additionally, the word *culture* often invokes social groups whose members share values, beliefs, and practices that are grounded in particular geographies of the world and the histories that have shaped them. It is common to think about their ways of dressing, speaking, eating, and acting as cultural. In school celebrations, these features may be trivialized with attention to food and clothing more than deeper issues of socialization.

Individuals are situated in multiple cultures that shape who they are and who they are in particular situations with particular people. In multicultural societies all across the world, people have opportunities to learn about and share in the cultures of other groups. Accordingly, more and more people identify as belonging to two or more cultures, and different aspects of their identities shift from the foreground to the background depending on the social context—along with its purposes and expectations—in which they find themselves.

It is important to note that researchers have found no scientific basis for racial categories or cultural differences based on race (Omi & Winant,

1994). However, race continues to operate as a powerful social fact with significant material consequences—including life or death in particular social situations—for people who are assigned to racial groups. Consequently, for many people who are assigned to historically and contemporarily oppressed racial groups, racial identities are made to matter (Hobbes, 2014). Members of marginalized racial groups come to understand the diminishment, stigmatization, and violence wrought against members of their racial group. They achieve this understanding through community and family socialization, their personal experiences, media, and sometimes through the school curriculum and the structure of school policies. These teachings are critically educative (though painful) for young members of oppressed racial groups. By understanding how particular racial identities are constructed and responded to in society, racialized individuals can protect and sustain themselves and others whose communities are subject to discrimination, and allies may participate in this effort to produce equity and inclusion.

Why Do Identities Matter So Greatly in Teaching and Learning?

Classrooms and schools, like other societal institutions, are social and cultural contexts. Schools serve as socializing agents for children and young people to take up positions, values, and beliefs that align with the dominant social and cultural groups in a nation; this assimilationist purpose has driven mass education in the United States since its inception in the mid-1800s (Smagorinsky, 2022). By *dominant*, we mean the social and cultural groups who have the most political and economic power, whose languages and cultural beliefs and values have been assigned as being most worthwhile and most likely to bring about individual and social progress. In the United States, white, European-originated, upper-middle-class speakers of textbook English continue to hold this privileged position as the dominant group. The cultural socialization of students in schools happens through the languages that are valued and used for schooling purposes, the content of the curriculum—which racial and cultural groups are represented and how they are represented—and the ways in which students are taught to make meaning. This socialization often comes through the imposition of Euro-Western logic as opposed to the diverse cultural ways of understanding that may centralize, for example, the role of personal experience (affect- or

emotion-based) and the wisdom of elders in establishing meaning and "truth" claims (Majors, 2015; Ritchie, 2014).

Responsive educators understand the diverse set of life experiences students bring to classrooms that, based in family, culture, and other group or contextual interactions, have generated their identities: who they know themselves to be and how they interact with others in the social context of school. The topics presented in this book for curricular exploration will challenge students and teachers alike to examine their belief systems, their experiences, and their ways of knowing, thinking, learning, and doing. Thus, it is essential that students and teachers begin their explorations in each of the units proposed in this book with the question of how their identities shape opportunities for learning and unlearning what and how they think and how they know themselves. These reflections provide the basis for many of the social action projects we will describe across the chapters.

> Thus, it is essential that students and teachers begin their explorations in each of the units proposed in this book with the question of how their identities shape opportunities for learning and unlearning what and how they think and how they know themselves.

In this chapter, we begin by describing some ways of exploring this central question of "Who am I in relation to others and the world?" in classrooms.

Applying Identity in the Classroom

A productive way to begin this inquiry is within the context of a unit of inquiry into the self, relationships with others in the classroom, and relationships with one's communities and the broader world. This question is one that all members of the classroom, including teachers, can explore together in order to foster self-awareness and to explore and critically examine the different identities—and accompanying experiences, values, and beliefs—that have constituted these identities. Such inquiries provide opportunities for classroom members to begin defining or redefining their identities and values toward an identity of a justice-oriented classroom community. The creation of justice-oriented classroom communities sets the stage for students and teachers to engage in new forms of learning and action that are essential in times of crisis, and other times, too. In this way, beginning with

exploring identities prepares class members to take on the questions and work proposed in the book's remaining chapters.

We recommend that teachers undertake this unit before delving into other units in subsequent chapters. This unit would be an ideal start to the new academic year as it also serves a community-building purpose. We know that teachers do many types of community-building activities at this time of year, and this unit could be one of them. It is also the case that teachers (and students) must work to sustain healthy and inclusive classroom communities, so this unit could also be undertaken at another time in the year, with teachers linking to the community-building activities they would have done at the onset of the school year.

Two weeks is ample time to conduct this unit; fewer days would also work well. On a reduced schedule, teachers could select some of the questions they believe are most important for them and their students to engage with. Also, teachers need not focus entirely on this unit within the timeframe they allot for it. Teachers can plan for a portion of each class session to attend to the unit and use the other portion of class time to undertake their other planned curriculum and learning routines.

It is essential to set the groundwork for identity-based conversations by setting norms of listening, an openness to learning and understanding different viewpoints, and considerate and authentic questioning, including respectful dissent. Agreements about listening, speaking, and responding will be especially important to abide by when discussing challenging topics. Teachers will likely find that they need to continually refocus students on the goal of building and maintaining a strong and caring classroom community in which individuals are seen, valued, and accepted for who they are as a whole person rather than a narrow slice of them as members of exclusive cultural, social, or national groups with whatever meanings are attached to being affiliated with those groups.

> Set the groundwork for identity-based conversations by setting norms of listening, an openness to learning and understanding different viewpoints, and considerate and authentic questioning, including respectful dissent.

Core Questions for Exploring Identities

What follows is a list of sub-topics and questions that teachers can use to guide students' and their own explorations of the broader question, "Who am I in relation to others and in the world?" Teachers can present the questions that follow to students to begin a unit on inquiry into self in relation to others and the world. It is important that teachers also conduct their own self-inquiry in advance of conducting this unit or as students are experiencing the unit. Teachers must first do this identity work because it will help them more deeply understand and question the identities they perform and the ways in which their identities influence their interactions with and views of others, including their students.

We recommend taking time to review and discuss each of the questions as a whole class, with the teacher clarifying and providing definitions and examples of concepts within the questions that may be unfamiliar to students. We also recommend that teachers model how they might respond to each of the questions. Such modeling will help students understand how their preliminary responses to these questions could be shared in a language that supports their listeners' understandings of their viewpoints. Teachers can also invite students to volunteer some of their thoughts about how they would respond to particular questions. We will discuss each of these questions in depth later in this chapter. Teachers can draw directly from our discussion to help them facilitate student understanding of the *what* and *why* of these questions.

- What are my core beliefs, values, interests, concerns, and goals?

- What are the local and global relationships in my life? How am I connected across both local and global communities?

- What are the multiple communities to which I belong, and what are their naturalistic, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and other dimensions?

- What are my cultural, language, and literacy practices, and how do these practices represent those of the communities to which I belong? What am I learning about myself as a literate person?

- How do socially constructed categories such as race, gender, social class, and dis/ability shape my experiences in/of the world and my view of self and others?

Activities for Exploring Identities

In addition to exploring each of these sub-questions in depth, this chapter will also pair them with suggested literacy activities through which students and teachers can examine the questions. Provided are a variety of literacy activities that can support exploring these sub-questions and topics. Since most students will be familiar with reflective journal writing and group discussions, we recommend that teachers select these two activities for students to begin their self-explorations. This inquiry will help students focus on the substance of the questions and not be distracted with learning and trying out less familiar or unfamiliar modes of learning. As teachers begin to see their students getting more comfortable with the substance of the questions, they can invite students to self-select one or two additional activities to help them expand their ways of learning and promote engagement and enjoyment of the work:

- Write reflectively in journals.

- Participate in partnered, small-group, and whole-group discussion.

- Audio-record interviews of peers, family, and community members.

- Conduct self- and ethnographic observations that involve paying close attention to how people see and understand themselves and others in different social settings and interactions and take detailed descriptive notes while observing; then revisit your notes for reflection to assist with deeper/new understandings.

- Read a variety of texts, including both conventional print and those that are multimodal and online.

We now turn to discussing each of the sub-questions in detail with suggestions of learning activities for students to explore the questions.

What are my core beliefs, values, interests, concerns, and goals? This question gets at the heart of identity statements. What are the most important beliefs and values that guide my perspectives on life situations and possible actions/responses? What are the things that are of interest to me in my personal, familial, and social life and, extending outward, in society and in the world? If one embraces the *ubuntu* philosophy, how do I and my identities emerge from my relationships with others?

Teachers can invite students to use reflective journal writing followed by partnered and small-group discussions to share these facets of their identity with their peers. This reflexive writing and thinking provide opportunities for students to bring themselves into the classroom in ways that are more person-centered than focused on specific topics. It provides ways for classroom members to begin knowing one another as people with all their individualized beliefs, values, interests, and concerns.

Students may also choose to initially share with a classroom member with whom they may have an existing relationship so that they feel relatively safe. At the same time, moving outward, these partnerships would include other classroom members who may be outside students' closest friendship circles, setting the stage for building classroom communities in which students and teachers come to know one another more intimately. Students' individual identity statements are grounded in family, community, and other group memberships in which relationships help to shape their beliefs and values.

What are the local and global relationships in my life? How am I connected across both local and global communities?

These questions signal that students are living in a transnational or global world. Their relationships with family, friends, and interest groups; beliefs; values; cultures; and activities are not undertaken solely within the locally bounded communities in which they happen to be living. Instead, students' lives and relationships stretch to other global geographies that are grounded in particular histories, often assisted by their participation in digital worlds or physical travel (Skerrett, 2015c). This view of students positions them as global citizens, an essential standpoint in today's interconnected world. We recognize that the current times are nationalized and polarized in ways that are likely to extend well into the future and so we don't wish to romanticize the potential of classrooms for promoting "cosmopolitanism," the aspiration to become a citizen of the world. This goal is not shared by those who practice strong identity politics, nationalism, nativism, or other tribal forms of affiliation. These possibilities need to be anticipated in any effort to form broader human communities. The more parochial perspectives need to be provided with voice and to be

listened to in order to prevent orthodoxies that confine the floor to one perspective.

Inviting students to think about not only peers and family structures but also authority figures prepares them to take on critical perspectives on authority figures who have power to open or constrain the range of actions they are able to take in different local and global community spaces and in response to different situations. For example, students may feel a sense of *transnationalism*, of belonging to two nations to which they have close ties. Yet they may be recognized as citizens of one nation and not another. This complex allegiance may be true for their family members as well. What do these sets of relationships mean for students' opportunities and interests in learning about the important issues at play in one or more of the nations to which they are connected? How do they affect their capacities for engaging in social action within and across global communities?

In addition to reflective journal writing, interviewing and observation have the potential for enabling students to learn more deeply about their own and their families' local and global connections. Students can interview family and community members about life in a country to which they have familial or cultural ties. With a short set of prepared open-ended questions, students can ask questions about

- their family's reasons for migration;

- the social, economic, and political conditions of their nations of origin; and

- family and community members' hopes and goals for migrating to a new nation-state.

Students with more long-standing U.S. family residency, whose families have migrated within the U.S. or whose communities had occupied the continent for millennia before the European invasion, might look into how their cultural histories have helped to shape who they are today. Students can ask questions about political status and activity in original and new nation-states and family and community members' feelings of belonging and agency to participate economically, politically, and socially in their new nations. Engaging in these

interviews allows students to learn more about the nation-states to which they have ties, and it begins to develop or strengthen their sociopolitical awareness of issues affecting one or more nations. In this way, students' identities as global or transnational citizens will be further explored through these learning activities. They will potentially develop their identities and gain greater awareness of who they are in and across local, national, and global communities.

Classrooms will likely be as full of different political positions as the number of people in them. For example, teachers and students hold political and ideological views around topics such as who has citizenship rights and who should or should not be living in a particular nation or community. These perspectives are developed in families and other social groups and fanned by opinions shared on social and news media. People also exercise their own thought processes in determining their personal positions. The discussions that will grow out of students' inquiry and sharing about local and global group membership will likely be influenced by class members' views on issues such as immigration and citizenship.

This confluence of opposing perspectives might require delicate management if they resemble the ways in which they are contested outside school or online. It's useful to consider the value of bringing conflicting ideas into contact and using an antithesis to challenge a thesis to produce a new, more refined understanding and synthesis. This process is known as *Hegelian dialectic formulation*. The volatility of the issues might make the discussions uncomfortable. But when people only talk past each other, new understandings won't emerge. The conflict is what produces new conceptions, and avoiding it makes it difficult for students to grow in their thinking.

> The conflict is what produces new conceptions, and avoiding it makes it difficult for students to grow in their thinking.

What are the multiple communities to which I belong, and what are their naturalistic, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and other dimensions? This question, while similar to the previous one, expands students' awareness beyond political aspects of identity and governmentalized conceptions of nationhood. It invites students to reflect on the naturalistic, cultural, and social

characteristics of the different communities to which they belong. These communities extend across classrooms, sports, religions, affinity groups in which people come together to engage in activities they share a passion for, and other social groups. These communities can also expand to global groups—for example, online gaming and special-interest communities—and other nations to which students and their families have ties.

Attending to naturalistic features enables students to notice the physical, spatial, and other environmental features of a setting. Exploring naturalistic features of a space is important for literacy work because environmental conditions influence students' levels of physical comfort and pleasure in undertaking literacy work: reading, composition, and discussion (Skerrett, 2016; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Communities populated with marginalized people tend to be situated within or adjacent to environmentally compromised natural features, as the Flint, Michigan, water crisis demonstrates. This more recent situation reflects historical place-based inequities such as those experienced by marginalized rural mining communities in Kentucky or western Virginia in the early 1900s. It behooves all students to recognize how society positions those with little economic resources, including where they are located geographically and in community design in relation to harmful and threatening conditions.

Students can read texts that may be available in their homes and communities (e.g., those dedicated to current events: newspapers, magazines, and online resources) or historical texts that expand their knowledge about the communities to which they belong beyond what they can glean from family and community members. They can have discussions about what they are reading and learning with others, who in turn bring their own personal knowledge and perspectives on the events inscribed in texts. These explorations create opportunities for examining multiple perspectives, an important component of building critical literacies (taken up in depth in Chapter 2).

Inviting students to attend to the cultural aspects of the groups to which they belong expands their understandings of culture beyond the commonplace understandings. For example, culture is trivialized when, on Cinco de Mayo, the school cafeteria workers wear sombreros and serve

tacos, and that's all students participate in for their cultural education. Deepening students' attention to cultural aspects allows them to think about group cultures, such as how video games like Fortnite include norms and practices for activity and relationships that govern their conduct within the confines of the game. Ultimately, students can connect these cultural norms and practices to those of other communities, from the classroom to those social groups they participate in voluntarily.

What are my cultural, language, and literacy practices and how do these practices represent those of the communities to which I belong? What am I learning about myself as a literate person? These questions provide students with opportunities to document and appreciate the rich stock of cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices that they use and develop within their communities. More and more, literacy educators are understanding how these practices serve as resources for students to draw upon in conducting literacy work in classrooms. One enjoyable method for students to engage with these inquiries is by keeping observational logs of their language and literacy practices. For example, students could commit, for a week or two, to pay special attention to the different languages or language practices they use across different social contexts such as

- school,
- home,
- work,
- community settings, and
- different groups of peers.

At the end of each day, students write down the different languages they have used across the day and across settings, along with some reflective thoughts about their decision making and feelings about their language use in and across spaces. Doing so allows students to make initial observations about language ideologies (e.g., power issues or cultural norms that drive particular uses of different language practices in different contexts). For example, students may notice how they work to approximate white middle-class English when speaking with teachers and how they speak their home/community versions

of English when speaking with family members or neighborhood friends. Students can also, through this documentation, notice the languages and language practices that are most intimate for them and that help sustain particular relationships and cultures. They might begin to develop formal knowledge of code-switching practices—their shifts in diction when speaking to people representing different linguistic groups—and code-meshing, such as their use of Spanglish or Chinglish: language blends that integrate features of two or more languages. (See Skerrett, 2015c, for a sample of a log that students can use for these investigations.)

Language and literacy practices are closely intertwined. This book draws from a perspective of literacy as social practice (Street, 1984). This perspective maintains that literacy is broader than the reading and writing of printed texts. Rather, literacy extends to all meaning-making and communicative practices that include visual, oral, aural, gestural, spatial, and multimodal (involving two or more) sign systems (New London Group, 1996). Paying attention to the modes and activities through which they express meaning facilitates students' awareness and acceptance of this idea of literacy as practice (Skerrett, 2013, 2015c; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Students find great enjoyment in taking stock of the many activities that fill up their days and looking for where literacy lives within them. They often find it provocative to investigate the ways in which they communicate with others and make meaning, including their communication on sports fields, in their workplaces, in neighborhood settings, and in religious communities. They benefit from understanding the linguistic expectations of different social settings and how to be taken seriously within each, including classrooms and their social languages and speech genres.

Inquiries into language and literacy practices are important because they allow students to build strengths-based perspectives of themselves as users of literacies that expand beyond the boundaries of classrooms, where the literacy tasks and tools provided often do not allow students to access their broader repertoires of knowledge and skills with many/multiple literacies. Additionally, when students can make connections to the ways in which they communicate and make sense in and of other social worlds to the world of school, they create bridges that can help enhance their literacy work in school as well as in other social spaces.

Bridging school and other literacy practices encourages the development of stronger academic identities in students.

How do socially constructed categories such as race, gender, social class, and dis/ability shape my experiences in/of the world and my view of self and others? To do the work we propose in the book, teachers need to assist students in inquiring into how significant social constructs (e.g., race, gender, class, dis/ability, mental health, national affiliation, and other labels and positions) shape their experiences of the world and self- and other-ascribed identities. Very early in life, students learn to understand how the world views them and how it values or devalues their identities along lines of race, social class, ethnicity, language practices, gender, gender expression, and other socially constructed identities. Students get messages from school, home, and other spaces about how to think about, respond to, and act within and against these narrow identity markers. They receive messages about the ways in which they are expected to view themselves and act in contrast to others who are assigned to different racial, social class, identity, dis/ability, and other groups.

Young people, assisted by more experienced others and/or peers and through the lens afforded by media, consolidate and analyze these messages. They then create narratives for themselves in which they reconfigure, refuse, or accept other-ascribed identities with who they know and understand themselves to be personally, within their families, and in relation to other social groups. School is a core context in which students experience identity construction. As such, it should be a central topic of inquiry, and classroom work should offer opportunities for building and (re)constructing identity.

Consider Allison, who has a young son; along these social identity markers, he is characterized as a young, Black, middle-class boy living in a primarily white suburban neighborhood. Until her son was 7 years old, Allison did not have explicit conversations in which she informed her son that he is Black and the various social meanings and histories that are attached to this racial category. Allison's son's middle-class status and his immersion in a primarily white suburb that prided itself on being liberal meant that her son had a multiracial group of middle-class friends who came together around their interests in particular forms

of popular culture and play dates arranged with other parents who responded to their children's interest in spending time with Allison's son outside school. Rather than informing her son that he is Black, Allison and family members used books centering Black characters and Black historical figures to convey messages to her son that his Black skin, which is a mahogany shade, connects him to historical and contemporary others and experiences who have claimed or been positioned within the identity of Black.

From books and characters with origins in the Caribbean (where Allison was born and raised) and the United States, discussions also opened room to educate him about his cultural roots, the African diaspora, and Black people's contributions to the world—in science, the arts, and politics—including through their patriotic leadership in the pursuit of racial and other forms of justice (see Chapter 6 for ideas on teaching about patriotism during contentious political times). Racial identity work was especially important to do at home as the school curriculum, beyond Black History Month, offered few literacy opportunities for a boy deemed Black to explore what this identity meant, in all its fullness, in school.

This identity of Black became distinctly personal in second grade, when Allison's son mentioned to her during bedtime reading that a classmate, a white girl around his age, had said aloud to the class as they were reentering the classroom from recess that he "was not invited to her birthday party because her mother didn't like Black people." This personal experience of racial discrimination experienced by a 7-year-old boy brought the historical texts about racism and fights for racial justice alive in her home. Before this incident, Allison felt she was prepared to address with her son the instances of racism she expected he would experience. However, no human can be prepared for such assaults on one's humanity or the humanity of their loved ones. Allison had to keep at bay the immediate emotions of pain, grief, fear, and anger she felt about her son experiencing racism in what felt to her like way too soon. Instead, she focused on her son's emotions and asked, "How did that make you feel?" before going into a discussion that connected the racism they had been reading about, its currency in today's society, and how it shows up in families, schools, and everyday life.

Allison worked hard that night to remind her son that his Blackness was beautiful and significant and only one part of the many characteristics that made up his unique and important humanity. In the weeks that followed, Allison's son brought home subsequent reports related to this event. There was a rebuttal of racism by a young white boy who, a couple of days later, loudly announced to the class that Allison's son was invited to *his* birthday party *anytime*. And then there was, from that same young white girl who made these painful comments, continual invitations of play and friendship toward Allison's son. Recall that it was her mother and not the child who refused to invite Allison's son to her daughter's birthday party. These events portray how young children can serve as a source of solidarity and anti-racist action and a reminder that even though children may be actively socialized in home and in other contexts to develop anti-racist tendencies, teachers and their curriculum can play a powerful role in counter-acting problematic identity formation processes. Literacy instruction can support students' development as anti-racists.

This explicit topic of racial literacy instruction will be taken up in full in Chapter 5 and illustrates the challenge described earlier to attempt to promote community and a degree of cosmopolitanism in a society that is deeply polarized politically, ideologically, racially, and in countless other ways. Racial identities especially matter. They always have, they continue to do so in these times, and they will very likely matter in other times, too. Racial identities matter for literacy work and learning in school. Further, teaching empathic stances and understandings, such as what was displayed in the second-grade white boy's allyship with Allison's son, goes hand in hand with developing students who are able to recognize situations in which empathy and understanding are needed and how to deploy them in ways that not only support individuals experiencing oppression but also provide learning opportunities for their peers. We take up this topic of teaching empathy in Chapter 4.

The stock of information students accrue across these various inquiry topics related to identity can lead into a specialized focus on the topic of student agency, critical inquiry, and social action, which form the basis of topics of additional chapters in this book. Having investigated their connections and activities in local and global communities, their multifaceted identities, and their cultural, linguistic, and literary resources,

students will be ready to engage in questions related to social inquiry, critique, and action. Students can provide instructional methods, content knowledge, and learning activities and processes through which teachers and students can engage in social justice–oriented change work. Students study the questions posed in the next section after they have conducted inquiries that are more personal, that serve as information-gathering opportunities, and that allow them to notice and assert their identities and accompanying personal, family, and community cultural, linguistic, and literacy assets.

Laying the Groundwork for Developing Critical Perspectives and Taking Social Action

Because this book is ultimately about equipping students with tools to recognize, analyze, develop, and enact responses to social justice concerns, laying the groundwork for the fulfillment of these goals is particularly important. Beginning with the areas of exploration that students have already undertaken (around their identities and their accompanying cultural, language, and literacy practices) provides the basis for helping to build their critical dispositions and social justice–oriented practices. The educational work outlined in this book rests on teachers taking an asset-based, appreciation-based perspective on students' cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices within and across the multiple communities to which they belong. This strengths-based view, however, cannot and does not obscure the real challenges and problems that exist and that students experience in their multiple communities. As such, after conducting their strengths-based inquiries, students return to their data with some broad questions that allow them to synthesize their learning as well as begin posing critical questions. These questions can include the following:

- What are the strengths, resources, challenges, and problems I notice within my communities?

- How might I participate in local as well as global communities in ways that promote social justice?

- How do I re-create or re-story a view of myself and others (and our collective learning and actions) based in ideas of shared humanity, value, and social justice?

Students can engage with these questions through a fresh round of journaling and different configurations of group discussion, ranging from partnered to whole class. They can return to their families and communities for another round of interviewing and observation. And they can deepen their reading around particular problems and challenges they begin to identify.

The first question in the series above—"What are the strengths, resources, challenges, and problems I notice within my communities?"—invites students to take a critical stance on their communities while they hold on to their asset-based lens. It is important that teachers frame this question about community concerns and challenges with the idea that communities are located within social, economic, and political systems, structures, and policies that have created conditions of challenge for the communities and people who live in them. Chapters 2 and 3 will delve into guiding students to identify, understand, and analyze the workings of systemic inequities in and across the communities in which they live.

Accordingly, when students from an underserved community point out that it appears that employable members of their communities struggle to gain access to jobs; or that the school building is structurally deteriorating; or that in their racially diverse school, more white students are placed in honors classes than students of color; or that minoritized people live near chemical dump sites and affluent people don't, students can be guided to think about how these things became this way. It is essential that students see the lens of how inequitable systems have created disadvantages for some groups while easing access for others so that individuals and particular communities are not viewed as being inherently problematic or responsible for the challenges they face.

The second question—"How might I participate in local as well as global communities in ways that promote social justice?"—invites students to begin positioning themselves as change agents. Chapters 2 and 3 offer teaching and learning activities to help students form and strengthen these identities and related practices. In a globalized world in which students have already been asked to think about their local and international communities, it is important that considerations of social justice connect the local with the world. Because of the diversity of students in today's classrooms, it is very likely that students' connections will represent a

good portion of the whole world. By literally mapping local and global communities on chart paper or digital maps, students will be able to see where and how particular challenges manifest across communities. They can create alliances based in particular social justice causes as portrayed in these displays. Such displays of challenge and injustice also set the groundwork for building empathic stances (see Chapter 4) for students who both belong to and are outsiders of communities that face social justice challenges. When teachers and students can visualize how rampant injustices are in local, national, and global communities, they can promote not only empathy but also indignation that can ignite research and action to contribute to righting social wrongs.

The third question—How do I re-create or re-story a view of myself and others (and our collective learning and actions) based in ideas of shared humanity, value, and social justice?—returns to the question of identity, but it looks at identity at both individual and collective levels. Furthermore, this return to the concept of identity helps to advance students' views of themselves as empathic and agentive individuals and groups committed to using literacy to bring about productive change in the world. One interesting activity would be to ask questions requiring students to think about specific situations of injustice with which they are familiar. Teachers could introduce students to the concepts of *bearing witness*, *allyship, co-conspirator*, *perpetrator,* and *victim*, or *oppressor* and *oppressed.*

Students can then describe the role they see themselves and others they know taking up in these situations, such as those at school, at home, or in different community groups. They can describe the actions taken; perspectives shared by different actors, including themselves; and their own assessments of those actions or perspectives. This activity can occur through

- students writing narratives about events;

- students filling out a table with rows and columns corresponding to each of the dimensions described above: situation, roles, perspectives, actions, and so on; and

- students working in small groups to dramatize a few of these situations. The teacher's role would be to support students in

determining how they could present violence against psyches and bodies—for example, in ways that do not create undue emotional trauma (or actual physical harm!) for themselves and their classmates.

Students may then be able to notice the different positions or roles that emerge in situations requiring social action and positive change. Being able to notice the times they have borne witness or participated as allies or co-conspirators will help to build their identities as change agents. Love (2019) distinguishes between allies and co-conspirators. People identified by oppressed groups as *allies* are supportive of racial and other forms of justice. They take the time to educate themselves and engage in conversations and activities pertaining to historical and contemporary injustices. Allies might retreat when they sense they would experience harm or some loss by actively engaging in anti-oppressive work.

Co-conspirators, on the other hand, take risks alongside those who are experiencing oppression. They use their privilege to advance and protect social justice. They are willing to give up something or put themselves in harm's way if doing so will support those who are oppressed in moving toward freedom. The boy who loudly announced that Allison's son is always welcome to his parties likely risked alienation and ostracization from powerful classmates, positioning himself as a young co-conspirator with much to lose by advocating for a victim of discrimination. Noticing actions of others—their classmates, family, and communities—may help students recognize how they are members in connected groups of social justice activists.

Noticing times when people or institutions have perpetrated violence against individuals and groups allows students to question what societal conditions, beliefs, and value systems encourage these wrongs. Noticing when people could have taken action against injustice but didn't allows students to reflect on the truth that silence or inaction makes people complicit agents of oppression. The slogan "Silence is complicity" appeared on many signs carried by demonstrators in 2020 who hoped to arouse citizens who opposed oppression to speak out against it. We should also emphasize that *curricular silence* is complicit

in perpetuating inequity when these issues are excluded from school. Students will realize there is much work left to be done to create a more just and humane world and that learning how to be a social change agent is a central part of their education. Connecting the situations with which students are familiar to broader, more impactful concepts (such as activism, allyship, and co-conspiratorship) is a critical first step in becoming an agent for positive social change.

For example, to prepare for a unit on patriotism (see Chapter 6 for more details), students could be asked to consider a few broad questions:

- How has patriotism been defined in history and in current times and by whom?

- What makes someone a patriot?

- What are the characteristics and ways of patriots' thinking, knowing, and doing?

- Who are some people in history and current times who have been (or could be) called patriots, and according to which perspective are they patriotic?

- What causes do people of different patriotic identities take up, and why do these movements appeal to them?

- How do some of my thoughts and actions, and those of others that I know, represent patriotism?

Broad questions such as these prime students to begin connecting themselves to greater social movements of change that have ultimately compelled or challenged nations and institutions across the world to be more inclusive of, and responsive to, the shared humanity of all people; to take up and act according to values that create opportunities for more people to lead safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives; and to hold leaders and citizens accountable for upholding these values.

Exploring deeply the question of "Who am I in relation to others and the world?" sets the stage for investigating topics that make literacy education (particularly in the subject areas of English/language arts and social studies) more relevant and real for all students who daily

notice and experience injustices and need to be equipped to participate in their worlds in ways that advance justice and peace. We believe that if school is to prepare students for participation as active citizens seeking a more just and humane society, these are questions that educators can't ignore. Silence is complicity; and times of crisis call for action through words and deeds that speak to the necessity for a new reckoning about the society that students create as their generation inherits the nation.

Identity in Practice: Boston, Massachusetts

We turn now to the experiences of one teacher and her students who explored issues of identity, diversity, and global justice in a unit of study. Mary Grady is an English language arts and English as a second language (ESL) teacher in Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts. Mary self-identifies as a white woman with Irish roots. Given her international student population, Mary had already done quite a bit of identity work with students as part of her curriculum. When Allison visited three of her classes via Zoom in April 2021, it was clear that students recognized each other's national, cultural, linguistic, and other identities and had formed an inclusive classroom community.

After Mary read an early draft of this chapter, she and Allison discussed what might work best for Mary and her students, given the curriculum she had already covered and the other units of study she had planned. Mary decided to use a unit of study that she would implement in March–April to integrate key questions in this chapter. This unit of study was an inquiry unit in which students researched opportunities to serve in the Peace Corps in different countries and what potential volunteers would experience and learn as Peace Corps members in various nations. As will become evident in her written reflections on this unit of study and examples of student work, Mary's students hold affiliations and ties to many different countries, which has contributed to their interests in global phenomena. This unit of study also touches on aspects of building students' identities and capacities as social change agents, which Chapter 3 will take up in depth. As we have been discussing, identity questions unify all chapters of this book and the curriculum ideas in them. Working with one set of ideas inevitably introduces students to other related concepts.

In Mary's description of teaching this unit in her classroom, we see that she and her students focused on the following core questions in this chapter:

- What are my core beliefs, values, interests, concerns, and goals?

- What are the local and global relationships in my life?

- How am I connected across both local and global communities?

- What are the multiple communities to which I belong, and what are their naturalistic, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and other dimensions?

One caveat we offer is that taking on the perspective of a Peace Corps initiative potentially places the students in colonizing positions. Jakubiak and Smagorinsky (2016) found that U.S. students applying for overseas positions teaching English held patronizing attitudes toward the people of the nations they hoped to visit and elevate. The students assumed that learning English would uplift the people they hoped to teach; and the agencies required no teaching experience or knowledge of the receiving societies. It's important to undertake such work with respect and not a colonial attitude.

By engaging in the Peace Corps unit, students identified social justice needs of different countries that they personally cared about or were interested in learning more about. They made personal connections across their local communities and other nations. This project, for several students, led to inquiries in which they centered family members as informants on their or their family's country of origin. Students conducted research about many substantial elements of their nation of choice, including its naturalistic features and cultural aspects. The variety of information that students discovered ensured that readers/ viewers of their inquiry projects did not walk away with a limited picture of a country in need. Rather, students developed an expansive understanding in which their nation of choice was also represented in terms of its beauty, strengths, and contributions to the world.

Finally, Mary planned her unit so that her students could use and develop important literacy skills such as methods of conducting research (e.g., gathering information from credible internet sites and conducting interviews of family members). Students also employed and further strengthened their multimodal literacy skills, both in finding and analyzing multimodal texts to inform their project and in preparing their final presentations. All students used presentation software that included print text in varied sizes, fonts, and placement to provide structure for their audience's meaning-making and to intentionally

create areas of emphasis on different slides. All presentations included photographs; hyperlinks to different sites, including sites students used for research purposes; and embedded video and audio files. These files enabled them to share the musical cultures of the nations they researched.

We include the template Mary provided to her students as a digital resource; see resources.corwin.com/troubledtimes

Mary also encouraged her students to use their multilingual strengths in reading and writing. For example, when students could not find an appropriate English translation for a word or concept they knew in their home language, Mary invited her students to use their home languages, which impressed on them the perils of cross-cultural translations of words. As such, student presentations were also multilingual in nature. Finally, in addition to working on standards for reading and writing, students also engaged in standards related to speaking and listening as they presented their projects, including responding to comments and questions. Students also worked on standards of listening and speaking as they viewed, listened to, and posed questions to their peers as they presented.

Mary felt it was important for students to have supportive professionals who were not permanent members of their classroom community as part of the audience to which they presented. She recruited four "judges" to attend the presentations. Allison had the privilege of serving as a judge for three different classes that completed this project. For Allison, this role provided an opportunity to view and listen to students' presentations, ask questions their presentations brought up for her, and provide students with written feedback. Allison's feedback noted elements of each student's presentation that were especially compelling and enjoyable for her and offered some questions or advice they could consider that might make their already-strong presentations even more robust. Mary provided a rubric for the judges to use to provide feedback to students. The rubric directed the judges toward an open-ended, holistic assessment and scoring system. Judges were to document at least one positive point a student shared about the country they had studied, pose an authentic question to the student based in their presentation, and provide an overall score of between 1–5 points. Given these three assessment items, Mary was able to create a rubric in which multiple students could be assessed on a single

page. The complete rubric is available online at resources.corwin
.com/troubledtimes

What follows are Mary's reflections on the project and student work as well
as her thoughts about how her students took up issues of identity, rela-
tion of self to others and the world, global citizenship/cosmopolitanism,
and social justice.

At the start of the school year, I interview students about their languages
and cultures. I also ask if there is a restaurant in Boston they can recommend
so that I can try food that well represents their cultures. This question often
starts a lively discussion among students from the same country about
which restaurant to choose. It is affirming for students to express their
expertise in these matters and to know that the classroom is welcoming
and safe for people from all of the cultures and languages that are present
in the class.

An overarching goal of ESL instruction is to help students participate in
school as readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers. Students will
use skills that they learn in my class in all of their academic subjects in high
school and in college, if that is the path they choose. I know that they do
their best work when they can understand and relate to the subject matter
and access their prior knowledge. I also know that they must feel supported
by the audience who is listening to their reflections, speeches, essays, and
presentations.

Students get credit for their progress in reading, writing, speaking, and
listening in English. During the 2020–2021 school year, most students were
learning remotely and using technology to express themselves and show their
English skills. For an end-of-year project, I asked them to choose a country
where Peace Corps volunteers have served. Their task was to convince
judges that we should do Peace Corps in their country. During that school
year, my students and their families were from the Dominican Republic,
Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Cambodia, Sudan, the Democratic
Republic of Congo, and Cape Verde.

Some students presented their homelands, and others chose countries that
were interesting and less familiar to them. I observed that they were able to
see countries that had been colonized by European and American settlers
as worthy of visiting, living in, and helping. This research also provided an
opportunity for them to see that their language skills in their native languages
and in English will be useful for future careers.

Students asked if they could use firsthand experiences they had had in
their homelands as part of the research for presentations. Others asked if
they could interview their parents and grandparents about their personal

experiences. I answered emphatically, "Yes! Please do." I specifically recall meeting with one student to discuss her project. I told her that she had to write about a popular food to eat during a holiday in her country as well as a street food (food that you can get any time from a cart). She grew visibly excited, saying "I know exactly what to do for these slides," and she got to work to find pictures and explanations.

Students chose to present the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and El Salvador. They also presented India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cuba, Colombia, Tanzania, and Angola. While some of my top-performing students did exemplary projects (on India and Tanzania), I was most moved by the work of two students who had completed very little work all year until they got excited about presenting their homelands to their classmates with this assignment. In fact, these two students had not even logged in to Zoom classes most days. But they were inspired to complete this project and show their audience how much they care about their homelands.

One student from Cambodia and another from Cape Verde love their countries and presented slides showing the beauty and needs of these communities. In one case, the slides were of the student's home country. In the other, it was Angola, a country that had been colonized by the Portuguese, the same as the student's homeland (Cape Verde) had been. When these students did not know English words for foods and dishes, I asked them to write the Khmer or Portuguese words next to the images. It was impactful for them to use pictures and words that were familiar and meaningful to them.

Technology allowed us to see the geographical landscapes, people, animals, foods, and musical landscapes of these countries. Some students presented Peace Corps countries that were far from their homelands (a student from Haiti presented India and a student from Sudan presented the Philippines). They expressed their desire to help others and to learn from cultures that are very different from their own. Other students who are from Haiti presented their country as a land with a lot of natural beauty and extreme poverty. A student who is from Haiti has volunteered there with her family. She would like to return there after college to work as a nurse to make a difference in people's lives. With the completion of her Peace Corps project, she is closer to reaching this goal.

A Look at Student Work

Mary provided students with an organizational chart to help ensure that students addressed the different aspects of the country they had researched. She asked students to brainstorm about the following elements:

- The name and geographical location of their selected country, and languages spoken there

- Important facts about the country

- Available volunteer opportunities and which one(s) the student would be interested in doing

- An explanation of why this country is a good place to volunteer through the Peace Corps, and challenges that a volunteer might face

Mary also provided students with a template to help them create their final slide presentations. The chart and template prompted students to share about the geographical location and environmental features of the country they chose. They identified cultural aspects (primarily food and music), the opportunities available (and preparation necessary) for volunteering through the Peace Corps, and their own impressions about the country they researched.

> The slide presentation template is provided as a digital resource at resources.corwin.com/troubledtimes

Mary asked her students to look into the preparation required of those wishing to serve in the Peace Corps. This element strikes us as teaching students about the diversity of peoples and cultures around the world and how, in our shared humanity, we should think of ourselves as partners, allies, or co-conspirators, hoping to be accepted to join in particular quests for social justice alongside others most affected by these injustices.

Figures 1.1–1.6 show samples from students' slide presentations that show the range of their work and illustrate how they took up notions of identity, including global citizenship, world knowledge, and global justice. These samples include the work of students who, for the first time that school year, chose to engage fully with a unit of study (such as Maikel, whose work is presented in Figures 1.1–1.3) and students who had been "top performing" in terms of their steady engagement and deep investment in their academic work for the entire year and

before then as well (such as Staleyjee, whose work is presented in Figures 1.4–1.6).

Maikel is from the Dominican Republic and selected Colombia for his project. Around the time Mary was beginning the Peace Corps unit, she had also been teaching around a podcast, "The Crisis of Vice." Mary reported that this podcast was about union leaders being killed while working in a mine in Colombia and that the mining company is based in Alabama. She explained that Maikel became interested in those politics. With his choice of Colombia for the Peace Corps project, Maikel extended his own opportunities to learn more about a country and its people who had experienced oppression, some to the point of death, in their efforts to unionize and demand fairer, safer, and more equitable working conditions. In Figure 1.1, Maikel presents the nation's flag and its meanings, which include terms that could be explored in a unit on patriotism (see Chapter 6). Maikel also showcased the unique and significant elements of Colombia as part of a global world, emphasizing its expansive biodiversity.

> Maikel's interests could be taken up further in a unit on patriotism (see Chapter 6). He could explore the following question: How could we think about these union leaders as Colombian patriots?

The final slide we share from Maikel's presentation is related to working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia. With this slide, Maikel discussed the preparation one needed to undertake this work, various opportunities for working as a Peace Corps member, and the benefits that would accrue not only to Colombians who were served by the Peace Corps but to Peace Corps members as well. As in service-learning initiatives, the learning of the person providing service is a critical part of the experience, making the relationship reciprocal rather than top-down. Maikel noted benefits to Peace Corps members such as learning or strengthening Spanish language use, developing knowledge and skills through serving, and learning about and enjoying the environmental and cultural elements of Colombia. In this way, he emphasized that all humans are interconnected and are in positions to serve, educate, and support one another toward shared goals of increasing global justice.

FIGURE 1.1 Maikel's Colombia Presentation

### Flag

The colors represent Loyalty, vigilance and victory

FIGURE 1.2 Colombia Presentation Sample 2

Interesting Facts

One interesting fact is that colombia is the second most biodiverse country in the world.

Another thing that is really awesome is that colombia is known for its significant natural resources, modern cities, and a diverse culture.

FIGURE 1.3   Colombia Presentation Sample 3
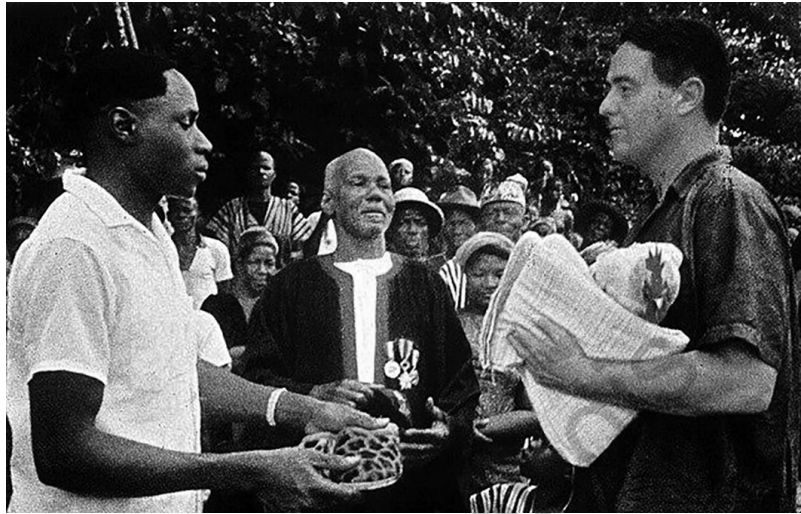
Maikel's selected image could also be read through the lens of a white person approaching Indigenous and Black Colombians to help them and the native-born people presenting gifts and other signs of peace and welcome. This image could be viewed as replicating the colonialist projects of white Europeans across the globe. This image and its range of potential interpretations could be a topic for further exploration in a curriculum, for example, drawing on ideas discussed in Chapter 5 on racial literacy.

Another student, Staleyjee, chose to research the country of India. Staleyjee was born in Haiti and was interested in learning about India. It is clear across her presentation that Staleyjee takes an appreciative stance on India. She took great care, for example, in selecting images that conveyed the richness of Indian culture. Mary described Staleyjee as being interested in the artistic nature of the project. Consider the piece of artwork Staleyjee used for her introductory slide (Figure 1.4).

Staleyjee attended to all aspects of the assignment, reporting on India's geographical location, environmental features, and cultural aspects and the details of volunteering with the Peace Corps in India. Staleyjee focused on a women's art collective that was one of many Peace Corps volunteer opportunities in India. Like Maikel, she described both the tasks and the preparation needed for this type of service.

FIGURE 1.4   Staleyjee's India Presentation Sample 1

**FIGURE 1.5   Staleyjee's India Presentation Sample 2**

FIGURE 1.6   Staleyjee's India Presentation Sample 3

Interesting Facts

One interesting fact is India has the largest number of Post Offices in the world. The largest employer in India is the Indian Railways, employing over a million people.

Another thing that is really awesome is The country has brought the world diverse languages of 121, famous actresses, and six seasons. India is the world's largest democracy, with a 1.3 billion population.
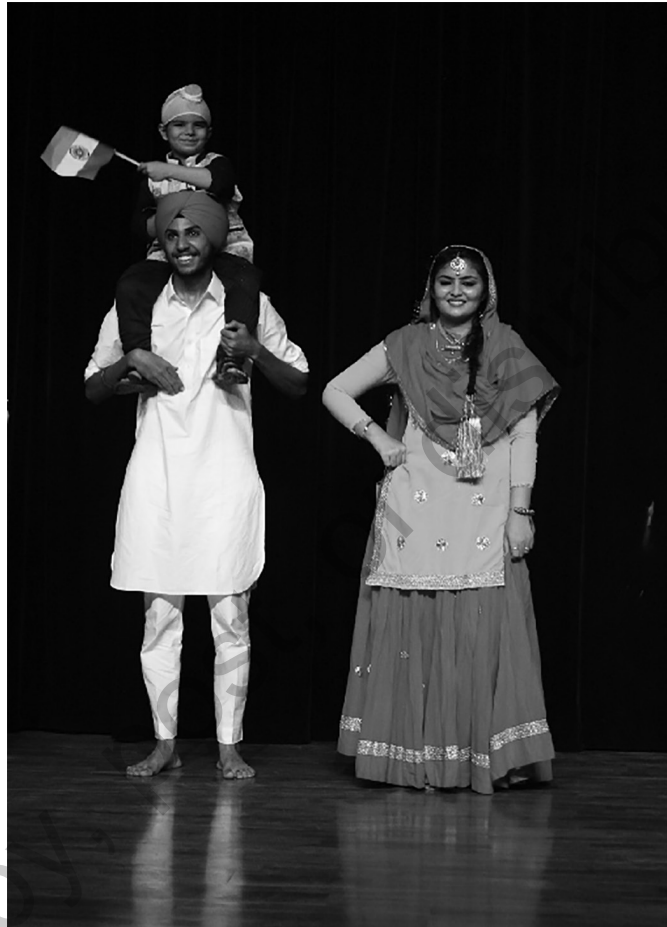
The final slide we have selected from Staleyjee's presentation (Figure 1.6) showcases new knowledge she learned about a nation she had held an interest in for some time. She referenced the economic and employment achievements of the nation for its citizens, its political orientation, and the linguistic diversity of India. Noteworthy are Staleyjee's words, such as "awesome" and "contributed to the world," to convey that India should not be viewed solely through a lens of people experiencing poverty and needing help but rather as a nation whose citizens provide "interesting" facts and contributions to the world.

Reflecting on Identity in the Classroom

It was an important learning experience to view and hear student presentations. From presentations across the three classes that Allison observed, it was clear that students identified as transnational people, connected to people, places, and phenomena that held personal significance for them, their families and communities, and their nations of origin. Going further, students were drawn to explore nations that had experienced similar forms of oppression as their nations of origin (such as colonial projects involving linguistic oppression) and abuse, depletion, and devaluing of human and natural and cultural resources to strengthen Euro-Western nations while further impoverishing other world nations. Mary and her students' uptake of a unit addressing our fundamental question of "Who am I in relation to others and the world?" allowed students to identify and investigate their many identities, including that of globally aware social justice activists, a topic further taken up in this book's remaining chapters.

In terms of assessing student work on projects such as these, we follow Mary's lead in supporting students with a template or set of guidelines or a rubric, as many teachers already do. In Mary's classes, students could use the guidelines to work independently, feeling confident that they were addressing all elements of their project as detailed for them by their teacher. Additionally, students had freedom to expand their research methods (such as interviewing family members). They could also choose to include aspects of a nation that were personally noteworthy to them with the open-ended nature of some of the project guidelines, such as "listing interesting facts." In assessing students' work, Mary considered the depth of student engagement in the work, as shown, for example, by the extent of the research they conducted and their understanding of what could be considered unique and significant about the country they chose to research.

Mary's assessment practice of inviting interested and considerate adult professionals as an authentic audience for her students' presentations is also very valuable. She reported that, based in her knowledge of students, she could see them making stronger efforts to improve their multimodal project presentations, knowing there would be other guests in

their classroom who were genuinely interested in their work. Mary gave her judges an open-ended rubric with a few questions, asking them to write a sentence or two about aspects of a presentation they enjoyed, a follow-up question or two, and a suggestion or two that might enhance the good work students had already done. Students felt like respected scholars who were eager to engage with audience feedback, both live and post-presentation (in the form of written feedback). Knowing that Mary was able to construct this unit into her already-existing curriculum, we feel confident that other teachers, at the beginning of the year or at some other point, will find a way to introduce the key topic of "Who am I in relation to others and the world?" into their existing curricula.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some similarities and differences between your teaching context, student demographics, and curriculum and those of Mary (the teacher featured in the chapter)?

2. How would you have to adapt the work Mary undertook with her students in light of your own teaching context, students, and curriculum?

3. Having authentic audiences to present their work to was a very fulfilling part of this unit for the students. How would you go about creating an authentic audience for student presentations?

4. After implementing this unit, what new knowledge have you and your students learned about one another in terms of personal identities, local communities, and global interests?